Demoness
by CrimsonCherryScarlet

Summary

There existed no natural born females in the demon race. Even Lilith had been created from the first human female. Over the eras demons had been adding them to their ranks through deals, Sabbath and seduction... Covenants are delicate. Not all females survive. Or stay sane. Success reflects the demon's skill. Where would we be if the Phantomhive's butler couldn't do that much?
Chapter 1

*Bad girls are locked in the dark.*

That was the truth in Carrick’s Charity School for Young Girls. What a bad girl was, however, depended on a lot of things and the headmistress would pass judgement as she saw fit. Even when the girls only stole, sold themselves and lied because Mrs Packard ordered them to. And a *good, grateful* girl should be obedient.

Laughable.

Yes, they were taught to read, write and count so they could grow up to be teachers and governesses because the School was supposed to be an *upstanding* and *respectable* institution. But who cared if a couple of unwanted orphaned chits went missing?

Evelyn was very good thief because of such a rule, proving her usefulness so Mrs Packard would be reluctant to let her go while her age made her vulnerable. She had brought money and goods, jewels that could be sold or pawned off, smuggled food for her and some of the girls from time to time, a treat or two, a thicker blanket... small things.

Mrs Packard said sins had to be purged in the dark, smiling gleefully while she dragged the screaming girl of her choice into the cellar, tossing her down the stairs into a darkness so solid one could drown in it. Screams fuelled her delight while she dragged the poor victim through the floor. Then the sobbing echoed through the corridors, slightly muffled by the thick doors.

Evelyn was not a screamer, at least not when the cellar was her sentence. There were other punishments harsher than a few days alone in the dark with no food and just a bit of water.

It was quite a similar place to the cell where she found herself at the moment though the cellar had been stocked with coal, the supply rarely used for more than the kitchen needs and the amount required to keep Mrs. Packard’s room and office warm and comfortable, smelled of the dark dust, smoke and dirt, was also quite bigger than her current lodgings and crushed coal could be made into a much more comfortable bed than the straw mat under her and lacked the chains that bound her to the mossy moist stone wall. Useless things those. What kind of thief would she be if she couldn’t escape from those simple manacles? They were accessories she used when they came to deliver her food, faking fear, innocence and helplessness.

A few tears, a sob, hiding behind her hands… tricks of the beggar’s trade.

No one came for her, family or good folks, while in the orphanage and she made sure to scare away the men that came, trying to drag her to a whorehouse or the workhouses. She preferred to keep stealing and even kill, if needed, making a place for herself in the street, for the future. So Evelyn got locked in the dark cellar so many times for her sins, for her insults, for her insubordination, for her existence, that the dark no longer felt a punishment.

Darkness was a sanctuary.

Evelyn had been on the alleys of London, stealing only for herself, working only for herself, surviving for the sake of it, for years now, having left the Charity School for Girls as soon as her age permitted, so there would be no chase, no retribution, no laws to drag her back, eyes used to the night, her hands nimble and step quick, burying herself into the most twisted of areas so she would be forgotten. A proud street rat, as it were.
Mouser was the name everyone in the seedy underworld called her, most not even realizing her gender. Her baggy, mismatched and worn clothes helped the illusion, as did the short dark brown hair that fell messily around her face, shaggy tips brushing her chin, a small braid dangling on the left side, touching her shoulder, a thick and red glass bead gleaming on the tip. Looking either too clean or too pretty in the streets was a problem that a handful of coal and ash fixed right quick.

The issue with her current way of life was a kidnapping made by a bunch of “demon cultists”, as they had introduced themselves as soon as she was chained in place, that intended to use her as a virgin sacrifice. Said, word by word, with references of innocence and her ability to protect her untouched flesh to such an advanced age in such circumstances. After a lot of talk and praise about how unexpected a prize she was.

Utter nonsense.

Virgin she might be but innocent was another issue altogether. She did warn her captors about that but she was sure no fanatic would not believe her. And her attempt had been a bit half-hearted… Not that escape was difficult as they believed her caged and weak, lessening security and care. But she was in the dark, with food given to her and she was warm and had a quite sturdy roof overhead. Why change the situation? She would run when the threat grew but for now she felt happy with her forced reprieve.

Mouser sorely needed a rest as Smiling Jack was running her ragged, running in circles because of the kidnappings and murders that had had an increase that summer. People talked. And she heard. And dealt with it. A lot of things were stirring in the underbelly, most of them unpleasant and with shades of occult and otherworldliness that just felt… off. Whether one believed or not it was irrelevant. The damage would be done.

The last three days had been easy and calm.

The cell door opened suddenly, breaking the quiet with a sharp bang.

Mouser narrowed her eyes, jumping, startled, slipping the chains in place, reacting to the brightness of the lantern, watching as a boy was tossed within, rather roughly, the guards chaining him to the walls as tightly as she faked to be bound, moving away without a spare glance for either of their captives, the darkness returning abruptly as the door was closed and locked. Just grunts doing their jobs to lord that did nothing but to laze around, complain and demand.

So they had started to gather the blood to fuel the actual summoning, as they prattled on. They didn’t think that it was worthy to keep quiet in front of the people they would soon kill.

So it was time to leave.

Silently she discarded her chains, standing, stretching, watching the boy carefully. Noble, rich and carrying a pair of very nice rings, despite being disguised as a street kid with an injured eye. But people saw what they wanted to see and if had been captured the cultists weren’t looking too hard at what they were picking up. Her breasts were not that small even under the binds, the male shirt, the wool sweater and the shabby jacket she wore and still few seemed to notice the suspicious lumps.

“You hurt, boyo?” She asked in a low soft voice, crouching smoothly in front of him. Her eyes were an inky brown, its shape and colour almost doe-like, framed by long lashes but that was not what was remarkable about them. The colour was common and their form mattered little to her. What was important about her eyes was that they had adapted to the darkness. Shades of gray and black showed her the world when no light shone through. Colour became apparent when a sliver of
light shimmered.

She saw his shape, his clothes and his attitude quite clearly. And every instinct she possessed was pointing sharply at all the oddities of his presence and demeanour. Smooth capture because there were little bruises that she could see at least. Almost no resistance while they dragged and chained him. A bit too much of relaxation and smugness in the way his eye scanned the darkness, blindly but unafraid, waiting for it to adjust.

“No.” His voice showed no hint of fear of hysterics either. Good. It also sounded surprisingly worldly for a kid that should be barely thirteen and was most definitely of upper world origin. It was a voice she would expect to hear from another orphanage kid, the street rats and the broken men Smiling Jack catered to.

“I’m Mouser. Do you want to get out?” Her tone might have been a mite too cheery for the situation but she was making plans. Maybe a nice reward for being so good for the rich kid that had been playing poor and gotten caught. Some nobles did that often... go into the streets to fool around in the part of poor people, to go to the seediest brothels and gambling hells. Or when they searched for some street runner to do their dirty work. They had the fun and reassurance that their warm houses and armed footmen were waiting so only the thrill would stay with them.

“What can you do?” There was a slight mocking in his voice and a smirk as he looked up from his sitting position. Such a common attitude for his kind. He seemed to be unable to see her but was quite sure of her position as the tilt of his head allowed her to see. And then he realized she was right next to him, a slight jump of his shoulders marking shock and surprise, as he turned fully into the darkness. “Aren’t you... wait...” His eye narrowed in the dark. “You were chained.”

“I ain’t now boyo.” Mouser chuckled. Sure you ended up with bleeding wrists and sore hands on the first tries, and if one wasn’t careful broken bones, but freedom made it worth it. Any cutpurse could slip out of a constable’s cuffs as soon as they went into the street. She looked away, towards the door. “We have a few hours. You want out?” “What can you do?” He repeated the question carefully, a bit of calculating interest infiltrating his expression but still no real fear within his eye. What was the little rich kiddo playing at? Waiting for a rescue? Was he the bait, the lure? The sacrifice, one used when trying to pinpoint the location of a rival gang? Had he been followed there by a small force? Had he been sold by richer or poorer familiars that saw him as an obstacle in the succession and inheritance lines?

Mouser parted her lips in a half smirk, tilting her head.

“Rude.” She pretended to complain, reaching for the inside of wool sweater with its many hidden pockets, slipping her hoarded keys out. Stolen from the cultists, stored carefully. Never even felt her hands at work. Yes they had stripped her and bathed her like a disobedient pooch when she arrived, proceeding to verify the status of her lady parts, after the shock of realizing she was a woman, but they had been unable to find all the trickery and tools hidden in her clothes. That was the whole point to them. Any proper lady would have suffered a fit of vapours. Mouser... well... the orphanage was no different in their treatment when they were made presentable for their very rich and respectable patroness or were prepared as an exhibition of female flesh for possible brothel buyers. She had been redressed in her belonging and she was not sure why. Also she fit very few of the requirements for “proper lady” labelling. “Here ya go boyo.” Mouser said as she snapped the chains free after a few second of tinkering.

He nodded curtly in place of any thanks, kneeling, readjusting his position to something more comfortable, eye narrowing, still scanning the darkness with the twitchy movements of a truly newly blind.
Mouser stood and walked towards the door carefully, running her hand over the surface, knocking on it with a loud bang that seemed to startle the boy, his head snapping in the direction of the sound. There was no answer nor alarm on the other side. They were most likely alone so another key was put to work and the thief opened the door and slipping cautiously into the dimly lit room. If a cell had a lock on the inside it was likely so there would be no need for a second man to open it while one had fun with who was inside. Less people who knew, less mess to curb. She huffed, amused, remembering the place.

A modified small basement with the cell created at the very end through the use of brickwork. It was like the old orphanage cellar which meant an old grand mansion. It was prepared to groom the sacrifices with a bathtub, a small fireplace, and neatly folded fabric of what seemed to be robes on the serviceable wooden table, soaps and all the little items that would be used to clean their little lambs. Not one of those titbits of information served to pinpoint their location. The kid moved out of the cell too, calmly assessing the situation.

Mouser approached the walls, sliding one of the lamps out of its support, creating a makeshift shiv before doubling back and closing the cell door once more. A safeguard if things went south and a way to pretend they were still in there if the escape was successful. There wasn’t much in the room that could be used as a weapon. Throwing soaps would be distracting at most. And unless you shoved a sponge down someone’s throat there was no way the floppy fluffy things would kill. Strangling someone with a towel would also be time-consuming and unpractical. No brushes, no combs. Those, bone, wood or metal could be snapped and sharpened. The bottles were too small to be more than a thrown annoyance and their glass and ceramic looked way too frail and cheap to do any damage beyond a scrape. A shard in the eye would work but the chances of such happy happening were no good.

“No guards.” The boy noted, arms crossed.

“Why bother?” Mouser looked around once more, leaning against the table, stretching her legs leisurely after strapping the makeshift weapon into her outer sleeve, feeling the irregular shape scrape the fabric and touched her key pockets, listening to the slight click of the metal. “For them we’re a kid and a girl. Helpless, weak, disposable.”

“You don’t believe I’m just a kid?” He put such an innocent façade on, turning a wide-eyed innocent look her way, voice softening just so... Mouser chuckled, straightening, unaffected.

“If you’re just a kid I’m the queen.” She began scanning the walls a bit more thoroughly. No windows. No gaps. No coal shoot. “Gorgeous work with the face though boyo.”

Everything was walled and closed off. It was obvious that they were underground and the only way out would be through the door. She walked to it, closing her eyes, listening the sounds carefully. Dissonances were being carefully catalogued in her mind. There shouldn’t be anyone there, Mouser assessed after a few moments. There were no sounds, no rustles of impatience made by the fabric of the clothes, no sound of breath, no huffs. Also any guard would have already checked the noise they had produced with the banging door and the talking... She banged the wood once more with her fist, making it groan. No response. Mouser lowered her head a bit, staring at the lock for a long moment, eyes narrowed.

“Did you see the way in boyo?”

“No.” Blindfolded too, then.

“Tch” Mouser groaned. She wanted a cigarette so badly... It was what she missed in this impromptu vacation. Her fingers played with the braid for a moment, tapping the bead, and then
the thief crouched, starting experimenting with the nicked keys. The lock opened with the clicking of well-aligned gears. Mouser sighed and appraised the boy. “Helpless us...” She whispered, amused.”At what time were you caught?”

“A couple of hours or so. It was night. Nearing midnight.”

Mouser nodded, considering. There would be little activity at that time in whatever was on the other side.

Softly the door opened with no creak, revealing the staircase and a second door to her right. A peek through the keyhole, as it was also locked, revealed a normal, very well stocked pantry. No coal, no coal shoot. Pity. Mouser walked softly with barely a sound but the wood tended to creak under the heavier steps of the boy. She made no fuss about it as they walked up the stairs.

Cellars and basements like that were always linked either to the kitchens or some secondary storing house to supply the manor. Another locked door whose key should only be in the hands of the butler, cook and governess blocked their way. And sure enough it was not one of her keys. Mouser grumbled and leaned against the door using the key from the cell, deforming it methodically in the process as the kid watched. Finally the tumblers and gears were either too broken or in place because the door was opened.

It was a kitchen. Empty and silent. Mouser smirked smugly, glancing at the kid, to check if he was still following, placing a finger in front of her lips, winking, asking for silence. She discarded the shiv nonchalantly, picking up a trio of wicked looking kitchen knives, balancing them. Then she picked a new one and passed it to the boy.

“Pointy end goes into people that you dislike.” She whispered leaning against his head, ruffling his hair playfully, hiding the blades in her clothes. They had taken her pocket knives, her guns, her dagger, the darts and the razors... it would be a pain to replace all of that... He just watched her, expression almost unreadable. The outer doors were easier to open from within and with the materials the kitchen could readily provide. The downside to it was the silence required of the operation. The servant’s quarters were near. Too near. An out of place sound and the curiosity would overwhelm them. Perhaps they had orders to ignore sounds due to the corral in the basement but one could not be too sure.

Mouser stopped looking around in the settling darkness as they stepped outside into a wide garden.

“Well... hell’s blighted spit... We ain’t in London.” She groused, closing her eyes for a moment, rubbing the bridge of her nose, looking around. It was the outskirts surely. Such wide grounds, trees, landscaping... Few town manors could have those. The windows above their heads were dark and dead, the nobles either drunkenly sleeping or under the influence of poppy, laudanum of some such. No danger there for now but often the houses outside London’s streets had guards because of the fear of highwayman and burglaries. Often it was ineffective. “Still good boyo?”

“Hoxton’s estate.” The boy whispered softly, eye narrowing as he did his own exam, holding the knife with a steady grip but keeping it lowered.

“Nothing like nobles playing demon baiting...” Mouser shook her head, turning to look around once more, trying to find the path to the outer wall that surrounded the richly elaborate manor. Just a few weeks ago it was prostitutes gone missing. Then the thieves started to freak about some rumours, then the kids had reported that a man had tried to grab them from the streets into a coach... Blighted hells she had been bloody busy because of a bunch of bored morons.

“They’re escaping!” A voice suddenly shouted, lanterns flaring a glaring light through the flowers,
shrubbery and decorative statues, the sound of gravel being crushed under heavy steps, other voices answering the shout, converging.

The boy thinned his lips, eye narrowing in annoyance as a trio of guards spotted them and gave the alarm, running, determined to stop them, recapture and re-cage. That gave them a slight advantage. They were not trying to kill them otherwise the guns would be out and would already have tried to punch a few holes into their sorry carcasses.

“Are you squeamish boyo?” Mouser whispered keeping a relaxed stance, hands in her sleeves as he shook his head slowly. “Good. This might get messy.” Her dark eyes hardened a bit as the first man reached them, lunging forward, up close as someone used to close quarter’s and fighting dirty, the kitchen carving knives held in both hands, her elbow going for the throat, delivering a solid hit, the knife in her hand digging itself into the stomach of the attacker, twisting viciously without hesitation, releasing the improvised weapon, going for the pistol he carried, holding it with her right hand, aiming, firing a couple of shots towards the guards, a scream letting her know she had a hit. But the third was still coming and more were approaching, their steps loud and echoing, shouts clouding the night. A few lights in the estate started to glow.

“Sebastian...” The boy's voice rose behind her, harsh and cold.

Mouser stepped back, dispatching the man, the one who had avoided her shot, knife in the throat, a shot in the chest, grabbing another gun, stuffing it into her pocket as backup, turning to shoot, grabbing the kid by the scruff, tossing him out of the way before pressing the trigger, aiming towards the guard that had gone for the grab, raising a sap to knock the boy unconscious. The guard fell, the bullet opening a red bloom on his chest when a sudden shadow moved, the screams echoing around, each of the men that had appeared falling, some lanterns going off, one creating a small fire in the bushes, a silver knife deeply sunk in each corpse. Mouser crouched in the strange calm that followed, curious, recovering it and another pair of fully loaded guns a couple of pocket knives and a dagger before returning her attention to the implements that had delivered death. Actual silver. She closed her hand around it, pulling it out of the corpse, sliding it close to her wrist, inverting it to hide the blade alongside the inner arm. Another weapon was always useful as odd as it looked.

“Young Master.” A tall man clad in black stood in front of the boy, lean and proper, smirking slightly, red eyes gleaming with amusement amongst the black hair of his fringe. So it was Ciel Phantomhive after all as the crest on his ring said. There were not that many kids with eye-patches and pierced ears running around too. Much less kids with butlers at their beck and call. And the Queen’s Guard Dog was infamous in her world. “Should I kill her too?”

Mouser slid the knife out of her sleeve, on the left hand, raising the almost emptied gun and tilted her head smiling, challenging. Viewing the corpses around her might be frightening and she knew a similar fate awaited her if the kid ordered it, but she would show no fear despite the situation. Her life was survival. There was bound to be a day where she would die because of a misstep. Her stance seemed to mildly amuse the man, a smirk parting his lips, red eyes softening. Handsome man. She scoffed. Devils hid behind pleasant faces, that she knew all too well. Seen her share of them in the pits of London even though she had never seen one who was this good at killing.

“Leave her be.” No emotion, no gratitude just a no-kill.

Good enough for her.

All tension faded from the trio. She slid the gun into her jacket carefully and shifted her position. The third kitchen knife was poking her slightly, guns weighting her pockets, threatening to slide the loose pants down her hips. It was some repayment for the things she had lost from the... what was
Ciel Phantomhive turned away and started to walk towards the gate, clearly expecting them to follow like overeager puppies, giving the guards and the ruckus behind the lit windows of the estate no spare glance.

“Were you really trying to kill me with such an unsharpened blade?” The man asked almost jokingly, approaching while still dutifully following his master. He apparently did just what he was mocking with ease.

Mouser followed too, nonchalantly, sliding her hands into her jacket’s pockets, cold fingers finding silver and gold trinkets from last week’s market run in the inseam. They needed to be pawned.

“Jab it hard enough somewhere soft and squishy and it won’t matter, mate.” Mouser tossed him the blade without a care. He caught it flawlessly, bowing slightly, making it disappear with a flourished sleight of hand, breaking his step for a fraction of a second, watching her with unsettlingly clever red eyes.

A carriage waited for the Earl of Phantomhive beyond the highly decorated gate, the horses shaking their head quietly. Beautiful, slick, well trained. All that screamed rich. He’d be waylaid in the streets by the first group of ignorant brutes that didn’t recognize the crest. The man named Sebastian opened the door and helped his master into the dark cabin. Prim, proper and stiff. And still something was off. There was something not truly submissive about the way he seemed to obey. Ciel looked at her for a moment, standing in the opened space, one hand holding the carriage’s roof for balance, staring at her from above, gears clearly clicking neatly behind his eyes.

“Don’t you need a ride back to London... Mouser?” He asked softly.

“You offering boyo?” A slight smirk was his answer. She smirked too, sliding her braid behind her ear, revealing a row of silver and gold earrings, the emergency money of a thief, pirate and sailor. One of them was always reserved to pay for their own funeral as no one would provide that much for them. “No need kiddo. Safe journey.” Sebastian inclined his head formally before closing the door and taking the driver’s place the horses obeying easily to the first movement of the reins.

Damp, dirty, smoky and full of some the worst scum in London, too near the Thames and ripe with its stench. The heavy smog also seemed to find its way easily into the rooms regardless of floor and whatever protections they nailed to the doors windows and cracks. That’s how the Dancing Pig, Smiling Jack’s den was. Then one added cheap booze, cheap entertainment, cheap over-painted, overripe whores and the picture was as foggy as it was clear.

It was almost night again as she reached the place whose creaky attic she called home. It had been a long day of walking and sneaking into farmer’s carts, navigating through London and making a few appearances on her usual haunts to reassure her allies and tell Jack’s enemies Mouser was still not dead. She was greeted rather warmly as she walked by, her step sure and silent weaving through the clientele and furniture. Most of them would sell her, their mothers and left testicle to the devil for money, at least half of them had tried to kill her one time or another. It was just business. But they all put on the face of a friend while under that roof. It was an unspoken, unwritten rule that always was held true while in the Dancing Pig.

Big, burly and sporting an old and faded Glasgow grin that gave him his moniker Jack came to her, immensely bushy white sideburns trembling in outrage. But he waited until they were in the attic to
actually burst as she dug through her belongings, remembering what she had to acquire to replace her disappeared trinkets, taking the pistols and knife out of their hiding places, tossing them onto the lumpy mattress. Followed by every item that had remained hidden in her threads while Jack’s shouting scolding speech came to an end.

“Where were you, ya stray? Four days with no word...” His wide gestures filled the tiny room as surely as his voice. Smiling Jack thought of her as a replacement of his murdered child and behaved accordingly. But above all she was part of his gang albeit an aloof one.

“I was occupied.” Mouser found the cigarettes and the spare steel lighter with a smile, placing a white cylinder on her lips, igniting the device with a sharp click, looking around, taking a deep happy drag of the tobacco. The heavy blankets that kept cold and light away, almost turning the place into a tent were still in place their colours faded and their appearance old and ugly, continuing to serve their purpose. Her narrow bed was unmade, covers and sheets haywire and her trunk undisturbed at its feet. “Apparently people still think I look helpless.”

“Quit the fancy talk luv. And helpless?” Smiling Jack laughed heartily, reassured by her deadpan answer. “Evelyn I’ve known you for the last sixteen years ever since you were a wee thing with big shimmering eyes that earned her so many pity pennies and a pair of quick tiny hands that robbed them blind before the chumps could blink.” Mouser smirked blowing the smoke away, watching it drift around. Four years old and Mrs Packard had tossed her with the others to the street to get more funding for the pretty dresses the old biddy was so fond of. Not that it kept them from the schoolroom every morning. “And that was before we taught you how to clean the poor sod’s clock and teach him the time of day.” Mouser chuckled blowing more smoke with a gleeful look in her eyes.

“Do you have anything for me to do?”

“Nothing. Just rest.” Smiling Jack grumbled, turning away, muttering all the way down to the tavern.

Mouser smiled, the cigarette held deftly between her lips.

_Now he had nothing?

Mouser stared at her feet and kicked away the boots, tossing her sorry self into the bed, besides her stolen weapons with a long sigh, shaking the ash or her cigarette into a broken pot.

If she hadn’t been sure Phantomhive was going to take her somewhere she didn’t particularly wanted to be she would have accepted his ride. Her feet bloody _hurt_…

“_That woman..._” Ciel started, considering carefully, staring at the cake that had been placed in front of him, his expression closed. They had concluded the Queen’s mission, destroying Hoxton’s cult with ease, the man now imprisoned by Scotland Yard, his allies on the run or in hiding. Sebastian glanced at him as he poured the lapseng tea into the fine china not allowing a single drop to spill. “She might be a good addition to our staff...”

“Indeed.” Sebastian agreed, voice kept politely neutral, thinking back, placing the cup and saucer in front of the boy, knowing his actual opinion was not being asked. Such was the duty of a butler and the part he had agreed to play. Also he had very little to add to that at the moment.

“Investigate.” Ciel ordered taking a sip, eye closing solemnly.
“Understood.” Sebastian answered, placing a hand over his heart bowing slightly, leaving to tend to his other duties, his mind at work, rearranging his day to accommodate the new request.

According to the Young Master the escape had been Mouser’s doing, as dubious and amusing as that name was. And there was something about her soul, her scent, a spark that had shone through even though he had interacted little... He could feel his eyes grow a bit demonic. He recognized the instinct even though it was the first time he was experiencing it this acutely within a contract.

There existed no natural born females in the demon race. Even Lilith, had been created from the first human female. Over the eras they had been adding them to their ranks through deals, Sabbath and seduction. But it was a delicate procedure, from choosing the right female, soul, instinct, personality to the turning and training. It was also signified unlocking emotions giving the male demon something more, a sort of power no one seemed to understand but was highly sought after. It was a very meticulous covenant.

Could that crafty creature be a good choice?
Mouser cradled Tobias against her chest, scratching his ears lazily while supervising the steady flow of booze being carried into the Dancing Pig, sitting on one of the big crates that were placed in front of the tavern, used to protect shooters when an attack occurred. Despite the code of nonaggression within attacks could still crop up outside. The tavern’s mouser purred against her neck, craning and twisting to get a bit more of attention.

It was late morning, the workers were chattering while carrying the boxes, their voices a quick lighting blur of sound, no disasters had been reported, no patrols were missing and Jack was nursing a hangover from the darkest pits of the abyss while leaving the work of managing the Pig’s activities to her, Phil and Lars.

The “Season” was ending soon and so was the time of the fat wallets and easy profitable prey. Soon it would be the time to truly work on heists, burglaries and resume the fight to control or gather territory. Then winter would come and most of them would be too busy trying not to die from frostbite, bundled up in taverns and pubs.

Some of the kids ran pass her, shouting “good mornings”, laughing while heading for their posts. Resilient and cynical. Those survived. Some returned with tired looks, more sleepy than anything else, having taken night shifts to prove how grown they were, just sparing a wave and yawn.

Mouser sighed and looked around warily.

The street wasn’t too busy, most of the area’s inhabitants being night owls. The windows were shuttered, doors closed, a little smoke still rose from some of the chimneys coming from the last dying embers or the new fires those that had forced themselves out of the covers were starting. She put Tobias down gently with a last pat, vaulting down the crate, stretching. The mouser moved too, jumping gracefully, sitting next to her old boots, looking around, his tail undulating softly. She slid a cigarette between her lips, plucking it from someplace in her jacket and lit it up, returning the lighter to her pocket, blowing wisps of smoke as the delivery ended and the street was left empty once more, the emptied cart creaking away, disappearing on the corner.

“Should we go inside Tobias?” The cat meowed and rubbed himself against her ankles, purring. “Yeah, yeah, you lecherous old cad. I know of your siring half of the kittens in this alley.” She blew another cloud of smoke watching it drift away towards the slightly grey sky.

It wasn’t a pretty day for the summer time but it wouldn’t be too horrid. With some luck there would be a sizable profit from pick-pocketing the nobles that paraded around in the gardens. That was the urchin’s job. There were some burglaries planned for the night…

None of those operations needed her skills so whatever she did was for her sole benefit. Except that night but that was a different job altogether. Turf wars could get brutal and it was no longer just the street gangs in play. Joining the usual Brits, Scots and Irish were the Indians, Chinese and the Italians, although the latter had been quieter since the slaughter that had ravaged the Ferro family a couple months or so ago, early in the Season.

“Miss Evelyn Crows.” Mouser smirked slowly at the voice and the name used to address her, back still turned to the newcomer. Tobias stilled around her feet and pawed at her pants, demanding immediate height. She took another drag of her cigarette slowly, tossing the butt into the muddy broken cobblestone, stepping on it to gutter out the small ember, before turning, minding the twisting tabby at her feet, blowing the smoke away slowly, lazily, hands in pockets, hunching
“Sebastian Michaelis.” She said quietly, proving she had also done her research but had hoped the Phantomhives would once more be just a shadow on the edges of her world, mentioned but never again touching her life. Vain hope it seemed. Mouser tilted her head back, straightening, tossing her hair away from her eyes, the braid dangling.

Sebastian Michaelis stood there, dark and stiff, as prim and proper as she had seen him amongst the slaughter he had wrought on Hoxton’s personal guard, red eyes examining her with slight amusement, darting ever so subtly to the cat at her feet who meowed loudly, offended by her lack of interest. She sighed and gave up, crouching swiftly, picking him up, now catching a clearly fascinated spark in the butler’s eyes as the cat demanded further attention curling around her arms, rubbing his furry face against her cheek, letting out a loud purring sound, clearly staking a claim while she scratched his dented ears, leaning against the crate, sighing wearily.

“What brings you here?”

“Orders.” The butler stepped slightly forward, reaching for her. Mouser tensed, torn between running and attacking, the crate protecting her back becoming a hindrance. His gloved hand slid over Tobias’ ears, making the cat purr, stopping his clawed paw from nailing the butler on the wrist. That brought his body way closer to hers than she would have liked and since he was so damned tall it forced her to look up so she wouldn’t lose eye contact. Still her body thrummed, poised to run, tense with his proximity, feeling quite trapped. Usually men didn’t get this close to her unless she was killing them. “The Young Master would like to recruit you.” Sebastian’s voice slid softly around her, deep and mesmerizing, his eyes unreadable as his hand moving near her face, playing with Tobias, the cat’s motion occasionally making the fabric of his glove brush against her skin, prickling her with a tiny jolt of awareness.

“Aye, aye…” She mumbled into the air, her voice carefree as Tobias yellow eyes closed, trembling in feline ecstasy. Mouser broke eye contact, chuckling quietly, feeling her face warm. She was blushing? “Why in the blighted depths of this flea bitten pit of filth would he want that?” His scent was… odd. And if he was close enough for her to sniff him it was way too close.

“Something about you impressed my Young Master.” His answer seemed simple and straightforward. Mouser couldn’t help but laugh as her eyes hardened coldly.

“Is he one of those? Fake philanthropists peppering the high ups trying to save some poor lost soul as a way to justify their lazily expanding bums?” Sebastian was smiling at her outburst. Mouser tensed, torn between running and attacking, the crate protecting her back becoming a hindrance. His gloved hand slid softly around her, deep and mesmerizing, his eyes unreadable as his hand moving near her face, playing with Tobias, the cat’s motion occasionally making the fabric of his glove brush against her skin, prickling her with a tiny jolt of awareness.

“Maybe it was that spirit.” His whisper was hot and seductive, a slow tempting rhythm, flattery stirring around her like a hypnotists voice, his lips close enough to her ear that the heath of his breath was teasing along her skin. Sebastian moved slightly away, stopping for a moment, touching her face, tilting her chin, making her look up once more. “The skills we desire are the ones this life has honed.”
The gesture had the condescendence one would give a child but the thumb on the underside of her jaw was making decidedly adult teasing. Mouser gulped, keeping her focus.

“And what would I gain in this trade?” The thief was not the trusting sort from the start and her life had taught her that nothing was as true as it appeared. People lied and people cheated. She made a living using those simple facts. Her mind was churning quietly, measuring the possibilities carefully.

Sebastian smiled, sliding the braid away from her face with his free hand, thumb brushing her cheek, a faint chime coming from her earrings as his fingers left them. Mouser almost jumped out of her skin with surprise and the sudden burst of warmth, the spark the touch ignited. She could see why Tobias was still purring in her arms even though her hands were as immobile as death. She looked up, eyes wide, her breathing in disarray. It was a smile that people would believe, a smile that spoke of innocence and honesty. Faker than hers.

“To be in a house, warm, protected, safe…” Hopes and dreams that lured… If they wanted her for her skill there would be few things safe about the job.

“Liar.” She whispered back, feeling breathless. But not a total lie either as she would be in the house, protection came with the master’s name although it wasn’t total and she could keep herself safe. Too close, too strange, too handsome. “Can you step back? This is looking mighty odd from the outside seeing most people here believe wholeheartedly that I am male.”

“Blind fools.” Sebastian whispered amused while stepping back, avoiding Tobias’ claws once again, standing straight and formal as if none of those moments where he was weaving some sort of hold over her never happened.

“I encourage it.” Nothing deadlier than being a pretty girl in the streets. Seen it so many times… Broken, hurt, tossed away. Mouser crossed her legs uneasily.

“I do not tell lies” He spoke after a long pause, looking around, appraising the surroundings once more as if preparing to face some sort of threat. Then he snapped out of it and his attention returned to her. There was something in his voice and in the sly smirk twisting his lips that made her believe, disbelieve and fear for her life.

“Telling the truth and being entirely honest are two very different things.” There was so much one could do with truths and half truths and omissions… Sometimes why lie at all?

“Not all understand that.” And darn if the slight warm smile of pride he gave her didn’t make her insides just a mite too warm and gooey. Mouser shook her head, the cold glass bead slapping her cheek, jolting her into awareness.

“Aye….” She mumbled slowly placing Tobias on the crate, next to her, hoisting herself up, sitting. “You want me to be what, then?”

“You would be placed as the Young Master’s secretary.” Sebastian did not move, staring at her. Mouser curled over herself, one elbow on her knee, head in hand, eyes narrowing.

“Secretary?” She deadpanned, amused.

“My assistant if you prefer to nitpick.” The butler shifted, taking his watch out, checking the time. Mouser’s eyes followed the nice silver clock, her mind making numbers out of it. A bit harder to steal seeing it was connected to his tailcoat by a chain. Any tug would be too noticeable.

“I…” She shook herself into the present, teetering. And Sebastian snagged that opportunity like a
true con artist, flipping her usual game.

“Would your group fault you for grabbing the most profitable opportunity? For escaping this?”

“No.” She admitted slowly. The core members of Jack’s gang protected her too much, treated her like kin even while exploiting her skill set. “Jack would encourage me to grab what opportunities I can to get out…” She grunted making a vague gesture towards her surroundings, resigned. His points were valid and his logic was rubbing itself with her own. Trickery. She was being nicely conned. And she was foolishly going to accept. Mouser resigned herself, defeated. Survival. Grab what you can and regret nothing you leave behind. “You sir are the devil.”

“I’m just a hell of a butler.” Sebastian retorted, looking slightly amused, closing his eyes with a smirk. “How soon will you be able to come to the Phantomhive Manor?”

So smug. Mouser snorted.

“As soon as I’m able.” She examined him. “Can I wear what I please?” There was a slight look of surprise in his eyes before he masked it and nodded. “Clothes will be provided. Also weapons will be purchased to your tastes if need be.” “Tomorrow.” She just had to announce her chance to Jack…

“Meet me in the Phantomhive town manor then.” Sebastian bowed slightly, taking her hand, first by the wrist, turning his palm slightly so hers fit within it, his fingers brushing the inner side of her wrist, kissing the back of her hand softly, in an almost courtly manner before walking away, leaving a lingering caress over her wrist and palm.

Mouser blinked a few times and then shook her head, turning her back on him, jumping of the crates, Tobias following on her step, still placing himself around her ankles as she went into the Dancing Pig.
sleeves, sliding the gloves into place to start the day, preparing breakfast, picking the tea leaves, ironing the paper. There were no other servants to order around so any other tasks would have to be done by him. Not that was any different for any normal day. He just didn’t have to fix another’s mistakes while fulfilling his obligations.

“Good morning Young Master. Its time to wake up.” Sebastian always liked saying that with the most sickeningly happy tone he could manage, a notch to loud and slightly too shrill. The Head of the Phantomhives was never a cheerful person, much less in the morning. It annoyed the boy but he could find no fault in the behaviour because that was the way a butler should conduct himself. Also he was too sleepy and too startled awake to notice the difference. He would just feel annoyed by it. The same went with opening the curtains before he had time to adjust to the awakened state, always resulting in a grunt and flinch.

Sebastian poured the tea with carefully measured movements, appraising the mood and the quantity while Ciel stretched looking around drowsily for a moment, before his eyes regained their usual focused frown. His soul hummed strongly in his senses.

“Have you done it?” Ciel demanded, turning, hands clutching the bedding.

“Today’s tea is Nilgiri.” It was dark in colour and very strong in flavour and scent, filling the room, the odour wafting lazily from the cup. Sebastian passed the cup and saucer gracefully, waiting till the Young Master had a firm grip, before straightening, stating his findings.

“Evelyn Crows. Born outside of wedlock, a bastard child of the heir of rather prominent merchant family who died in the ocean a few months before her birth. The mother, Sophie Crows, actress, singer, courtesan, died in childbirth. The child was immediately been taken to the orphanage and seeing that there was a considerable amount of money associated to her mother’s name the headmistress jumped at the opportunity. Also if tragedy continued to befall her sire’s family, the Deveriges, whose only survivor is the rather elderly Lady Ophelia Deverige”

Who would never in her strict and moral life allow a bastard child of her grandson to bear her upstanding name. But after death that would no longer be an issue for those who pursued said money.

“Evelyn could become an heiress to be sold in the wife auctions. While the headmistress had the child she could also manage her banking accounts. Evelyn abandoned the orphanage at age sixteen, as soon as she was considered an adult, and disappeared. Most people, whoever cared to remember, believe her to be dead.”

Sebastian paused for a moment, appraising his young master’s reaction. A slight frown of concentration cracking the usual bored look. He moved on.

“As Mouser few seem to be aware of her identity or even gender. Most fear her outside her gang. It appears she is an intelligence gatherer, an enforcer and assassin used by Smiling Jack when he feels the need to be ruthless with outsiders and others of his ilk.” Sebastian moved a bit around, going into the closet, choosing the day’s clothes, setting them neatly, ready for dressing. “She has agreed to work for you.”

Ciel sipped his tea considering. So soon? He expected it to put Sebastian through a considerable amount of trouble and moving around. True it was a similar method to what he used when recruiting the other servants but he had been remarkably fast at pouncing at that opportunity.
What is your interest?” The Earl pinpointed the heart of the matter quite quickly even if the original curiosity had come from him. Sebastian kept his face calm and composed, looking at him with a slight, politely blank, smile. “Answer me truthfully.” The boy prodded again, growing suspicious taking hold, his dislike for being left in the dark demanding answers immediately.

Sebastian sighed rather theatrically and adopted a pensive stance, looking up, towards the ceiling.

“Do you know how female demons are created? They start as female human prey…” Sebastian kept his voice light and playful, smiling carefully, leaving no doubt about what he wished to do to their new employee, making the young master cringe slightly, almost letting go of the cup and saucer, eyes wide.

“You want a toy?” Ciel cut, his voice dragged out painfully, before Sebastian could go into detail, his expression changing to absolute shock.

“Would you allow me that small token?” Sebastian bowed slightly, catching the clicking gears behind Ciel’s eyes after the shock had worn off. It took a while still but it was quite amusing to watch the play of emotions and feelings going on behind his eyes. He hadn’t intended to go into detail anyway but it was a chance to make the Young Master squirm. If a demon was useful two demons might be better… And a female at that. It wasn’t like they could trust Meyrin for some things and the incident with the dress still grated on the Young Master’s sensibilities. If Mouser had been there that time they could have used her to bait Druitt couldn’t they?

“Who would she obey?”

“Mouser will still be working for you and through the covenant forged by creating her she will abide by my words. As my loyalty is to the Young Master ultimately she will still be one of your pieces.” There. Pretty, neat and alluring.

“Very well.” Ciel conceded, eyes narrowing as he stared into his tea. He probably wanted to enjoy the sight of his struggles as females were known to be difficult and he had his own issues with his fiancée as the baseline comparison.

It was a small group crossing enemy territory at night through the heavy fog of the dimly lit streets, as the gas lamps were sparsely placed, enough to create light but not to eliminate the darkness as they did in the richest streets, not rising any suspicions from the outer patrols at the edges of the territory. They had been summoned there to talk about the incidents after all and nobody would want to disturb them before their own boss had ordered it. A bit of thuggish etiquette but when the gangs had the Yard, the coppers, the so called spider and the boyo breathing down their necks you either played by the underworld rules, bending them carefully here and there or prayed not to discovered while being outright greedy. That had been the Ferro’s problem by all accounts.

Meetings were a way to keep balance and talk about the distribution of territory and loot or to deal with some offence or demand. More often than not blood was spilled, leaders killed and more territory was added to the surviving group. Quite by accident or a way to cleanse an insult made at the talks.

The theatre wasn’t exactly abandoned despite its boarded up windows and shabby looking outside but it no longer hosted shows or a troupe. It used as Rory’s base and a way of showing off his power, dazzling underlings and supplicants with a performance of power created by all the glitter
within, using it as a noble would inhabit a palace. But being a former public house created for spectacles came with a few vulnerabilities, most of them compensated by the presence of heavily armed guards. It didn’t have the protection Jack enjoyed at the Pig. Taverns were considered neutral ground no matter what, no matter where.

Jack had no intention of talking.

That did not mean that appearances shouldn’t be kept while waiting to meet the one who had to be killed.

Mouser walked behind Jack, smoking quietly, head kept low, staring at where she placed her feet, hands stuffed into her pockets, closed lightly around the pistols. Lars and Phil talked to each other over her head, keeping their moods light, one on each side of her. Harry and Hobbs were on the lookout, their guns plainly in sight, watching the rear. Flanking Jack were Colton and Red, looking burly and angry. All in all a small guarding contingent proper to Smiling Jack boss status. Quite non-threatening.

They were allowed in by equally brutish looking door guards and asked to disarm in the first great hall, under a big bright chandelier. Elegantly worked tables lined the walls. Most of them were forgeries. But Rory liked to think himself a gentleman. Eight guards waited for them to comply, their own arsenals displayed.

This would be a critical trick to the plan.

Mouser blew a ring of smoke, taking the cigar away from her lips, tossing it on the tiled floor, crushing it slowly. A slight insult. Two of the thugs ran to fix, pushing her aside, sweeping the floor and rubbing a wet cloth over it. Jack went first with two pistols, taking them out, placing them on the table. They patted him down quickly, their manly pride quite baffled by the action, finding nothing else. He was followed by the other guys, the process similar, the patting awkward and seemingly ineffective, leaving Mouser for last, waiting, staring at the small pile of blades and pistols. She pretended to hesitate.

“Mouser.” Jack said calmly, as if admonishing a young boy.

There was a slight pallor in the faces of their opposition when she was identified. She sighed in resignation sliding the two pistols out of her jacket pockets followed by a trio of pen-knives from the inner lining, rolling her outer sleeves up and unsheathing two flat daggers, placing them on the table, crouching to pick up a pair of gambler’s guns out of her boots, another knife from her belt, explosives and blinders from her pants. Then she hopped in place for a moment, checking if the other weapons didn’t clink. They patted her down quickly, almost gingerly, focusing on the baggy pants, finding only her cigarettes and a lighter, allowing her to keep those, as her display had delayed them quite enough.

Rory waited in the centre of the brightly illuminated stage, opening his arms in welcome. Mouser used the time it took for him to complete his presentations and dramatic announcements, looking around, pinpointing the defences. No shooters in the galleries. They were actually filled with crates and merchandise, supplies and baubles. Solid doors had taken the place of the curtains. Maybe paranoia. He could also be murdered if someone managed to sneak in and settle in one of the booths. Guards flanked the entry points. One main door and two smaller, leading to the stage discretely disguised on the walls. The thugs were left on the audience under the watch of the door guards.

Mouser walked up with Smiling Jack, lighting a cigarette nonchalantly, unthreateningly, as Rory called someone named Pascal, a brute of a man, clearly a personal bodyguard, guiding them to the
private quarters behind the curtains where a table as set for the negotiations.

Jack sat.

Rory sat.

Pascal stood next to his boss.

Mouser stayed near hers playing with smoke.

“I do welcome you and your boy Jack…” Rory started placidly, trying to make his voice sound more cultured and higher class. It was not working. Mouser thought picking her cigarette, shaking the ash to the floor, watching his dismay and effort to conceal it. “Seeing that I invited you here… Care for a scotch?” He poured a generous amount to himself while eying his opposition carefully. Mouser blew a bit of smoke, placing the cigarette back on her lips, looking down, keeping her body still, hands casually crossed over her chest.

“There’s the matter of my urchins.” Jack said sweetly, his unnatural grin helped by the cold glow of his eyes. She saw Rory flinch. As her sources said he was fully aware of his blokes’ actions. The shot was cold and precise, catching Rory’s chest squarely before he had a chance to open his mouth, the second nailing the bodyguard before he had time to pull his pistol. Mouser lowered the gun she had fished out of her inner shirt and looked at Jack, taking the cigarette away from her lips, a grey cloud slithering out with a smile, approaching the men, delivering a second shot to Pascal’s prone form, truly dispatching him.

“That settles it then.” Mouser whispered wryly.

Jack chuckled, standing walking out, taking the stage.

Outside the sounds of the fight had grown and ebbed down, their ambush successful.

“Is any of you willing to die for a corpse?” Smiling Jack asked as the men he had brought and the ones that had invaded subdued the guards, those who had surrendered when the gunshots had echoed through the galleries from Rory’s backroom.

The trunk was almost full and most of her belongings seemed to be either tobacco, lighters, ammo or arms of some kind. She had chosen not to conceal any of them on her person that day. Seemed the nice respectful thing to do as Sebastian said they would supply her with weapons in addition to clothing. Some of hers might still be salvageable. Some of them were gifts.

Mouser had spent the night after the new territory had been taken in the tavern, celebrating their victory and her chance. While they indeed approve and encouraged the departure there was a lot of bemoaning about losing the Mouser and all the wonderful intel provided. How were they to repeat the success of Rory’s Raid without him? They had urchins, they had whores and they had brains, that’s how, was her laughing answer while raising a pint.

Jack had been helping her pack throughout the wee hours of the morning while cautioning her again and again and again about the ways of the nobles. Mouser just smiled while bobbing her head, murmuring an agreement occasionally. Do what’s right by you. That’s all I can ask. Jack said often through the speech.

She still refused his help as she loaded the trunk into the fiacre’ luggage rack, the vehicle that had
been called for her, driven by one of his men. The driver strapped the trunk into place silently, his eyes darting around naturally, the habit of a pit dweller, as Mouser hugged Jack quickly, in thanks, before hopping into the closed space or the passenger’s seat, leaning back, allowing herself a moment of relaxation, rubbing her eyes tiredly as the horses started their trot, the wheels moaning, the box bobbing. Then her attention snapped again to the world outside the window. How many nobles had they waylaid and robbed blind on their way home simply by swapping the driver and leading them into an alley?

The maze-like streets and wobbly dark wood and blackened brick façades of the under classes gave way to the well organized and fancifully arranged manors in almost no time, the sun making the whites gleam, the plants look lush and the fences no less imposing. Bumpy roads gave way to a smooth ride over flat cobblestone. The only movements that could be seen were the delivery carts and hackneys. Suppliers of goods, news and letters. The fiacre stopped abruptly at the backdoor of the Phantomhive townhouse with a groan, the horses snorting. Mouser hopped out without hesitation, helping the driver take her trunk, noticing the door opening quietly at the end of the small path through the garden.

“Thanks.” She said softly, picking up her luggage with a bit of effort, grunting, walking towards the house, closing the iron gate with her boot, panting a bit, placing the trunk down as the fiacre creaked away. Mouser stared at the manor for a long moment, crossing her arms, fingers touching her cigarettes without picking one. She could pinpoint at least eight points of entrance for a burglar, three of which could only be used by a very good one. The shrubbery and nicely balanced gardens added to the privacy of the main house. Something meowed from the bushes. She glanced down and smiled, crouching. “You’re not from these parts either…” Her hand petted the sleek black-and-honey head of the cat, scratching his chin with a coo, noticing it scarred tail and forepaws. Not a nobleman’s pet.

“Mouser.” She disguised her surprise when Sebastian’s voice caught her unawares, gulping a squeak, barely keeping herself from hopping onto her trunk like a lady that had just seen a rat, standing slowly, turning slightly guiltily, keeping a straight face with some effort. He was smiling faintly, eyes closed, tilting his head a bit.

“Good morning.” Mouser grated out softly, embarrassed.

“Indeed. Welcome. Come.” He picked up her trunk as if it weighted nothing, ignoring her protest with a wave, guiding her into the house, the cat following them, sitting by the door, staring pointedly. Sebastian placed the trunk near the kitchen table and picked up something from the counter, going back outside, giving it to the cat with an unguarded smile and a caress. So that’s why the cat was sneaking and loitering about.

Mouser chuckled, amused by the glimpse of a softer side and looked around. It was like any other kitchen in the nobles’ domains, big, neat, well stocked and well equipped.

Sebastian came back closing the door quietly, straightening with a sigh, looking her up and down. Mouser blushed suddenly, feeling… oddly nude. She coughed a bit averting her eyes, breaking the feeling. Maybe it was because he knew she was a woman and was not someone she had known for a long time. It was just the strangeness of being regarded as female after quite some years of boyishness.

“How will this go, then?” Mouser asked, rubbing her hands together, stretching.

“I thought you might want to bathe and change clothes before we go through your weapons and check what can be of use and what needs to be improved in order to be a Phantomhive servant. Then the Young Master would like to talk to you before I show you to your room and clothes.”
Sebastian quickly surmised the plan while opening her trunk and starting to place her armoury on the table, flicking open one of the pocket knives, checking the blade. “The bathing chambers are down this corridor and I assume you don’t want my help.” There was something so suggestive about the way he rolled the words out that made her shiver in instinctive response, barely suppressing a girly sigh. Then her sense of humour kicked in. Nobles were helpless in those things. The boyo being younger than most would be doubly so. And if she was to be Sebastian’s assistant… something told her nanny might be an appropriate appellation also.

“I’d rather not be manhandled on the first day no matter how handsome you look.” Mouser sniggered, lowering her head in acknowledgment as she walked out. She heard his slight chuckle as a mild triumph on her part.

Bathing chambers…

Even if it was the servants’ part of the house it was a good deal more luxurious than she was waiting for. The room was of modest proportions, with a small fireplace to warm the water and keep the air pleasantly balmy. The coal was burning low, just enough to warm the water as August was still coming to an end and summer blazed outside. The tub had to be an item that once belonged to the main bathing chamber but had been relegated down because its colour had faded and turned dull and some cracks lined the porcelain. It was already partially full and warm when Mouser’s fingers glided over it. Towels were piled on their cabinet with soaps and sponges and a change of clothes awaited her on a small bench. A plain simple blue dress. Just to cover up it seemed.

A cracked mirror returned her visage for a moment. Pale and sleep-deprived. Mouser stuck her tongue out at the reflection and stretched, chuckling, undressing, sliding the braid loose and washing the brown locks first before twisting the short unruly strands, keeping them out of the way and adding the hot water, grabbing a soap and indulging in a bath.

The clothes didn’t fit right but that wasn’t their purpose but the way they made her look reminded her a bit too much of the orphanage’s uniform so she did her best not to look at the mirror after placing cloth over her body, returning to the kitchen, stopping surprised when she noticed that her weapons were cleaned and displayed on the long table while the butler busied himself with the breakfast preparations. Also there was a simple mug of steaming tea and some sort of curly glazed bread waiting for her in the edge of the table, near what seemed to be the bladed weapons section.

Mouser was sure she hadn’t taken that long to bathe. There was no way… She glanced at him once more, eyes narrowing with suspicion. The thief shrugged and walked in sitting on the bench, picking up the hot tea, sniffing, glancing at the sweet bread as if it would be taken at any moment. Its scent was strong and enticing.

“It would be no good if you stomach rumbled while talking to the Young Master.” Sebastian looked over his shoulder while tilting the skillet, stirring something that smelled quite heavenly.

“Thank you. So what’s your opinion on my haul?”

“Quite a selection. How do you carry and distribute them?”

“I prefer to have the two flat daggers against my forearms. The pocket knives… are very easy to conceal so I usually loose count. I keep finding them in inseams I forgot I had.” Mouser crossed her legs, balancing on the bench, taking a careful but blissful sip of black tea, sighing into the cup.
“The pistols and revolvers… usually got two under the arms, two behind my back, against the small of it, and two on my thighs. And there’s the gambler’s guns. They’re weak but in close quarters that doesn’t matter.” The group of derringers gleamed prettily and daintily on the other side of the table. “One in the breast pocket, two against my waist and one in each boot.” She sighed, smiling. It seemed like overkill when said like that. Sebastian threw her an amused look perhaps sensing her train of thought. “And then I tend to use whatever is available wherever I’m at.”

“All of them seem in good working order. You’ll just need custom sheaths for the daggers and proper holsters as your uniform will not allow you to keep them hidden in messy folds.” He placed everything he had been preparing into a tea cart and smiled.

“And this is?” She pulled the dress a bit.

“Just something to wear while waiting.” Sebastian was placing the breakfast items on a silver platter, displaying them carefully. Mouser frowned. Somehow that seemed like an excuse… No matter how rich Phantomhive might be clothes with that swiftness were… “Enjoy your tea.”

Mouser smiled mildly, reflexively, as he left, looking at shimmering dark liquid within the mug.
“Diced, sliced, cubed or just peeled?” The thief asked tossing another peeled potato into the pot flicking the curling rind from the knife into the trash sack, picking up another, sliding the blade around it slowly, leaning back, the bench tilting, bare feet propped on the table. Sebastian had glared a bit at that, clearly going for a scolding, growing quiet and warily watchful when she picked the kitchen knife and started to take care of the vegetables.

“You don’t have to help with lunch preparations.” The butler said once more, checking on the cake, busying himself with the meat, sticking cloves and rubbing seasoning into it, the gloves stained red.

“Hmmm. I’m not supposed to assist you?” She tossed the yellowish-white oval in and picked another brown lump, her tone playful. “Besides a house this size with only you as a servant…”

“It’s quite all right.” Sebastian lowered his head a bit and swept the onions into a skillet and placed it on the fire to get them golden. “Just peeled then.”

“Looks like.” Another potato bounced against the pot, the soft sound of steel against the vegetable restarting. Her legs were crossed by the ankles and the dress was not exactly set on its most decorous flow but there was no one else there now was it? “It took you a lot more time to wake up the boyo than to do all those chores that by rights were not a butler’s and would take probably all afternoon to be completed by a single pair of hands.”

“Your point being?” Sebastian stopped for a moment, glancing over his shoulder, recognizing an interrogation, amused by the fact that she had started to connect the dots so soon. Curious humans usually did not survive him. Sebastian shook his head slightly, going back to the miserable tasks he had to perform at near human capabilities. She grinned, moving a bit tossing the potato at his head, watching as he sidestepped it and caught it in his palm, placing it next to him, near the sink without even a glance towards it. Her smile was smug as another peel started to curl over her hands.

“Deamhan.” Mouser murmured calmly standing, tossing the last potato in, picking the pot, placing it on the counter, standing next to Sebastian, grabbing the one that had been thrown, joining it with its kind. The evidence was clear but as people often chose to look the other way when faced with the surreal it was not strange that the Phantomhive butler had been also overlooked. Superstition and religion still held their powers and place even if the world seemed to be changing. Then there was the interest in occult, hypnotism, mysticism and ancient tradition as fashion dictated. Also the cats. Wasn’t it said cats only loved women and demons? Tobias certainly was responsible for more bloodshed amongst the clientele of the Pig than the bouncers.

“You speak Gaelic?” Sebastian smiled, fangs now apparent, his eyes going from dusky red to a pinkish glow, wiping his hands on the apron, turning towards her, towering over her. Mouser examined them languorously, curiosity somehow overruling her fright. Unless he had put opium in the tea there was no way that could be a fakery.

“Cussing mostly. Had a few Scots in the gang.” She smiled at him putting on a show of brazenness. “They were... not quiet.”

“The Young Master will be disappointed.”

“Likes the drama does he not?” Mouser leaned, washing the potatoes, her sleeves pulled to her
elbows, placing each cleaned vegetable on the cloth he had spread out for that purpose. Sebastian stared at her arms and wrists for a moment, finding scars crisscrossing them, thin and pale, old. They didn’t seem to impair her movements so he left it at that. “You said… when you came to the Dancing Pig who were you talking for?”

“For my Young Master of course.” Sebastian turned once more to the oven and stirred the onions.

“Despite what was said… I can see no need for my talents when he already had yours.” She turned slightly, staring at him with a frown. “Why do you want me?”

“I’m a man.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m still male.”

“And now I feel I should back away very slowly and quietly.”

“You won’t.”

“Feeling very smug about…” Mouser hadn’t seen him move, her words dying in a breath. But somehow he had and now was standing in front of her, pinning her against the counter, arms caging her, bare palms flat against the stone, a sly gleam in his dark eyes, his face hovering near enough for her to feel the heat of his skin on hers, his scent once again making her senses falter. His fingertips teased slowly along her cheek, the freed arm giving her no room to sneak away, tilting her chin up, slightly, exposing her throat, just before his warm lips brushed over hers in a light, sweet kiss that lingered for a few too quick heartbeats before he stepped away, returning to his chores with a smirk his eyes lingering on her for a moment longer before snapping the gloves into place once again and getting the cake out of the oven.

Mouser kept her hands on the counter, gripping the edge of the stone, her eyes wide before letting out a breath, closing them, her face reddening and getting out of her tiptoes. Well then… that was a first…

“Blighted overly randy black hearted angel kissed hell-spawn…” She grumbled rubbing her face with a groan. “What are you so keen on gaining by taking me?” Mouser’s voice came out softly, her outburst calming some of the turmoil.

“Power.” Sebastian answered, showing his fangs in his smile, not facing her directly while mixing the cake’s filling. She looked away, letting go of the counter.

“What do I gain?”

“Power.” The demon repeated in a lower tone, leaving so much unanswered.

Mouser did possess the skills needed for a secretary. The test Ciel challenged her with was relatively easy. Read, write, count, sort the mail, present a quick report, behave and talk like a well bred lady. To keep the façade those would be essential. Her other abilities needed no further exhibiting.

Ciel examined the penmanship on the refusals of the day’s invitations with a mildly satisfied expression before signing them. According to her, as he verified each requirement carefully, they
did manage to teach something at the orphanage in-between beatings and being thrown out to steal. Mouser didn’t elaborate on that, sitting with a straight back and a demure expression, hands over her lap, the tips of her fingers blackened by ink, bare feet over the carpet, looking very much the part of the sweet innocent young lady. The dress helped.

Even though she still called the Young Master boyo it seemed to be something he was willing to admit. A quirk of hers… as Meyrin’s clumsiness, Bard’s explosions and Finny’s… whole self. The sheer usefulness counterbalanced the harmfulness of such attitudes. Also there was the demonic potential to consider and the fact that the boy often got out of his way to find something that sparked his interest or amusement.

Sebastian stood next to Ciel’s chair, solemnly, composing the picture of a sombre master and the faithful butler.

Mouser’s eyes narrowed slightly, suspicious about the shift and positioning. Yes, he liked the drama and was preparing for the big announcement. Probably would like her to have a bit of a vapours fit. Her fingers reached for the place where her cigarettes would be, stopping short, remembering she had none in that dress. She huffed and flexed her hands slowly.

“There is something else you might need to know.” Ciel Phantomhive announced as his face was composed into a smug grin, the cadence of his voice carefully enunciated. Mouser smirked, leaning back on her chair, adopting a more relaxed countenance, crossing her legs under the loose skirt, one elbow on the chair’s arm, face on her palm, the picture of slouching sloth.

“He’s not human. I know.” Mouser said softly tilting her head towards Sebastian.

Ciel’s face was a mask of pure bewilderment and astonishment, his dramatic moment cut short by her bored answer. Sebastian chuckled discreetly behind him, his eyes flaring demonic for a moment as his gloved fist was pressed against his mouth, hiding the smirk. The Earl of Phantomhive managed to regain his footing, coughing to cover up the surprise, putting on airs.

“Stop showing off Sebastian.” Ciel straightened, his hands placed on the desk, interlacing as he leaned forward, conspiratorially. “It bodes well that you could realize the true nature of one of my servants. As he informed you of your secondary duties?”

“Strict boyo.” Mouser smiled and looked at the clock for a moment, frowning. “Those involve guarding you. As you saw before I have no issues with that.” She blew her hair out of the way, smirking.

“Very well.” Ciel nodded slowly. “Sebastian show her to her room and help her settle in. I expect you start tomorrow morning. And bring me some cake.”

What did a lady need? It wasn’t a hard question to answer in theory. Sebastian had chosen clothes, shoes, gloves, underwear and some choice pieces of jewellery. A servant of the Phantomhive manor needed to be elegant and presentable. At least the ones who were seen with the Young Master. Also it was another way to keep her attention. The butler closed the door of the study after delivering the orange infused black tea and marble cake to the Young Master, returning to the servants’ quarters in a sedated pace, checking his clock.

For now Mouser would share a room with Meyrin. Despite the fact that he had somewhat admitted his intentions and had been toying with her ever since he’d received the order it would be too
The last thing he wanted was to complicate his play. Seduction had its rhythms and it depended heavily on the prey’s acceptance. He knocked softly.

“Come in.” Mouser answered, her voice muffled by the door. She was staring at the full length mirror that stood between the two narrow beds as he walked in, the reflection returning a mistrustful look as it stared back while she made small movements.

It was a simple room, plain walls, boarded floor, a couple of simple gas lamps providing the light, one window near the ceiling, closed, the beds, a small rug in between them, a large wardrobe against the wall.

Sebastian appraised her slowly, appreciating his choices. The elegantly tailored black trousers, a male model adapted to her feminine shape, a linen white shirt, the collar opened just so to reveal a black silk choker, a play on a bowtie, under a pinstriped, black and white, corseted waistcoat with silvery buttons. Black leather and lace round toed ladies’ high heeled boots gave her a bit more of height. A silver comb with engraved ravens pinned her hair back, leaving only a few fashionably unruly strands out.

“It suits you.” Sebastian commented as he approached and adjusted the choker into a softer bow and the comb, creating the illusion of a twisted bun instead of just pinned back short hair, his hands taking their time over the soft skin of her neck and brown tresses. Mouser chuckled, catching on, looking at him through the mirror.

“These are lovely. And the pants... But the dress…” She glanced at the great amount of dark, silver threaded grey silk with black highlights in the closet and shuddered. The demon found it amusing that she displayed more fear towards the dress than she had to anything else so far. His hands slid down her back and adjusted the lacing with a few tugs, tightening the bow resting on the small of her back. Mouser gave a few curt gasps at each tug, the last one succeeding in breaking her balance and making her lean on her heels against him. Sebastian’s arms went around her waist, allowing her to steady herself.

The thief huffed, slapping his hand, muttering in annoyance, going from a smooth posh accent to the rhyming slang to a few words in Gaelic peppering the string of foul expressions.

“You’ll only have to wear it in the off chance the Young Master deigns to attend a social party. Otherwise this will be your uniform.” The fit was now perfect as it should be. The spares would also have to be adjusted but that could only be made when she wore them... “Do you have room for your concealed weapons?”

“Various. I could also stop using some of those depending on how easy it is to reach the others with the holsters you mentioned.” Mouser started to roll her sleeves, folding them carefully around her elbows. “Should we start dinner?” She asked, showing him his stolen clock, opening it with a flick, checking the time. Sebastian smiled taking the heavy silver away pocketing it once more. “Of course.” He opened the door, allowing her to walk out first.
from inside the butler had opened the door. He half expected her to be deeply asleep and as contrary to waking up and leaving the covers to get something done as every other human so far. In the main house more often than not had to wake up the other servants… That grated a sigh out of him as he closed the door and walked towards the kitchen.

Sebastian found Mouser sitting on the bench at the table, legs crossed, the booted foot bobbing softly, the back door opened to allow more light within the room, reviewing what seemed to be a list quickly scribbled in an scratch of paper, a stack of notes and letters by her side, the hair comb on top of them, a mug in hand, the cigarette on her lips, humming to herself as she reread the words.

Working?

“Mornin’ Sebastian.” Mouser smiled, turning to him on the bench when she noted his presence, placing the mug on the table, shaking the ash into a chipped cup he had tossed away last morning, placing the white cylinder inside, blowing the silvery smoke to the side. Already dressed, the sleeves rolled out of the way, new ink staining her fingertips, the fountain pen sitting harmlessly by her side.

“You’re an early riser.” The demon noted. Odd. Quickly Sebastian checked the time before giving his attention back. A list of names was placed next to her. All noble or bourgeois families. It had to be the dwindling party invitations, the last attempts of merriment of the Season. A note from Lau was separated from the pile. Then there was heap with the Funtom company related correspondence. The papers were separated, from sensation press to the more serious news of the Times. And a simple brown package with the leathersmiths’ store symbol was placed a bit further away.

“I was trained to be so. Much as I dislike it.” Mouser chuckled, the shadow of memories carefully concealed behind the easy smile. “You don’t sleep do you?”

“That is a considered luxury to one such as I.” He picked up the package and opened it, checking the contents for flaws. They were acceptable. “These are for you.” He gave her the belts and holsters. “Keep at least your daggers with you at all times hidden under the sleeves when guests are present.”

“Aye, aye.” Mouser stood slowly, moving towards the room, taking the new implements with her, the footsteps echoing softly against the floor.

Sebastian started the breakfast preparations once again, restarting the routine. She returned a few moments later, the sheaths strapped by small belts to the outer side of her forearm, sleeves still not covering them, the handles of the flat daggers a bit past her wrists. The sleeves would easily hide them. Judging from the time and the slight trace of steel mixing with her scent she had at least a dozen more pocket knives and, most likely, a pair of gambler’s guns in her person now. The scent of gunpowder was too faint.

“Do you need any help?” He shook his head calmly, allowing her to return to her seat, turning, placing a small black appointment book in front of her. Mouser opened it, examining the entries. It was the logs of the Young Master’s teachers, classes, appointments, contacts… One of his responsibilities to be shared with her. The pen scratched a few more things on the makeshift list, adding as she picked up the cigarette once more. “Lau sent a message mentioning the Lamb. I’m thinking it has something to do with the why you’re in London.”

“The Lamb?” Sebastian encouraged, placing a plate in front of her with toast, smoked salmon and a bit of cottage cheese with herbs. Mouser stared at it for a moment, frowning, like she had done
every single time he placed food in front of her. She tilted her head slightly, almost as if debating if she should accept or not.

“Brothel. Heard rumours about it having some rooms dedicated to opium which would be a breach on the deals with the Chinese and the boyo.” Mouser huffed, picking up the fork, poking at the salmon. Sebastian smiled. Less need for him to nose around if she knew what was being said. “Quite recently in fact. Sweetness wouldn’t be this stupid. She died a few weeks ago. Client kill.” Mouser snorted. “Maybe she was in the way.”

“Today’s duties will revolve around the opium den and dismantling it.” Sebastian organized the platter.

“It’s on Green’s turf. If anyone is responsible it has to be him… No Madam would do it without gang support. Unless she was not very bright.”

There was a very subtle underlying layer of harassment that faded away to even more subdued levels while maintaining its vein as soon as the boyo was completely focused, giving way to a somewhat servile but still aloof brand of service as Sebastian served the tea, his voice smooth and calmly weaving through the room. From the greeting, to the curtains, to the tone. Mouser watched with a slightly raised eyebrow, keeping silent as instructed, the appointment book in hand and lips closed into a line, maintaining her smile a bit restrained, standing next to the now opened window, watching.

Charlotte had been the one in the orphanage that could do that and get away with it. She had a way of looking so innocent while giving the headmistress tea boiled with crickets, coal dust in the scones’ blueberry jam and allowing the fire in the office to gutter out, chilling the old hag. There was a never ending list of pranks Charlotte had pulled and gotten out of. Nowadays she was one of the Fashionable Impure, a courtesan with amassed wealth, beauty and a blackmail list three miles long. They still kept in touch as old accomplices although Mouser tended to avoid her due to the unfortunate tendency Charlotte displayed towards dressing her like a doll.

“Good morning.” Mouser chuckled slightly, clearing her voice when the boyo’s attention shifted towards her, blushing a bit, snuggling into the covers sharply. “Sebastian informed me that you have no scheduled lesson for today. This morning you have to appraise the correspondence for the Company and give your yes or no to the invitations that arrived so I can forward the letters.” The thief checked her list quickly and nodded. Not a busy day. Too much to do at night. “I’ll leave you to get dressed and have your breakfast.”

“Read the invitations and be ready to summarize them.” Ciel ordered, sipping his tea, his eyes on his new pawn.

“Aye, aye. I’ll be in the study then.” Mouser smiled softly, unbothered by the unveiled contract mark in his eye, lowering her head in a nod, leaving with a slight saunter on her step.

“Still giving you no trouble?” Ciel asked, turning his face slightly as Sebastian placed the clothes on the bed, helping him into them.

“Surprisingly it is so.” He answered truthfully. As a servant of the Phantomhive she was at least more housebroken than any of their other… idiots.

“And your goal?”
“It is a bit early to try making a covenant with her.” Sebastian looked towards the study, eyes narrowing. Even if she seemed accepting so far there were still some hurdles to be tested and some more work he needed to weave around her before Mouser fell into his hands. The promise of power seemed to be lacking its usual persuasiveness.

“How long is this going to take?” Ciel grumbled from the corner of the alley, dressed as himself, the cape covering his body heavily, face hidden in the shadow of his top hat, peering into the lit entrance of the Lamb, his expression dour.

Mouser huffed a wisp of smoke and turned a page of the salacious romance that was the new rage. After the letters and financial reports had been dealt with the Earl had decided to go in a shopping trip. Apparently one of them had noticed her interest in the book when walking past the book store and its massive line of female customers.

The military style double breasted cape-jacket hid her weapons neatly as she leaned against the wall, standing close to the boyo as instructed. Mouser marked the page, glancing at him with a smile, blowing a billowing cloud into the air deliberately, peeking too, taking his hat off, placing it on her head and using his head as a support for her chin, hugging his shoulders. Ciel was fuming but said nothing of it for the moment.

“Not much I’d say.” Carefully she slipped out a watch from the cape and checked the time, allowing him to see it too. “He goes in, looks fancy and gets the trust of the Madam. Should be quick, he’s glib enough. Gets shown the smoke rooms. Then gets us and we get Green.” Mouser pocketed the watch once more. “Comfortable there boyo?”

“Don’t touch me so freely.” He growled but made no gesture against her.

“Then don’t look so defenceless.” Mouser whispered against his ear, pulling him towards the dark as a pair of males passed by, staring at the spot where they had been and now seemed gone from. “They have been eying you for the last ten minutes. Now they’re convinced you’re just another snooty overly cautious noble customer out for a good time.” Her arms loosened around him and his hat was placed once more on his head as Mouser tossed the spent cigarette onto the cobblestones and stepped on it, resuming her reading. In the dark.

“Forgive me for keeping you waiting.” Sebastian said suddenly, standing too near, his heath touching her cheeks, startling both of them. Mouser groaned, closing the book she almost dropped. The good steamy bit was coming and now he chose to arrive?

“This is Green’s house.” Mouser stopped, pointing towards an apparently normal residence on the other side of the street, between a group of similarly built brick places, the lights blinking faintly behind darkened panels of dirty glass, lighting a cigarette placed on her lips with a click of the steel lighter, hands sliding out of the cape through the slits cut on the fabric for such a purpose, placing it on a pocket once again. The light shone for a second, the fire touching the tobacco, turning it into an ember.

It was dark and the fog was clouding the streets even further. She blew the smoke forward nonchalantly, mixing it with the ambience, sliding her arms under the cape once more. For the end of summer it was slightly chilly.
It was Green’s doing after all, the new Madam of the Lamb one of his favourites, pliable and dumb enough to think he was all powerful and fold quickly into the scheme. The boss supplied the opium through back channels Lau had thought long closed, and had done little to distance himself from the operation, focusing solely on profit, providing minimal security despite the risks. The boyo had sent a message to the Chinese as they left the brothel street. They were going to Green’s, kill his guards, interrogate the man, locate the storehouses and torch the operation. Simple enough.

Mouser exchanged a look with Sebastian who had been eying the building with the same serene expression as ever. He tilted his head slightly towards her as they waited Ciel’s orders.

“Do you know more about it?” Ciel asked, staring forward, his eye narrowed as he tried to pierce the fog.

“I’ve never been in it seeing that his turf was not close to Jack’s and he never hosted a meet. Even so it shouldn’t be too different of a normal house.” Mouser turned slightly, hands under the cape touching the handles of her daggers. “He’ll have guards. Two are always at the windows of the upper floor.” A group of drunken man walked by them, making noise, laughing and singing. “They might have already spotted us but with this fog we may appear as harmless as those drunkards. Or not appear at all.”

“At least twenty men.” Sebastian added.

“Crowded… But with his line of business it was to be expected some paranoia.” Mouser smiled, taking the cigarette away from her lips, making a few rings. “Especially if you’re going to bark at his door, neh boyo?” Ciel grunted, hiding his sudden annoyance. He closed his eye for a moment then looked towards the two black clad figures he had with him, sternly. One tall and imposing. The other almost as short as he was.

“You two, this is an order: Capture Green.”

Mouser smiled. Sebastian grinned, bowing slightly, one hand against his chest.

“Yes, my Lord.” He said deliberately slow, an amused gleam in his red eyes. He moved, picking up Mouser suddenly, lifting her easily off the ground. She managed out a muffled squeak, her expression turning to a moment of alarm as he propped her against his shoulder, the arm under her bottom, purposely holding her a bit unbalanced.

“Comfortable?”

“You trice cursed berk of a bloke.” Mouser grumbled, crossing her arms over his head, sighing, placing her chin over her wrists, refraining from squirming, blushing slightly, looking pointedly away. ‘Thinkin’ upper entrance?’

Sebastian said nothing before jumping, both fading into the fog.

Ciel groaned and lowered his head. Barking at his door, was it? He huffed in mild amusement as the sound of cracked of wood and shingles echoed throughout the streets.

The guards were looking up, startled, guns in hand without shooting when the ceiling cracked and collapsed, allowing them an entry point. Sebastian straightened, looking around quickly. Mouser had disappeared suddenly as soon as her feet touched the wooden boards of the attic’s floor even before the mist of broken wood and accumulated filth settled. There was a sudden grunt behind
him as a life faded away, the slight click of heels letting him know Mouser was on the move, before the men started screaming for reinforcements and the bullets were shot.

The demon drew the silver knives and the fight began.

Mouser killed the sentinel by the stairs quickly with a jab of the knife, pushing the body away, avoiding the blood, deftly unbuttoning most of the cape, leaving only the raised collar closed to allow freer movements, jumping down to the first floor, crouching, looking around quickly before hiding when the reinforcements started to pour out of the rooms, startled, going up, stomping along with enough noise to wake up the whole neighbourhood.

Only one of her knives was out and her free hand was touching the gun that was holstered on her thigh carefully, waiting for a few moments before moving.

Green was like so many others… he got the money and tried to put on airs, creating a life of luxury inside a house modified to be a fortress. Which meant he was in a room in-between soft sheets and plump feathery pillows, forgetting his thuggish roots. Paranoia would drive him deep down and probably that house had escapes built in, leading to the Thames or into other people’s basements and wineries, to the under-London labyrinth.

Mouser ran down the main set of stairs barely looking at the men she shot or stabbed out of her way, gunning for the basement before the commotion reached further down and made their prey escape. Although he would be the kind of man that would wait until the last moment, to always have the last word and threat in victory and defeat. She barged into the basement suddenly, catching a glimpse of the startled Green amidst the brocade of a duvet, sitting up from what appeared to be a deep slumber, stabbing the bodyguard that had advanced first on the throat, sidestepping the blood, drawing one of the guns, shooting the brute further away on the chest before turning to Green, pointing the smoking gun. He was just a terrified man in his sleeping gown for the moment. Hadn’t reached for any of the pistols hidden amongst the luxury.

“You’re… Jack’s Mouser…” A flash of recognition crossed his face although it was heavily mixed with confusion as he scrambled under her aim. The a flash of something more, a blooming hope made her drop the gun and reach for the second dagger, turning suddenly as the order snapped, the man diving for cover and possibly some sort of armament. “Kill him”

Mouser’s eyes narrowed in mid movement, recognition kicking in, slowing down, stopping short when Sebastian grabbed her wrists, smirking. She sighed lowering her head with a small shake. Both blades were pointed at his stomach in what should have been a horizontal slash.

“Buggering bloody hell you daft tosser…” She cussed twisting out of his grip, sighing once again, sheathing both daggers after shaking the remnants of blood of the right one, recovering the gun, holstering it too. “Almost spilled you innards.” She blew a sigh sideways almost rolling her eyes.

“That is Green.” Sebastian confirmed, pulling her closer, one arm around the waist, patting her head.

Mouser hissed and tried to shake his hands away.

“Aye.” She gritted out when the demon finally let her go. “Shouldn’t you be getting the boyo?”

“I am already here.” Ciel walked down the stairs, occupying one of the armchairs without a glance towards the bodies, adopting a relaxed slouching stance as Sebastian illuminated the room.
“You opened the door, didn’t you?” Mouser grumbled, looking pointedly towards the butler. Then she shrugged and slid the cape off, sitting on the chair arm, crossing her legs, leaning back with a tired sigh, lighting a cigarette, waiting.

Green scrambled away, stopped by a bedpost, shivering like a young tree in a storm.
Delivering Green was a hassle but that would put the rest of the responsibility in Lau’s back so the Earl of Phantomhive could return to his mansion and, according to the boyo, have some peace. Sebastian carried the unconscious man without looking like he was making any kind of effort through the darkened streets, the carriage being something that would draw too much attention to their movements. Mouser tagged along at a sedated pace, walking side by side, serving as the guide of their little expedition.

The man had been unwilling to talk at first, as Ciel started his carefully prepared questions, trying to reach for a gun hidden under one of the trunks at the bottom of the bed, until she broke both his index fingers. Hard to pull a trigger without them. Or even hold a knife. Mouser had done it out of habit, chuckling a bit self-conscious when both demon and master stared at her with way too interested looks.

Then he sang without further interrogation or insistence on their part perhaps hoping to buy his freedom.

The boyo had returned to the mansion, Sebastian had helped him into bed with all the butler dictates and Mouser had been sitting in the kitchen, watching the prisoner while cleaning and prepping the weapons she had used. Green had been unconscious for the last hour and a half or so. And there was the downright scary the habit Sebastian seemed to be developing… interrupting her reading just when the heroine was about to be blissfully ravished, making her jump out of the chair when a slow deliberate breath moved lazily against her neck, just bellow the earrings.

“It’s down there.” Mouser stopped in front of a darkened arch, by the waterfront, looking at the stairway whose abrupt curvature hid the path from prying eyes. Another alley, another dead end most would think. “Lau and his lap-girls are usually in the main room, near the back. Not one for leaving the den unattended, I’ve heard” After a few steps down Chinese lanterns illuminated the stairs, guiding the clientele towards a closed door, deep down. “Have you ever been?”

“Usually Lau tends to appear at the mansion or the manor quite randomly. The Young Master rarely felt the need to look for him.” Sebastian leaned, opening the door. Mouser chuckled entering the dark, misty and hot atmosphere, crossing the room calmly, ignoring the smoke, the dazed men lounging on their mats, corners or divans and the offers of opium. “And you?”

“Lau is one of the mafia bosses, one of the powers of the streets. The gangs have to thread carefully.” Mouser shrugged as they reached the Chinese that lounged about with a pipe and eight girls. “Especially the ones based here, near the East End.”

“Ah… it’s the butler and…” Lau stared for a moment as Sebastian placed Green on the floor, blowing a billowing cloud of pale smoke, idly examining her. Then the Chinese chuckled. “Jack’s kitty.” He announced with a happy tone. The girls moved a bit, giving Lau room to conduct his business as he leaned, his attention shifting towards the one that had challenged his rule and the Phantomhive’s decisions. RanMao remained, looking over her shoulder, sitting idly on the Chinese’s’ lap.

“Meow.” Mouser deadpanned, crossing her arms with a sheepish smile, exchanging a small look with the usually unemotional RanMao. He had been one of the first outsiders to notice maybe
because he was not as an airhead as he acted or maybe because he was used to noticing girls. And act accordingly much to Jack’s chagrin and the onlookers’ disgust. And Mouser’s distress. But it was all play and he could be dissuaded by a couple of slaps on the questing hands, usually shaking it off as a joke.

“Ah a man such as him…” the Chinese adopted a menacing posture, moving to examine the unconscious former gang leader. “To try such a deed…” Lau scoffed, giving the pipe to one of his girls, turning towards them once more. “Who is he again?”

Mouser stretched softly, sighing tiredly, walking in tiptoes to avoid any loud noises from the heels, before starting to unbutton her cape, disappearing into the corridor, going into the room that was given to her. It still felt odd. And big. In the other house there should be at least a couple of maids to fill it out, shouldn’t it? Because as much as sharing a sleeping place made her think of the orphanage it was better than to look upon the empty bed next to her and think of the second Wednesdays of each month. She was out the boots, holsters, assorted pocket knives and placing the waistcoat on the empty bed when the soft knock on the door called her, discreetly and quietly.

Sebastian stood there, waiting when she slid the door open. Most likely he had finished the rounds, locking doors and checking for intruders. They stared at each other for a moment in silence, keeping the appearances, the masks they wore for Phantomhive’s benefit. A couple of days and he was… The butler reached for her, leaning slightly, cupping her face in his palm possessively, sliding into her room, closing the door silently behind him, the free arm looping around her waist, leaning back, dragging her to him. He was no longer wearing the outer jacket or the tailcoat and the fabric under her palms was soft and warmed by his skin.

“You behaved beautifully.” Sebastian whispered against her ear, dragging his voice out slowly, playing with her earrings, creating a rhythm, a soft hypnotic chime.

“I’d thank you if I didn’t think you are plotting something.” Mouser started with nonchalance, her fingers tightening on the shirt as she shifted, trying to break his grip, before mewling softly, lowering her head slightly as he kissed her neck suddenly, feeling a blush creep over her cheeks, forehead touching his chest.

“Plotting?” Dark, playful in tone, moves as sharp and abrupt that left her disoriented... And there was suddenly the bed under her and a demon on top. No gloves. A mark over the back of his left hand. Black nails. His hands tugged her shirt, trapping her arms on the sleeves, exposing more of her skin. The soft tug of silk around her neck as he pulled her choker free, the ribbon hanging loosely after tightening almost painfully before disappearing entirely, leaving a ghost of a caress behind.

Mouser bit her lip slightly, blinking in surprise, gulping a gasp.

Sebastian smirked, his eyes glowing like darkened embers. A touch of sin, a hint of darkness. A prey captured without surrender. Wicked innocence, pure corruption. Tossed into the darkness she accepted it. Faced with despair she fought. Death touched her scent as deeply as the tobacco she was fond of, leaving its mark. Allure. Hunger. Sebastian placed a consuming kiss on her lips, sliding the loosened hair away from her face, the faint clink of silver against the floorboards giving away the comb’s presence.

The sound she made was small and feminine, teetering on the edge.
But she turned away from the precipice, just a bit as they parted.

The price for the power he offered was her body, something, possibly the only thing, she had managed to keep safe from the life she led. And a surrender of the freedom she gained. So Evelyn hesitated. She leaned against him, embracing him softly, freeing herself from the bind he had placed her in with the shirt, closing her eyes.

So close… Sebastian let out a small frustrated snarl even as revelled on the game.

“I’m not doing a grand job in resisting temptation am I?” Mouser whispered belatedly against his ear, letting go.

“You are not meant to resist.” The demons answered, allowing her that small independence, leaving.

“You’re quiet.” Ciel noted harshly, bored, examining the woman sitting in front of him. Mouser looked up from the correspondence that held her attention, eyes narrowing slightly as she focused on him. There were no real marks of the night she had spent working. Maybe she was just used to it…

“I’m not used to chatter.” She chuckled apologetically, sliding a strand of hair away from her face, slowly, placing the papers on the carriage’s seat carefully pilled, one hand over them so the shaking would not send them to the floor. “Did you want anything boyo?” They had already reported the nights’ events and assured him everything had been taken care of. The carriage moved smoothly towards the main house and London was long behind them. They should be arriving shortly. Then she had to check the mail delivered at the main manor, concoct a schedule so the day would not be wasted, meet the rest of the servants, memorize names and plan a few escape routes in case of major emergencies. And unpack.

“Nothing really.” He looked out the window. “I know of your past.” He mentioned.

“How lovely.” Mouser smiled vacantly her doe eyes the picture of perfect innocence.

“How was it?” The Earl asked softly, genuinely curious. Few knew what happened behind the doors of an orphanage although most ladies chose one of such houses as the recipients of their charity. Even he had some connections to those kinds of works. It was needed for the Phantomhive’s image. Even if from time to time sensation press caught wind of some odd occurrence and made a grand story out of it. Then all the noise faded and the Headmistresses, Masters, Nuns and Priests did as they liked.

“Hell must be nicer because if you go down there at least you did something to deserve it.” Mouser sighed and looked out. “Besides being born, I mean.” She crossed her legs, chuckling slightly as if her words were some sort of private joke, leaning back. “I can tell you stories, if you want…” She frowned suddenly, tilting her head towards the window. “I smell smoke.”

“Don’t tell me…” Ciel started to say, twisting, trying to get a better look of the mansion that began to peek around the bend.

It was a very nice mansion even if the west wing seemed to be smoking quietly, the roof caved in.
Fuming was also the boyo, standing next to her as they got out of the carriage, gripping his cane a bit too tightly although that didn’t stop him from turning around, offering her help. Trained gentleman and all.

Mouser placed a cigarette on her lips out of habit as she looked around, taking in the gardens’ façade, the fountain, the sheer size and imposing view, fishing for the lighter placed in the holster that sat against her left thigh, lighting the white cylinder quietly. Sebastian had hopped down the driver’s perch with measured gracefulness, opening the carriage’s door for the young master, looking around too, appraising the situation, and sighed, staring at the damage with a knowing frown. Neither of them seemed surprised by the ruined wing but the dismay was almost palpable. Granted it was not the scenario anyone would prefer when returning home but they seemed to be under-reacting. Or…

“I know this silence. It’s the someone is going to die tension.” Mouser mumbled softly, looking up towards the open windows, taking a deep breath lacing it with silvery smoke, smirking. There was a sudden shrill scream as a trio of people came running through the imposing front door. A tall dirty-blond haired man, wearing the trappings of a chef, a young blond man with a straw hat and an auburn haired woman in a maid dress. Mouser quelled the sudden flinch and gun patting that usually answered such situations, watching. They had to be the house servants… well… the calling for the boyo certainly gave that away.

Sebastian sighed again, taking the stage, his face turned into a smiling mask of severely tested patience. The thief blinked softly, looking away, getting a sudden shiver down her spine. The servants stopped suddenly, caught in fright, babbling their tale in a high pitched screech. It was just so… odd.

“Mouser. Follow me.” Ciel snapped, turning his back on the situation, going around the pantomiming servants, going up the stairway without a backwards glance. Mouser looked away and shrugged.

“Aye, aye.” She murmured, picking up the papers from the coach, following the Earl into the large entrance hall, looking around with an appreciative expression as the closed door muffled the noise outside. Another servant, an elderly man awaited for the boyo, greeting him with a stoic expression, taking his thin summer jacket, informing him quickly and quietly of whatever he felt was needed. Mouser greeted him with a small hasty curtsy as she followed the Earl through the halls, taking notice of the layout. It was an automatic thing.

Even though the scent of burnt wood and singed stone permeated the walls, despite the open windows and doors to ventilate the area, it was still a magnificently massive place. It also seemed to mirror the boyo’s gloominess. The study was relatively free of the scent of smoke when they entered, closing the door behind them. Ciel sat behind the desk, rubbing his forehead, the look of annoyance still plastered on his features as Mouser crossed the room, opening window, the white lace curtains billowing in response, looking for a moment at the gardens and greenhouse behind the mansion, sitting on the windowsill, allowing her smoke to drift outside.

“Even in such a short amount of time…” the boyo grumbled suddenly, making her look back inside.

The place seemed to suit him, done in calm neutral colours and simple and clean geometrical patterns, a green and pale brown, almost bronze patterned carpet covering the wooden flooring, the shelves meticulously organized. Some paintings adorned the walls behind the desk and next to the door. There was a small fireplace with a couple of armchairs and coffee table flanking it to the right of the desk and a round table to the left, most likely used for tea preparation.
It was the Head of the House’s sanctuary and the first place a thief such as her would search for blackmailing papers. Surprising how many nobles kept diaries and ledgers unprotected in their desks.

“You still seem calm.” Although explosions and fires were not part of the Phantomhive household everyday they were still common enough. And the antics of the servants were one of the things that tested Sebastian’s abilities, something he enjoyed toying with, despite all the troubles resulting of it.

“You don’t have a fainting chair in here so I’ll restrain my hysterics.” Mouser stood, tossing the dead butt of her cigarette into the fireplace, going around the writing table, picking up the papers and separating them quickly, turning three of the new eight piles towards him.

“Does nothing ever faze you?” The Earl moved, placing his elbows on the table, leaning against his interlacing fingers, examining the woman carefully.

“Do you want to make a game out of it boyo?” Mouser challenged with a smile, patting the papers with one finger. “These just need signing.”

“Very well.” Challenge accepted Ciel mused, measuring his adversary, a smug grin cracking his frown before picking the quill.

“Using Sebastian is an invalid move though. Would be too easy.” Mouser poked his nose playfully. The boyo grumbled in annoyance at her gesture but didn’t slap her hand away or shouted about touching. It was progress. “Read these. Then decide.”

“Young Master…” Sebastian opened the door quietly after knocking, a quick glance grasping the situation. “It’s settled. So, if I may.” Sebastian waited for her calmly. Ciel barely made a gesture of dismissal, his attention shifting towards work. Mouser straightened and followed the butler.

The corridors took them to the servant’s quarters, a door closing behind them cutting off the luxurious part of the house, giving way to a more simple and practical space. The scent of smoke was more intense there the green and white walls darkened by sooth that descended into a hallway of doors. Kitchen, laundry, rooms... some men moved around, carrying materials. The repairs were underway already.

Mouser would explore the house in detail later on for the sake of sleeping easily.

Sebastian opened the door to the kitchen, entering. The servants gathered around the table jumped suddenly, standing up rather nervously, looking around, checking if there were no misplaced sounds or intruders before examining her acutely. At least the man in the chef’s uniform did in a way that was vaguely... military. Weapons first, body, then eye contact. The younger blonde was smiling happily, giving her a shy wave. The woman adjusted her glasses slightly, her expression dazed behind the lenses.

“Everyone… As I said earlier the Young Master hired another servant.” Sebastian turned slightly towards her, waiting. Mouser took a few steps forward, allowing them to see her a bit more clearly, keeping her hands still, arms limp. There was one missing, the elderly man. Perhaps surveying the outsiders working on the damage. One could never be too careful. Newcomers were usually the ones that brought a chance for a spy to be infiltrated.

They all sported a slightly surprised look now. Maybe it was the weapons because after Sebastian had presented her as part of the staff they immediately relaxed their guarded stances.
“It’s quite a pleasure to meet you all.” Mouser smiled, drawing on the hours of forced etiquette, eyes darting for a moment at the blackened walls, to the corridor door, the narrow windows, the door towards the outside. “My name is Evelyn Crows, although most people call me Mouser.” They looked a bit livelier, as if they were about to welcome her, speak, mention their names but Sebastian interrupted after checking his clock.

“She will be working as the Young Master’s secretary. Sebastian glanced at the maid who snapped straight immediately. “And will be sharing the room with Meyrin.” The woman stammered an acknowledgement. “Show her to the room and then tend to your tasks.” He turned to Mouser as he left. “You can take the rest of the day off.”

There was a sigh of relief from the servants as he abandoned the room, all of them turning towards Mouser. Respect and fear for the butler. And maybe guilt because of the fire. Mouser chuckled a bit, relaxing too. Even if they didn’t know instinct still worked.

“Name’s Baldroy, but call me Bard.” The chef introduced himself placing a cigarette on his mouth, an easygoing grin readily parting his lips, his accent definitely form the Americas, patting the uniform in search for a lighter or a match. Mouser tossed hers. He caught the steel trinket with fast reflexes of a trained man, nodding a thanks, igniting the flame. “So what’s your story?”

“Orphanage.” Mouser smiled and retrieved her lighter. Bard offered her a cigarette. The thief accepted, muttering a thank you, leaning against the table, lighting it too, slipping the steel lighter into its place once more, allowing the smoke to drift from her lips. “Street gangs.”

“I’m Finny.” The young man introduced himself with a bubbly smile, bright eyes locked on her. Mouser smiled back, before being hugged, her eyes widening in surprise. “Welcome home.” There was more to his words, to his tone and the other servants seemed to be in tune with the meaning Finny was giving them.

“Thank you.” She murmured, looking away, shyly, embarrassed, disentangling. But her body rebelled against her attempt at dignity, a yawn escaping. Meyrin chuckled. Mouser looked sheepish. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got to be tired with the trip…” Meyrin supplied helpfully, smiling a bit. Mouser shrugged, putting out the cigarette in a clay ashtray on the table. “Come.”

The walk upstairs was uneventful, just a quick navigation through the corridors, their boots echoing a bit over the wooden floor and stairs of the manor’s secondary corridors, closed doors keeping her from finding out more about her new environment, the scent of burned masonry still permeating the air. The trunk was at the feet of the second bed, when the door was opened, a pile of fresh sheets and covers ready to be used along with a pillow resting on top of a bare mattress.

Mouser opened the container of her belongings without a glance at the dress that was already placed on the pointedly open closet, next to Meyrin’s casual outfits, maids’ uniforms and formal uniform, trying to decide between unpacking or making the bed.

“Do you need any help?” Meyrin asked peeking over her shoulder, adjusting the round glasses carefully.

“No. I’ll manage…” Mouser placed the book, cigarettes and lighter on the nightstand and unstrapped the sheaths and holsters, shrugging them away from her forearms and shoulders so they wouldn’t be in the way.

“Is this the new novel?” The maid picked the book up, excited, flipping some of the pages, cooing
at the words after a brief pause as she browsed the chapter, adjusting the glasses, leaning further into the pages.

“Yes...” Mouser straightened, rubbing her neck a bit embarrassed, placing a boot on the bed frame, to reach one of the belts around her thighs. “You read them?” Another boot, and finally the belt was off, the holsters held around her waist only.

“I saved money for some of them...” The maid mumbled softly, closing it, taking a deep breath. “Could I borrow it when you’re done?” Meyrin had turned fully towards her, leaning over the other female, holding the book like a shield and an offering, the unfocused eyes behind the glasses steely and determined.

“If you let me read the others...” Mouser smiled, nodding, unbuttoning the waistcoat after taking a few cautious steps backwards, a few of the pocketknives that rested in-between the garment and the shirt falling with a clatter, after getting the last belt free, placing all the pistols on the nightstand. Four guns, the two that would around her thighs and the two that rested on the small of her back, under the bow.

“Your uniform is rather pretty.” Meyrin walked to the other side of the bed, determined to help. Mouser gave into the offer. It was done after a couple of mishaps. Neither of them seemed very adept at making beds or tucking in corners although it seemed more an issue of distraction than actual skill. “The Young Master was the one that gave me these.” The maid smiled touching the glasses and the skirt, after the bedding was in place. It was obvious she liked them and even from a bit of the distance Mouser could see that it was something made form higher quality materials than the run-of-the-mill master would be willing to give. But then again the Phantomhive name carried a lot of weight and money even if its bearer was short and scrawny.

“Sebastian...” Mouser stopped in the middle of unbuttoning her shirt, frowning, the words dying suddenly. Sebastian had chosen her clothes... she looked down at the black lace of the garter belt peeking a bit over the trousers’ fabric. Damn demon... She was wearing the unmentionables one might find in the drawers of a French cancan dancer but that made sense seeing no ladies’ overly poufy and tight under-things would do with the trousers, shirt and vest. But they were... Mouser groaned and shrugged the shirt off, picking up the hip length chemise and the short bloomers she’d chosen as sleeping wares instead of the long, lacy and itchy nightgown. “Sebastian got them for me.” She grated out. Every piece was lacy. And black. Not something a respectable lady would wear. Then again so were the trousers. Mouser had no actual complaints.
Chapter 5

It did look different in the darkness and a couple of exploration trips had proven insufficient to grasp the whole layout, Mouser thought as her steps took her lightly through the corridors of the upper floor. Silent and mostly empty. Despite or maybe because of it, it was easy to navigate. She had divided her explorations into areas so each place would be thoroughly mapped. From certain areas like the servant’s quarters, library and study she already had plans and several ways out. Living in the manor, working there still gave her a restless feeling. That and the demon that did not sleep lurking about to interrupt her reading habits. But never the actual work.

Autumn had started and the first rains created a muddy mess on the roads. The sound of water and wind whispered against the walls and windows further muffling the noises inside the walls. The hush was broken suddenly by a choked scream, a sleepy but terrified sound, muted into a series of curt gasps. The thief looked to her left, following her ear. The boyo’s chambers… there were no other sounds that would explain the scream, the fear. Unless it was not physical nor an attack. With a sigh she turned the doorknob, slipping into the front room, avoiding the furniture while heading to the bedroom door, knocking gently.

“Boyo?” She whispered when all that answered her was a somewhat hushed sob. Mouser opened the door, peeking before entering. She smiled slightly as she noticed that his eyes were searching the darkness, also blinded by whatever had hunted him in his dreams. It was an expression she recognized too easily along with the bundle of protective covers around his body. So she moved carefully. The Phantomhive wouldn’t be defenceless and she knew for a fact that there would be a pistol under the pillow. “You do know you’re safe, boyo.”

“Mouser?” His voice wavered slightly as he looked, the covers falling around his shoulders, undoing the hood. They were still twisted and tangled around his shoulders, making the boyo look smaller. The lost look in his eyes did not help. He was terrified but able to recognize her. Good. She approached the bed, lighting the candle that sat on the nightstand, closing her lighter with a sharp metallic click. As the small golden light flickered to life, making her squint, the boyo’s blue eyes calmed, examining her. “What are you doing here?”

“Walking in the dark.” She slid the lighter into its place, looking around, making sure that there was nothing more there. “May I sit?” Ciel moved a bit towards the centre of the big bed, suspicion alight in his eyes. The duvet followed with a rustle. Mouser sat over it, glancing at him silently, watching with interests as the scared boy disappeared into the stern face of the Earl of Phantomhive. Someone he could trust was with him. Usually that’s all it took to dispel the fear. She smiled. His eyes narrowed at her. Mouser poked his forehead and pushed him back, towards the mattress and pillows, pulling the covers, straightening them over him, slipping his hair away from his face in a sisterly way. “Sleep boyo. Your day is very busy tomorrow.” She stood, not touching the candle, walking towards the door.

“Do you have nightmares?” The boyo asked suddenly, staring at her, peeking over the duvet. Mouser stopped her movements, fingers playing with the metal of the door handle, looking over her shoulder.

“Every night.” Mouser expression changed for a moment, the shadows the candle created dancing over her features as she sighed. “Leave the light burning. For most it worked although it never did keep the monsters at bay.”

“Shouldn’t you say there are no monsters?” Ciel said, chuckling, once again in control of himself, the sheets rustling as he snuggled deeper, getting comfortable.
“We both know it’s not true and we met ours long before a demon showed up.” She opened the door, walking out. “Goodnight Sebastian.” Mouser whispered to the shadow to her left.

“Young Master.” Sebastian’s voice followed the soft knock as he opened the study’s door. Mouser stopped writing for a moment, looking up, checking the grandfather clock a bit to her right. Should be… “Governess Addams is here for the violin lesson.”

Right on schedule, she mused, slipping the to-do list from under the letter, making a note.

There was a long-suffering sigh as the Earl of Phantomhive stood, composed himself and left the room accompanied by his butler, abandoning the early work. He had decided to deal with the documents related to the company fast so he would have a free hour in his schedule. It was somewhat suspicious of him to be so eager but then again bouts of fancy came and went.

Mouser sighed too, stretching a bit when the door was closed behind the pair, staring at her stained fingers blankly for a few moments, flexing them, reading the document one more time, checking its flow and if the phrasing conveyed the boyo’s intentions but not his actual words. Those had been a bit too acrid to put on paper. Probably would make the factory’s manager cry and, while entertaining, it wouldn’t be productive.

It was done, just needed to be signed and forwarded. She stood, placing the letter on the desk, checking his work quickly, picking up a cigarette from the case left by the armchair, opening the window as she lit it and retrieving her book, diving into the scene.

The Young Master was with Governess Addams at the moment, taking the violin lessons and despite the training the instruments from time to time still pleaded in anguish for him to stop. It was akin to the screams of the tortured, a lullaby of home. Not as often as in the past but Sebastian’s ears were also keener, sharp enough to catch the mishaps.

Most of the butler’s chores were done for the moment.

The demon checked the pocket watch quickly.

It was a small window of chance to pursue his prey.

Mouser was still in the study, reading, unaware of his presence as he intended, sitting on the windowsill so her smoke wouldn’t stay inside. The dead butt of the cigarette was gone, burned in the fireplace. Sebastian moved quickly, avoiding detection, standing behind her for a moment. It was interesting he thought, analyzing his action. The curve of her neck enticed his predatory nature even though there was nothing deliberately seductive in that moment. Nor submissive. She was just looking down, her attention solely on the black and white of page and letters. His eyes glanced at the words as he leaned softly, breathing a puff of breath against her neck, under the earrings. The odour of tobacco was fresh on her skin. Even if it blended and was part of her scent it still served as a very effective mask. Sometimes it hid all too well what she was feeling. He was learning the nuances. It was an entertaining way to use his time when not fulfilling his obligations to the Young Master and waiting for her to stumble into what he offered.

The book jumped from her fingers suddenly, falling unceremoniously on the floor with a outwardly low thud in the empty room, accompanied by a startled, very minor gasp, her body arching away,
defensively, hand reaching for the sleeve where the dagger was concealed, fingers barely brushing
the hidden handle as Mouser half turned, her movement smooth and unbroken.

Reflexes and survival. He had triggered something that usually was kept dormant.

Sebastian moved quickly as well, stepping into her space, pulling her body against his, pinning her,
one arm around her waist, hand firmly gripping her wrists behind her back, under the handles of
both blades, interrupting her attempt to break away and fight. Even so the heel of her boot threaded
harshly on his foot and she twisted and writhed. Silently.

Mouser took a deep breath suddenly, calming, thinking, glancing over her shoulder a bit warily and
then chuckled, her breathing pattern in disarray, leaning back, her silver comb used to bump him a
bit callously against the chest, while easing the pressure of her heel. Her first though had clearly
been enemy, mind gone numb and body taking over, aggressively. She would not give up even
cornered and pinned. Reassuring to know.

The demon’s free arm slid over her front, around her chest, his hand curling around her throat,
tilting her head back until she offered him her lips, watching as they parted in anticipation, eyes
shadowed by desire, covering the irritation of his successful capture, the fear and aggression gone
from her irises and scent.

Lust was a tool and a reward. Any demon knew so. Sebastian moved, his fingers leaving a light
cress on her captured neck, brushing her jaw, her lower lip, feeling the light shiver against his
body, another attempt to move, this time trying to get a bit closer, the wicked smirk on her lips
growing slowly as mischief shone in her dark eyes, the tip of her tongue touching his thumb,
nipping, pulling the glove. He moved his hand, allowing her to divest him of the piece of clothing,
the fabric falling down next to her book.

Sebastian spun her around suddenly, pressing her back against the curtains, the wall behind the
fabric solid, allowing his weight to rest against her, one arm still around her waist, pressing her
intimately against him, enjoying the feeling, the sounds of her gasps and the frantic beating of her
heart.

“As soon as I find my wits I’ll insult you.” Mouser whispered against his chest, taking another
deep breath, the blush spreading over her cheeks, eyes closed. Sebastian chuckled, his fingers
threading through her hair, dislodging the comb, cupping the back of her head, tilting her face, his
lips meeting hers, satisfied with the warmth, by the sigh of pleasure breathed against him. She
moved, tiptoeing to deepen the kiss, her hands seeking his hair too, locking them in a battle of
tongues and teeth. He enjoyed the control, the claiming and the fact that she wanted to claim him,
fighting to gain leverage while accepting the pleasure. Greedy human...

The sound of the doorbell echoing through the house broke them apart. Sebastian allowed her to go
free. Mouser let out a breath, grabbing the curtains for balance.

“As indeed.” The bitterness of the tobacco and the sweetness of the woman. Even if his sense of taste
was different there were things that were easy to identify, to remember, to enjoy. Her scent
betrayed her arousal, frustration and weakness. If he were to push now he would lose, make her
harden her shell and her wariness. Sebastian straightened his clothes quickly and with a slight
glance back he left to attend to the unannounced visit.

“Do you play chess, Mouser?” Ciel asked suddenly, looking up from his desk.
Mouser stopped her reading, putting the letters aside, staring. Mostly dry reassurances and reports. An occasional invitation. Notes from the underworld.

“No.” She glanced at the clock. Almost tea time.

The weather outside announced plainly that summer had ended, the trees naked, the skies gray and the roads made of sticky cold mud. The boyo nodded slowly, closing his eye with a sigh. Mouser had been with the Phantomhives for the three weeks now. The house held no secrets, the servants were friends, Meyrin borrowing and giving her sensation books, Finny being a sweetie-boy, Bard sharing cigarettes and engaging in a game of poker every Friday night with high food, money and trinket stakes, Tanaka being a surprisingly insightful and helpful old man. Then there was the demon hunt.

“Come here. I could use the entertainment.” Mouser chuckled as she stood, pulling the chair that was reserved for when a guest needed a hearing in the Phantomhive’s study, sitting down quietly, crossing her legs, leaning against the cushioned back, getting comfortable.

Ciel set the pieces quietly, fishing out a small board from his drawer, taking the black army, fingers touching the ebony material softly, reflexively while his voice explained the rules tonelessly. Mouser watched the Earl, not the chequered board.

“The goal is to capture the king.” The boyo finished. “The whites always start.”

Mouser looked down at her options, sighing, cautiously pushing a pawn forward. The Boyo’s black knight stirred. The game moved, her mind adjusting to the rules, annoyed by the lack of leeway, feeling a need for flexibility, a need to cheat and turn the tables. The clock ticked... and suddenly the small white pawn found itself within range of the black knight, and the black queen moved, taking it down, tumbling the piece, standing with it at its feet. The thief stopped, staring, looking up. Ciel leaned back, his expression closed. The captures were lean and the board was in disarray except for the king on his throne and those three pieces.

“A white pawn became the black queen.” Mouser murmured out loud, letting the words sink. Ciel looked up, staring her down, waiting for a crack, playing yet another game. She kept her stoicism in place with a grin. No longer free, no longer hers, no longer powerless... no longer alone. Mouser allowed a sigh to come out, standing, picking up the mail one again, sorting the letters slowly, mulling. “You don’t ask for little, do you boyo?” One of the letters caught her attention suddenly, the crest in the sealing wax deserving of attention. “The Queen seems to be calling.”

Mouser lit a cigarette quietly snuggled into the chair, the new book opened between her hands, forgotten while waiting for the clock to strike five. The boyo was rereading the queen’s missive, the rustle of paper cutting through the sounds of the rain and fire. He wanted to discuss the order with Sebastian, pry information and have him prepare for the trip. That a trip would be needed was the only hint he’d given her. But at the same time the boyo was willing to wait until 5 o’clock for tea and cakes while scheming.

It was a few minutes away.

“A trip? In this season?” Sebastian’s knife slid easily through the Charlotte cake, producing a
perfect slice carefully placed on its plate. Mouser followed it with wide eyes. Every time cake came into her line of sight she couldn’t help but stare. It just looked so mouth-watering... the demon glanced at her for a moment as he placed the cake in front of the boyo, smirking when she looked away rather pointedly, preparing the tea, the scent of the Ceylon Dimbula warming the room.

“Sebastian, do you know of a practice called “bear baiting”? Ciel asked, appraising the food in front of him with a critical expression, picking up the silverware. Mouser adjusted her position and pulled a blank piece of paper ready for notes. The demon barely blinked or looked surprised, adopting a pensive expression, examining his master.

“The phrase has a most fun and pleasant ring to it. The truth, however, is quite different.”

“The bears are tied up, whipped and have packs of wild dogs set upon them until, finally they are killed.”

“That is so incredibly like humans”

“It was banned under the Cruelty to Animals act of 1835.” Mouser huffed. “Do you have an opinion?” Ciel turned to her, attracted by the sound.

“Still happens. They are just very careful about where the rings are set.” She scribbled a bit. “Nowadays they do prefer to see two grown men bleed while pummelling each other with bare fists. And bears are hard to get.” It was a reality the boyo nodded to acknowledge, shifting his attention back to Sebastian. It was something that the Scotland Yard should deal with if it was taking place in London. His instructions were a bit different.

“However a loophole remained.” Ciel continued cutting into the cake, talking with measured tones, pacing the words. “If the bullying dogs were not goaded what would happen?”

“It would become a case of one animal bullying another.” Sebastian answered, cutting another slice of the cake, placing it in the small table in front of Mouser. She stared at it for a long moment, eyes narrowing at the berries. “Animal bullying so to speak.” He finished, straightening, taking his place solemnly in front of the boyo, waiting politely for his master to continue.

“There is a village where they do that. Houndsworth. It is famous for raising hunting dogs. However, beneath that it has another side...” Dog fighting most likely. Mouser shook her head slowly, picking up the cake as soon as she was sure it would not be stolen, licking a bit of cream from her fingertips. “This wrenches at her majesty’s heart therefore we are to investigate this village under the pretext of making it her resort. That’s the true goal of this trip.

Resort... Investigate properties, the landowners, the village itself... She made another note, looking for the Phantomhive’s man of affair’s name in the book Sebastian had given her. Documents should be prepared... Ciel gestured at her. Mouser stood, retrieving one of the papers, glancing at it. Some additional notes about the place prepared by the Queen’s aides.

“A village of dogs huh?” Sebastian said slowly, his expression betraying a slight disgust. Mouser looked up from the paper, examining him, the clear emotion behind his voice somewhat at odds with the usual stoicism he displayed.

“What is it?” Ciel also noticed, staring at the butler, his expression dour.

“It was just that I had believed securing a resort location was somewhat beneath you, Young Master.” The demon mentioned glibly, composing his posture once more.

Mouser exchanged a look with the boyo, approaching Sebastian, showing him the letter.
“There is something else, a reason why I, the Phantomhive, must be the one to go to this Houndsworth village. There are quite a few people who were murdered or are missing. The population of the village has decreased by a third in the last ten years. Investigating and resolving this situation is one of the jobs I was given.”

“Then I should make preparations.” Sebastian said smoothly. “I expect we’ll depart tomorrow.” The butler bowed and moved away.

The roads were predictably bad but fortunately there was no rain while the two coaches trudged through the countryside. One would have been enough but the fear of a destroyed manor awaiting his return had made the boyo give orders that made all the servants come along. They were chanting merrily on the second coach, along with most of the luggage.

The boyo seemed to be calm, looking out, towards the bleak misty fields, sharing the coach that Sebastian drove with Mouser who was laying on her back, boots propped up on the frame, one arm under her head, the daggers peeking subtly from her wrists, the other holding the book above her eyes, the cape falling around her, touching the floor, partially covering one pair of pistols. Her other weapons were locked away. One didn’t want to look too intimidating.

“They really are in high spirits. It seems they are thanking you, kind Young Master.” Mouser couldn’t keep a slight chortle in when Sebastian smoothly weaved that comment into the monotony of wheels and horses, looking towards the boyo whose face betrayed a slight annoyance. He was not going to justify his actions once again, refusing to be goaded but his anger quite transparent beneath the mask. Sebastian pulled the reins, stopping the horses. “This is the village entrance.” He announced calmly.

Mouser groaned, taking her boots off their perch, twisting, feeling her bones snap into place with little creaks, sitting down, looking out.

“Bleak.” She muttered, staring at the gnarled old tree with the iron collars placed like hangman’s nooses and the remains of unlucky beasts at its roots. The other servants’ reaction was less contained, a shriek of horror rising from the second coach. The thief leaned back, smiling, opening the book once more into the drama of the ruined young woman struggling to regain her honour while the boyo looked over his shoulder calmly.

“I forgot to mention it, but this is the planned construction site for the resort.” The dismay at that was almost palpable in reaction to the boyo’s words. Mouser kept her smile in place, flipping the page. A creak in the fog made her duck, touching one of the guns but the unconcerned reaction of the demon behind her allowed Mouser to let the handles go, straightening, looking into the murky surroundings, searching. Finny recovered first from the sight of the unwelcoming entrance of the village, pointing towards a shadow pushing a baby-stroller, its features becoming more apparent the closer it got.

“First villager spotted.” Finny announced cheerfully before jumping down the carriage, running towards the heavily dressed old woman. “I’ll help you Ma’am.”

“Y-you shouldn’t Finny! If you’re not careful the baby inside will be hu...” Meyrin shouted suddenly, worried, leaning on the coach’s edge.

“What?” Finny forgot his strength suddenly, looking back to give his attention to the maid, completely lifting the stroller from the ground, panicking, dropping it, apologising loudly, arms up
as a caught thief.

“Is the baby all right?” Meyrin asked frantically, worriedly only to gasp in shock. Bard followed suit, almost dropping his cigarette. Mouser peeked, grimacing, putting the story aside.

“And we’ve reached creepy.” She murmured. A dog skeleton wrapped for a burial.

The old woman straightened the stroller, ignoring the shocked trio, tucking the fabric around the bones.

“You know... this little one was eaten by that...” Her voice proclaimed shakily as she moved away, starting some sort of song as the mists engulfed her.

Eaten? Mouser’s thoughts echoed the servants’ words. She looked up. Sebastian’s expression was closed and serious as if he was concentrating in the song. The boyo was still looking towards the disappearing old woman. Mouser tapped on her daggers for a moment, her book ignored as the coach began to move once more.

The fog soon lifted as the sun rose up, the small village by the lakeside with its lord’s mansion overlooking the place from the hill. At first glance it was average and peaceful. Dogs were jailed, dogs were moving around, dogs were being trained.

“Bending their wills through the carrot and stick approach instils obedience in them. Such a wonderful scene isn’t it?” Sebastian mentioned as they passed the bucolic scene. And if the sarcasm in his voice was any heavier the coach would stop in its tracks with the axels broken.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing to me?” Mouser grumbled, reaching up, patting the demon’s back without looking. She felt a subdued chuckle vibrate against her fingers, through the heavy outer coat.

“However the dogs themselves are to blame. Doing everything they can to court humans and gladly accept the collar around their necks. It is a completely unfathomable concept to me.”

“And yet you’re under contract to obey the boyo here.” That made both males glare. Mouser smiled, tilting her head innocently, opening her book as an escape method.

“If you have anything to say then spill it. “ Ciel ordered, his temper showing. “Well then, heeding you words I shall. While I am quite a cat person I do not like dogs. Actually I detest them.” Sebastian looked back smiling sweetly. Ciel arched an eyebrow. “And you?” He turned to Mouser for either backup or a victim.

“Smelly, slobbery and bark up a storm when you’re trying to burgle a home.” Mouser surmised, closing the book giving up the attempt to move on with the plot, looking up with a blank face.

The boyo smirked, letting out a sudden bark, mocking them both.
Chapter 6

There was single maid with white hair dressed in a modest dark lavender colour uniform and pristine white apron waiting for the coaches, looking up with big bright purple eyes at them while asking with a soft voice if they were the Phantomhive party, bowing daintily in respect, placing a kindly deferential smile upon her face as Sebastian opened the coach’s door, helping the Young Master down.

“Welcome to Barrymore Castle. The master is awaiting your arrival.” The maid said softly, straightening from her curtsy.

Mouser couldn’t pinpoint exactly why but she disliked the woman almost immediately but the animosity was there, sudden and sharp. She picked up the leather briefcase that protected the documents she had organized and prepared along with the man of affairs and Sebastian, noticing that her reaction was not being shared by any of the other servants.

And she disliked the castle even more. It was not the decrepit looks nor the fact that the structure seemed out of a horror novel with bare stone, broken walls, ivy and blackened windows... She accepted Sebastian’s hand, stepping down the metal steps, adjusting her cape, adopting the same face one would wear when bluffing at cards. It was something in its atmosphere. Then the interior was stiff, warlike, filled with a rather unhealthy taste for taxidermy. Almost nothing worth of stealing was displayed.

“This way please.” The maid said, opening the door to the parlour, waiting for them to cross. Sebastian and the boyo looked around, at the decapitated and stuffed creatures mounted on the walls. Mouser’s eyes darted immediately towards the windows and doors and then to the house’s master. A burly dark haired man with brown eyes and sideburns, frowning as if the whole world met his disapproval.

The maid screamed, curling on the carpet, covering her face with her forearms as the long whip hissed, the man’s voice raised in anger, over her whimpers.

“What’s with the little Chihuahua? I was told to welcome the Queen’s envoy!” He roared, the whip thrashing about, the room barely wide enough for the motion. Actually it was quite a miracle nothing was broken in the process.

“Chihuahua?” Sebastian muttered as the boyo’s face lost its smugness into an open-mouthed look of shock. Mouser raised her free hand to her lips, covering a smirk. Then it disappeared as she focused on the man once again. He was dressed rather provincially. There was no strength in the whip. Just enough to make it crack but if he was truly applying any energy to it the woman’s clothes would already be shreds and her arms a bleeding mess. A show then, a proof that his power was absolute over the lives of those that served him.

“Angela, are you not even capable of something as simple as that?” he kept shouting, the leather cracking.

“Sebastian.” Ciel spoke the name authoritatively, a mild look of disgust crossing his eye. And Sebastian was suddenly there, grabbing the man’s wrist, stopping the whip while still keeping the boyo’s top hat safely stored on the crook of his arm.

“What are you doing, you Doberman? Are you trying to bite back at me? Let me go you” The man tried to break free to no avail, his eyes slightly widened, disbelieving the strength of the demon’s
“I am the one who ordered him.” The boyo’s voice rang out smugly, drawing attention, moving next to the chair and table. Mouser was immobile, standing behind him, holding the briefcase.

“What?” The man blinked a couple of times, not understanding.

“I’m assuming the letter was delivered. Evelyn?”

“It was written and sent according to the Young Master’s specifications. There should be no reason for deeming your arrival or purpose as unexpected” She said softly as the boyo pulled the chair, placing his cane on the table, sitting down one arm over the padded wooden back, facing the man, nodding without glancing at her.

“I’m Ciel Phantomhive.” He introduced himself as Sebastian allowed the man’s wrists free and Angela scurried away undoubtedly to prepare the trappings for the obligatory tea.

“Are you saying this little toy poodle is the Queen’s envoy?” The house lord seemed less than pleased at that information as he rubbed his wrist, still holding the whip.

“Are smaller dogs not acceptable to you Lord Henry?” The boyo asked smugly, staring unflinchingly at the man.

There was a small flurry of activity as they divested themselves of the jackets and capes.

Mouser organized the documents, going around the table, placing them in front or Lord Barrymore before returning to the boyo’s side, standing straight.

The tea cart and Angela arrived moments later.

Sebastian moved next to it, standing politely and quietly.

The thief watched out of the corner of her eyes as the maid’s shivering hands reached for the cups, making the porcelain clatter. They were bruised but there was no way that it hurt as much as that. She had to serve tea and scones to the headmistress time and again while her arms were bleeding. Shivering and snivelling was not allowed. The blood in the tea was also not allowed but she couldn’t help where it dripped now could she? Angela was either was faking it to garner pity or was just a wimp.

Pity, the thief decide when Sebastian leaned in, taking over the tea serving duties after a quick whisper.

Barrymore tossed the papers onto the table, leaning back, arms crossed.

“This isn’t even worth discussing.” Sebastian placed the tea next to the boyo whose gaze was steeled. He neglected to do the same for the castle’s Lordship in a deliberate slap to the man’s social standing. It was not noticed by the dupe seeing as he was focused on the graver insult brought on by the boyo. “No matter what you propose, I am not willing to sell.”

“State you reason.” The boyo demanded coolly.

“The curse.”
“The curse?”

Mouser went around the table and picked up the papers, bowing her head slightly, returning to her spot, organizing them, placing them by the boyo’s side quietly.

“In this village where man and dog live together since antiquity there is a curse against those who would try to get their paws on it. A fearsome hex.” Barrymore stood up, placing beefy hands on the table, leaning forth menacingly. “Even if it were the queen that would not change.” One hand pounded his own chest. “A terrible fate will befall anyone who tries to go against the Barrymore family in this village.” He gestured widely for emphasis, the family rings gleaming.

Ciel smirked.

“Oh. How interesting.”

“What?” Apparently Barrymore was not used to face resistance.

The boyo leaned back, clasping his hands together, eye closed.

“In that case I shall remain here for as long as it takes to witness this terrible fate” His eye opened, challenging, accompanied by his characteristic smirk. “firsthand.”

The anger clearly distorted Barrymore’s features, a growl building within his throat.

Mouser stopped on the staircase that led down to the kitchens after a survey of the castle, lighting a cigarette while eavesdropping, preparing to leave to check the surroundings.

“So, you’re the only maid in this household?” Bard was saying, his voice cheerful as she opened the door, trying to keep it from creaking. The thief huffed, a short white cloud leaving her lips and disappearing, as she walked into the place discreetly. The cook was smoking as always, legs crossed, leaning against the table, gesturing widely, smiling.

“That’s amazing! I truly respect you Miss Angela!” Meyrin praised, clapping her hands once, sitting with her back straight and legs properly placed. She was either mimicking the ingénue in front of her or just practicing her social polish. Finny had his hands over his knees, curled into himself, in a shy position, looking at Angela as if she was some sort of goddess, bright eyes sparkling with altogether too much innocence.

“I am nothing so grand.” Angela murmured in that soft voice that made Mouser feel a sudden need to be struck deaf. Or pluck the woman’s tongue out. Either or. “I do nothing but make mistakes.” She chuckled softly, charming the servants, her posture seemingly as shy as Finny’s as the words flowed.

“If there is anything we can do to help you with please let us know.” Bard announced. “Since we’re all servants let us get along. Right Finny?”

Finny nodded enthusiastically.

“Yeah, of course!”

“How kind you all are...”

A bell rang.
Mouser looked at the board, finding the brass tag reading bedroom under the shaking bell. The maid stood up quickly, gasping.

“Pardon me, the Master is calling, so I will have to take my leave.”

“Must be hard. Almost quittin’ time, pitch black outside, isolated from the village... and a brute of a master.” Mouser whispered loudly while crossing the kitchen, towards the backdoor as the dress disappeared after the closing entryway that led to the castle corridors. Meyrin looked up suddenly, staring at Mouser’s back, her eyes widening behind the glasses. She stood abruptly and began to run.

Mouser smirked and moved on.

“Sorry to barge in...” Ciel almost jumped from his chair, his book closing suddenly between his palms as Mouser’s voice came from the window, the thief climbing in, leaning against the frame for a moment, catching her breath. Her hair was loose around her face, covering most of her features but leaving clear a stern expression, shoulders hunched forward, legs apart. She did look rather boyish that way, the un-tucked shirt and lack of waistcoat combined with the posture minimizing her curves. Then her expression shifted, she straightened and the look disappeared.

Mouser closed the window she had jimmyed open and drew the curtains together once again. Sebastian had barely reacted while unpacking. That should have been a clue of the lack of hostility of the intruder. As instructed she had been snooping around, missing for most of the day.

“What do you have to say?” Ciel placed his book down on the armrest.

“This is a strange village. People believe wholeheartedly in this curse business. Also they were not too keen on talking. They changed their minds after a bit of acting.” Mouser threw her arms around Ciel suddenly, her doe eyes widening and shimmering. “After all I wouldn’t want my Young Master to be hurt so please tell me, help me give him a reason to leave, to keep him safe...” She said in a weepy vulnerable voice, laughing when the boyo thrashed in her arms, complaining about touching, allowing him to go free. “The curse chooses and the criminals it pointed are literally fed to the dogs. Quaint little tradition.”

“Are there any outsiders in the inn?”

“None. No merchant, no traveller, no thief, no highwayman. And this isolated place would be a haven for them too. Highly unlikely for a copper to pursue this far...”

“And the maid?” Sebastian asked softly.

Mouser bared her teeth.

“I do not know why but every time I see or hear her I feel a murderous urge the kind I haven’t experimented in...” The demon was smiling slightly. Mouser threw her arms up. “Gah.” She hissed harshly. “But putting my dislike aside there is something off about her too. As long as anyone cares to remember the women of her family have served the Barrymores. But there is no mention, ever, to a man, a husband, a father. And all say she looks so much like her mother and quote the kindest person I ever did see, unquote. Even as decrepit as this place is, it’s impossible for a single maid to maintain. The way she was whipped...”

“She was whimpering and cowering in fear.” Ciel noted.
Mouser dismissed the words with a tongue click.

“Have you ever been whipped?” Mouser unbuttoned her shirt’s sleeve, rolling it up, showing her forearm to Ciel. “This was made by a riding crop. Granted it’s a bit different from the bullwhip but it’s still the same principle. It will rip fabric and skin in moments. She withstood how many strikes? Not a single slash on the hands that were unprotected, not a single tear in her dress.”

“And that tells us what?”

“On its own, nothing much. Then Meyrin talked to me a few moments ago. It seems his Lordship is...” She turned to Sebastian. “What is a polite way to say shagging the maid?”

“Involved with, I believe.” Sebastian answered as he started to brush the Young Master’s cape, chuckling when he noticed the vivid blush on the Earl’s face.

“How dry. But there it is. Village is indoctrinated, isolated, the maid is involved with the Lordship and the man is unwilling to let go of the power and status he enjoys here. Also I’m just waiting to be called a bitch.”

“A miniature kingdom ruled by the fear of a curse.” Ciel surmised, picking up his book once more. “Unsurprising.”

A knock sounded, small and meek. Mouser walked over to Sebastian’s side, busying herself with the luggage.

“Enter.”

“I’m sorry to disturb you so late at night.” The maid paused softly as she opened the door, waiting a few seconds before entering, closing the door very softly, scrunching her hands together, twisting them. For someone with bruises that should be quite painful yet the movement didn’t stop.

“The young Master was just preparing to sleep.” Sebastian mentioned, his annoyance at the interruption clear. Mouser straightened, holding the sleeping wares, looking absolutely innocent as she crossed the small distance from the closet to the bed, spreading the fabric over it.

“I have a request.” Angela whispered, all piety and kindness, worried over the fate of an outsider. “Please withdraw from this village. You must not stay here!” Dire dramatic words whispered as forlorn warning.

“Why?” It was Ciel disinterested comeback as he flipped the page.

“That is...” Suddenly a howl cut the air. Mouser looked up, frowning. Sebastian closed the closet’s door, turning quietly, still seemingly dissatisfied with the maid’s presence. “No! It has come! The Devil Dog has...” She began to shiver, eyes widening wobbling on the edge of a fainting fit.

“Devil Dog?” Ciel muttered, putting his book down, eye narrowing. Angela screamed suddenly when a shadow of a dog was highlighted against the curtains. “Sebastian.” Ciel shouted.

The demon moved, prying the curtains apart, looking out the murky glass.

“What was that?” Ciel joined him shortly.

Mouser fished out a cigarette, dismayed to find some were soggy because of the fog and lit it, the flame taking its time to catch on the tobacco and paper, before going for the window as well.
“Young Master, look.”

There was something shimmering through the night and on the paths that led to it. The lights were starting to flicker awake in distant windows and a low sound of commotion began to rise and reach the castle. The boyo turned and left the room. Mouser and Sebastian followed at a rather sedated pace, watching as he crouched outside, touching the shimmering glowing dust. Ciel chuckled and turned.

“Mouser.” She hummed, looking towards him. “Toss the cigarette into this.”

“Aye, aye…” She murmured, disappointed, aiming carefully as the boyo stepped away. When the ember touched the dust it ignited in a bright flash of white light, dying down as it was consumed. Mouser hissed, covering her eyes with her forearm. Sebastian had moved a bit, discreetly, keeping most of the glow away. As she had been exploring in the dark her eyes had settled. A sudden flashing light like that could be quite painful. The boyo had also shielded his eye, blinking slowly to refocus.

“Young Master.” Meyrin’s scream came from the house, suddenly, the Phantomhive servants gathering at the front door of Barrymore Castle.

“Miss Angela” Finny called, looking around until his eyes found the maid.

“Just what is all the ruckus about?” Bard added, hugging his pillow.

They were in quite a state, dressed in their sleeping wares. Even Tanaka sported a stiff night cap. Mouser crossed her arms, looking down, towards the village. Torches were approaching.

“The Devil Dog has appeared, the one that will bring disaster to the village.” Angela murmured dramatically, one hand closed near her heart, looking away. “Those who have disobeyed their master will be punished by the Devil Dog.” She stared at them directly. “That is one of the laws of this village.”

The trio flinched, Tanaka looked unperturbed as did Sebastian and Ciel. Mouser sighed, rolling her eyes, watching as the villagers gathered in front of the house.

“Miss Angela, please inform Lord Barrymore that the master Devil Dog has appeared.” One of the people of the mob said, stepping forth.

“Who was punished?” She gasped softly.

The dogs were in quite the uproar as they entered the village, barking into the night, most of them locked in their kennels. It was not hard to find the body of a young man at the end of the glowing trail. He has clearly been bitten to death but… the boyo had approached, crouching next to the corpse too, his expression shifting the smallest bit. Mouser shook her head. She had seen people killed by packs of feral dogs in the alleys or executed via a boss’s beloved pet. That was not nearly slobbery enough for either theory. There were no bits missing, no harsh splatter. Just bloodied bite marks.

“How cruel…” Bard murmured, still holding onto his pillow. Meyrin had been the only one that had bothered with changing clothes as an unmarried young woman would always be in a bit of a precarious situation. “Don’t touch him. “Barrymore’s voice rang out, the crowd parting to allow their lord passage.
“So, the bad dog was James?”

“Yes. He broke the rule of having five dogs per person.” One of the villagers, an older man with a grey moustache and a crushed cap answered. “It seems he was keeping a sixth.”

“I see. Then I suppose there was no helping it.” Barrymore stated with a grim countenance, uncaringly.

“No helping it? What?” Bard shouted, outraged, a cigarette once more on his mouth.

“This village has rules set down by myself.” The lord turned, raging, using the momentum.

“Those who break the rules will be punished by the Devil Dog that serves the Barrymore family!” It was a rather dramatic announcement. And the villagers started that odd song the old woman had muttered on the road. Some sort of prayer to the dog? They carried the dead man away. Barrymore and his maid stayed behind for a moment. “I was sure that it would be an outsider to fall prey, but it seems you were spared.” He walked away after the ominous statement.

The lake was apparently pleasant in temperature as the servants indulged in the water, no sign of cold breaking their playing, laughing and taunting each other while splashing about. Mouser sat next to the Young Master’s chair, over the carpet, reading, having refused to put on any kind of bathing clothes. Most likely she was just wary of the water and swimming being a city creature. Ciel was reading too although the demon did not doubt the great difference in contents. But perhaps no great difference in reasons. As for Sebastian, he was standing a few paces away, one arm crossed over his stomach, holding a white towel, watching and waiting after serving the tea.

“Are you not going to swim, Young Master?” His remark was met with silence. Mouser looked up though, smirking a bit, looking over her shoulder. All her holsters and weapons were in place, unhidden. “I see. Of course you are…”

“If you’re still able to swim here in this season it may yet have some merit as a resort.” The boyo interrupted the game before he could politely mock his lack of ability or experience, glancing towards the servants and the Barrymore’s maid sitting on the other carpet, next to the picnic basket under a parasol, waving at Finny.

“Are you truly thinking of making this place a resort?” Sebastian asked, glancing towards the servants too, only a slight surprise placed in his voice.

“Of course.” Ciel said flatly, changing the page, looking down once more.

“What of the Devil Dog?” The demon stated casually

“You’ve noticed as well, right? The truth behind that “Devil Dog”? Sebastian smiled, chuckling slightly. Mouser sighed, closing the book, putting it down by her side, straightening, legs crossed, grabbing her ankles, looking towards the hill. “Lend me your ear for a moment.” Sebastian approached, leaning, listening carefully to the muted tone. Mouser looked slightly back, unperturbed.

“Yes my Lord.” Sebastian straightened and started to move away. “Immediately” He added softly.

“You are quite eager.” Ciel noted, looking at his butler with a slight frown. Don’t you hate dogs?”
“Yes, I do. That is why I want to get this over with as quickly as possible... before it degenerates into the worst possible situation.” Sebastian added before disappearing into the village.

Mouser stood, one hand on her hip, near the handle of a pistol, slipping into the thigh holster to retrieve her cigarette and lighter, stepping a bit away from the boyo. Clouds were gathering quickly, guttering out the sun, brought by a cold wind. The trio had left the water, dried themselves and were diving into the food. And the sound of shouts throughout the village shifted to a victorious chorus along with the church’s bell.

“They caught the dog.” She mentioned, looking at Ciel. The boyo closed the book and stood.

“Yes. Come. I have to confirm her Majesty’s fears.”

“Aye, aye.” Mouser answered gloomily, following.

They arrived as the sign to begin was given and the dogs freed, the cheering of the villagers deafening. The servants had joined in when they noticed them leaving. There was nothing that could be done. Mouser shook her head, looking away, her eyes focusing on Finny suddenly, unsure of what had attracted her attention. He seemed... not as horrified as Meyrin who covered her mouth in disgust, or Bard who clenched his teeth in rage, or even the boyo who looked with a sour expression of repulsion... the gardener-boy was shaking, paling, his big blue eyes wide open and unseeing.

“Stop it... this is wrong...” He was whispering in a small voice.

Mouser sucked in a breath suddenly, twisting.

“Finny... don’t...” She began, reaching for the boy.

“This is too much!” He shouted suddenly, running towards the dog fight, picking up one of the deeply buried flogging logs, swinging it wildly, throwing the bullying dogs out of the way. “Stop it!” The old woman shouted in shock, gripping her head, passing out into the arms of fellow villagers, punctuating the enormous blasphemy the boy had done to those people. They started to grow aggressive, muttering about righteous punishment as Finny cradled the dog and the boyo and the servants ran to him.

“They’re bad dogs... punishment to the bad dogs...” the crowd was echoing. Mouser could see the smug satisfaction the Lord’s eyes as the crowd started to advance.

Mouser’s shot caught the villager’s shoulder. The man screamed, hand covering the wound, his peers glancing back, stopping to help. She made a short sound in the back of her throat, still aiming, walking towards her group, unsheathing the dagger.

“I missed.” She deadpanned, dagger on the left, pistol on the right, standing in front of the Earl of Phantomhive. Meyrin looked spooked. Bard was ready to fight bare fisted if need be. Her actions seemed enough to shock the villagers into inaction and silence for a brief moment. Only the dogs barked. Some groaned, still pummelled into submission by Finny’s charge.

“You bitch!” Barrymore shouted, shaking in outrage. Mouser shifted her aim towards him coolly despite the fact that he hid behind his people, poker face in place.

“And there it is.” She drawled with a slight smirk breaking her features. “Boyo. Orders?”
“If I told you to kill them all, would you?” Ciel asked softly, staring the mob down.

“Might not have enough bullets but the blade of a knife doesn’t tire easily.” Mouser kept her smirk in place, the cigarette held between her lips, allowing the smoke to slither out. “Orders?” She repeated.

“You’re outnumbered!” The shouts began, rising from the mob once more, their confidence growing.

“Surrender!” Others demanded, gripping pitchforks tighter, fidgeting.

“Stand down.” The boyo said softly. She huffed and sheathed the blade, breaking her aim, holstering the weapon, tossing the cigarette down, stepping on it.

The villagers descended upon them, grabbing, drawing ropes, tying the servants to one of the wooden posts left, gagging them. Ciel was chained to the wall through chains that seemed prepared to hold a human. The time it took to disarm most of Mouser made them just slap one of the dog collars chained to the wall, around her neck, tying her arms behind her back as their lord seemed to be getting impatient, the dogs growling, mirroring the mood. They suffered no aggression because the village laws dictated that was to be left for the dogs. The loophole was still in effect.

“Humph... you’re getting what you deserve Maltese.” Barrymore stated, looking utterly smug surrounded by dogs and villagers that wholeheartedly believed in his power and the rule of the Devil Dog.

“Master I’m pleading with you” Angela interfered suddenly, eyes wide, despair in her voice. Mouser twisted against her ropes, reaching under her waistcoat, touching one of the pen-knives, pulling slowly until it rested against her palm. “please forgive them!”

“That’s true.” Barrymore seemed to consider, magnanimously. “This Pomeranian is, even if only temporarily, one of those serving Her Majesty.” He turned to Ciel whose expression hadn’t changed. “Depending on what he has to say I may be able to let him go.” Barrymore faced the Earl of Phantomhive, trying to look even bigger. “Tell Her Majesty to withdraw and never consider this village again.” He demanded.

“You’d go that far to protect your miniature kingdom?” Ciel smirked, looking unfazed. “It’s seems like the expression “furious charge” was invented for you.” His dismissal seemed too much for the Lordship.

“Then know what happens to those who disobey me!” He raised his arm. “Do it.” The dogs charged, released, barking, teeth bared.

Mouser’s blade slid under the ropes, her hands twisting to cut.

Something bleached white crossed the air, thrown hard. One of the dogs yelped, thrown back, immobile, broken fangs scattered about. The others were pushed back by Sebastian a swift kick after a leap. The demon straightened, adjusting his gloves, examining the ambience, the people, the dogs, the chained Phantomhive and entourage and the dog.

“You’re late.” Ciel complained grumpily.

“Please forgive me, my Lord.” Sebastian said softly, glancing back smugly.

“Are you trying to get in my way you Garm?” Barrymore shouted flustered. He turned to the
villagers. “What are you doing? Go and bite them to death!” More dogs were released, growling as they approached, eager to obey.

“Ah... what a loud and barbaric sound they make.” Sebastian complained.

Mouser felt a nick on her skin as the dagger finally cut through the ropes, flinching in pain. She saw the change in his eyes as the dogs cowered, stopping, laying down, wagging their tails.

“This is why I hate dogs.”

“Wh... what?” there was a shock in the man’s face. Mouser sat back, discarding her binds, and pulled at the collar, using the pen-knife to pick the lock wincing at the scrapping sound of metal. The knife would need sharpening afterwards.

“The farce ends here Barrymore. Listen, you village mongrels.” Ciel’s voice rang out strongly. “There is no such a thing as a Devil Dog. The only thing here is an old man who was bitten by the delusion of authority.”

“What proof do you have?” Barrymore shouted back, feeling his control slipping.

Sebastian moved towards the first dog he had knocked down pulling something from its mouth.

“This.” A dog skull, the one she had seen amongst the collection of dog paraphernalia in the... “It was in the basement of the mansion. The shape of the teeth match the marks on James.” He then stood pointing up, towards the clouds where a dog shape was shadowed. “Please bear witness. This is the real truth behind the Devil Dog. The shadow was just a simple projection. Nothing more than child’s play.” Then his gloved hand went to his pocked picking up a flask of powder. “The shining thing in the night was pure phosphorous. He just poured the powder on an ordinary dog.”

“The Devil Dog was an illusion choreographed by one person.” Ciel completed smugly. “And that person was you Henry Barrymore.”

“Whe...Where’s the proof I did that?” The man was starting to sweat and the people who had followed him blindly were waking up. Also the lock finally gave way with a broken clack as Sebastian was walking towards James’ dog, kneeling next to it.

“Please hand it over. Your job is done now.” His voice lowered gently as he reached for the dog’s snout. Then stood, opening his hand, showing what he had retrieved. “It is a high quality fabric. Why do you suppose this dog refused to let go of it until the end? The reason is this.”

“That’s...” Barrymore was definitely fearful now.

“Correct. While trying to protect James it bit your leg and this tore off. It is a piece of your trousers.” Sebastian said calmly.

“Give it up. You’re finished” Ciel shouted as the villagers turned on the Lord, finding the wound of the dog attack, grabbing him, dragging him to a brand of popular justice that never sat well with the likes of the Lordship. Mouser stood, shook the dirt from her pants as Sebastian freed the boyo. Angela had stayed behind, helping the servants free, returning Mouser’s weapons with shaky hands. Finny ran to the dog as soon as the ropes were loose.

“You’re incredible. Trying to protect you master until the end...” He whispered, kneeling, petting its matted fur. But it had been too much. The dog had died after his duty to its master had been fulfilled. “you tried so hard... so hard...” Finny whispered, weeping.
“This is why I hate dogs.” Sebastian whispered, as the rain started to fall.

“With that the case is at an end. We’ll leave the village as soon as the rain lets up.” Ciel announced, the certainty in his voice undeniable.

“Yes.” Sebastian answered frowning slightly after examining the Young Master for a moment, feeling slightly off, knowing there was something more to the dismal place, bowing before leaving. For the moment his presence was unnecessary.

Mouser didn’t stand up when he entered the room after the customary knock, sitting on thin the bed, caring for her arm. It was shallow, just a nick. Her wrists were slightly marked by the rope and the iron had bit her neck a bit. Nothing major. She was in the maid’s room, the one given to her and Meyrin, in front of the male’s room. It was the section of the castle reserved for the guest’s servants. The room given to him was a few meters away, separated by his status in the household.

“Do you need something?” She asked softly, looking delightfully tussled.

Sebastian pulled her arm slowly, grabbing her by the wrist, meeting little resistance. It was still bleeding a slow thick trickle, darkening, just before the wound sealed itself. He sat next to her, taking the wound to his lips, licking it slowly. Mouser’s eyes widened suddenly, her fingers trembling before closing into a fist, controlling her reaction through strength and pain. Warm skin, the scars even smoother, the shift in her scent triggered by his actions, the slight hitch on her breath.

Romans believed that excess bleeding dragged the soul out of the body. While that was not true, blood indeed carried a taste of the soul, seasoned by it. Humans would feel salt and iron. Demons could taste all the flavours the spirit had to offer. It was not disappointing.

“Sebastian... I...” Mouser hesitated a bit while he started to place a simple bandage over the cut, fingers playing with the reddened marks left by the binds. “...have to ask. How will it happen?” Still on the edge, now peeking down, fascinated and seduced by what she saw.

“A covenant will be set between us. You’ll belong to me, utterly as I will belong to you. It can be seen as equivalent trade...” It was safe now to reveal a bit more, stroke her sudden curiosity.

“You’ll always gain something more.” She mentioned, smiling. “No gambler’s den favours clean deals.”

“What is offered to you is power, immortality, love.” He caressed her face, his fingers sliding through her hair, drawing her closer to him. It was an easy word to use, insignificant for a demon but the easiest way to explain what a covenant would forge, to lure the prey. And despite her reserves and suspicions it was not a deal demons created lightly.

“Neither of you ask little. Take what you can...” She whispered when a scream echoed faintly, coming from the basement where they had locked Barrymore, after rescuing him from the angry mob.
“What’s all the kerfuffle about?” Mouser asked, reaching the bottom of the stairs that led towards the basement, the dudgeon and rooms where the hunting paraphernalia had been stored, Sebastian silently following. “Oh.” She eyed the empty prison, the crimson puddle aided by the rain that dripped from the rather large hole in the wall and shook her head, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Cor blimey that’s a lot of blood innit...” Meyrin was standing up now, helped by Bard, shivering a bit in shock. Tanaka looked at the damage unemotionally. Sebastian approached the bars. “No way the blighter survived that... whatever it was.”

“Humans can survive the oddest things.” Sebastian mentioned as the sound of boots echoed through the stairs once more and the boyo appeared, Angela and Finny in tow.

“Master Barrymore!” The maid gasped, staring at the blood and hole.

The suddenly loud pounding on the front doors brought the group’s attention outside, leaving the basement for the entrance hall, opening the doors to find one of the villagers dripping wet and in a state of panic and all he said was Devil Dog.

Mouser held up her parasol, keeping the rain from her and the boyo. The lace, woven into black roses and swirling rows of thorns, at the edges was soaked through but they were both dry. The idea had been “my parasol, my rules” in addition to the hats and jackets. Not that she had a hat. Then the boyo said he was the one paying her so he was entitled to sharing the protection.

The dog pit was filled once more, the villagers kneeling, praying through the same odd song, dogs sitting and howling into the air. Then a sudden flash of lightning illuminated Barrymore’s corpse, propped against the wall, eyes open, unseeingly.

Ciel’s eyes widened in surprise, glancing at Sebastian. The demon advanced through the crowd, crouching next to the man, examining his wounds. From a distance Mouser could see that his arm seemed bit off but the size of the wound suggested a single bite. There was no way a dog, a normal dog’s mouth could encircle and rip away those arms. At least not in one go. And as lightning struck, showing Barrymore’s dead form again and again the white haired maid passed out with a squeak.

“With that the case is at an end.” Sebastian quoted dramatically as the Phantomhive and his staff assembled in the parlour. “Having declared such a thing this is rather unfortunate, isn’t it, Young Master?” The demon mentioned, smiling slightly, a condescending look in his eyes. Mouser snickered before she could help herself.

“He said it?”

“Shut up.” Ciel demanded a bit angrily, frowning harder than usual.

“What about Miss Angela?” Sebastian asked, recovering his butler veneer, looking at Meyrin.

“We’ve put her to bed for the time being.” The maid answered with a tired, worried lilt in her
voice. “It’s no wonder she’s tired out.”

“It’s so heart wrenching it’s unbearable.” Bard said grimly. Finny nodded, his big eyes full of worry.

“Why? The blighter’s dead. Not as if he’s going to be missed.” Mouser crossed her arms, looking towards the fire.

“That’s such a mean thing to say.” Meyrin piped in. “What about Miss Angela?” Mouser glanced at her for a moment, her expression showing exactly what she thought about it.

“This village completely isolated itself from the rest of society, fearing the curse of the Devil Dog. Its existence was supposed to have been a farce Lord Henry created in order to rule.” The boyo started, calmly, reviewing what he knew. “However that same Lord Henry has now...”

“Those bite marks... Doesn’t it as if they really are the Devil Dog’s work, just like the villagers say?” Bard piped in, looking around worriedly.

“Maybe the real Devil Dog was angered by Lord Henry doing all those bad deeds in its name.” Meyrin tossed into the conversation, spooked.

“Well it seems certain it was not the work of humans.” Sebastian appraised. Mouser eyed him for a long moment then huffed, smirking.

“What do you mean by that?” Bard demanded, confused.

“Monsters are real.” Mouser said in a low voice she used when telling horror stories to the kids under Jack’s protection.

Mouser was sitting on the bed looking and feeling as grumpy as a bear awakened before spring, hugging the pillow lightly against her chest, her hair pointing in several directions, the bedding rumpled, eyes half closed, as Meyrin prattled on and on, gesturing wildly about ghosts, investigating, finding Finny, something about the Barrymore maid bonking a stranger, the boyo finding them and joining in with Sebastian or some such and Finny running away screaming.

“What?” She groaned, her head falling forward, snapping back up, the jerky motion startling her slightly, asking slowly, in a raspy voice.

“It was just so exciting. It’s like out of a novel and...” The pillow caught her squarely on the face. The maid screeched when the object was flying towards her, before contact. “Mouser...”

“Go to sleep...” Mouser snarled, snuffing out the candle, diving under the covers, turning her back on the maid. Meyrin chuckled nervously, adjusting her glasses, sitting on the bed, flattening the sheets with nervous fingers. Maybe it hadn’t been the best time...

“Today’s snack is Cabinet Pudding prepared with blackberries from the surrounding regions.” Sebastian placed the slice in front of the boyo along with the Assam tea.

Mouser glanced at the cake for a moment, pouting, sitting to the left of Earl, before returning to
work, making a list of the lost classes, time tables to make up for it, what could be cut from the
schedule and a list of chores to do as soon as she found out how much mail had been delivered.
Usually where a Lord went his mail followed but there... isolation, rain and bad reputation was
keeping everything at bay.

“You’re quite laidback, aren’t you?” Ciel asked, picking up his cup.

“There is no need to get flustered.” Sebastian replied. Mouser grumbled, flipping the page,
continuing her scribbling. Obviously he was not the one dealing with the schedule.

“Sebastian!” Meyrin barged into the dining room, followed by Finny.

“What is wrong? You’re making a ruckus.” Sebastian scolded with a calm harshness that made the
noise dim slightly. Still the gardener-boy was too overwrought to be reduced to silence by the
usual air of disapproving intimidation. He was contaminating Meyrin too.

“Miss Angela is nowhere to be found.” Finny said, fists clenched, fidgeting.

“Ah.” Bard acknowledged, understanding. “It seems there are some herbs that grow near the
swamp. She said she’d go pick them.” There was no worry in his voice, finding the action
endearing and caring.

“On her own? To the swamp?” The gardener-boy said suddenly, worry growing over his features
in a harder mask.

“Really? At a time when the Devil Dog may be running loose?” Meyrin adjusted her glasses,
looking grim, following Finny’s through.

“Ah, damn…” Bard gasped.

“Why did she go pick herbs at a time like this?” Finny complained, completely in fretting mode.

“It seems she was worried about how pale you looked.” Bard explained, his voice low, thoughtful.

“For me?” The boy ran away suddenly, blanching at the news, bolting.

Mouser tapped her fountain pen, observing with disinterest.

“Sebastian we’re going too.” Bard announced, crossing the room toward Meyrin.

“Oh?” Sebastian wasn’t showing much interest either.

“What? Don’t you have any hot, red blood running through your veins? Let’s go Meyrin.” Bard
was behaving like any other man. Let’s go rescue the fair maiden his actions were saying.

“Yes Sir!” Meyrin saluted, getting into the spirit.

“What about you Old Tanaka…” The old man was already prepared for an expedition although it
seemed he had dressed and packed supplies for elephant hunting in Africa. “He’s got the spirit.”
Bard said appreciatively. “Right! Let’s go you rabble!” And they ran out after Finny.

The boyo took another bite from his snack, mostly undisturbed by the commotion, before glancing
at Sebastian. “So... What colour is your blood?” Ciel provoked.

Mouser looked up once again, capping the fountain pen, smiling slightly.
“I can tell you his underwear is black.” She mentioned softly.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Ciel blushed vividly, turning to the secretary, a bit bewildered.

“It seemed equally irrelevant.” Mouser turned her look back to the sheets of black and white as the boyo regained control.

“Seems like that was something to get flustered about.” Ciel teased again, putting the exchange with Mouser aside. Sebastian allowed a very put upon sigh to escape. “Show them how perfectly you play your role Sebastian.”

“Yes, my Lord.” And boy did he sound miserable about that.

“My, my... you’re quite good at the shake hands command.” Sebastian’s voice rang out, still calm, still collected, slightly amused and a bit to their left.

“Sebastian...” Finny’s voice came through the fog too, closer, a rather small whisper, the mists too thick to navigate without a guide.

Mouser turned a bit eyes narrowing, staring at the swirling white mass around them, the boyo next to her looking around too, trying to find his missing demon, the one who had moved ahead when he heard a growl.

“However, as expected, it’s a bit too heavy.” Sebastian’s voice echoed again, giving them a direction, the scene suddenly apparent as they stepped close enough. A gigantic white dog with red eyes and black claws was fallen against the stone ruins of a wall, looking around, sniffing the air, looking a bit confused. Mouser whistled low, watching, arms crossed under her cape. That was a big pooch.

“Hey. This isn’t the time to be playing around.” Ciel demanded, walking calmly towards his servants who turned, surprised.

“Young Master...” it was almost a one voice exclamation by the servant rescue group, the boyo’s presence confusing them.

“Of course. I intend to clean all this up in just a moment.” Sebastian was smirking slightly, standing between the group and the dog that kept sniffing, pointy wolfish snout twisting towards the demon butler. “It is a scent you cannot resist, is it not?” He began saying, slowly, softly. “Puppy’s favourite. They’ll want to eat it every day. It’s Innuko.” A box was suddenly in his hand, the dog’s eyes following as it swayed slightly.

“Innuko?” The servants repeated a bit confused, looking around, at each other.

“He brought doggie treats?” Mouser chuckled, covering her mouth. He was quoting the newspaper publicity with a straight face and... “He actually brought the doggie treats?”

And from a vicious dog that attacked strangers Sebastian was now dealing with an overeager puppy begging for scraps with big eyes and a tail that would not be still.

“The best way to train a dog is to bend its will and strengthen its loyalty. In other words the carrot and stick.” Sebastian moved, jumping towards the dog, nibbling on its nose. Mouser this time
couldn’t help it. She started to laugh, as the faces around her showed clearly they thought the butler was not only odd but utterly cracked. Punishment and rewards followed, the dog being tossed around by the demon, either looking bewildered after a punch or kick or wagging its tail at the prospect of a treat.

“This is a bigger show than I could have imagined.” Ciel said, staring, doing a much better job at keeping any amusement he felt contained. Mouser snorted, trying to control the sounds coming out of her mouth.

“And finally...” Sebastian said before moving. “A big hug.” That hug plummeted the dog against the ground, creating an enormous crater, dust rising around it, followed by a sudden silence.

The group approached, peeking down the darkness, worrying. Mouser placed her hands on her knees, bending down to peer into the pit.

“What are you idling about? Come back here this instant.” Ciel demanded, looking down too.

“Understood.” Sebastian’s voice echoed through the hole, a rumbling starting to build coming from the depths of that place. Mouser stepped back suddenly. So did the boyo.

Water shot up like a geyser, the demon and a white haired, fair-skinned man on his arms.

The servants shrieked and backed away, quickly, spooked by the water’s force.

“Hu... is this hot water?” Bard noticed, surprised as droplets rained over them.

“One thing essential for a resort is a centrepiece that will provide tourist attraction.” Sebastian began, allowing his voice to rise and fill the space. “Bathing luxuriously in excessive amounts of hot water draining away the fatigue of the day. That is what this is. The spa.” He jumped down gracefully. Mouser noticed one thing about the man Sebastian carried. He was still behaving rather dog like. “If one who serves as the Phantomhive butler could not strike a spring or two where would we be?” And the pooch destroyed the moment by licking his cheek.

Mouser chuckled at his annoyance. Meyrin just stared for a moment before turning away, talking about shock, blushing heavily, sneaking peeks of the naked male. Mouser eyed him unabashedly for a moment and shrugged.

“Pluto!” Angela appeared, her voice floating around coming out of the fading mists of the swampy area, running towards them all gracefulness and innocence. The pooch jumped from Sebastian’s arms, barking before hugging the woman, latching on like, well... a dog looking for petting.

Mouser pressed her lips together to hide her amusement at the thing’s antics and gave Sebastian a handkerchief as the others stared in shock at the scene. They had thought her dead. And she couldn’t say she cared if things had turned that way.

“I found this little one about a month ago.” Angela started to explain, sitting on the ground, the devil dog resting his head on her lap, enjoying some petting. “I love dogs and he was just so cute I ended up trying to tame him.”

“Cute?” Finny and Meyrin exchanged a look, tossing the word.

“He has a bad habit of turning human when he gets excited though.” She explained in an overly conciliatory tone. Mouser huffed, itching to cover her ears and screech.

“Don’t try to settle this by calling it a habit!” Bard shouted, rather outraged.
“So, you kept him without telling anyone.” Sebastian summarized, his face a blank.

“Yes. Lord Barrymore used the legend of the Devil Dog but in reality he was more afraid of it than anyone else. When I thought about what would happen if this one was found out... I suppose I was too naïve. I did not think for one moment that he would do that to Lord Barrymore.” A giant wild devil dog. Of course he would not hurt anyone what an utterly silly idea. Mouser huffed, her heel clicking against the cracked stone. “I beg of you, is there no way he could be taken to Lord Ciel’s mansion?” Big purple eyes shimmering like a picture of innocence and niceness. Beggar tears. Genuine ones? What had the world come to? Sebastian’s eyes widened in surprise and not just a bit of displeasure.

“Take him to the mansion?” Bard said, surprised by the request.

“If he’s under Mr. Sebastian’s tutelage I believe he will become a wonderfully obedient dog!”

“Well I am a hell of a butler but...” There was no denying the clear distaste for the idea in the demon’s face.

“That sounds fine.” Ciel said cheerfully. Sebastian’s eyes narrowed menacingly. Mouser stepped a bit closer rubbed his back discreetly.

“Are you serious, Young Master?” It was not easing his mood it seemed.

“Yes, it sounds fun...” the boyo glanced up in smug challenge. “in many ways. Well whatever. Our goal was accomplished.”

“Would it perhaps be the time to say that line you so carelessly uttered before?” Revenge with a polite smile.

“You do it.” Ciel was not amused. And Sebastian did, performing.

“With that, the case is at an end!”

“Don’t forget about me Pluto.” Angela was saying putting a collar on him, kissing his cheek, rubbing his white hair. “And lets meet again Finny.” She kissed him too, making the boy blush intensely, smiling kindly.

Tanaka was perched on the driver’s seat, reins in hand. Bard and Meyrin had already hopped onto the coach. So had Mouser and Ciel. The thief was kneeling next to the boyo, arms placed over the back of their coach watching the scene with narrowed eyes. Sebastian surveyed the last minute issues, walking around, mostly ignoring the goodbyes.

“Well then... Shall we make some headway?” Sebastian spoke, turning towards the white haired maid as the devil dog climbed onto the second coach, curling and drifting into a nap. He was examining her again, a deeply suspicious glint in his crimson eyes. Mouser clicked her tongue, shifting.

“I will definitely come to see Pluto sometime.” The maid said, smiling.

What was it... The... favourites. It clicked suddenly. The girls whose value in the marriage auctions granted them protection and less to no work from the Headmistress. The enemy with fake smiles and power to punish. The minions and spies that tattled on every other girl while training the
forged politeness that won over the glittering ball halls of the higher ups.

“If possible, I would ask you to refrain from doing so.” Sebastian was unimpressed and untouched by the request and syrupy tone. “Taming a devil dog is not such an easy task, though you seem to have quite a talent for it...” Sebastian kept both his face and voice pleasant despite the narrowing of his eyes and the clear distrust behind them. Mouser smirked, catching the irked shift beneath the perfect porcelain doll appearance of the maid, smiling, turning away, sliding down the seat, crossing her legs.

“Let’s go, Sebastian.” The boyo demanded. The butler said nothing as he climbed onto the carriage and urged the horses into motion.

The sudden scream of pain accompanied by gasps and shouts of outrage and fear echoed through the inn’s first floor. The rain had forced them to stop. It had been mostly empty, just a few gentlemen from the ton drinking and loitering about, talking about returning to London’s gaming hells. It was just a place to stay the night.

Ciel stood up from the thin bed, disoriented, running towards the corridor, trying to see what was going on. Sebastian was already there, watching. Bard, Finny and Tanaka came out of the room they shared, next to his. They had left the new acquisition on the stables with the horses.

Three men, the drunken rich gentlemen, were in the corridor, in front of the women’s designated room, cowering in fear. The door was open, the empty space occupied by Meyrin who had no glasses on, wearing her rather modest nightgown and holding a pair of Mouser’s pistols, her aim trained on the trio, her expression stony. The fourth man was pinned to the wall by his right hand, groaning in pain, Mouser’s dagger digging into his palm, firmly held by the woman whose nightwear showed most of her legs and arms. And looked absolutely vicious.

The innkeeper hurried up the stairs checking the scene.

“Now see here! This is a respectable house...”

“Is it?” Mouser said her sarcasm rather thick, her wrist moving. The wood creaked where the blade was sunk. The man screamed as the bones surrounding the dagger snapped out of their proper places due to the pressure. Crimson blood streaked the wooden wall under the candlelight. “So... respectable means... two women...” another absent-minded twist, another howl. Ciel cringed a bit at the sounds, feeling rather fascinated. Sebastian seemed to be enjoying the show too. Finny shook his head in shock but realized if even Meyrin was being deadly those men could not be good. “can be raped...” Bard scowled, looking at the males, hands fisting. Another twist, inverting the direction suddenly, a sharper scream as wooden splinters were shaken free, digging into the wound. “Because... care to elaborate?” She looked the man in the eye, watching him weep for a moment, her question directed to the innkeeper, pulling the blade free, turning.

The man slumped to the floor, cradling the wounded hand, squealing. While they liked delivering pain the soft noble-kind of Britain was wholly unaccustomed to be on the receiving end.

“Indeed I would like to hear why my maid and secretary were forced to defend themselves in your ‘respectable establishment’.” Ciel drew himself up, his voice dragging softly in menace.

Sebastian crossed the corridor, sliding his coat over the less covered Mouser, standing in front of Meyrin without impeding her aim, doing his duty and sustaining the Young Master’s claim on the
women.

“I... your Lordship... you see... I... the ladies were alone... I had not noticed they were part of your party... usually respectable ladies do not travel without... so alone... so I was forced to conclude they were not...” he stammered, shivering under the Phantomhive’s estate glares. Young Master, servants and butler. Mouser was looking at her blade. The men scurried away, frightened, dragging their wounded friend. “proper ladies...” he finished in a tiny squeaky voice. “I am terribly sorry about my mistake... I will compensate you of course... forgive me your Lordship.”

Groveling.

Ciel shook his head. Not terribly entertaining.

“Sebastian. Deal with this.” He demanded, turning back into the room, going to bed. The butler sighed, sending the servants away, to their rests, reassuring the innkeeper, encouraging him to call the authorities as he should, waiting for all but one to disappear inside their rooms.

Mouser tilted her head sniffing at the coat covering her shoulders. Sebastian caressed her hair gently, placing his lips over hers softly. “Viciousness can suit you beautifully when the time is appropriate.” He mentioned, red eyes gleaming. “Clean and sharpen the blade before sleep. A servant of the Phantomhives cannot allow their weapons to go blunt.”

“Of course.” He just smirked, disappearing into the boyo’s room. “Sebastian... your tailcoat...” Gone.

Mouser huffed and shook her head, closing the door, propping a chair against it. The lock had been broken.
“Boyo?” Mouser kicked the study door lightly with her heel in way of knocking, her arms balancing the delivered packages, announcing herself, waiting for his answer while leaning back against the wood to adjust the volumes and weight, allowing her hand free to twist the doorknob. “It has arrived.” She adjusted the weight once again, crossing the room, placing the parcels on Ciel’s desk, checking the work that was already done and ready to be filed or sent. “The chemicals are downstairs too.”

“Good. Get a few books. Three thick ones at least.” The boyo demanded, sitting back, patting the large cubic parcel’s brown paper, a slight smirk in place. Mouser shrugged and went for the bookshelves, fingers tracing the engraved leather of the volumes.

“Any preference?” The boyo shook his head as she took some encyclopaedias down, holding them in the crook of her arm, one by one, the paper and leather weighing quite a lot, and placed the volumes on the desk with a dry thud, leaning against them with a sigh.

“And I will need a dark room. Carry this...” He pushed the other packages towards her, looking up, examining Mouser carefully. “and the chemicals into one of the rooms, close the window and make sure no light gets in. Light a protected candle and place some drying ropes across it. Then call the servants here. Tell nothing to Sebastian.”

“Aye, aye...” Mouser blinked a couple times before moving. The things he mentioned should be the other deliveries, one of the rooms in the servant’s quarters, the secondary laundry room should do as it had a granite workbench and only a small window. She could also use the dirty sheets as a way to prevent any luminosity.

The three servants were shivering in front of the boyo’s desk, trying to look serious. Tanaka stood behind them calmly, waiting for his orders as a classically trained aide of the house. Mouser sat down, on her usual spot, this time choosing the armchair that she had turned, back towards the fireplace, giving her a view of the whole study, crossing her legs, waiting. The boyo’s dour and solemn expression was not helping the mood.

Meyrin took a deep breath and decided to speak up.

“So then, what was this matter you wanted to discuss with us?” She asked finger-twiddling, voice low and shy.

“There is a job I want you three to do.” Ciel finally announced.

“Job?” the chorus sounded while the three hugged each other, smiling, chuckling nervously.

“What a relief!” Finny exclaimed.

“Being called up to the Young Master, I thought we were going to be fired for sure.” Meyrin continued, cheerfully while Tanaka muttered his characteristic Hohoho.

The boyo awaited till the excitements subsided and placed the camera that had been delivered on the top of the desk.
“This is one of the items that Talbot is said to have collected: a camera with a past. I heard this long-lost item had suddenly come up at auction and I went to quite some trouble to acquire it.” Mouser chuckled quietly. So that had been the goal of the flurry of letters, contacts and the two trips to London in the last three days.

“Talcum?” Finny asked, curiously, mishearing the name.

Tanaka coughed discreetly, calling attention to himself, straightening.

“William Henry Fox Talbot. He was an English scientist and one of the inventors of photographic technology. There is a strange rumour surrounding the final camera he used. It is said that if you take someone’s picture with the camera then the being most treasured by that person may also be revealed in the photograph.”

“The thing most important to that person?” Meyrin stated, romanticising the idea.

“And this is that camera?” Bard asked.

“Let’s take one as a test.” The boyo stated, leaning forward, taking the dark fabric, hiding under it. Finny was in the direct path of the photograph. “Don’t move. This camera takes ten seconds for the negative exposure.” The gardener immediately held his breath, standing still and stiff as a fuse when the boyo removed the cap of the lenses.

“What’s negative exposure?” Meyrin asked hesitantly, watching.

“Put simply it reflects and burns Finny’s image.” Bard explained, looking at the camera itself.

“If you don’t stand still for ten seconds it will blur and won’t come out properly.” Ciel added, still under the dark cloth, his voice slightly muffled as Finny struggled, starting to turn red. “Eight. Nine. Ten. All right.” Ciel covered the lenses. Finny let out a huge gasp, inhaling greedily. “It was fine to breathe though...”

True, the darkroom was improvised but it seemed to be within the acceptable standards of the boyo as he developed the image, explaining the process methodically as he performed each step. Mouser’s eyes narrowed. Why was he bothering to do all this?

Finny’s eyes widened as it started to form in the dim reddish light.

“Ah! That’s my little bird” He chirped happily as the boyo used a set of tongs to pick up the piece of paper.

“How cute!” Meyrin said ruffling Finny’s hair, both entering the study as Mouser closed the door behind them.

“I gave it food everyday and eventually it would come eat from my hand. I was so happy and when I went to pet it nicely...” there was loud snap as the wooden bear figurine Finny had been hugging while reminiscing snapped, the bear head clattering over the carpet. “It stopped moving.”

Mouser shook her head softly while putting the books back into their place.
Meyrin stared at the broken head for a moment.

“You mean it...” She gasped, fingers covering her lips.

Bard had a sudden shiver to conceal.

“Ah, I forgot to mention something.” Tanaka intervened once again, touching his moustache, putting the tea cup down. “the precious thing that is reflected is something which does not belong in this world.” Mouster stopped moving, her fingertips sliding down the book’s spine, looking towards the boyo. She huffed, amused, catching on, and returned to her task. “In other words, only the dead.”

“The dead?” Bard gasped nervously.

“By that you mean...” Meyrin did the same, a breathless gasp, eyes widening behind her glasses.

“The most precious thing to that person which is not of this world.” Ciel completed, eye closed, looking smug. Mouster crossed the room, rescuing what was left of the figurine from Finny’s arms, placing it on the support table. “In other words, it means the dead will be transposed to the photograph.”

Bard and Meyrin shrieked in fright behind Ciel’s chair.

“Do occult stories like that really exist in the 19th century world?” Bard asked, spooked.

“You have a devil dog in the gardens. Why is this any weirder?” Mouster mentioned, preparing the meeting papers about factory expansion and new areas to explore for the Funtom Company.

“How amazing! What an exceptional camera!” Meyrin, fan of the thrills and shivers, praised the story.

Finny was curled in a corner sobbing about his little birdie.

“Take a picture of Sebastian with this camera. However do it without him realizing.”

“A sneak photo?” Bard asked.

“Indeed.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier if you told him to sit still and let you take it?” Mouster said softly taking supplementary notes for the documents’ later organization. The boyo glared for a moment before looking back at his chosen photographers.

Meyrin’s mind apparently went towards the other photographic territory, a blush and a very focused expression coming over her face. Mouster chuckled. Couldn’t fault that...

“Wh...who is the one Sebastian cares most for?” The maid pounced on the question.

“I’d kinda like to know.” Finny added, brought from his sadness by the prospect of knowledge, coming out of his corner of woe, wiping the tears away.

“I can answer that.” Mouster waved her hand with the brief for the Funtom’s candy products, raising her voice cheerfully. They turned to her, curiosity lighting their eyes. “Himself.” The group slumped, dissatisfied with her answer, turning back to the boyo.

“That bastard is always finding flaws with my artistic cooking.” Bard stood straighter, growling.
Mouser lit a cigarette, watching, settling back into the cushioned armchair. “He’s human too. He must have a weak point or two.”

“Cats.” She said dryly, largely ignored by the mood ignited by the boyo, who seemed to be savouring the results of his nudges, placing the documents in a neat pile.

“This is our chance.” Bard completed his line of thought, smiling gleefully.

“You’ll do it, right?” The boyo asked casually.

“Yes, my Lord.” The trio spouted, cheerfully breaking the obedient straightening that preceded the phrase, gossiping about how much they wanted to say it. Ciel nodded, dismissing them.

“This will be something to see...” The boyo mused smirking, his eye roaming to the other person sharing the room, the one that still hadn’t given in. “Mouser.”

“Aye?” She finished the documents and picked the pen and paper to verify, blowing a last of the smoke into the air, the butt going into the cosy fire.

“You’re forbidden to talk to Sebastian for this day.”

“And if I do?” Mouser leaned back, fingertips touching, placing the pen and papers to the side.

“I’ll dock your pay.” The boyo said in a sweet threatening way.

“How about you pay me more?” She retorted with a smirk to match his. Not talking to the demon: No checking chores, no coordinating schedules, no getting pinned against the wall, no discussion about mail, the estate and placing orders... no cake.

Ciel groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Go to the games room and bring the Funton doll house, the lead army and the farm animals.” Mouser’s brows drew together but she shrugged, stood and left the room, hunting the items requested.

Three little soldiers and a black sheep... or a ram, seeing it had horns. Strategy planning for a toymaker. Mouser leaned against the boyo’s chair, crossing her legs, tilting her whole body to the left, watching as he placed the toys in the dollhouse, focused. The clocks chimed, time echoing through the manor, marking the start of the chase.

“At this time Sebastian is normally in the library.” Ciel said, the toys in place.

Cleaning and organizing, verifying the maid’s job.

Mouser opened the note book in one hand, looking away. The day had been cleared of classes because of Mr. Paul Jones’, from Brit Business Company, visit. Funtom work could wait and society was bundling up for the winter events. Clubs, literary salons, opera, theatre, the occasional museum lecture and showcasing. Balls and soirees were dwindling and invitations came with a bit less enthusiasm. On the other hand the Earl of Phantomhive’s lack of appearances at social gatherings made him the hostess’ prize. The one who could nab his presence would be highly praised and respected. Until gossip said otherwise.

Failure, informed Meyrin about five minutes later, peeking into the study, looking dejected.
“It is getting cold rather fast this year isn’t it? Every morning I see frost...” Mouser mentioned, going for the armchair, sitting down smiling, placing the work tools on the low coffee table, opening the new sensation book. Rich heiress, evil men, fortune, misfortune...

“Next up is the cleaning of various rooms.” Ciel continued, glancing at the clock, moving the soldiers and sheep. He intertwined his fingers, resting his chin over them, looking thoughtfully at the dollhouse.

This time the failure was announced by a loud bang. Almost as if a wall had been knocked down. Mouser looked up from the first chapter and the unfortunate events that kick-started the plot to find the Young Master rubbing his brow with an annoyed expression and thinned lips.

“Then come his daily duties in the butler room.” Ciel rearranged the soldiers once again.

Mouser just hummed in accordance, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs.

The earl smirked and waited till things were prepared before ringing.

It didn’t take long for Sebastian to show up.

Mouser peeked from behind her book, pulled away from the first kiss with the evil cad that would further corrupt the pure heiress and drown her deeper into woe, amused, watching the interaction.

“Was there something you wanted?” Sebastian asked, standing at the partially opened doorway, looking inside.

“It’s untied.” Ciel noted, chin pointing towards his bowtie, his chair placed sideways so the field vision from the window was open.

“Understood.” Sebastian said, his face a complete blank of boredom and annoyance. Still he was down on one knee, tying the bow once again. Mouser chuckled quietly, placing the book in front of her eyes. Outside the window they were being loud enough for her to hear. Also she was fairly certain that there was no way Sebastian didn’t know he was being tailed and snapped. He glanced at the windowpanes after his task was done, casually stepping towards them, opening the window wide, glancing both ways. But not down when it would have been logical seeing that this was the first floor. “Let’s let some air in.” The demon said with a slight smile before leaving without any further comment.

Mouser went to the window, leaning outside, looking down, elbows on the windowsill, face between her palms.

“This is not going very well, is it?” She asked to the three people spooked out of speech dangling on a set of stairs, feeling rather amused. Behind her Ciel groaned in frustration.

Lunch was taken in the studio that day.

Mouser was sent out before Sebastian even came near the place.

So she raided the kitchen, helping herself to some of the cold meat leftovers of last night’s dinner, putting them on a bit of fluffy fresh bread, one of the loaves to singed to be presented to the boyo, went to verify if any more mail had arrived and then she planned on staying in the kitchen, reading, until the boyo called her back, or till it was time to retrieve and deliver the documents.
It was just a measure so there would be no chance or temptation to talk.

A knock on the door? Mouser stilled in the middle of the grand foyer, glancing at the double doors.

She looked at the nearby clock.

It was still too early to be the guest...

“Boyo... you might have a problem...” Mouser opened the study door, peeking in as the conversation veered towards flame throwers and a very definite no on their use to photograph demons.

“No need to be so formal my dear girl.” Lau said pleasantly behind her, patting her head playfully, opening the door fully, his arm over her head, barging in, arms opening in greetings. “Hi Earl.”

Mouser groaned, closing the door behind him, standing next to it.

RanMao was in the corridor, making no motion to follow.

“Master Lau?” Meyrin gasped, surprised as the Chinese slid forth, walking past the trio, placing his hands on the desk, leaning forward, glancing around quickly, taking in the ambience, smiling peacefully.

“What did you come here for?” The boyo was not amused or pleased.

“I heard something interesting was happening.” Lau stated simply.

“Go home.” Ciel looked away, eyes narrowed, a vein on his forehead thrumming.

“Don’t say such cold things. Leave this to me.” Lau complained, picking up the black ram, his hand gliding over it mysteriously. “The spider’s web has already been woven. The more you struggle, the harder it becomes to escape from those bonds.” Mouser tilted her head a bit then smiled, picking her papers, slowly. “Whatever the prey, once they get involved with me, catching them is only a matter of time.”

“All right. However I will not tolerate failure. No matter what.”

“But of course. If I sullied the Phantomhive name I’d be ejected from this country after all.” Lau stopped for a moment while everyone stared at him. “So what are we doing?”

Mouser chuckled on the way out as the faces inside went from anger to pure disbelief.

\emph{Cannot talk to you. Here are the papers for the meeting. Do you want to verify or should I just give them later?} Mouser smirked slightly, showing him a paper with those words written. Sebastian stared for a moment, taken slightly aback. Her eyebrows arched a bit. He chuckled. So for today the Young Master was determined to create whatever trouble he could.

“Please.” He took them from her hands, reading quickly while walking towards the entrance, opening the doors, glancing at the mansion’s access, preparing form the guest’s arrival. Then gave the folders and information back. “Leave them in the drawing room.”
Mouser nodded softly and moved away, placing the papers on the table of the drawing room, nodding a greeting towards Tanaka, the public face of the Funtom Company and went back to the foyer. She stopped for a moment in the first steps, looking around. Seemed whatever preparations they needed were in place. She sighed, frowning when noticing RanMao sitting on the stairs’ banister.

The coach was stopping outside, visible through the doors.

Sebastian had his back turned to the interior of the house, waiting solemnly. She walked silently over to the boyo and the Chinese, sliding behind the column, peeking, curious to see what RanMao was going to do to keep the demon still.

“And so it begins.” Lau said softly, peeking, his head placed next to her, leaning casually against both Mouser and Ciel as Sebastian crossed the foyer, carrying the guest’s hat, followed by the man who glanced around, looking dutifully impressed. Mouser angled her hips, shaking the Chinese’s hand away.

As the men reached the middle of the stairs, before they split left and right into the depths of the house, RanMao began to move, crossing and uncrossing her legs so slowly that even the bells she wore around her ankles didn’t make a chime. Her china-doll expression did not change in the least.

The British gentleman stopped staring as the woman displayed her sensuous movements, a blush spreading over his fair features. The boyo started to blush too, his bright blue eye widening. Sebastian didn’t even glance back. Mouser snickered against her fingers.

“What is with that?” The boyo grumbled, glancing away, his face a bright shade of pink.

“Oh, how strange. I thought that would definitely make that butler stop and look for a second.” Lau whispered, tilting his head thoughtfully.

“I am an idiot for believing in you for even a moment.” The boyo complained.

“It’s too early to give up yet.” Lau slid out of the columns’ shadow and started gesturing. The servants slid out of the stair’s corner with heavy fans, starting to wave them upwards. RanMao was now standing, balancing, her legs moving slowly, the air flowing around her. Her short cheongsam skirt started to float. Mouser’s lips pressed together, snorting as she bottled a laugh, covering Ciel’s eye, leaning against him.

“You’re way too young boyo.” Mouser whispered against his ear. He grumbled, arms crossed, face growing redder and redder, warm enough to heat her palm.

Bard had a kneejerk reaction, the camera pointing up suddenly.

Sebastian was looking down with a calmly puzzled expression.

“Mr. Jones?” He called softly, startling the man who snapped out of his daze and hurried along.

“Ah, how strange.” Lau commented as Mouser removed her hand from the boyo’s line of sight. RanMao was sitting down once more. The Chinese hugged Mouser suddenly. It was a usual gesture, the one that disgusted onlookers back in the day. The thief rolled her eyes, staying still. “Maybe we should try placing you nude...”

“Would not work.” Mostly because she would refuse. Maybe. Demon interest in front of audience might also be an issue. Mouser broke away, walking towards the double doors, closing them.
“What a waste of time.” The boyo said, frowning once again.

Mouser and Bard gambled and smoked, continuing their game of cards, sitting on floor, on the corridor outside the boyo’s study, relegated out with the rest of them, a small pile of trinkets in-between the cook and thief. Lau had joined the picture trio now. RanMao sat next to him quietly.

“I wonder what the earl is doing all on his own.” Lau spoke up, looking in the door’s direction.

“Brooding.” Mouser said curtly. “Four of a kind.” The cards were placed over the carpet in quick succession. Bard groaned as she displayed her hand, letting go of his cards with a frustrated grunt, smoke coming out of his mouth in a short burst, the cigarette trembling in outrage.

“Sulking maybe.” Lau agreed, nodding slowly.

“He said he wanted to think on his own for a while but...” Meyrin whispered, staring at the wooden entryway too.

“Flush.” Bard said chuckling cockily. “The Young Master is pretty serious this time...” his mood changed as he glanced away too.

Mouser sighed, blowing up the smoke, shrugging, glaring at her hand, tossing the cards down.

To prevent further contact and keep himself entertained throughout the rest of the afternoon, after Sebastian presented his report about the interview and left to prepare dinner, Ciel had called Mouser to the games room to play chess. She had lost once again, not really interested in playing, just humouring him while learning. There was a slight improvement in her plays and some potential if she cared enough about what she was doing.

Night was falling earlier and earlier everyday and the outside darkened at a quickened pace.

The pieces were once again organized for battle... Ciel glanced out once more. There was time for a last match then...

Mouser sighed suddenly, straightening on the chair and looked at him for a moment before closing her eyes, head down. Her fingers reached over for the first move... toppling the white set slowly, one by one, each piece producing a soft clack against the board, until the king was down. Then she stood up, leaning, picking up the black queen, placing her amidst the carnage, looking him in the eye calmly.

“It’s about time.” The boyo said, looking away, into the night, standing up.

Mouser followed him outside, watching as the cold created foggy breaths.

Neither of them was dressed for the outside weather but the task shouldn’t take long.

“I still believe you are overworking it.” She noted, lighting a cigarette calmly, protecting the lighter’s tiny flame from a cold gust of wind carefully. The boyo just huffed, reaching the empty spot chosen for his play.

Finny was raising a headless statue while Pluto howled, somewhere near.
“Is this really all right?” Finny asked as Mouser stepped back into a safer area, behind the gardener-boy, watching.

“Yes.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. Just do it.” The boyo shouted.

Finny shook from head to toe, closing his eyes with a whimper, before gaining momentum and tossing the statue upward with all is strength. As it fell he cowered, frightened, as the boyo stood still. Finny couldn’t take it, though. He stood and started to run, screaming for the Young Master.

It was too fast for her to see but as the dust cleared the boyo was on the ground, Finny was a few paces short of the impact area, dazed, and Sebastian was there wearing the stone wings of the beheaded angel for a brief moment, looking none too happy. He started to help the boyo up when the lights from firework dragons began to glow, illuminating the area for the picture to be taken.

“Isn’t this a wonderful picture?” Lau and RanMao came out from their hiding places.

Mouser blew a wisp of smoke, shaping it nonchalantly, glancing around.

Sebastian was standing surprisingly still.

“You’re late.” Ciel chastised.

“I apologise.” The response was automatic, something that should be said when faced with the lord’s displeasure. “I was making preparations for tonight’s dinner. Today’s main dish is a Rouen style roast duck.” Motionless and very close.

“I see.” The boyo said, looking to the side

“You should just have ordered me to let you take it.” Sebastian mentioned, a laugh in his voice, unmoving. Mouser smirked and walked away shivering a bit against the nigh air.

The sounds of things breaking echoed loudly throughout the mansion.

Mouser stopped in the middle of one of the darkened corridors, looking around, frowning. Then she walked towards the makeshift darkroom to check what was happening, stopping in the curve, staring at Sebastian who rewarded Pluto with a quick reluctant pat and a treat. She huffed softly as he turned, ordering the dog to sleep outside. The boyo’s success was rendered moot now, wasn’t it...

“Forced to face defeat in his moment of triumph.” Mouser smirked, watching the demon’s approach. “I do have to say that’s quite more beastly than just failure.”

“My, my...” Sebastian stopped in front of her, tilting her head up, forcing eye contact. Mouser allowed herself to go. He leaned close, foreheads touching. “Aren’t you disobeying the Young Master?” The demon breathed against her lips as if promising punishment. Mouser moved slightly away, escaping his fingers, looking down mischievously.

“The day ended quite a few hours ago.” She mentioned very softly. “On the other hand... I’m easy.”
“Excuse me, it’s time for bed.” Sebastian said softly as he knocked on the study door, opening it when no answer came. The boyo was sleeping on his chair, Mouser noted, peeking behind the butler’s back. “Sleeping out here like this... how sloppy.” He muttered to the thief. “That aside it would seem the number of unnecessary jobs has increased again.” Sebastian completed with a small sigh.

Mouser looked at the camera on the desk and raised a normal one she had found in the library.

“Want to play a bit?” She asked with a smirk leaning her head against Sebastian’s arm in an affectionate bump.

“So the one most important to the Young Master is Sebastian?” Meyrin said, surprised.

“So that’s how it is...” Bard retorted

“They’re really close friends.” Finny said cheerfully.

“The young Master is my rival... what should I do...” Meyrin groaned, a fist shivering under her chin.

“But Mouser is...” Bard looked at the other half of the picture where Mouser leaned against the Young Master’s chair, smirking, head tilted towards the camera. “and... back there...”

“Ah PluPlu!” Funny pointed to the devil dog’s figure behind the murky window.

“So the one Sebastian cares the most is PluPlu?” Meyrin gasped startled, hands going into her hair. “Or...”

“Is that true? Wait? Who is the one getting photographed here?” Bard said suddenly, staring at the image.

“Mornin’.” Mouser muttered as she walked across the kitchen, aiming for the tea pot, hair still down, a bit longer, some tips reaching her neck now, the strands that had been braided brushing her shoulders.

“Mouser did you take a picture yesterday?” Meyrin asked suddenly.

“Picture? I thought Sebastian was the one you were after...” She said softly, helping herself to some breakfast, hiding a smirk as the quarrel grew behind her.
The Young Master stared in dismay at the picture placed in front of him, propped against the salt and pepper shakers. Sebastian was snickering quietly in the background, moving smugly, placing another plate in front of him, leaning with a smile. The butler stood next to his sleeping form, captured in black and white.

“I’m honoured.”

“Shut up.”

“It’s your own fault for leaving yourself defenceless while asleep.” Sebastian chastised softly.

“You bastard.”

“The image reflected in the picture is but an illusion. However, even if it is an illusion, wishing to hold onto it is one of the hollow dreams humans have.”
Chapter 9

Take what you can... wasn’t it? There were fears that were deeply ingrained in her mind. What she’d seen, what she’d done... In the end it mattered not. Do what’s right by you. Move forward, ignore the pain. So she wouldn’t let an old fear rule her. Mouser’s hand crushed the linen bedding nervously under her fingers, one hand gripping, the other releasing suddenly, looking around once again.

The butler’s room was spacious and comfortable, simply furnished with a rather wide metal frame bed, closet, drawers, desk, a ceramic pitcher and basin under a mirror and nightstand, the light provided by a couple of small lamps. It was cold though, the fire unlit on the fireplace built into the wall. He probably had no need for it. The door had been unlocked also so it was easy to assume he had no fear or secrets within.

There was a slight hesitation created of surprise when Sebastian entered the room, stopping, staring at her, the same polite blank stare he used when looking at Ciel when the boyo was being particularly difficult. Mouser looked up and sighed, letting go of the fabric, steeling herself. He closed the door calmly, straightening, watching her, his expression closed and calm, the mask still in place, irking her slightly.

“Are you accepting?” The demon asked softly.

Mouser stood, feeling his eyes on her, calculating, the only shift in him, and walked towards him, barefoot, uncaring about her state of undress, the hair down, framing her face without rule. She had sneaked away after Meyrin had gone to bed... actually after most of the household did. There was no reason to disturb anyone else. Her hand shot out suddenly, gripping his tie, pulling him down, lips crashing against his. Greed and lust. A claim in her gesture, in the way her heated lips moved against his, tongue darting just a bit, a fleeting touch, a brief hesitation, as if she was about to run, before a tilt in her head brought the kiss into a deeper caress, a soft sound echoing in her throat, an odd shy moan.

“I’m taking.” She challenged, moving just an inch back, breathing the words hoarsely.

Sebastian smiled, a sly slow grin spreading over his lips, showing just a bit too much of a fang, still bowed over her as she hadn’t let go of the black silk, the kind of smile that promised either pain or mischief. Hard to tell. The door lock clicked softly, the lock groaning, complaining about the use.

Mouser hardly had time to let go of the tie, to react, as he moved, unnaturally fast, possession in his hands and mouth as they touched her, allowing a deep growl of satisfaction to break out of his lips, dragging her closer, picking her up with sudden urgency, the wooden door creaking when he pressed against it, his kiss hungry and demanding, bringing his scent around her. The thief’s leg slid up against his, curling around his thigh, tiptoeing to gain leverage, her hands in his hair, their tongues tangled... and then he was gone. Mouser gasped, arching back against the door, unbalanced, her fingertips scrapping the wood slowly as something inside her kept urging her on, bringing heath to her cheeks.

Sebastian smirked as she crossed the room slowly, cautiously, watching with eager wonder as he got rid of his clothes, gestures slowing down once again, a predatory look in his eyes as he pulled the gloves free with his teeth, dropping them on the desk, unbuttoning tailcoat, vest and shirt, black nails gleaming softly as the long dextrous fingers worked on the vestments.

The thief sat slowly on the bed, apparently unable to look away, the fabric whispering under her,
her breaths shallow and quick. There was no shyness in him, for one. A handsome male, dark hair falling tousled and wild around a wicked face, the devious smile still gracing his lips, matching the impious intentions in his eyes, the pupils shifting, thinning, growing unnatural, pale skin, almost eerily so, smooth and unbroken, unmarked, a leanly muscled body that did not betray the strength of the beast within.

Also it seem she had been right about the colour of his underwear, now discarded next to his other pieces of clothing. Her eyes moved downwards slowly, a shiver running up her spine. Men were not a mystery. She knew full well what dangled between their legs and the pain it could bring. But to actually feel desire for Sebastian as a man, to see proof of his desire in more than ravenous kisses and wandering hands... it trilled and confused her.

A fang made a cut on his lower lip, a small bead of blood welling up, glistening in the almost total darkness that bothered neither. Her breath shivered as it left her parted lips, eyes glued on his form, roaming once again, appreciatively, the tip of her tongue wetting her lips, anticipation fraying her nerves.

Sebastian’s blood kiss touched her forehead, deliberately staining it red, the demon sliding onto the bed, mattress dipping under his weight with a groan, cupping her cheek, making her move closer, her hands sliding over the soft skin of his shoulders, caressing him back a bit tentatively, in discovery, as his hands slid over her chemise, under it, betraying his earlier hurry in a lazy slide, fabric and skin uniting in a tortuous caress to madden her.

Mouser arched with gasped, broken sounds, eyes closing, hands going limp, shivering once again as long fingers drew patterns over her arms, hands, stomach, edging softly near the edge of her bloomers, sneaking teasingly under the band for a moment, tracing the shape of her hipbones.

The chemise disappeared suddenly as he pushed her back against the soft sheets, hands trailing down her exposed form, thumb brushing suddenly against the nipples cold and arousal had stiffened, dragging a longing gasp from her, her back bowing from the bed, eyes closing as heat grew from within. His next kiss touched her right ankle, his hands trailing down, dragging her bloomers down and away, leaving another red stain with his lips. Mouser’s eyes snapped open, a bit surprised as his fingers slid over her legs, knees and thighs, receiving a long lazy caress, fingertips brushing the skin before the palm flattened, hot and possessive against her, dragging her down after reaching and cupping her derriere.

The thief chuckled in a smoky tone, amazed at the feelings, at the need, at the very fact that she was growing wet and unbearably hot, looking up, trying to focus on his eyes finding it impossible as his hands kept moving on her, dragging shivers and whimpers, the blood rushing to her cheeks, the sensation making her molten, surprise at each action making her squirm against the demon, the feeling of skin against skin further making her loose focus. For all the smoothness of his skin there was something undeniably hard cradled between her thighs. A shiver ran through her, instinct making her try to close her legs, with a bit of a start, her mind snapping in fright at the unfamiliarity, finding his hips on the way, a movement from his hands kneading her breast slowly allowing her to forget with an hissed curse, her head falling back against the mattress, hair spilling like ink around her face.

Sebastian touched her hand, turning her left palm upwards, holding her wrist firmly, prying her fingers open, fingertips ghosting over her palm, the bead of red touching her palm, the demon nipping the skin, breathing against the bloody mark, moving on to her right palm, repeating the motion on her other hand. Then he curled down, caressing her waist, hands running over her, prolonging the stroke, reaching for her right ankle, another bloody bead finding its resting place before returning to her forehead, cupping the back of her head, pressing her against him before
claiming her lips hungrily, wet hot tongue playing with hers once more, curling and sucking, his hand finding her damp centre, touching her slowly, sinfully, making her arch with a whimper into his mouth, arms sliding around him, pulling him closer, as her mind simply gone numb with pleasure, blanking for a moment.

Mouser refused to let any tendrils of fear reach her, break her away from that. Pleasure flooded her senses, flaring his own, the scent of her arousal hanging heavily around him, the sounds, the taste of her telling him what he required, need growing impossible to ignore even for a demon that disdained humanity, who saw them as little more than prey. The blood seals were in place, the woman giving herself to him, to do as he desired, her virginity further fuelling his hold.

Harsh bites followed by slick scorching kisses over the sensitive skin and languorous sweeps of their hands, forceful and sweet without warning or logic. Not any that she could tell, fallen into that blissful state, matching him, touch for touch.

Pain clawed through her suddenly as he claimed completion, her lips parting silently before growling, short blunt nails digging into his back, both latching onto him and spurring him on, her legs going around his hips instinctively, the thought of fighting the invasion simply vanishing her mind as Sebastian nuzzled her slowly, his breath teasing along the column of her neck, bringing him closer, deeper, the feeling of pain and fullness... her arms went limp for a second, sliding from his back, barely able to hold on around his neck, her eyes closing hard as he stopped moving, her body simply cradling his, the simple act of breathing, even their heartbeats sending shivers through her.

Ache and lust fuelled each other in a cycle, wandering hands learning her body again and again with merciless accuracy, finding each spot, each secret that drove her wild, unlocking all she had buried beneath fear and disgust, forcing pleasure to rip through her body, ravishing her until nothing but him filled her mind.

Mouser gasped, arching, clinging, unable to move in his hold, the rhythm he set ravenous and brutal, moving sinuously. It was as if he knew exactly what to do, where to touch to leave her a mess of flaring need and sated to the point of staring down an empty abyss, unable to do more than mewl and undulate against him, accepting. What was left aware of the world in her mind was whispering quietly that it was impossible, that it couldn’t last, how could he still... endure... when she... her mind blanked once more, nails drawing blood this time. Sebastian bit into her skin suddenly, his voice whispering against her as his tongue dragged over her dampened skin, a cry coming out of her mouth once again, feeling entirely too responsive, as he urged her to follow, through the haze, through darkness, over the crest, beyond the abyss.

Pleasure could be such an elusive quarry, the demon pondered in the aftermath, watching his little prey under him, defeated and caught. Not for the human but for the demon himself. Hunger could be sated either by sex or souls. Preferences aside, quality and quantity of either mattered. Sebastian moved a bit away, parting from Mouser, allowing her some rest. Maybe he had been a bit too demanding. She was... drifting contently, a slight dazed smile on her lips. He chuckled softly, caressing her cheek slowly, watching as she reacted with a sound that sounded suspiciously like gravelly a purr, rubbing against his palm.

That said, he had not fed from her. That would defeat the purpose of a covenant. The pleasure he took was more than physical and food as it was being channelled towards her birth.

“Ichor is the blood of demons.” Sebastian whispered softly against her ear when she finally began
to focus, shivering as warmth began to ebb away, the twitching and sighing from her pleasure finally clearing from her mind, his fingers displacing a few strands of her hair, searching the brown eyes for understanding. She frowned for a moment, turning to him. “It’s the last thing needed to cement this covenant.” He continued, fangs apparent once again, longer, sharper, eyes shifting clearly into his more bestial self, raising his arm to his mouth, sinking the white fangs suddenly into his own skin, the ichor welling easily. Undistinguishable from blood unless one knew the qualities it possessed. Unusable by any other. Simply taking his blood would kill the fool who dared it.

The deep cut was placed against her lips abruptly, forcing them open.

Mouser hissed and choked on the ichor, forcing herself to swallow, her body fighting it by simple instinct, trying to breathe and break away from the strange substance filling her mouth. Her eyes started to change, slowly with each pull, the fight lessening although the taste and slickness of it made her queasy. Silently Sebastian slid his wrist away when he deigned it enough as she panted, gasping for air, twin trails of dark red sliding down the corners of her mouth, eyes as red as it, the pupils demonic. He gave her a bit of room. Mouser’s breathing was ragged, heartbeat quick, the pain of her mortality burning away breaking into her mind, making her scream suddenly, curling into herself.

Sebastian watched carefully for any signs of rejection, of further change, licking his wrist to close the wound before his hands slid over her body, soothing the agony in long languorous strokes, finding each of his previous discoveries, using them to their advantage, her pained screams ebbing into occasional whimpers when his touch wasn’t enough to calm down the viciousness to the blood that worked in the change from within.

“It will be over soon.” He reassured her in a low tone. She snarled, curling as his hands worked on her back, darkening nails piercing the mattress suddenly, displaying a first onslaught of strength.

“I’m going to heave...” The complaint came softly and murmured as Mouser looked slightly over her shoulder.

“I’d be forced to give you more ichor if you do.” Sebastian gave her a particularly unhelpful smile while moving onto her legs.

“Motivation not to...” Mouser started slowly, gagging with a choked sound, eye widening in a sudden panic, covering her mouth with her palm, groaning, gulping a few times.

“This time around it should taste better.” He reassured her playfully.

Mouser grunted, tensing before shouting again, the pain ripping her away from him, her fangs shaping slowly, gradually. Her red eyes then closed little by little as the first pains of the shift ebbed away, collapsing on Sebastian’s bed with an exhausted sigh.

In a day or so she would have become a newborn female, Sebastian appraised, covering her gently.

There was no sign of Mouser when Meyrin woke up and perched the round glasses on her nose, looking around the faintly lit room they shared. It was early morning, the light dull and grey and the sound of rain touching the walls and windows outside, and the maid felt proud that she was getting more and more capable of waking up on her own. It was a point of pride as a household maid though nobody could manage to wake up earlier than the butler. Books, clothes and weapons
were in the places they had been discarded, some neatly placed, others just left wherever they had fallen.

That was not unusual.

She was not in the kitchen when the maid had walked down, already dressed and ready to start the day although Meyrin partially expected to see Mouser chatting with Bard, both smoking and making a fuss about their gambling gains and losses. Most likely that absence meant she had taken the tea and gone to the study or library to sort the Young Master’s mail and tasks before being called by either him or Sebastian.

It happened from time to time. But when she asked Bard, who was grumpily staring at the table, still sleepy and Finny, who devoured his breakfast happily, glancing eagerly outside despite the light drizzle, neither had seen her.

It wasn’t her day off either. Mouser used those to go to London often returning with a grumpy expression glossing over a happy demeanour and iron-curlled hair, looking like a little porcelain doll and completely irked by any mention to it, saying only that her friend loved dressing up.

They hadn’t crossed paths throughout the day.

That was slightly stranger as the pauses they had usually brought them together in the kitchen or in the room Meyrin would be cleaning. From time to time Mouser pitched in the dusting while they talked. But the lack of contact still happened, especially when the Young Master ordered some sort of special task or the letters that arrived needed more attention than usual.

Mouser was not there when the Young Master was having lunch and was missing when the servants got a break to eat something themselves.

So Meyrin was starting to grow worried as the hours passed. The maid fidgeted for a moment with her skirt, walking through the corridors once again, checking the rooms, finding, thinking if she already cleaned that one or that one, before returning to the kitchen staring at the butler. If anyone knew it would be him, wouldn’t it?

“Sebastian... I haven’t seen Mouser...” The maid began, stammering a bit, straightening, stiffening and ceasing breathing for an instant, shivering a bit when Sebastian glanced at her.

“She was feeling unwell this morning.” Sebastian paused for an instant as he displayed the ingredients needed to prepare that day’s pastries. “I urged her to take the day off.”

The maid sighed, touching her chest for a moment, calmed.

Then her imagination got to work, creating a grand swoon near the staircase with the butler catching her dramatically, recreating the scene of one of the books, all lace and ruffle’s and somewhat sparkly. The maid’s face heated up suddenly and brightly, catching and following up on the idea as she wandered away, stuttering.

Mouser sighed covering her ears for a moment thankful for the night’s silence, eyes closed, breathing slowly. Her hands slid away from her face unhurriedly, staring at them. The nails had turned fully black and looked glossy and sharpened. No longer bluntly short but oval-shaped, the tip razor sharp as the shreds on the sheets had proved.
It had been like waking up with a hangover on top of the worst period cramps any woman had ever endured, adding that to a fever and a beating. Sounds, scents, what she could see, what she could feel seemed too intense, too vivid. Occasionally something else had flickered on the edge of her growing senses. There were moments where all she could feel was power, strength. Then she felt unsteady and weakened. But the discomfort was fading away, bit by bit and as night came she felt almost normal.

It was just a matter of growing accustomed to that kind of sensibility...
“I see. The Ice Top Market is quite something.” Sebastian commented, looking around, watching the beige fabric tents set over the thick sheet of ice covering the river’s surface, forming a square shaped corridor, and the crowd as they entered the fair.

Mouser looked around too, walking carefully over the ice suppressing a shiver every time her ears caught the sound of a creak under her heels. Her mind was telling her that the ice was thick enough to support a lot of weight and shock but being able to hear the tiniest sound was proving a disadvantage in such a situation. The sheer amount of people was also bothering her slightly.

On the other hand it was indeed something rather unique and beautiful in its own way. There had been no signs of snow, yet the cold had been harsh enough to cover the Thames in a thick plaque of ice while they were still in mid-November. And people wanted to enjoy it for as long as it lasted.

“The Frost Fayre takes place next to London Bridge on the frozen river Thames. The last time it was this grand was back in 1814, apparently.” Curiosity had made the boyo come out of his manor after reading the news on the morning paper, walking around with the appraising eye of a businessman bundled up in a fur-lined winter cape.

Pedlars and shopkeepers praised their wares loudly, trying to outshine each other, to gather more clientele, to take as much money as possible. Games were being played. Food was being sold. It was a mix between noble, bourgeois and working class with a few members of the criminal class in between. Cutpurses ran swiftly through the people gathered around the tents. Swindlers tried their pitch, tricking the unawares.

The boyo huffed, smirking slightly while looking at one of the displays, stopping abruptly, his attention caught on something, the passerby instinctively sidestepping him and the black clad pair.

“What is the matter?” Sebastian asked calmly, glancing towards the Young Master’s focus point. Mouser moved a bit to prevent one of the young thieves from approaching, winking and smiling when he recognized her after a bit of staring. Tim waved back, a wide grin covering his face, and disappeared again on the crowd. If word got around there would be less worrying about light fingers on her part.

“All the wares they have lined up here are shoddy.” The boyo appraised, his attention shifting around the stalls once again. “If the ice freezes like this next year we could clean up with a stall here. That, for example.” His cane pointed towards one of the items displayed.

“Oh, Young Nobleman, I see you have quite the eye.” The shopkeeper lost no time, seizing what he thought was a golden chance. The boyo spared him only a glance. It didn’t deter him. “That is an item made by the now hugely popular Funtom Company when it was still a small craft shop.” The man announced proudly.

“What a total fake.” The boyo dismissed the item, looking away, resuming his stride. “The Funtom Ark enjoyed by the last generation was made by the most skilled craftsman and it was extremely rare and valuable item because only three were made.” He started to explain for the benefit of those who followed him. “Since the mansion burned down, even the current company doesn’t have the real item anymore. There’s no way there would be a real one here.”

Mouser frowned for a moment. It was hard to tell if he was forlorn about it or just stating a fact.
“It is still a toy any child would love to have.” She mentioned softly. “Forgery or not.”

“Noah’s Ark is a lot like this country.” Sebastian said looking unimpressed.

“What?” The boyo stopped, glancing over his shoulder.

“A ship steered by a single boatman. The ones who will be saved are the select few.” The demon smiled in a mask of agreeability. Mouser smirked, looking around. The select few... those with money and status. The rest of them would scurry around and die. “It is a most arrogant tale.”

Ciel simply huffed, disregarding his opinion.

“You’re...” A man’s voice rose softly from the right, a passerby stopping suddenly, staring. Mouser stiffened, recognizing a man of the Yard. She almost took her gloved hands to her mouth to whistle a warning before recalling her new employed position, pursing her lips together to keep silent.

“To see one of Scotland Yard’s detectives has enough free time to dawdle around here I suppose London must really be at peace.” The boyo said with a straight face, watching as the man grew flustered.

“I don’t. I’m on duty right now.”

“Well then, work hard enough to earn your keep on behalf of Her Majesty and the people who employ you, inspector.” Translation you’re dismissed and bothersome. With that he turned around. Mouser sighed, doing the same. Sebastian moved too, fluidly with a polite nod.

“Wait.” It took the man a few long seconds to react, running to catch them. “I have something to ask you! Master Ciel...” he shouted, reaching for the Boyo’s shoulder, his hand sharply slapped away by Sebastian, the trio stopping once again.

“Please excuse me.” Sebastian said, calmly, watching as the detective backed away a couple of startled steps. “As you can see our Master is quite frail...” She heard the small huff from within the Boyo’s hood, his head tilting slightly while glaring at the butler. “I mean delicate.” Mouser snorted, knowing the correction did little to ease the jab, covering her lips with her fingertips. “So I would ask you not to lay you hands on him too roughly.”

“There was a dead man from some criminal organization in the ice. It seems a pricy blue diamond ring is missing.” Mouser said opening her eyes slowly, allowing her attention to expand once again a slight red tint underlining the dark brown colour for the briefest moment, the contrast showcasing her demonic pupils a bit more sharply. Sebastian smiled, nodding slowly, standing in front of her, shielding them from the crowd’s eyes. She wobbled, touching her forehead for a moment, distracting herself from the slight headache created by the strain of so many people resonating on overly sensitive perceptions and the attempt at focusing solely on that area, on that person. “Also this is Lau’s restaurant tent.”

“You are improving fast.” Sebastian praised, caressing her cheek.

“It is a habit. Do it right or you’ll hurt, the Headmistress used to say.” Mouser sighed, catching his hand, giving it a quick squeeze, keeping it against her chilled skin. “I’ll go ask Tim if he knows who the bloke was.”
“Be quick about it.” Sebastian said looking around.

“Aye, aye.” Mouser smiled slightly, letting go, walking into the crowd once again, reaching down suddenly, grabbing Tim by the scruff as soon as his had had slid wallet safely from its owner’s pocket, dragging him towards an alley in-between tents as he struggled silently. “It’s just me kiddo, stop squirming.”

“Mouser?” Tim turned on her grasp and allowed a breath out. “Blimey, I thought I was a goner, I was. So how’s working with the high ups?”

“Surprising. That’s all I’m saying.” She looked around quickly, still able to see Sebastian’s head over the crowd, still standing near the restaurant tent. “How much would information cost me?”

“On what?” Tim his face brightened, smiling, showing a chipped tooth, eyes bright in-between a mop of brown hair. He was a bit younger than the boyo, dressing in mismatched clothes and hiding most of his face in an oversized scarf. He was a slick burglar, runner and one of those people who often were more knowledgeable about what was going on than they let on. He was one of the boys that had no loyalty, using gang protection only when it suited them, surviving on the fringes and scraps. While vulnerable in one way he wouldn’t be targeted by others.

“The dead chap they fished out of the river this morning.” She specified, wincing when a man with a music box playing London Bridge nursery rhyme walked by, the sounds a bit dissonant and sharp.

“Four shilling.”

“You damn robber.” Mouser chuckled, giving him the silver coins, companionably, ruffling his hair, knowing she had the money to spare.

“He was part of the Irish.” Tim pocketed the coins happily, rubbing his hands together. “Those barmy blighters that have been bombing places...”

“I saw the papers. Are they around?” Mouser sighed.

“Ayup... I’ve seen them skulking about. What are they getting at?”

“Money, what else. But the Yard’s on their tails,” Mouser sighed and looked around. “Thanks Tim. By the way... Coppers.” He saluted, slipping away quickly as she returned to the tent once more, catching them as the boyo walked out accompanied by the detective and Lau, the inspector guiding them, looking overly serious and worried.

Undertaker? He had a tent set up on the Frost Fayre? Well... he would appear in the oddest places but that? Mouser sighed softly, looking at the boyo, arms crossed under the cape. His face was a façade of incredulity and also looked a bit off-colour. Sebastian made no comment.

“Is it really here?” He asked slowly, clearly doubting his eyes.

“Yeah. Apparently a few people have died of frostbite so he decided to set up a shop.” The inspector clarified, looking at the sign too, seemingly not knowing who he would be dealing with. Most likely he assumed that it was just another of London’s undertakers.

“Earl, the name of the shop... it can’t be...” Lau began slowly, his face looking a bit more serious
than usual.

Aberlain ignored the Chinese, adopting a professional demeanour.

“Since I specially permitted you to tag along, please wait here, outside.” The inspector reached for the doorknob, leaning to open it, failing completely to keep his balance when the door was revealed as a simple painted fabric flap that made the man fall flatly into the tent, closing behind him with a whoosh and resuming looking like a wooden object.

“How reckless.” The boyo commented.

“That is but a privilege of youth.” Lau retorted philosophically before pausing, allowing silence to reign. “So, where is it?”

“The Undertaker’s shop! We met him during the Jack the Ripper incident, remember?” Ciel took a few deep breaths to compose himself after the small fit of anger, sighing, glancing at his butler as Lau’s expression changed to a display of understanding. “He’ll be in tears in a moment. Sebastian, get ready to...”

The Undertaker’s loud laugh echoed on the ice, accompanied by the shocked faces of the group.

Lau opened the flap, allowing them to enter, catching sight of a bewildered Aberlain and a twitching Undertaker still chuckling.

“You’re amazing. You have definitely chosen the wrong profession.” The Undertaker straightened slowly. “As a comic you could have been world renowned.” He commented, clapping his hands together, forgetting to wipe a bit of drool from the corner of his mouth, still shaking with barely contained laughter.

“Just what did you do?” The boyo asked, shocked.

“I... I just started talking like I normally do...” The inspector stammered out, looking around, as confused as any of in his company. “but then this guy suddenly...”

“Oooh...” Mouser chuckled abruptly, caught off guard by the sudden realization of what the joke entailed. The Undertaker joined in, both cracking up laughing.

“Aberlain... what a fearsome person...” Ciel grated out grudgingly as Sebastian moved in, standing behind the boyo, his expression dark.

“It seems you are quite skilled Mr. Inspector.” Mouser stopped sharing giggles with the Undertaker, catching on the mood. Jealousy towards a skill? His expression alone was enough to intimidate the inspector, closed, cold, narrowed eyes and thinned lips.

“No, I’m just...” Aberlain raised his hands, stammering.

Mouser sighed and slid one arm around Sebastian’s, leaning against him. As a demon butler he took pride in his job. Having it taken unintentionally by a do-gooder was a bit of a blow to the pride.

“We were laughing at him, not with him.” She murmured soothingly, intertwining her fingers with his. Sebastian turned slightly towards her, opening his mouth to speak.

The sound of gloved hands banging against the wooden coffin snapped them out of that little side talk, the attention brought once again to the Earl of Phantomhive. Lau looked over his shoulder
from the crouching position he had adopted to watch the show of comedian rivalry.

“Tell us about the Ring, Undertaker” Ciel demanded, authoritarian. However that mood just flew over the Undertaker’s head, busy as he was chuckling to himself. “the one the body you disposed of this morning was supposed to have.”

“There’s a possibility that it was buried around the area he was found in.” Aberlain piped in, helpful to a fault. “I implore you on behalf of the good citizens of London, such as yourself, please assist us with the investigation.” Mouser snorted and buried her face against Sebastian’s arm, stifling her laughter.

“I have been highly impressed by you inspector. I’ll tell you. Come along...” The Undertaker crossed the room slowly, walking outside, still shivering with laughter.

“You know the Undertaker?” Sebastian asked, unsurprised by that outcome, both parting as the flap was opened, as propriety ordered, walking side by side as secretary and butler, formal and dry. The outside appearances should be carefully kept. In the manor it was no secret though. And had been quite a shock to the servants when he had moved Mouser into his room.

“I was a client provider.” Mouser said, blinking as they crossed into the grey light, steadying her step. “Occasionally one needed information too.” She completed, adjusting the gloves.

The Undertaker’s hat swayed around, guiding them through the fair, to the outskirt where a stage and a long table had been set, an ice statue of an elegantly clad lady placed on a pedestal against the bridges’ background.

“See? Over there.” The Undertaker stated, pointing at the statues’ sculpted hands where the ring sparkled daintily.

Aberlain screamed in shock. It had been displayed and unsecure all along, placed for all the Fayre to see.

“I guess one of the ice sculptures here just happened to come across the frozen ring and in order to take advantage of it they made it into a statue.” Lau appraised, smiling blissfully, ignoring the inspector’s distress.

Mouser’s eyes narrowed at the familiar design of the ring, glancing down at the boyo’s hand.

“Get it out. Right now.” Aberlain screamed, flustered, signalling his men.

“Understood.” Two coppers advanced, reaching for the statue.

Mouser sidestepped them slowly, partially moving behind Sebastian, reacting to the uniform of the police before catching herself and stopping all movement. Sebastian threw her an amused glance.

“What are you doing you ignorant whelp?” A portly bearded man stepped forth suddenly from a group of two other males and a conservatively dressed pair of women, glaring at the group.

“That holy maiden is something that will be presented to the winner. You mustn’t touch it.” The man clad in white moved dramatically to the left of the group, tossing blond locks away from his face.

“Viscount Druitt.” The boyo grated out suddenly, stiffening, as if having bout of abhorrence. Mouser frowned for a moment, stepping forward, standing next to him. There was something familiar about the Viscount.
“Young Master... They seem to be the judges for the ice sculpture contest announced on the
paper.” She informed softly, covering his issues.

“The contest Judges?” Ciel repeated, still stiff, frozen in loathing. “Why is he one of them?” The
boyo hissed slowly, clearly suppressing a shiver of revulsion.

“Wasn’t he taken by Scotland Yard for people trafficking?” Lau asked suddenly.

*People trafficking.* It became clear all of a sudden. One of the benefactors...

“He was released a few days ago.” Aberlain said, his voice clearly carrying the weight of anger
that he would be unable to use against the nobleman.

“Money, huh.” Ciel breathed, his face blank. Mouser nodded in agreement, keeping her expression
guarded.

“I’m sorry. Scotland Yard will have to take this statue into possession now.” Aberlain turned to the
bearded man, trying to negotiate a compromise, to make him see that it was not whim, that his
actions were backed by the Crown’s authority.

“No! Even if you are from Scotland Yard we will not permit anyone to have their own way at the
frost Fayre, the peak of excitement for all the townsfolk.” The bearded man was inflexible, roaring
against the coppers, leaning towards the overly dramatic.

“Beauty is something to be adored.” Druitt moved in, taking a white rose from his winter jacket,
the two matrons staring at him like he was the paragon of men. “Are you people trying to force
shame on this beautiful maiden?”

“Like you’re one to talk.” The boyo muttered.

“The Young Master seems to be talking from experience.” Mouser whispered staring at the man in
white antics her expression slightly mocking. Instead of a glare there was a shudder under the
winter cloak.

“If you really want her just bring enough beauty to satisfy her.” Druitt was moving around,
theatrically displaying his inclinations. Then his eyes seemed to focus on Mouser with sudden
appraisal. “My, my... If only one could offer a beauty such as yourself my little raven...” The
viscount was there suddenly, picking up Mouser’s gloved hand, throwing a charming smile that
made the spinsters behind him blush. Mouser shuddered, her free hand twitching for one of her
guns. “The holy maiden will still be cold and unattainable... but the mystery of a raven attracts the
eyes... makes him wonder if she could be captured.”

“How kind of you to say so.” She said through clenched teeth, fangs becoming just a bit more
noticeable in her grimace, retrieving her hand as soon as it was possible, hiding it behind her back,
clearly caressing her guns, stepping back. “But the thing about ravens is that they will peck your
eyes out for touching their talons and those ladies would deem that a shame.”

“A wild raven then, one that would be a challenge to tame...” The viscount still smiled, the bodily
harm threat clearly dissipating over the barrier of his personal pink and sparkly world.

Mouser choked on a curse and turned to the boyo.

“I withdraw my teasing earlier and wholeheartedly agree with your prior appraisal.” She said stiffly
as the bearded man sang Druitt’s praises. “Barmy wanker.” Mouser added curtly.
“He clearly doesn’t seem to remember ravens are closely linked to death and darkness.” Sebastian appraised, smiling coldly behind them.

“Well, caw caw.” Mouser gritted out, shifting her position a bit, crossing her arms, eyes rolling. “Prat.”

“As expected from one who loves art beauty and cuisine. It’s as Viscount Druitt says. If you want this statue win the contest.” The bearded man announced after all the prancing around and dramatic antics.

“I see.” The boyo regained his confidence. “I can agree with that. The ring will belong to the one who wins the contest. It’s simple and clean.”

“Master Ciel?” Aberlain interjected.

“I will obtain this ring.”

“That’s a stolen object.” The inspector was starting to grow slightly angry. “It’s also important evidence in the serial kidnapping of several young girls!” He stopped, covering his mouth suddenly, looking away guiltily.

“I see. So, that’s why the Scotland Yard is in such a frenzy searching for it.” The boyo drawled out smoothly.

“And I’ll bet you all of them are wealthy or noble.” Mouser said, smirking.

“Even so it is true that those in possession of the ring have met ill fates, one after the other. It really does fit its name of cursed stone and yet you still...” Aberlain was growing desperate and turning to superstition as a dissuasive method.

“Cursed huh...” The boyo smirked, raising his left hand to his mouth, his own blue diamond gleaming in the greyish sunlight. “Then it does really fit me”

“That reminds me. Your ring also has a beautiful blue stone set in, doesn’t it, Earl.” The Undertaker noticed too, joining in, receiving a nod from the Earl. “You should be careful. Diamonds are hard but for all their hardness they’re fragile.” The grey haired man advised, still smiling. “If you overexert yourself too much it may shatter.”

“What of it?” The boyo dismissed the warning calmly. “This body and this ring...” His lips touched the stone. “are both things that have been shattered and been revived. As if I would fear them shattering after everything I’ve been through.” Mouser smiled, noticing a similar expression, a darker one, crossing Sebastian’s features. He was responsible for both it seemed. As for fear... The boyo’s soul flickered suddenly in her senses, sharply. Her lips parted in surprise but the glimpse was soon over. “Win the contest Sebastian.” The order was definite in his voice, without the need to state it.

“Yes My Lord.” Sebastian’s answer was the same as always, sounding proud and sure.

“And now we will commence the traditional Frost Fayre ice sculpture contest.” The announcer’s voice rang out, drowning the crowd’s, the participants lined behind him on the stage. The Yard coppers, Lau, Sebastian and a trio of unknown males, dressed in simple clothes, their scent filled with gunpowder. Mouser sneezed as the wind changed, catching it. Those should be the Irish. “The
"Well then we shall now begin judging." The people had gathered once more as Big Ben’s clock rang the time, echoing throughout the frozen Thames. “First up is the “Joyful Scotland Yard” team with their guardian of London.” It was a life-sized statue of Lord Randal. In itself wasn’t a bad effort but the subject... well... “Please give your marks. one, two, one, one, zero. A total of five points.” The coppers and Aberlain looked dejected at the score and then noticed the ice had begun to crack, the head falling off, shattering on the boards. “Next is the “China Dress is Best in Miniskirt Form” team but... due to circumstances beyond our control we are not able to judge it here.”

A nude statue of RanMao who posed in the exactly same position, standing next to a bewildered Lau, as a couple of white flags held by blushing men covered the ice breasts and crotch of the piece. Of course the prudish nature of the Victorian public would protest.

“Why?” Lau asked suddenly.

“There is no way they could show that in public.” The boyo shouted, blushing, giving the Chinese a fierce glare.

“But I think hiding it like that is more perverted” Lau pouted, nodding slowly, ruefully.

Mouser chuckled, watching the blushing and frowning judges refusing to score the piece. Except for Viscount Druitt who held a ten, smiling happily.

The boyo shook his head in frustration, looking towards the butler who stood next to him.

“You can win, right Sebastian?”

“Of course. Once you have given an order I exist but to fulfil it.” The butler looked towards the stage unemotionally.

“Next up is the “Queen’s Woof Woof” team with Noah’s Ark.” The announcer shouted, moving on. Mouser chuckled, turning as the fabric that had hid his work felt.

“Lovely naming sense.” She mentioned, looking at the ice ark. It was beautiful. It made even the boyo crack a gentle smile. Amazingly his face didn’t shatter.

“What magnificent proportions” The bearded man stood suddenly, all the judges staring in awe at the work. “This is precisely what ice art is” He appraised emotionally.

“This is amazing.” The announcer continued, keeping the mood. “Well then please give your results”

“Please wait one moment.” Sebastian stepped forth, raising his voice. “You have not seen everything yet.” He stated, raising his arm, fingers snapping, the sound making the ice react, the top of the ark cracking in straight lines, falling next to the sculpted wave that held the sculpture, making the ice groan under Mouser’s heels much to her dismay, revealing a centrepiece of animals artistically balanced and placed.

Amazing. It’s like it’s alive. Those words echoed through the astounded crowd.
“I see he made the joints in the roof weak on purpose so that in time they’d melt and fall off.” The bearded man’s amazement only seem to grow as he stared at the piece.

“Oh... Oh...” Druitt’s voice rose suddenly, all drama. “God’s rage! The only one to escape unscathed in the blazing storm was Noah. Leading his paired animals, waiting for the time of regeneration as they drift upon the waves.” Mouser and Ciel exchanged a grimace.

“Young man I am completely astounded! To be able to see such a high class ice sculptor...” The bearded judge had turned to Sebastian, heaping praise onto him.

“No, I am just one hell of a butler.” Sebastian smiled, hiding behind the polite mask, tilting his head slightly as if that effort meant nothing.

“Well then let’s go to the grading!” The announcer picked up the pace once more, turning to the judged, stopping suddenly in mid movement as one of the Irish men stood next to the Ice Maiden statue, pointing a gun at the stage.

“Wait right there.” The man shouted, dragging all attentions towards him. “This ring was originally ours. Sorry but I’ll have you return it.”

“What? You people aren’t the...” Aberlain moved, staring at the Irish.

“That’s right. We’re the bombing thief ring that’s been the talk of the town lately.” He flapped his jacket open, showing a myriad of dynamite sticks strapped to his waist, clicking a flame to life on a rather large lighter. “I’ll count down from ten. If you don’t want to die then get lost. Ten.”

“Young master?” Sebastian asked, moving a bit closer.

“My orders haven’t changed.” The boyo stated calmly as people ran away around them, as the coppers tried to help and as the countdown echoed slowly. “Do it Sebastian.”

“Yes my lord.”

“What are you doing? Get out of there this minute Master Ciel. Young lady, please make him leave!” Aberlain shouted suddenly as the last people reached the frozen margin, turning to the boyo. Mouser lit a cigarette, happily, unable to resist the urge to any longer.

“If you want to run then do so. Don’t pay any attention to me.” The boyo said, self assured as she adjusted the gloves, ignoring the inspector.

“Like I could do that.” Aberlain shouted suddenly, attracting their attention. “I became a police officer so I could protect the people. In order to protect everyone!”

“What an idiot.” Ciel whispered as the inspector started to run towards him. Mouser nodded in agreement, quietly, before the inspector was stopped by a shot near his feet, forcing him to a halt.

“Don’t get one step closer.” The bomber shouted, pointing the gun steadily. “I’m down to the last three. Are you really not gonna run little noblemen?” He pointed the gun towards the boyo’s head. Mouser smirked behind him, her hand sliding softly over the back of the Earl’s neck, ready to move if Sebastian came in late.

“I have no need to.” The boyo said clearly before a black shape skated by, kicking the gun away from the Irish’s hand, sliding gracefully on the ice.

“What?” The other two Irish shouted, surprised, shooting, frightened.
“That’s the legendary quadruple spin jump!” The bearded man shouted from the bank, staring as they got disarmed and knocked down by Sebastian skating.

“It’s the gallant blackbird dancing upon a world of white and silver!” Druitt’s voice carried clearly through the cold air, as entranced by the performance as the other onlookers. “Enchanted by that smirking face, being overcome with delight, maidens reach for those wings.”

Mouser hissed, stiffening. Ciel shuddered, disgusted.

“I sleep with him... for goodness sake stop making it feel creepy.” She whispered.

“Saying that is not helping me in the least.” The boyo grumbled, looking away.

“Ten, ten, ten, ten, ten. It’s a full score.” The announcer shouted suddenly as Sebastian skated rings around the ruffians. Mouser chuckled and glanced at the bomber, tightening her hold suddenly on the boyo’s scruff.

“Damns you brat.” The Irish shouted, lighting a dynamite stick. “Be blown to smithereens then.” The stick came flying towards them.

Mouser moved briskly, lifting Ciel off the ice, tossing him sideways, making him yelp before getting caught in Sebastian’s arms and moved out of the danger area balanced like a silver platter. She jumped away quickly, avoiding the explosion as the demon slid around the man, attracting the explosive throws.

“Damns that monster” the Irish shouted after the failed explosions.

“Stop it boss have you forgotten?” One of his cronies grabbed his arm before he could light another stick. “We’re on ice.” He shouted, voice shivering with fright.

Mouser smirked, picking her cigarette, blowing smoke softly to the side. The bombers looked at her suddenly. Sebastian was too far away now. She arched an eyebrow and brought her heel down hard on the weakening ice, digging it into the slab, pulling it out. Controlling her new growing strength was a good trick. And one she had no need for at the moment. Spidery cracks started to spread and soon it all shattered.

Sebastian was spinning, gaining speed as the ice ran to crack around him, making the boyo scream, losing the winter cloak, watching as he was throwing him upwards, smirking. Mouser sighed, tossing the cigarette into the murky water. Well... If that was a test to her too... She took a deep breath, running, dodging broken slabs, hopping from one to another, gathering height as one tilted up, before jumping as high as she could, catching the boyo, landing on the ice ark.

“Spooked boyo?” She whispered against his ear, hugging him tightly before letting go, straightening as Sebastian joined them, tossing the ice skates overboard.

“The ship sails leaving behind people’s despair!” Druitt’s voice echoed through the air, letting them know they could be seen from the bank. “The ship sails alone with the world’s future carrying the chosen hope with it. Onward to a winding, dreamlike journey, the ship sails.” The matrons were still blushing and worshiping him. The others seemed too shocked to speak.

“That was a rather rough method.” The boyo complained, looking straight ahead.

“I apologise.” The demons answered in tandem, bowing slightly, exchanging a sly smile behind his back. The boyo frowned, not amused. Sebastian was the one who continued. “I only thought that ridding myself of the baggage weighing me down was the most appropriate course of action.”
boyo chose to let that go after an aggravated grunt, looking forward.

“And so the shard of hope will sleep at the bottom of the Thames. I suppose that is amusing in its own way.”

“It will curse London.” Sebastian mentioned.

“If it ended like that, then it would show that it was all there was to this town and country. After all we Phantomhives have always…” The boyo appraised, staring at his own cursed ring and then to the margin where Aberlain was trying to fish out the bombers from the frosty river. “Sebastian you said Noah was arrogant, but isn’t wishing to save everyone even more arrogant and foolish?”

“It appears so.” Not yes, nor no. Not agreeing or disagreeing. And yet it did look like either.

“However every so often an idiot like that isn’t so bad.” There was an expression of calm in the boyo’s face, the disdain he displayed gone.

Mouser sighed.

“That was the joke.” The thief said.
Chapter 11

The door burst open suddenly as Mouser walked down the stairs passing the schedule to Sebastian, making sure everything was as it should, while he was following the Young Master to the dining room. A flash of pink and blond made a sudden dash towards the boyo, tackling him into a hug and spinning him around while screaming his name in a girlish voice, giggling playfully.

Mouser blinked a few times, stopping on her tracks, confused, looking at Sebastian for guidance.

“The Young Master’s fiancée.” The butler clarified, standing dignified amidst the yelps for help the boyo occasionally slipped out of the pink hurricane.

“Truly?” A few more blinks before she shook her head. It was to be expected, wasn’t it? Mouser smiled softly. That was rather adorable actually.

“Here! This is for you.” The pink girl announced happily, placing a small box in Ciel’s hands as the boyo was barely able to stand due to the shock of being swung around like a stuffed toy. He was allowed to regain his footing after a few deep breaths. “Open it. Quick, quick.” She shook his hand, big green eyes watching every move he made, growing suddenly wide, the smile she wore fading a bit as she noticed the ring, grabbing his hand, stopping him from opening the box, dragging it closer to examine. “Wh...What? I thought I broke that.” Her voice was a mix of bewilderment, shame and sadness. It went unnoticed by the boyo.

“Ah. Sebastian repaired it.” The Earl explained, looking at her, not understanding the point of her question, still holding the box’s crimson ribbon.

“No way! It was all cracked.” She turned Ciel’s and around, shifting the way the light played over the metal and diamond. “I don’t even see any flaws.”

“Such skill is only natural for one...” Sebastian began, bowing formally.

“Who serves as a butler to the Phantomhives.” The boyo completed with a neutral tone.

“Exactly as you say.” The butler straightened with an acknowledgment nod.

Mouser’s eyes narrowed, examining the girl’s growing sadness.

“I see. Sebastian...” She whispered looking a bit away.

“My Lady...” Her maid approached, a pleasant looking woman with brown eyes and hair, looking at her mistress worriedly.

“Lady Elizabeth, what is in that little box?” Sebastian asked suddenly.

Elizabeth grew flustered, chuckling, plucking the box away from the boyo’s hands, quickly, cradling it protectively, away, hiding it behind her back after a second thought.

“Ah... is just... huh... a secret.”

“Secret.” Both master and butler said, confused.

Mouser smirked. Ah. Guilt.

“Didn’t you say you were going to give it to me?” Ciel looked at her, clueless.
“That was a feint.” She straightened and applied a playful demeanour over her disappointment.

“Feint?”

“A lady who tries to catch a man with gifts is no lady.” She covered her lips with one hand, closing her eyes as if her words were shocking, coyly. “It’s unseemly. Now Paula ring your bells.” She ordered with a giggle, looking towards the maid.

“Yes, my Lady.” Paula almost jumped, picking a pair of bell bracelets from her pockets. “Jingle jingle jingle.” She sing-sang along with the shakes of the metal chimes.

“Well then, good day to you.” Elizabeth waved happily, grabbing the maid, both dashing to the door, disappearing, the sound of their carriage going away echoing for a moment.

“So what did she come over for, then? The boyo asked himself out loud, confused. Mouser chuckled, ruffling his hair. “And why are you smiling?”

“That was so sweet boyo. Anyhow...” She tiptoed, kissing Sebastian’s lips slowly, cupping his face. His arms went around her waist, steadying her, pulling her body closer. It was the light and quick version. The boyo was blushing hard despite it, when they parted. Petty teasing perhaps but he never said a thing, pretending not to be even remotely shocked. There was a sudden crash in the hall, a yelp made by Meyrin catching the end of the show.

“I’ll see you tonight.” Mouser said, walking towards the door. Day off.

“I have a question Charlotte.” Mouser crushed her cigarette on the silver ashtray, staring at the daintily painted tea set positioned in-between them. Charlotte placed her teacup down and smiled, leaning on her chair. She was wearing a loose housedress with a delicate blue flower pattern and her cinnamon hair was simply tied in a ponytail. No makeup accentuated her features or softened the icy glint in her blue eyes. There was no doubt that she was beautiful. And there was no doubt that she was ruthless.

“Out with it.” For Charlotte those times seemed to be a relief. When she didn’t have to act demure and smile at people she would rather throw in the Thames tied to anvils. Mouser didn’t complain about the unabashed answers and sharpness of tone. They knew each other for too long to take offence.

“Viscount Druitt.”

Her friend thought back for a moment, her expression clouding.

“Fridays. Virgins. Started two years before we left.”

“I see. So it wasn’t my imagination.” Mouser sighed. “Just checking.”

“I guess you might see a lot of our benefactors from time to time. When I started... Well I made sure to get the right patrons. Now they pay me reparations.” Charlotte smiled coldly, referencing her blackmailing habits, the ones that further supported her lifestyle, looking around the richly decorated room. For a courtesan she had a cutthroat way of running her life. It was something her patrons rarely noticed until it was too late. By the time they wanted to toss her aside she knew more about their lives and business than them and their servants. And could utterly destroy them with one well placed phrase. That alone kept her reputation safe and placed her in invitation lists few
could land. Then there was her small private army, the chain of servants that spied for her, creating a gossip network that would make the ladies of the literary salons and possibly the Scotland Yard jealous to the pit of their souls, and her connections to the underworld. “So how is it going?”

“I’ll concede you were right about the sex part.” Charlotte laughed along with Mouser.

The sound of heels from above made Mouse stop her search for a carriage, looking up towards the night sky and the crescent moon that graced it, catching a flash of red jumping from roof to roof. She caressed a dagger gently, arms crossed under the cape, frowning thoughtfully. Then she saw something else in the shadows at the end of the street. The boyo was trying to control Pluto, groaning in vain effort, being dragged towards an alley by the devil dog’s leash. No Sebastian in sight.

The thief sighed, walking in that direction briskly, noticing that no one was in sight, peeking over the corner carefully, appraising the situation. There was a red haired dandy-like man with a red jacket over a suit’s waistcoat and prim trousers, wearing red-rimmed glasses accessorized with skull chains. The boyo didn’t seem friendly towards him. He didn’t seem friendly towards anyone, but still there was a bit more hostility there than used on the averaged annoyance.

“Because of the Madam Red incident I was demoted and have nothing but boring, lowly jobs.” The dandy was saying in a dramatically charged voice, going from deep to high in seconds. It wasn’t unpleasant, just strange. It was amazing how he could keep from feeling too ridiculous as some of the nobles when they tried to follow the most flamboyant fashions. “That bastard Will told me I can’t return to work until I’ve retrieved some troublesome souls. That rotten sadist.” Then the angry tone shifted to a thoughtful and girlish whisper. “Well food is better when it’s about to go rotten and those cold eyes send chills up my spine.” A blissful smile appeared on his lips, its effect a contrast with the sharp teeth, hugging himself for a moment before devoting his attention the audience. “However this one’s wildness is hard to ignore.” The dandy appraised, looking down at the white haired, crouching figure. Ciel’s teeth were clenched. The man in red adjusted his glasses, smiling down at the boyo. “You’re not about to tell me you’re going to take revenge for your beloved aunt, are you?”

“Shut up.” The boyo shouted,

“It looks like Sebastian isn’t around either.” The dandy continued, egging him on, picking easily on the helplessness of a kid. “What can a brat like you do?”

“Shut up.” The boyo shouted again, making Pluto growl.

“Your knight tonight is him?” He looked at Pluto with some surprise before scoffing, glancing annoyed sideways, hands on hips, a slight tap of the boots punctuating the words. “Why does this kid steal all the good men?”

“My personal opinion is that he collects them.” Mouser said audibly, walking towards the boyo, her heels clicking softly on the cobblestone, patting Pluto’s head, shushing him. The devil dog panted happily, whining when her scratching didn’t linger.

“Mouser?” The boyo stared at her, the sound escaping from his lips unrestrained, surprised.

The dandy watched her too, adjusting the glasses once again, eyes narrowed behind the lenses.

“Who are you?” He asked, voice lowering in a slight threatenabley way.
“Evelyn Crows.” Mouser said pleasantly, smiling, shifting her position a bit, silently, arms under the cape, hands around the gun’s that rested against the small of her back, tilting her head towards him. “And you?” The politeness of the tone seemed to blindside the man for a moment because he answered, the threat in his tone gone.

“Grell Sutcliff...” Whatever he was going to add, the tension of the drama already prepared, was cut short by the boyo’s gruffness and impatience.

“We don’t have time for this.” Ciel shook Pluto’s leash angrily. “Tell him to search for Lizzy.” He ordered quickly.

“Your girl’s missing?” Mouser shook her head, disappointed, turning towards the dog, scratching behind his ear once more. “PluPlu. Go.”

The devil dog barked happily, dashing forward, barking as he made his way. The dandy shrieked, looking happy when it seemed like the devil dog was in a collision course.

“Oh I’m being assaulted! Please be gentle!” Grell bowed a bit, opening his arms to cradle the dog who ignored him completely, going down the street, turning right. “Hey, what’s with this!” The red-clad man protested shrilly, stomping his feminine boots. Nice boots. Mouser noted, ogling them. Very pretty.

“Why does he listen to you?” Ciel groaned, looking sideways at the thief. Mouser shrugged, smirking with a mischievous intent clear on her face.

“I’m allowed on the bed.” She answered without any flippancy on her tone, watching the street. The boyo started to run, following the dog. She trailed him at a more sedated pace, keeping an eye on Grell who walked with them for some reason.

The winding darkened brick alleys where the barks echoed brought them to an antique store. Angel Wings Antiques was written on a sight placed above the window display. Grell cleared his throat carefully, opening a thick, leather bound ledger book, searching the entries swiftly when they came to a stop. Pluto was whining, scratching the door.

“Grim Reaper’s Death Note” He announced. “#403 Mandalay Family Puppeteer, Drozell Keins.” He stated, closing it, making the book disappear as the sound of shattering glass echoed through the lane.

Mouser examined him once again, clicking her tongue. So that was one of the Grim Reapers, the first one the boyo had met.

“Isn’t it a bit too convenient that his search brought you to your job?”

Grell tossed his red hair away from his face, smiling dreamily.

“It’s the red string of fate that connects me and Sebby together.” He stated dramatically.

“He’ll be thrilled to hear it, I’m sure.” Mouser chuckled, walking into the store. Pluto was biting something, looking their way when they entered. The boyo was having no success in retrieving it from his teeth. “Give it here, PluPlu.” Mouser coaxed. He barked and spat the thing happily into her hands, looking hopefully up, waiting from praise. “This is disturbingly familiar...”

A doll replica of the boyo’s fiancé was in her hand, detailed from the colours to the dress. She passed it to Ciel who fingered the pink fabric ribbon around the thing’s waist, his eye widening in clear recognition, growing agitated under the harsh look he presented the world, looking around for
something, anything else. A soft cold breeze brushed his hair away, catching his attention, coming from the opened backdoor, dragging their interest towards what seemed to be a yard.

The boyo lost no time, dropping the doll on a nearby table, running towards the door, crossing the threshold, stopping with a slight gasp, looking around, shocked.

The doorway led to some sort of weirdly gothic household in the middle of a gigantic garden surrounded by protective trees that whispered gently in the night’s breeze. It was almost a little wild wood, untouched by a gardener. How that managed to stay hidden in London was anyone’s guess. The other houses weren’t even peeking over the tree tops and no light but the moon’s broke the darkness. Mouser felt no difficulty but the boyo was squinting

“My, isn’t this a welcoming mansion.” Grell commented, walking towards them, looking around airily.

“Indeed. I can hear the torture instruments being sharpened for our enjoyment.” Mouser replied dryly.

Ciel gritted his teeth, thinking. He glanced at Grell first. This man laid hands on Madam Red but right now... he glanced at Mouser who stared at the building examining it with narrowed eyes and clear dislike. Mouser’s idea of protection tends to be grabbing me by the scruff, tossing me out of the way before shooting or slashing. While effective her strengths were on the offensive. Forcing her to divide efforts could be detrimental especially because I have no idea what we are up against. And Lizzy is in danger.

“Grell. Protect me.” He ordered, turning towards the Grim Reaper who looked at him confused and bearing a façade of ennui. “I’ll listen to whatever your wish is.” The boyo pressed softly.

“Don’t insult me.” Grell moved his hand as if throwing the proposition away, huffing, putting on an insulted demeanour that would have made an opera diva jealous. It looked very dignified. “I’m not the kind of cheap woman who performs for money...”

“I’ll let you do whatever you want with Sebastian for one day.” The boyo interrupted, smiling slightly, presenting a proposal that would be very hard to refuse, smiling smugly as if he knew exactly what would result of that.

“Whatever I want to do with Sebastian meaning...” The Grim Reaper though for a moment, gold and green eyes widening suddenly, sparkling with glee, anticipation and enthusiasm. “I can kiss him?”

“Whatever you like.” Ciel said slowly glancing at Mouser to gauge her reaction. She was smirking, amused. He huffed in disappointment. Her fangs were showing slightly but the eyes were not red in the least. And either of those signs could have nothing to do with emotional responses. Could just be she forgot to keep control or as they were in supernatural company she no longer cared about maintaining the new nature hidden.

“W... With tongue?” Grell continued, flittering about, puckering and purring, imagining a grand moment, batting long eyelashes to the boyo in a pleading look, trying to increase the reward promise, hands clenched in front of the chest, bowing forward so their heights were slightly levelled.

“That depends on how you play it.” The boyo stated, looking smugly satisfied, eyes closed, lowering his head, hiding the victorious look in the shadows of his raised collar and top hat.
“Understood.” Grell shouted, shaking with delight, celebrating her luck, prancing about happily. “Motivation meter at maximum death!” She exclaimed, moving forth with dramatic poise and panache, finishing the dance.

Mouser chuckled, watching the red clad back with bouncing black bow ahead of them.

“Your butler has amazing motivational skills for slightly deranged people.”

“Wouldn’t that include you?” The boyo mentioned.

“Like your sanity is any better.” She challenged back, as they started to walk, the dark walls growing closer and the spires looming, dead windows looking down on them.

The mansion’s door was opened by Grell with a wide theatrical gesture, the Grim Reaper stepping inside with a flick of the long red mane. Wood and steel groaned as they crossed the threshold.

“Now then! Lets get a move on.” The Grim Reaper announced glamorously, the fabric of the jacket whispering, following each of the movements with flowing dramatics.

“No. Please. Announce our presence for everyone to notice.” Mouser drawled, looking around, glancing inside at the girl on a pedestal, checking if they had been followed rolling her eyes afterwards, standing at the entrance. Only the trees in the pale grey night. Pluto was making a few happy whines inside the chamber. The boyo’s and Grell’s boots stopped clacking suddenly.

“Oh. That’s s quite similar to the ring you have on.” Grell noted, examining the girl while the boyo drew a couple of steps closer.

The sudden grunt of pain coming from the boyo dragged Mouser’s attention inside. She hissed in surprise and frustration, her hand grabbing one of the guns, aiming, tsking when finding the head and hat on the way of her shot.

“Plut...” The dog would be of no help, chewing on one of the dolls taken from the store.

Mouser started to move, curving around the room to get a better shot. A crystal from the chandelier hit the girl’s head, making her drop the boyo who scurried back. The girl seemed disoriented but there was no change in her expression or eyes. Mouser changed the plan, going for the Earl.

“Now, now! Don’t mistake which name you should be calling out.” Grell said, berating the boyo in a singsong tone, the one an adult would use with a toddler, voice echoing through the room enhanced by the acoustics, posing on the metal structure, high above them, smiling.

“Stupid mutt.” The boyo grated out as Mouser picked him up, dragging him away from the approaching doll-like girl, shoving him back, placing herself between him and the thing, the shot finally clear, cocking the gun, her aim just taking a moment to adjust. “Don’t.” The boyo ordered suddenly. Mouser twitched, lips thinning and dodged a slow punch, lowering her gun, glancing at the Young Master.

“Reaper’s have tools to hunt souls with.” Grell was announcing suddenly, looking down at the scene, slipping out a pair of red scissors. “Yes. Their Death Scythes.”

“Those are just normal scissors, right?” The boyo said slowly, looking up, unimpressed.

“I have pocket knives bigger than that.” Mouser shrugged, sidestepping another punch, tilting her head up to examine whatever the Grim Reaper was doing.
“I had no choice on the matter!” Grell shouted, irked. “Will took my custom Death Scythe away. I long for those vibrations again.” Mouser made a slight face, stepping a few steps back until the girl was almost under the chandelier. “I’ll cut her to shreds.” The Grim Reaper jumped down in a flash of red.

“Wait! Don’t kill her. This isn’t a doll!” The boyo shouted. Mouser half turned, realizing why she had been stopped, examining the outfit more closely. Rich girl. Shard of Hope. The missing girls the Scotland Yard was frantically looking for... so even when looking for a missing fiancée the Queen’s Watchdog sniffed out what would upset the Monarch and the official upstanding services hadn’t been able to solve.

As small as they were the scissors did the job, the doll falling down sawdust bleeding from the slit throat. Grell stood, snapping the scissors happily, looking down at it. Mouser approached, tilting her head, curious about the thing that had seemed strong a few moments ago.

“It was a doll after all then?” The boyo whispered, crouching near it, touching the doll’s hand, taking the ring away from the limp fingers, examining it under the light, surprised to find it genuine.

“But she still smells human.” The thief said, her hand tightening on the gun. Under the other scents that made that thing there was no denying... She focused a bit harder on the prone form. But there was nothing there. Just a shell. No soul playing with her senses.

“Mould it out of wood and clay, wood and clay, wood and clay...” The rhythm of the nursery rhyme began softly around them, sung by a male’s voice, the inner doors opening alone and slowly with a creak. A ginger haired man with a blue fleur-de-lis painted under his right eye, wearing a blue tailcoat, carrying a three branched candelabra, the glint of the candles casting a pale light, keeping most in shadow. “This doll was a failure.” He said slowly, coming out, standing in the doorway. “So I thought they need to be made much, much stronger.” There was a pause as he raised his free hand, waving it softly, slowly, voice ringing out rather melodiously. “Make it out of iron and steel, iron and steel, iron and steel. My fair lady.”

Four dolls approached as he sang, disappearing again into the darkened corridors beyond the doorway, walking heavily, in tandem, the sound of their bodies different from the earlier one.

Ciel clenched his teeth, standing, hands fisting around the ring.

“Those who interfere in the love between Sebastian and me... will end up like this!” Grell huffed and attacked suddenly, the scissors snapping against one of the foursome, the echo of metal against metal clanking. The doll had crossed her arms, defending, the human skin shredded but the metal structure underneath pretty much unharmed. It riposted. Grell dodged sharply, unbalanced, falling backwards, eyes wide.

“Blimey. Shaking in my boots here.” Mouser said in a monotone, sighing, shooting. The projectile got deflected with a metallic clank, the creature barely flinching.

“So hard.” Grell said, eyes wide in surprise.

Mouser groaned in agreement, holstering her gun once again, unbuttoning her cape, watching the dolls carefully. Their advance was slow for the moment, as if waiting for a provocation, for a movement to counter accordingly. Were their eyes made of glass? That could be a weak spot if she got close enough to shoot point blank... whatever controlled seemed to be within the head, seeing a near decapitation had stopped the first one.
“Grell. This is an order.” Mouser snorted as the boyo’s voice rose suddenly. He forgot that only worked with Sebastian... She slipped the cape away, tossing it into a nearby chair. “You and Pluto are to play with the dolls here forever.” He took a deep breath, running towards the door, making one of the dolls, the one with long platinum hair, react, charging towards Grell while the boyo sidestepped the Grim Reaper.

Mouser’s boot came down on the doll’s fist, crushing it down against the floor, looking down at the creature as Grell shouted as a result of the attack. Mouser moved, taking her boot away from the slightly twisted metal fingers, kicking the doll on the face hard, throwing her backwards, drawing both her daggers sharply, watching the movements once again. Slow and steady trying to surround them, apparently forgetting about the boyo as soon as he was out of their line of sight... the eye was slightly shattered...

“Do you plan to leave me here? How inhuman.” Grell shouted after the boyo, scrambling to stand as the dolls inched closer.

“Can a Reaper say that?” Was the boyo’s answer as he went deeper into the mansion.

“Shape up you big girl’s blouse.” Mouser said, dodging the doll that came her way, plunging the dagger towards one of the eyes, crushing it, the blade digging deeply into the skull, finding little resistance. Either the head was empty of what was inside was very, very soft. No blood, no screams, no nothing. It was creepy enough to be attacked by dull-eyed girl-shaped dolls but that drove the point home. It stepped back slowly, slipping the blade free on it own, falling down with a loud thud, platinum hair in disarray around the undone cap.

So it was just within the head...

Grell dodged another doll, scissors snapping shut, attacking suddenly, the thing’s skin ripping easily but the metal just showing some signs of scratches. The Grim Reapers were, according to Sebastian, extremely tough and durable, capable of great speed and strength. Neutral to most of the world while soul collecting. Natural enemies of Demons seeing their job was to retrieve one of the main meals of the species. According to him since she was a newborn who still had no ability to consume souls she should be safe from most of the ill effects of the grudge for the next hundred years or so. And by ill effect he meant stab wounds by Death Scythes.

“Go for the eyes nancy boy.” Mouser shouted, the doll in blue speeding suddenly, its punch aimed for her throat. Mouse crouched avoiding it, sweeping her leg, knocking the thing down, the flow of the dress covering her sight for a moment as she moved up, using the moment where the head hit the floor to stab her through one of the blue eyes, twisting the blade, severing whatever made it move.

Grell had managed to finish off the doll in pink, striking at the face quickly and repeatedly until the skin was torn and the glass fell in an almost too fine powder when the yellow one came from behind, hitting her squarely on the spine, knocking the Grim Reaper down. Mouser threw one of her blades more for distraction than anything else, making the thing forget about Grell, turning, lumbering towards her.

Mouser ran, almost too fast, grabbing its neck suddenly, eyes widening in surprise when she lifted the thing off the ground, the metal twisting under her hand, the doll slowly raising her arms, trying to grab at her wrist.

The sound of metal echoing and snapping made Grell turn her head, forgetting the pain that would soon fade, as the doll’s head popped free, falling down, the glass eyes rolling till they showed only white, the woman releasing its twisted neck, smiling suddenly, looking down. Beautiful blood-red
coloured iris with a demonic pupil, a cold smile that showed fangs that belonged to a predator... The brat had managed to acquire another demon... A female demon... near Sebby... Grell stood, eyes narrowing behind the glasses.

The click of a lighter echoed on the empty room as she lit a cigarette, eyes closed for a moment, the white cylinder placed on her lips. There was a slight, sweeter smile as she tilted her head towards the inner rooms, turning away, walking on the way to the door that lead outside, picking up her dagger, sheathing it once again, grabbing her cape, tossing it over her shoulder carelessly, slouching a bit.

“Come on. I need to catch the mutt.” Pluto, uncaring about orders, had left the room running towards the night.

“Evee dear...” Grell approached, sauntering, towering over the female, smiling down at her. “You wouldn’t happen to be a threat now, would you?” The Grim Reaper touched one of the brown strands that fell around the pretty face. Pity the crimson of her eyes had faded away to a dull dark brown. “It would be...” A sharp snap, an explosion and a deep pain accompanying it brought Grell’s attention down, forcing her to step back. A gun had been pressed against her stomach and while that would never be enough to kill it was quite painful. Also quite ravaging for the clothes.

“I am no threat whatsoever.” Mouser said smiling, looking up, keeping the cigarette between her lips deftly, even when talking, holstersing the gun, turning, walking out without a backwards glance. “Why, I could even be ever so helpful...” A slight chuckled drifted from the demoness along with the silvery smoke.

Grell lowered her glasses for a moment, surprised. She might not be Sebby’s covenant after all... just another contract the brat had made. Then a slight smile parted her lips, happiness and interest cutting through the pain. Viciousness...
“Why am I holding him?!” Grell shouted, straining, the heels digging slightly into the dirt, pulling the leash tightly, the leather taut, stretched almost to its breaking point, as Pluto struggled, trying to cross the bridge and reach the tower, panting, black nails digging into the soil. As a proof of the Grim Reaper’s strength the devil dog wasn’t able to get away.

“Because you want a kiss.” Mouser slid the whetstone against the blade, checking its sharpness again before sliding it again, the metal hissing, as she sat on the bridge’s railing, legs crossed, leaning over her maintenance, glancing at the Grim Reaper before hiding a smirk, continuing her gossiping. “A great, dark, sinful kiss that would make you beg for more even as his hands bring you nothing but pain and death...”

Grell shuddered suddenly, anticipation, imagining it quite clearly, trepidation and lust, sighing happily before her gaze sharpened into a frown, staring at the demon who played with her blades, blowing softly on the metal, fogging it before slipping a piece of cloth over it, deeming it worthy of returning to its sheet, slipping the other dagger free, picking up the whetstone once again.

“How would you know?” The Grim Reaper asked slowly, the grip on the leash loosening for an instant, a bit of aggression bubbling up.

“I read a lot of novels.” The metal shrieked again as Mouser smiled, tilting her head, following the curve of the blade. “These kind of themes, dark passions, excess of lust and burning desires are in vogue.” Another sweep of the stone, a quick check for imperfections on the metal as Pluto barked and howled.


“Naughty books.” Mouser kept smirking, sheathing the dagger, her fingers unbuttoning a bit more of her shirt, slipping into her cleavage, pulling out a folding knife from its resting spot against her breastbone. It had a black ivory handle embed with silver filigree and closed was almost a palm long. “Very educational. Also very unrealistic. I do not believe in half of it but it’s entertaining. Rather...” She flicked the knife open, winking. Grell chuckled a bit, catching the drift, huffing with effort when the dog picked up his attempts to run.

Mouser sighed, noticing the averted disaster, and began to work on the fancy blade.

“You are still alive?” The boyo came out suddenly from the trees, accompanied by Sebastian. It appeared as if he’d been running, frantic. The whetstone slid again against the metal as Mouser looked up, blank faced.

“The trust you place in me is overwhelming Young Master, it truly is.” The sarcasm slid slowly out of her mouth as she pulled the cloth, polishing the blade, slipping it into place, safely in-between skin and fabric, squirming a bit to readjust to its pressure, watching as Grell fidgeted like a blushing little girl before trying a flying hug towards Sebastian complete with squee, being tackled to the ground by an overexcited Pluto who latched onto the demon’s side panting and whining like the puppy he was.

“What’s with you!” Grell protested, standing, rubbing the abused backside. “Ah, wait...” Grell stood, adjusting the glasses, trembling finger pointing towards the tuxedoed puppy, face a study of utter puzzlement and confusion, voice lowering into a whispered tone of doubt and dread. “is he a
“Now you notice?” The boyo said dryly, looking dismayed. Under the cape he was still fidgeting impatiently, unimpressed and not amused, on the edge. Mouser slid her tongue over one of her grown fangs, frowning for a moment then focusing to make them recede. Appearances and all the cautioning about what was proper to present to the public.

“Oh no.” Grell’s expression changed immediately, hands dramatically posed, the deep breath sharply audible to mark the change in mood, trembling before bursting. “A feverish night with a beast. How immoral!” She screeched, blushing on cue.

“You really have no standards.” Sebastian managed to keep his face absolutely emotionless even as the flamboyant Grim Reaper fantasised around and a puppy nibbled on his jacket. The boyo didn’t need to manage anything, displaying his grouchiness quite clearly.

“I have seen worse.” Mouser sighed nonchalantly, picking up her cape, flicking it over the shoulder, walking towards the butler, looking up, wearing an irked expression. “I also will demand payment for overtime.”

“It will be provided.” Sebastian tilted his head towards her, chuckling quietly.

“Hmm. Fine. Anyhow.” She turned, glancing at the building. “The tower is guarded by something. I couldn’t break in using any of the usual ways. But I’m fairly sure the girl’s here. The mutt wouldn’t stop pointing and barking.”

“Pluto. I was waiting for you.” Sebastian said as he began to walk towards the door, gesturing Mouser to follow, the dog gripping his shoulder. “Doors sealed with unearthly power can only be opened by a guard dog of Hell.” He instructed quietly as they stopped a few steps away from the doorway. Mouser nodded in understanding.

Pluto uttered a sudden sound of pain, falling down, grasping the collar, groaning and writhing on the bridge’s floor, his body glowing as the change was forced by something outside of him.

“Maybe we should remove that thing.” Mouser said calmly, watching his pain.

“Feeling sorry for the mutt?” Sebastian retorted, amused.

“Not exactly trusting its origins either.” She finished as the devil dog’s form grew to its full size, a howl escaping his jaws, tail wagging as he jumped forward, the glowing door opening inwards.

“He’s so big!” Grell shouted suddenly, eagerly happy.

“Again he’s...” The boyo ran towards them, staring at the disappearing dog in the winding staircase.

“It’s quite alright.” Sebastian pondered. “We will have him guide us through here.”

There was no trace of Pluto when they started to go up the stairs, the curling steps unbroken by doors, the formerly barred windows allowing slashes of moonlight through, candles glowing dimply, placed in small alcoves throughout the stairway, until they reached the summit of the tower, moving towards a pair of double doors leading to what seemed to be a workroom. A cross between a doll maker’s workshop, pieces, tools and limbs strewn about and an alchemist hiding
hole as described in the novels with cryptic warnings, strange symbols engraved on the walls, beakers and glowing substances on the tables. Mouser looked around carefully, scrunching her nose at the unpleasant scents peppering the air as the boyo ran to the girl sitting against a wall. Like a doll.

“Lizzy!” He shouted, examining her, desperation creeping slowly into his tone as he gripped the girl’s arms, shaking, trying to awaken her. “Lizzy! Lizzy!” There was no response, her body moving about limply with each shake.

“It seems we’re a bit late.” Mouser grunted, annoyed at Grell’s comment, extending her arm, picking the left gun that rested on her back, shooting. That gave her a shriek and a Grim Reaper stomping her feet at her, flapping her arms furiously and fast. “Stop doing that!”

“I am not aiming for your face, yet, so quit nattering.” She growled, looking up, eyes narrowed, locking eyes. That extended into a slight hissy fit of sharpened fangs between them as the demon said nothing and his master worried over his fiancée, terminated in a twin theatrical huff, both looking away pointedly.

“No...” The boyo was growing more frantic at each second that passed without reaction. “Lizzy! Lizzy! Lizzy!” Each shout was punctuated by an increasingly harsh shake. Her eyes opened softly, after a few moments, when her head settled after the last shake, a tiny whimper coming out of her lips, taking a moment to focus, but still looking blurry and dazed. Mouser sighed. So she wasn’t a doll then. Maybe she should have tried checking for the soul instead of playing with redheads but...


“Lizzy... thank God...” The boyo joined his hands in an almost prayer, looking relieved, letting go of her.

“The ring... you liked it, right, Ciel?” She asked groggily, smiling softly, catching sight of the Shard of Hope gracing his thumb, next to the Phantomhive’s diamond.

“That must have been the present she had for you.” Sebastian answered in sight of the Young Master’s confused expression.

“How foolish... why, for me...” The boyo whispered darkly, standing, as if preparing to give orders once more. Probably wishing to leave as soon as possible now that his fiancée was safe.

There was a sudden sound, a string snapping taut and the girl was lifted from the chair, eyes widening in surprise but seemingly too calm, confused. Maybe she had been drugged... Mouser reasoned, stepping back quickly to get a better view of the new trouble.

“Why I wonder.” The voice of the ginger haired man that had commanded the dolls echoed through the room, bouncing on the stone walls into a confusing effect, as if coming from everywhere and nowhere at once. “Why is my body moving all by itself?” Another hiss of a string, a halberd cutting through the air, landing on Lizzy’s extended hands, the girl’s eyes widening in surprise and fright as her hands closed around the weapon, holding if firmly. “And why is it trying to hurt the one I love?” It completed before gliding the girl down, making her attack.

“Elizabeth!” Ciel shouted, reaching for her, almost struck down. Sebastian pulled him away, dodging the blade.

“NO.” Elizabeth as screaming, powerless to stop her own gestures. “Stop. Stop. Stop.” She sobbed as Sebastian flawlessly moved both him and the boyo out of harm’s way, glancing at the pair
sitting on the worktable, ignored by the attacking blonde.

“Grell.” He called as he walked backwards. “You can see it as well right?”

Mouser narrowed her eyes, focusing to see what he was mentioning. Thin almost transparent strings wrapped around the girl’s limbs, dancing as she moved. That explained the snapping sounds that creaked with each movement.

“Yeah, I guess.” Grell mentioned, trimming her nails nonchalantly with one of the death scissors. “But that blade might cut me.” The Grim Reaper complained morosely.

“You are worried about that?” Mouser deadpanned.

“You’re sitting right next to me.” Grell pointed out.

“It’s a fair cop.” Mouser admitted, shrugging.

“Please.” Sebastian said softly, sweetly, gripping the halberd’s handle, keeping it and the girl who wielded the weapon still.

“Oh my, Sebastian!” Grell perked up, clapping her hands together. “Are you asking me for a favour?” There a sly glint in her eyes as she faked demureness, fluttering eyelashes. “Then when we kiss it will be with... tongue.”

“Nice choice.” Mouser mentioned, chuckling.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but I tie cherry stalks with my tongue.” So he hadn’t been informed of Grell’s fee for that night’s protection service. Also he could do a lot with that tongue. Mouser shuddered suddenly, in reaction to the tone and memory as Grell’s reflected the mood with less contained excitement.

“Yes!!!” The Grim Reaper jumped into the fray scissors in hand, staring down at Lizzy. “To have a bigger weapon than I do when you’re nothing but a little girl... I can’t forgive that.” There was a smiled plastered on the sharp fanged mouth that was not reassuring in the least.

“Stop it Grell!” Apparently the boyo felt the same uneasiness as Grell slashed, the girl’s body falling to the floor. “Elizabeth...” He whispered, disentangling from Sebastian who tossed the halberd away, placing a knee down, touching Lizzy’s dress as Ciel looked confused and desperate.

“A puppet string.” He said clearly, pulling the string so the light shimmered on it.

“Stop it!” Grell shrieked.

“Only a death scythe’s edge could be this sharp.” Grell complimented the blades, posing.

“Although I should point out that almost everyone in this room has bigger weapons at the moment.” Mouser cut in, standing, stretching slowly.

“Stop it.” Grell stomped her boots in mild tantrum before mellowing and turning towards Sebastian. “How was it Sebastian? I am great aren’t I? Praise me, praise me.” The Grim Reaper snapped the scissors, smiling.

“What are you, a puppy?” Mouser groaned slowly, rolling her eyes.

“Stop it!” Grell shrieked.

“Amazing. You are most skilled with a pair of scissors, aren’t you?” Sebastian said as if reading flatly from a script. The tone didn’t faze Grell in the least.
“Ah! It’s a pleasure, death.” The Grim Reaper posed once more, flaring the crimson hair, showcasing the red jacked.

“Still thinking of the kiss?” Mouser poked fun, amused.

“Of course.” Grell shook, hopping a bit, adjusting her glasses with a smile.

“Your tongue or his?” Mouser arched an eyebrow.

“And the path of the thread leads to...” Sebastian ignored their antics, looking up, trying to find the puppet master.

“I reasoned” The ginger was standing on one of the thick beams, way above their heads, moving his hands, puppet strings falling down, binding them in place. Grell struggled, the boyo shifted a bit, surprised, Mouser wriggled in her restraints, reaching for her waistcoat, feeling the thread nip into her skin and Sebastian kept looking up. “that what I should use to make the doll this time is...” the thing continued unperturbed.

“Well, what are you made out of?” Sebastian interrupted suddenly, making the thing look confused, hesitating on his speech. Mouser sniffed the air slowly. Human leather, straw and wood, traces of metal and Lizzy’s perfume.

“Heh? What am I made out of?” He said slowly, as if seriously considering it.

“Yes.” Sebastian continued calmly, the halberd at his feet shifting slightly as his toe touched it. “From what I can see it does not appear to be a very strong material.”

“I reasoned that I was supposed to be human, however, lately, termites seem to be falling out of my ears.” The doll continued slowly, rubbing his ear before Sebastian moved, kicking the halberd up, catching him on the jaw, the pressure of their binds loosening. The demon caught the weapon without hesitation, looking around.

“Grell.” He called sharply in an almost order.

“Ah, finally we shall work together, united by our love. Sebastian.” Grell almost jumped at the opportunity. Unfortunately for her the Grim Reaper was used as a stepping stone for the butler who jumped high to confront the creature, halberd in hand, unflinching.

“I believe I should warn you about sadists but...” Mouser watched as Grell fell to the ground, the blunt side of the discarded blade, the halberd’s head, thwacking her on the back. The thief winced in solidarity.

“I feel no sense of duty or passion for being a butler from you.” Sebastian declared, disgusted before striking, the wood and straw body falling down right on top of Grell who shrieked and struggled to get the thing away. “As if I would lose to someone without passion.” Sebastian landed, standing dignifiedly.

“Ah that’s a passionate man for you!” Grell scotched closer on her knees, practically rubbing against his hip.

The boyo shook his head, cradling his fiancée, placing her in a sitting position against a wall, gritting his teeth together, divided by the need to get her out and the duty to understand what had happened to the other girls.

“So he was a doll too.” Ciel stood, staring at the fallen doll, approaching slowly.

“Drozell Keinz.” Grell clarified, managing to turn serious for a moment, after glaring at the ginger, adjusting the glasses carefully. “His soul was seized five years ago. However for some reason there was a reaction to his life force.”

“A temporary soul must have been used by someone.” Sebastian speculated, looking around. Temporary soul? Mouser glanced at him, lost. The demons just shrugged. So he would explain later. But seeing the room it was most likely some kind of summoning magic or the likes.

“Ciel...” Lizzy whispered, managing to come out of whatever was running through her body once again.

“Elizabeth, let’s go back to the mansion.” Ciel was quick to go to her side once more, embracing her.

“I wanted to give you a gift. Make you happy.” She whispered dreamily.

“Just relax. Everything is...” The boyo continued, his tone gentle. Lizzy was no longer listening, her eyes closed once again, her breathing quiet and soft.

“It’s not over yet.” Sebastian noted as the doll trembled, trying to stand.

“I reasoned that I must report to the master.” It was saying in a weakening voice, each step slow and shaky, the words spaced, mangled. There was a subtle change in the air as he walked towards the second grand door.

“What’s with him?” Grell watched, making a grimace, sticking her tongue out. “He’s trying to serve his master even when he’s all messed up like this?”

“I understand him.” Sebastian said, watching his progression with a serious face, calmly as it made its way towards a set of double doors across the room. “After all, I’m one hell of a butler.”

Loyalty and appearances. Devotion and purpose.

“Master...” The doll whispered brokenly as he fell forwards, hands on the door, the wooden planes parting simply, silently, revealing a simple elegant room, seeped in silvery shadows, decorated with cherubs and golden leaf motives, everything greyed, everything dusty, everything stale, frozen. A chair had its back towards them whoever was sitting on it starting out the windows. Pluto was curled at the feet of the man, looking harmless and puppy-like, licking the gloved fingers with a happy yip.

“Pluto. Why is he being so friendly?” Ciel tried to understand what he was seeing, joining the demons and Grim Reaper at the doorway.

“I do apologise.” The man in the chair said, unmoving, his voice smooth and calm. “My butler was so incompetent he couldn’t even offer a proper welcome.” And as always all fault rested on the aide.

“So you’re the culprit.” Ciel said, angered. “Why are you turning young girls into dolls?” Whether he would order them to kill or not depended on how clouded his sense of duty was over the fact that his fiancée had almost become one of the creepy automatons. Mouser would vote for a prolonged torture and then murder.

“Flowers, eras, people... beauty is a fleeting thing. Doll making is a blessed art that leaves behind
the most beautiful and perfect things in the world.” The voice continued dreamily, the body utterly unmoving.

Empty shells. Mouster didn’t know what to choose as worse. That they existed or that she knew people who would pay for them. A pretty girl that would not scream or fight, that would not disobey or...

“What a bad taste.” Mouster nodded slightly, exchanging a glance with Grell, agreeing, shrugging away the distaste. “What’s perfect about those nymphets...”

“Why were you targeting me?” Ciel interrupted much to the Grim Reaper’s annoyance. “I have no intention of becoming one of your precious dolls.” The boyo threw the Shard of Hope against the chair, grimacing, his voice rising slightly in the end.

“Please limit your insolence.” The man retorted calmly, dismissing the boyo’s challenge.

“What?” The boyo was taken aback.

“My butler’s head was filled with straw.” The man continued, his voice lilting as if the very idea amused him. “I cannot fathom why he wanted you.” A small pause graced the air as the boyo gnashed his teeth together, growling slightly. “Ciel Phantomhive you have carried the fate of death since your birth. That body of yours is already unclean.” There were no ifs that time. He definitely found the idea funny.

Shock crossed the boyo’s face, memories clearly being dragged out of someplace in his mind he would not willingly visit. Mouster didn’t move, recognizing the expression all too well, eyes flaring red in rage. But she also knew the Young Master was nowhere near the breaking point.

“How do you know about that?” His voice was dragged out in a slow guttural whisper.

“I cannot forgive that something like you exists in this world.” The man continued, the conversation, one-sided, disgust building over his words, each cutting sharply on the Earls’ pride. “Unclean, unwanted, barren. I would have wanted to erase you. Not grace you with such a privilege.”

“What?” Ciel shouted, enraged. He had no desire to turn into a doll but he also did not want to be judged for what grim fate had befallen him years before.

“Get rid of the unclean. Get rid of the unwanted, the barren. Get rid of it. Get rid of it. Get rid of it.” The man repeated, over and over, his chair trembling under the weight of his mantra.

“Get rid of you.” Mouster shouted suddenly, her temper snapping, her own memories gnawing at her, the voice, the tone too much, flinging one dagger suddenly, burying it to the hilt on the chair, the wood cracking around the blade, making it quiet. She sighed in relief, touching her forehead for a moment.

Ciel ran towards the chair, circling it, his eye widening when he found nothing but a human sized doll with a tiny marionette placed on his lap. An illusion for a hidden master, the place and light working to trick whoever entered the room. Pluto was startled, jumping away from the chair, sitting, tilting his big fluffy head in a question.

“This is...” Sebastian whispered when they gathered behind the boyo, looking at the same thing. Mouster hissed when she felt something brush her cheek, stepping back, looking around, suddenly nervous.
The tiny marionette began to move with a wooden click. Grell shrieked, hiding behind Sebastian, frightened by being caught off guard. Ciel gasped. Sebastian frowned. Mouser grabbed a gun and a dagger, pointing towards the sound. It had a clown face painted, sad and still. Then with a shrill sound it changed, looking deranged, mouth opened to reveal fangs, jumping of the chair laughing maniacally.

The boyo jumped back, startled. Mouser shot, as she did when a rat startled her, the bullet catching only carpet, the thing going towards the door at a surprising speed.

“Sebastian. Catch it.” Ciel ordered, coming to his senses as Grell shivered behind a very calm Sebastian. Pluto whimpered, lowering his furry head. Mouser allowed a shaky sigh out.

“The one controlling that doll is not in the vicinity.” Sebastian stated, his eyes narrowing, looking around the room with sharpened attention. “There are unseen strings attached all around here.” The thing that she had felt against her cheek... Mouser took a deep breath and looked around, examining the shimmering threads that suddenly became visible. “They are far from pleasant.”

Ciel frowned, annoyed by the outcome that solved very little of the mystery, glancing at the Shard of Hope fallen harmlessly on the carpet.

It was dawn when they reached the bottom of the tower and ventured outside.

“Sebby!” Grell shouted suddenly, running towards the demon who held Lizzy in his arms. “Now give me a hot kiss.” She proclaimed as the butler crouched, avoiding the Grim Reaper altogether without upsetting his burden. Grell ended up in a heap of red on the dirt a few feet away.

“What should I do Young Master?” Sebastian asked in a low tone, turning slightly. “Would you like me to take revenge for Madam Red right here?”

“Fine.” The Grim Reaper fidgeted, chuckling nervously. “I’ll leave the kiss until next time...” A shot echoed before Grell had time to move. “Evee?” She whispered surprised, touching the arm the bullet had grazed.

“What? I’m a bit possessive.” Mouser shrugged, checking the bullets she had left.

“You’re... ah?!” Grell shouted, confused, adjusting the glasses, the pressing need to leave abandoning her for a moment. Sebastian stepped forward. Grell shrieked, startled and jumped, moving away. “Oh what is a shot between girlfriends...” The Grim Reaper hand waved magnanimously, disappearing over the trees. “Bye bye kiss!”

“How does shooting become friendly?” Mouser pondered slowly, rolling her eyes, amused.

“Stop...” Sebastian was still in serious work mode.

“Leave it. It’s fine.” Ciel ordered firmly, his eyes on his fiancée. “I don’t want Elizabeth to be bathed in any more blood.” The boyo whispered, caressing the girl’s cheek.

Mouser smiled, cooing, ruffling his hair playfully.

“It is lovely to see you preserve the innocence of at least one girl, boyo.”
Ciel woke up with a start, kicking the covers away, reacting to a man’s voice, the gun pointing directly towards Sebastian’s head, his fears fuelled by a sudden onslaught of dreams.

“Don’t touch me!” He shouted in-between pants, eyes wide, squeezed against the headboard, the handgun held tightly between his hands, finger trembling on the trigger.

The demon just smiled after a few moments of immobile confusion, following the usual routine, turning towards the tea cart, preparing and pouring as the Young Master calmed.

“Today’s morning tea is Assam black tea with added milk. It is a milk tea that I prepared.” He extended the cup and saucer waiting as the gun was put down. Ciel sighed, calmed, taking the tea, acting like nothing had happened. Of course the butler would not let the matter die as easily, especially when he saw teasing potential. “Milk can help to soothe ones nerves. Especially after a nightmare.”

“Is this what you give Mouser?” Ciel retorted curtly, sipping, trying a new angle. Sebastian kept smiling, shrugging politely.

“She has a marked preference for rum and cake when upset.” The demon chuckled. She also tended to seek him but that should not be said quite so bluntly. He picked up the book that peeked conspicuously in the rumple bedding. “It must be because you were reading Edgar Poe’s works before bedtime.

“I have the liberty of doing as I please.” Ciel huffed, taking on the noble’s appearance, hiding behind the carefully measured sip of tea. Sebastian just arched a condescending eyebrow, placing the book on the nightstand. “What’s the schedule for today?”

“Today you will need to assess the files sent by the company. Mouser is in the study and already has sorted the main documents, those that will need a quicker decision seeing that Christmas is approaching.” Sebastian paused for a bit, allowing the information to sink in. “You will have Marchioness Midford and Lady Elizabeth as guest in the afternoon. And also Young Master...”

“Oh no” Ciel shouted suddenly, jumping from the bed, flustered, fidgeting, trying to open his shirt, giving a start towards the dressing room, looking franticly around. “Hurry up and make preparations. Hurry!” He shook his arms around, trying to convey urgency.

Sebastian tilted his head. That was slightly unusual.

“There is no need the Marchioness will only arrive in the afternoon...” He tried to reassure the Young Master.

“You fool! This is Aunt Frances we’re talking about!” There was a seriousness in his tone... He usually reserved that for work related issues...
“It’s been a while since we last saw you Marchioness Midford. As always you have arrived earlier than expected.” Ciel was waiting on the grand foyer, having arrived just a few minutes before the carriage pulled into the front gardens. Despite the looming threat of arrival he had made it. Tanaka was present as link to the former Phantomhive Household master, Sebastian seemed ready despite the confusion and Mouser had been dragged out of the study, standing next to the butler, looking around puzzled, snapping into attention as soon as the Marchioness entered the house.

“Forget the formal greetings.” Lady Frances Midford examined the people present with a critical eye, the stern but beautiful face clearly showing her disapproval. Next to her Lizzy stood as the picture of sweet carefree innocence in the proper pastel colours and bonnet, seemingly still unaffected by the incidents that had befallen her in the mad doll house. “Anyway Earl Phantomhive with that out of bed look can I presume you have just awakened?”

“Aww Ciel just woke up that is so cute!” The flurry was unleashed, the girl’s arms going immediately around Ciel’s neck in a crushing embrace, judging by his choked whimper.

“Elizabeth!” The name came out sharp and chastising, snapping Lizzy from her cuteness trance. “It is not proper to engage in such unseemly actions. Also you should be greeting him first.” Lizzy was slowly letting go of Ciel as if any sudden movements would provoke something harsher. “Even though this is where I lived in the past I have emphasized that you must still behave like a refined lady...”

“Sorry, I am so sorry Mother.” She said, straightening, blinking quickly, hiding a shiver.

“It has been quite a while!” Sebastian said, cutting in as the Young Master seemed a bit... incapacitated at the moment. The Marchioness attention went immediately to him, sternly, her eyes narrowing despite his flawless image of politeness, bowing, a hand over his chest. “Welcome Marchioness and Lady Elizabeth. Thank you for the trouble to travel all the way here...” She approached, slowly, menace in her eyes, the skirts rustling lightly, her boots hitting the ground hard enough to make a sound but lightly enough to keep her pace from being militarily sharp. “May I ask is there is something on my face...?” He asked suddenly, hesitating when she was close and glaring hard.

“That face of yours. It is still the same as ever.” The Marchioness stated haughtily, disapproving harshly. “What indecent looks you possess...” She continued staring him down as Ciel snickered quietly on the background. Sebastian seemed slightly taken aback, chuckling quietly.

“That face of yours. It is still the same as ever.” The Marchioness stated haughtily, disapproving harshly. “What indecent looks you possess...” She continued staring him down as Ciel snickered quietly on the background. Sebastian seemed slightly taken aback, chuckling quietly.

“I was born looking this way...” He tried the somewhat embarrassed, smiling approach. Which could not be a lie as he was bound by contract to never let one pass his lips. But that could mean several things. From that face was very, very close to the one he had while in his true form referring to the moment where he had chosen to adopt that guise.

“And also.” The Marchioness moved fast, fast enough to startle Sebastian, grabbing his fringe pulling it up hard, her voice rising. “Both the master and his butler are alike. The two of you are obviously men yet both of you keep your fringe long. Seeing it irks me.” She allowed the butler to go “Kindly learn from Tanaka!” She ordered, her gloved hands fishing for something in her reticule. Tanaka just sipped his tea, watching the scene unfold.

“Aunt, aunt, please wait a minute!” Ciel began to say, stepping back when a silver comb was displayed in her hand and the Lady began to advance, first towards the Earl.

Mouser watched, her lips slightly parted in awe, eyes wide, as the woman subdued them and
combed their hairs back, standing as still as a statue afterwards, appraising them with a critical eye.

“I am really sorry that I have to trouble you for this, Aunt Frances.” The boyo said tersely.

“Really now.” The Marchioness said finally approving her own work.

“It’s too cute...” Lizzy whispered.

Mouser almost jumped when the Marchioness glare turned to her.

“Welcome to the Phantomhive Estate, Marchioness.” Mouser said, bowing formally, keeping the words clear.

“You must be the secretary my daughter talked about.” She had only talked with Elizabeth briefly while Sebastian drove the carriage towards the Midford estate and Ciel brooded, looking into the dawning day gloomily. “You attire could be considered quite scandalous by society.” The Marchioness remarked, most likely talking about the trousers. There was a stigma against the female legs but...

“I am aware Marchioness. However one should always put practicality and common sense before flashiness.” Mouser said evenly with no expression, straightening.

“I see. Your hands are stained.” The Marchioness pointed out almost casually.

“There was quite a great deal of paperwork to sort and consider. I apologise for my dishevelled appearance but we were indeed only expecting you in the afternoon, my Lady.”

“What is your name girl?” The Marchioness asked imperially.

“Evelyn Crows.” Do not stammer. Do not show emotions that are not asked of you. You are a doll, a pretty doll to be seen and used. Talk only when talked to. Be polite, be demure, be sweet. Or so help me I will make you pay this time. Those were the headmistress’s words as she brushed Mouser’s hair, pulling hard on the last sentence. It had been the first and only time she had actually tried to sell her. It was a highest bidder situation as it was not the second Wednesday. The headmistress had left her alone, gone to hail a hackney. She slipped the jacket over the plain orphanage dress, touching the swish-knife Jack had offered her years ago, staring at the blade. It was well used and well kept.

Mouser kept a straight face, keeping the memory locked while the Marchioness did her exam. It was unpleasant and that woman scary but for goodness sake she had endured worse than a disapproving noblewoman.

“Work diligently Miss Crows.” The Marchioness said finally, turning towards the boyo once again. “I just came to conduct a surprise spot-check and you are still lazing around as usual. Also you butler is still as indecent as ever.” Mouser bit her lip containing a smile when glancing at the boyo’s terrified face and Sebastian’s pure confusion. “I am going to retrain you today. Firstly I’m going to check the inside of your house. Unruliness in the living environments is the thing that leads to a heart being unruly.”

“In that case allow me to lead the way.” Sebastian stepped forth, bowing politely. Ciel fretted, approaching the butler. “Please be at ease.” He reassured the boyo, smiling slightly. “I had already ensured everything would be in place yesterday.” He cleared his throat with a slight cough behind the gloved hand. Mouser took a deep breath and approached, following quietly. “Firstly I will lead you to explore the garden. The winter roses brought from Germany are exceptionally beautiful.” Sebastian explained, guiding them through the corridors, placing his hands on the brass handles.
But he closed the door quickly even before it was a fifth open. “I have made a mistake.” He stated quickly, laughing politely. “I actually wanted to let you explore the great hall.” Sebastian stated, turning away, making a gesture on the other direction.

“Something must have happened.” Ciel whispered worriedly, his expression cloudy. Mouser nodded softly as Lizzy stared at them, sharing a slightly worried demeanour. In the gardens... Had the mutt done something? Or had Finny tripped and knocked down another tree?

“What?” Unimpressed the Marchioness watched the butler, glancing at the double doors. “Since we are already here we should start exploring from the garden.” One would think it logical...

“No please come to the main hall. This way please.” Sebastian kept a cheery smile in place, turning away briskly, walking towards the opposite direction, guiding them. “It was an oversight on my part.” He continued, piecing an explanation, delivering it in an apologetic and placating tone. “It is currently the time whereby the roses of the Christmas season as well as those we brought recently from Germany bloom at their peak. Please come to the main hall where the view of the flowers will be better, you will be able to see the garden from there. It is our wish to provide you with the best scenery of the blooming flowers in the day.” There was a brief silence as they crossed the house before Sebastian began to talk once again as they neared the hall’s doors. “I refurbished the main hall a few days back. I have taken the liberty to order a wallpaper with a lovely design from France...” The demon stopped mid sentence, closing door harshly, smiling even more politely. Mouser bit her lip, wincing when the sound of china crashing on the floor reached her ears. Sebastian was starting to get annoyed too. “I have made a mistake.” He repeated, covering for the servants disasters. “I think we should proceed to the greenhouse to have tea.”

“What? I thought we were here to view the main hall.” The marchioness was growing suspicious as Sebastian changed direction once again, drawing them away from the hall.

“No we shall have tea first.” He insisted a bit firmly. “This way please.” Then he gave the most plausible excuse for the change of heart. “The two of you have been cramped in a small carriage for such a long time, both of you must be tired. I’m so sorry for not realizing this sooner I have already set up a resting corner in the greenhouse. Anyway please proceed there to help yourselves to the snacks and enjoy a cup of tea. I have coincidently purchased some excellent tangerines from Spain and I’ve been intending to use Ceylon tea grown in Dimbula to serve you orange flavoured black tea.”

The loud explosion echoed throughout the house, the scent of smoke reaching Mouser quite clearly. She glanced at Sebastian for a moment before shivering, stepping back. He was not saying anything, just smiling.

“Have you made a mistake again? You are such an indecisive man.” There was no denying the annoyance in the Marchioness voice now. The boyo was shivering in fear. Mouser stiffened behind him, feeling her arms lock, eyes wide. Sebastian bowed deep, humbly, hand placed against his chest, making his face neutral and calm. The scent of burned food was growing unbearable though.

“I’m sorry my way of handling matters are just so...” He paused as if at a loss of words before straightening. “Oh, I have just remembered that there is a place which I have been intending to let the Marchioness explore. Even though it might not be really suitable for ladies to explore it. Anyway let us all head to the stables.

“What do you think of this Marchioness?” Sebastian stood next to the purebred stallion, one hand
lightly touching his head. “I have specially bought a horse with blue-black coat as the young masters’ personal horse. It has always been my wish to show it to the Marchioness.” The irritable expression she had displayed earlier was gone now as she examined the creature. It seemed Sebastian last attempt to salvage the visit had been quite a success.

“Whoa. It is indeed a splendid horse.” A gloved finger was tapping her chin as the Marchioness declared the creature worthy of praise. “It has a nice build and possesses a good look.” She approached, placing a gentle hand on the horse's forehead, caressing the silky black coat, smiling delighted when it whinnied, shaking its head.” Ohya...” There was a glint of anticipation in her eyes as she glanced at the boyo. “Ciel do you want to go hunting with me right now?

“With Aunt?” The boyo asked, appraising the Marchioness, turning slightly, his face a mask of surprise.

“This is a good opportunity for me to observe what kind of man my daughter is going to marry.” The Marchioness answered with a straight face and a logic that any man would have a hard time to pierce without being shredded to pieces. “Or perhaps hunting is too strenuous for Earl Phantomhive who possesses the small skinny build of a girl?” Followed by a masterfully delivered taunt clearly made to goad the overly competitive boyo. Mouser smiled slightly, still growing accustomed to the scent of hay and a bit wary of the horse. Most city people were, as a horse would easily trample them. She could ride though. It would be hard to pilfer a horse and get away from the coppers if one couldn’t.

“Alright.” The boyo said, straightening, his face changing to a calculating cold look. “Sebastian go make preparations.” The butler bowed, answering the request.

“Ciel let’s have a competition.” The Marchioness announced. “Miss Crows.” Mouser looked at her for a moment, blinking in surprise before answering.

“Yes Marchioness?”

“Kindly help me to change into hunting gear. It should be in the carriage.”

“Understood.” Mouser bowed and walked away, towards the Midford’s travel carriage, asking the driver about the Marchioness luggage.

Mouser had a vague idea of where she was being led to but she did not ask nor was she informed. The Headmistress just delivered her to a maid with harsh eyes through the backdoor. She was taken to a room. But she didn’t look around, standing with her back towards the door that the maid closed and locked. The knife was opened slowly with a smile, holding it against her chest, held in her right hand, left over the closed fist. From behind it would simply look like she was praying. The girl allowed a sigh to leave her lips.

It was a very similar feeling of not wanting to be near or any part of that scene that unfolded but an order had been given. Just think you’re strapping Charlotte into one of those opera dresses when the maid is a bit late, Mouser told herself. Fortunately the Marchioness was revealed as an adept of the latest theories when it came to female clothing. A practical woman it seemed.

Mouser dealt as quickly as possible with the jacket, the dress, the corsets and petticoats, placing them on the guest room’s bed, preparing the hunting gear, surprised when she found a dark mustard and hunter-green tweed man-fashion inspired ensemble complete with matching soft
bonnet. The thief chuckled and turned, standing straight, awaiting further instructions.

“As you see practicality and common sense rules all.” The Marchioness returned Mouser’s words, seemingly amused, approaching in the bare minimum compulsory underwear. “I do not require help for these clothes.” Mouser bowed her head as she was dismissed. “One more thing.” The Marchioness grabbed her suddenly by the forearm, clearly feeling the hidden dagger. Mouser said nothing until she was freed and allowed to leave.

Outside the door she allowed a sight out, walking down the corridor, towards the charred kitchen. Sebastian was preparing the picnic basket. Mouser groaned and sat at the table, looking blankly forward.

She remembered the man coming into the room, door locked in his wake, walking towards her, gripping her shoulders, dragging her closer. She gave him no time to see the blade, turning, stabbing him through the crotch first, twisting the knife hard, kicking over the bloodied fabric as he screamed in pain, making him kneel, the skirt ripping, going around him, hugging his head against his chest, gripping his chin, garbling his shouts of pain, slashing his throat for silence, teeth clenched.

The maid had come running, opened the door, fleeing the scene screaming.

Mouser had walked out into the night, hiding her knife after cleaning it on the dress, bloodstained and tired. She wandered towards the East End, towards the Dancing Pig. Jack... maybe this would be the time she would be able to go, to leave...

“You seem distracted.” Mouser looked up, smiling slightly, moving away from the bothersome memory that didn’t seem to want to leave her mind, as Sebastian stood next to her. She leaned against him still sitting on the bench, twisting the upper part of her body, muffling a groan against his tailcoat, gripping the fabric. Sebastian chuckled. “There, there.” The Demon patted her head playfully. That was a Marchioness induced sense of dread. Almost everyone in the household, him included seemed to share it. Mouser chuckled and let go, standing, stretching, looking around.

“Am I to go?” Mouser asked, closing her eyes, trying to do the training Sebastian demanded of her. The boyo and Lizzy were in the games room. His mood was agitated, ready for action. Hers was sugary and playful but there was some sort of bite under it that Mouser couldn’t quite place but felt she should recognize. It was rather frustrating... The Marchioness was a terrifying strength. She didn’t need her budding demonic senses to know that. Pluto was sleeping, almost too far for her to feel. The servants seemed to be buzzing with energy, moving around in a confusing outbreak of noisy sensations. Sebastian stood cold and soothing behind her, his arms around her body allowing her to lean against him. No souls flared into her senses this time but she could feel them as a slight jab. Also she was getting rather peckish.

“Yes.” Sebastian stated, extending her an apple. Mouser picked it up, leaning against him a bit more, biting through the yellow skin, feeling the sweetness fill her mouth. Her sense of taste seemed to still be rather intact but she got hungry less and less. “It would be rather inappropriate for a man to be alone with Lady Elizabeth while the Young Master and the Marchioness hunt, would it not?”

“You are not a man.” Mouser stated, reaching up, caressing his face without having her fingers and nails tangling in his black hair. “You look very handsome with your hair like that too.” She half turned, tiptoeing, brushing her lips against his. He met her halfway, lips melding to hers, his arms tightening. Her free had stayed on his jaw, the other holding the apple limply. It was a promise, the taste of the apple brought sharply forth by mixing with hers, his tongue tracing her lower lip, sneakily slipping between her lips when the bell rang. They both glared at it, parting with a groan,
before Mouser disentangled, fixed her clothes and hair and went to check what did the Marchioness need.

“Evelyn dear we were so worried!” Mrs. Packard was putting on a show for the copper, hugging her even as her face scrunched in disgust and twisted in anger at the sight of the blood and torn skirt, letting go after checking if her maternal show had had its expected effect.

“We found her like this wandering the streets.” The uniformed man said.

“Oh my... we lost her this afternoon when we were shopping in the market... We though... the worse... Charlotte!”

Charlotte appeared almost immediately, hugging Mouser protectively, shooting a venomous look toward the adults, a look that went unnoticed, dragging her away.

“This is such an awful thing... If you don’t mind me asking how old is the poor dear?”

“Twelve, officer. Evelyn is twelve.”

Mouser looked around the woods on the edges of the Phantomhive propriety as Sebastian guided the black horse that carried the boyo and his fiancée. The Marchioness followed on a silver horse, looking around sharply, taking in her surroundings, clearly going into a seasoned huntress mood.

“Sebastian?” The boyo asked, pulling the rein, stopping the horse.

“Yes.” The butler stopped, looking around, examining his surroundings. “Young Master, this way.” He said, guiding the horse once more.

“Does your butler serve as a hunting dog as well?” The Marchioness asked playfully.

“You can put it that way... it is somewhat true.” The boyo stated without looking back as they came to a stop once again. Sebastian let go of the rein and looked around, clearing his throat, standing tall, his voice clear.

“In any case we shall start from the vicinity of this area. The rules are: the area where you are able to shoot is bounded by a perimeter of twenty five kilometres and also is forbidden to shoot birds that are situated lower than the tree height. Is that all right?”

“It’s fine.” Ciel said in a dull tone, checking the area.

“We shall begin now. The time limit is three hours.” Sebastian checked his clock quickly.

The Marchioness took off immediately, disappearing amongst the trees.

“Lizzie you should get off the horse.” Ciel said curtly. “I’m unable to hunt like this.”

“Ehh? But I am seldom able to be with you like this...” Lizzie was complaining when a shot echoed through the woods, the Marchioness returning.

“One-zero” She stated coldly, moving away once again.
“The Marchioness certainly lives up to her name.” Sebastian adopted a thoughtful expression, appraising the situation. “She managed to shoot down a bird as soon as the competition started. It seems she’s a bit too tough for someone like you Young Master.”

“AH!” Lizzie shouted startled when Ciel suddenly moved and shot upwards, catching a bird, his competitive streak unfolding fully.

“Even though I feel a little bad towards Aunt Frances I am not loosing something that has competition written all over it.” Lizzie dismounted, helped by Sebastian, the horse fidgeted, feeling the mood shift. “Lizzie stay here with Sebastian and Evelyn as it is going to be dangerous, understand?” The boyo might be talking sternly but there was a smile on his lips. He was eager to start. The horse dashed away, the sound of his hooves fading.

Lizzy smiled softly, her eyes softening.

“I’m so relieved. Ciel has finally returned to his normal self.” Sebastian glanced at the young woman. Mouser watched her too. “Because Ciel was so close to Madam Red I was worried. Then I was taken and... I don’t want any more unhappy memories to befall Ciel.” That explained why she had placed so much importance in giving him the Shard of Hope, on trying to make him smile when they were taking her home. “That’s why I try to cheer him up using my own methods. They don’t normally produce the desired effect though. I tend to overdo things and anger him in the process.” So sweet little Lizzy in pink and ruffles knew what her actions sometimes triggered.

“I am sure the Young Master has always kept your concerns for him in mind.” Sebastian knelt, smiling for Lizzie, reassuringly. Mouser chuckled. Lizzy showed him an open smile.

“Thank you Sebastian. You are so kind.” He could be when he felt like or there was something to be gained.

Shots echoed sporadically. Sebastian stood slowly, picking up the watch, checking the time.

Mouser place one hand over the girl’s shoulder.

Sometimes one just needed someone there even if nothing was said.

“The competition seems to be heating up. We should start cheering them on.” Sebastian noted, looking towards the trees.

“You killed again.” Charlotte said holding onto Evee, ignoring the blood without any effort. She had been so close to leaving once again and that stupid, blind, idiotic do-gooder had managed to capture her. She was tired, that was clear. During the day it was almost impossible to catch her nimble-fingered friend.

“Yes.” Evee said slowly, leaning against the other orphan, closing her eyes. “I don’t know how you do it.” She admitted once more, conversationally, barely awake.

Charlotte smiled sadly. She didn’t know how Evee did it either. But she was glad for it.

“It looks so cute!” Lizzy chirped happily admiring her work while sitting at the table Sebastian and
Mouser were setting as the three hour limit drew nigh. Mouser smiled, the twin-tails the girl had tied her hair in bouncing, accompanied by the ends of long baby-pink satin ribbons flowing down to her waist from the rather big droopy bows that kept the hairstyle in place. It made her earrings stand out a lot more but both the boyo and his fiancée had their ears pierced so maybe it wouldn’t be seen as odd by the Marchioness.

“Thank you very much for your kind words Lady Elizabeth.” Mouser said, resigned, stepping back from the table, tilting her head slightly as the sound of the horses approached. She also didn’t need to be linked to Sebastian to feel his amusement. He was laughing quietly to himself while doing his duties. She would laugh too if she had a mirror and Lizzy was not present.

The boyo had a momentary flinch when he saw her, dismounting, pressing his mouth shut. She heard the hiss of air of this laughter. The Marchioness said nothing although she glanced at her daughter, the expression softening for the briefest moment. Sebastian tied the horses onto a nearby tree branch, counting the kills, as the nobles took their places, glaring at each other.

“The Marchioness has hunted a total of fifteen animals with ten pheasants, two foxes and three rabbits.” Sebastian announced. “The Young Master has hunted eleven pheasants, three foxes and one rabbit, making it a total of fifteen animals as well. Let us conclude this with a draw. What do both of you think?”

Mouser placed the steak and kidney pie on the table along with the salmon sandwiches, appreciating the charged atmosphere to which Lizzy seemed immune.

“I cannot take this lying down. I will not be satisfied unless there is a victor.” The Marchioness sneered haughtily.

“I agree with you this time Aunt Frances even though occasions in which I agree with you are rare.” The boyo sated indolently, his face a serene picture of challenge. Before they both got back to glaring up a storm.

“In that case we shall determine the winner through another competition in the afternoon.” Sebastian stated, standing straight and calm.

“Of course.” Ciel stated.

“No problem.” The Marchioness retorted. “However it seems we have hunted all the prey available here.” She leaned thoughtfully against the elbow she had placed on the table as Sebastian served the drinks. “It is best if we change venue for the afternoon session.”

“Hmm you should not be worried Marchioness.” Sebastian made a barely perceptible pause. Mouser tilted her head, catching the sudden change of the wind, the difference of scents. “There are still larger prey lurking about.”

“Well since we decided on what to do later on let’s start eating.” Lizzy clapped softly, smiling, diffusing the tension. “It smells delicious...” She began when a growl and rustle came from the trees.

A bear emerged suddenly, most likely attracted by the scent of food. Lizzy screamed, eyes widening. The boyo shouted, jumping forward, wrapping his arms around the girl, turning his back on the bear to protect. A shot echoed through the air, the growling receded until it was nothing, the massive form of the creature falling to the ground, backwards, making the table and what was placed on it rattled, the Marchioness still holding the shooting stance, booted foot braced against the wooden top, panting heavily, chair toppled behind her.
“Aunt...” The boyo exclaimed, surprised, still holding Lizzy. Then the situation sunk in his head and he chuckled. “It seems I have been defeated by you, Aunt Frances.”

“Hmph it will take you at least ten more years for you to be able to defeat me.” The Marchioness stood, propping the rifle against her shoulder, smirking slightly. “However you are indeed worthy of my praise for the bravery you have shown at the time when you gave your all to protect my daughter. Also I owe you one.” She bowed softly in recognition. “You are indeed worth of being my son-in-law Earl Phantomhive.” She straightened and walked towards the horses. “All right since the competition ended lets head back home.”

It was sometime before she spoke again, making her horse slow down to trot by Sebastian’s side.

“Hey, butler. You left something behind.” She extended one of the silver knives slowly, staring the butler down.

“Oh my I wonder what came over me. I actually forgot a silverware behind...” Sebastian tried to joke as he took it back, concealing it with a quick flick of his wrist.

“Oh really. You actually forgot that you have left it on the bear’s head. You were the one who took down that bear, am I right?” The Marchioness said acidly, looking slightly back, frowning. “My shot missed. I actually panicked when I saw my daughter in danger. I must be getting old.” She scoffed self depreciating. “However isn’t a butler job to ensure that his master gets all the glory? Why did you let me win on purpose?”

“The Young Master is indeed talented when it comes to compete with others. That is why he is extremely confidant of his abilities to the extent that he has this viewpoint that there is no why I can ever lose.” Sebastian took a breath before continuing. “However in order to work towards one’s goal it is necessary for one to eat the humble pie... If not one will eventually trip and fall one day. In addition, the Young Master’s goal is not something that is easily attainable. This is wilful thinking on my part... I hope that the marchioness will become a role model for my master.”

“In other words, I have been used.”

“Of course that is not the case.” Sebastian smiled politely, elaborating. “The head of the household hat I serve is a child. Yet at the same time he is also the master. It is important for the Young Master now to have an adult by his side in order to keep him in check.”

“Even though your looks are very indecent that what you said was indeed accurate.” The Marchioness said calmly. Mouser chuckled behind them as Sebastian’s step faltered a bit. “For the sake of your master you actually made the process of teaching him the proper actions to take during different times part of your job scope.” That was her conclusion and final word on the subject.

“That is because I am one hell of a butler. I will do whatever benefits the master the most.” Sebastian calmly concluded.

“Hmph, you are a fellow that will never be taken advantage of.”

The scenery that greeted them when the door was opened was different than expected though. The
servants looked like they had gone through a street war and there was a table and decoration that was at the same time slightly singed, askew and could have been elegant if not for some detail or another. What was interesting was the immediate look of dread assumed by both master and butler as the servants explained joyfully their idea and wished the boyo a happy birthday. A glance at the Marchioness seemed to confirm their worst fears for a moment.

“Hmph. They were actually a step quicker than me... I came here especially today just for the sake of saying this...” She placed one hand over the boyo’s head gently. “Happy thirteenth birthday Ciel.” She turned to the household staff. “Also, everyone, I’ll be counting on you to take care of my daughter and her husband in the future.”

The boyo actually managed an open happy smile as he thanked his Aunt, congratulated by the servants, hugged by his fiancée. Meyrin stared at the girlish things attached to Mouser’s head. Mouser shrugged and laughed with them, noticing the Marchioness aside, letting Sebastian know he hadn’t fooled her. He disappeared as the Marchioness joined the small celebration.

Mouser coughed stirring amongst the coal dust, opening her eyes slowly, regaining conscience with a groan. Darkness and coal. She sighed, calming, smiling.

Sanctuary. The Headmistress was furious about her attempt to escape once again but as the dead man had already paid for that night she had punished her less than she would have otherwise. Just a beating. No whip this time either. She stood on shaky legs that would show bruises soon, walking deeper into the basement to a spot where she could curl up and sleep, without having to have or be a watcher, in the reprieve she was being given.

She sneaked away, reaching for the bows, undoing the ribbons as she walked into the darkened kitchen, stopping mid-step, the pink satin falling free before she had finished pulling it, her hair flowing around her face, undone and unruly, as her eyes widened, breath caught in a gasp.

Sebastian smirked slowly, sweeping his tongue slowly over frosting-stained fingers watching as her lips parted, a slight whimper shivering in the back of her throat, pupils dilating in clear desire, red shifting deeply within the irises, answering to his own. He had gotten rid of the combed back style Mouser noted. Next to him, on the counter was a cake. And it felt like both were calling.

Mouser walked towards Sebastian, half in a daze, capturing his wrist, bringing his hand down to her lips. Her tongue slid over his fingers slowly, lapping at the frosting, eyes closing with a sigh of pleasure, nipping at his fingertips playfully, opening one red eye with a chuckle when he picked her up easily, sitting her on the counter, next to the cake. Mouser placed her hands on either side of his face, watching as he moved, their heights levelled, her legs on either side of his hips. His hands were planted on the stone, caging her.

“Are you so riled about the indecent that you absolutely have to prove her right?” Mouser whispered, leaning, forehead against forehead, their lips close, her fingertips moving against his skin, sliding strands of black hair away. He said nothing, closing the distance, seizing her mouth, inviting her tongue to play. Cake... She through, mind blanking when she felt the sugary taste twinning around her tongue. It was sweet and chocolate and demon...

They stayed together in the darkness, forgotten by the party, as the weather outside grew colder...
and white began to blanket the country.
Chapter 14

The transition from sleep to awareness was getting sharper and quicker by the day and the hours need to feel replenished were also decreasing. It did not change her natural and forcefully suppressed inclination towards enjoying sleep. Mouser sighed, rubbing her cheek against the pillow, closing her eyes again. It was still night outside and no one was stirring in the manor... She shivered when long fingers slid down her spine slowly, tempting her despite the cold air outside of the blankets.

“It’s time for your lessons.” Sebastian whispered against her ear.

“Please... no more French...” Mouser mumbled. Combat she could take. Sense adaptation through deprivation and stimulation was rather bearable. Sometimes even pleasant when he was in the mood for teasing. Demon lore and ways were imparted more carefully and slowly. Sparsely one could say, just the basic facts, vital to her survival. As avoid Grim Reapers and why, hide fangs and ruby-eyes and grabbing a devil dog by the scruff and pinning them down is the fastest way to have it submissive. Given the nature of the facts she understood the secrecy demanded. And surely there was a need to hurry. But the lessons pertaining the elegant visage demanded of a high class servant... a shudder overrode for a moment the pleasant feeling of his hands.

“I will reward you if you perform well.” His voice was as smooth as his caress as she turned slowly, staring at the plain ceiling for a moment, eyes closing slowly, purring. Her hand slipped out of the covers limply and quickly snaked inside with a hiss, snuggling closer to the main heat source of the room. Sebastian cared very little about his own fireplace.

“Cake?” She murmured against his bared chest, nuzzling the warm skin, eyes closed. His scent was still alluring, even more so as her awareness grew. And she suspected he was doing it on purpose. As in he had very little to no need for sleep but occupied the bed with her wearing... not much usually.

“Forêt Noir.” Sebastian whispered smoothly, moving a bit, letting her climb onto his chest, using him as a pillow, the hand that was not cradled under her cheek tracing a slow nonsensical pattern over his skin.

“Blight-kissed toff...” He interrupted her slothful, aggravated rant with a sudden kiss over her parted lips, dragging her up, slipping fingers through the messy hair, tongue sneaking between the lips, teasing hers, coiling wetly in a last taunt, each stroke made of blissful warmth.

Mouser moaned, shivering, hand stopping abruptly, the unbalance he had created making her rub against him, the fabric bunching, knowing his baiting techniques full well by now.

The question was why was he offering before any lesson?

The sudden stroke of a cold breeze against her back, managing to slip under her sleeping clothes told her that the covers were being moved, sneakily so. Mouser chuckled darkly, parting, showing him her fangs without modesty, the nails sharpening just a smidge, slipping into his skin but not far enough to draw blood in a clear threat. Don’t you dare... she mouthed soundlessly, eyes widening. He was smirking. She sunk her nails deeper, a feeling of dread growing.

The thief hissed when the cold air hit her body, making her jump away from the demon and the bed, miffed, muttering curses under her breath, walking towards the closet. Fine. She would get dressed and bear the damnable lessons. Sebastian chuckled softly, the sheets rustling under him.
Before she had time to do more than look over her shoulder the wall connected against her back with enough impact to snap her spine if she had been fully human still, breath wheezing out, a smirking demon pressing her against the cold surface as she gasped for air and tried to keep upright. Each gesture just made her rub against him, the heath inviting, the movements bringing a sharp, intense pleasure nipping through her. Rough play wasn’t his usual style. Her growing resilience and strength gave him ample opportunity to demand more, to actually wrestle about, dominate after the struggle, getting the satisfaction to know she surrendered only to him and only after defeat. And he liked when she gave as good as she got.

Predator. Play, fear, force, pleasure.

Mouser hissed, still irked, lips parting, looking him in the eyes, the words she wanted to whip him with drying suddenly as his head dipped down, a wisp of air slithering against her neck, before he bit down, hard, licking a path over the throbbing mark, soothing it.

“En Français.” Despite the awful words used in the classes his voice, lips teasing the outer shell of her ear, tugging one of the metal rings just a bit, and his hands were promising everything once more, the gestures slow and measured. Mouser arched a bit when he found her core, moving, slipping his fingers against her, legs threatening to give out due to the shudders he was dragging out, the ribbons of her bloomers suddenly loose enough to let them just fall around her tiptoeing feet… she chose to ignore the languorous demand for the moment, focusing on the gestures, nails digging easily into the stucco that covered the walls, cracking it with little grinding sounds, a blissful moan leaving her lips, arching, showing him her throat. He didn’t let the invitation pass, nipping the skin, sending jolts of awareness through her. Had his arms not been around her and the wall firmly against her back she was rather sure her knees would have met the ground.

Sebastian simply had a vast repertoire of trickery and finagling to leave her willing to let him have his way, any way.

Good grief… repertoire?

Mouser frowned suddenly battling the pleasant feel of his hands slipping up her waist, cupping her breasts, thumb and forefinger pinching her nipples suddenly, making her jump, nails leaving a trail up the wall, while getting the fabric out of the way, some of the pieces clicking into place, her awareness broken once more by a hungry gaze, sharp small bites along her collarbone convincing her to raise her arms, to be bared for him.

Wordlessly she arched into the warm hard body, away from the still too cold wall, arms going around his neck, kissing him back, teasing his tongue playfully, invading his mouth, nipped in return, caressing his back, scratching offering part of the pain that only made her shiver, desire growing, one foot on the floor, tiptoeing, balance precarious, the other leg going around his waist, his warm hand slipping up her thigh, dragging her closer, cradling his hips against her warm wetness, the female undulating, keening against his mouth in pleasure, blinded by the pleasure, by the uncoiling of all the tension he had built within her.

It was maddeningly easy the way he was able to undo her and yet… Mouser arched after catching her breath and finding her bearings, nipping his neck, slowly, affectionately, kissing a path down his chest, gasping in surprise when he simply picked her up, allowing both legs to loop around his waist, sheathing himself deeply into her as he pinned her against the wall. The demon groaned lustfully, the small sound conveying his own pleasure as surely as each stroke, each caress, each movement…

Sebastian did make her scream in French till grey stained the windows and it was time to start the household routine. Funny how one caught easily on the swear words, no matter what language they
The crowd gathered in front of the coffeehouse was enough to pinpoint the latest crime location. Curious rich onlookers, commoners just passing by, bourgeois out to enjoy the place, people that had walked out of their hiding places in the cold weather to gawk at the cases that were making the sensation press’s days in bold lettering and salacious overtones with blood and speculation as top sellers.

The coppers seemed to be having some difficulty in dampening the panicked shrieks and fainting ladies, the outraged gentlemen trying to help and the occasional thief in the middle of the confusion, fast fingers working while the distraction proved solid. Mouser looked away from the scene beyond carriage’s window glancing at the boyo who reread the Queen’s missive once again, folding it between gloved fingers.

“Let’s go.” Ciel said determined, standing, hunching because of his top-hat, slipping the letter inside his cape, balancing the cane.

The carriage door was opened, Sebastian waiting outside, calm and collected, glancing at the scene too.

Almost by instinct the crowd parted as they approached, allowing them passage, the worried words and cries blurring into a sort of buzzing sound, weaving indistinctively around them.

Lord Randall was a well known face in the underworld. As was the temper he was displaying towards his wide-eyed idealist of a subordinate, the same inspector that had been in charge of the missing girls and ring case. His shouts reached over the crowd, over the orders to stay away uttered by his guards. Mouser arched an eyebrow, amused when the old man started to spout grievances against the boyo, unaware of their arrival.

“Sorry to be such a brat.” The boyo stated coldly, tapping his cane on the cobblestones with a sharp sound, making inspector and commissioner look that way, startled. The hanged men were being taken down, cared for. Bruised, battered, dizzied by the surge of blood to their heads but not dead. Close to dying though as the cold was unforgiving. The onlookers whispered in terror once again.

“Earl Phantomhive.” The distaste in the Scotland Yard’s leader was almost palpable, harsh and wintry. “Why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here to clean up the mess made by an old pathetic hunting dog.” No kindness from the boyo. So the distaste was mutual. Mouser pinpointed what she needed to take. Aberlain gasped in shock suddenly, the stack of information about the case gone from his hands, the disappearance unnoticed as the young lord spoke. Mouser bowed her head slightly, giving the papers to the boyo, keeping her face neutral, amusement dancing inside her. Faster. So much faster… She glanced at the fat purses around her, old habits coming to mind. The old dog didn’t seem too pleased either, sharing his subordinate’s surprise. “Hmm... is that so... a crime targeted only to people who have returned to England from India. I see the victims are not dead.” He gave the information to Mouser, walking forward towards the old hound. The thief passed the burden onto Sebastian.

“You cannot just...” Lord Randall began, cut short by the crest lacquered onto the Queen’s missive being show to him, a clear reminder of his status and position.
“If it was just a highwayman I wouldn’t get involved.” Ciel said sweetly, straightening in pride. “However I won’t sit by and watch the Royal Family be insulted.” He gave the Commissioner no choice but to hand over the papers, examining them leisurely while the man fumed. “The victims are described as “children of sloth and depravity”... which is quite accurate.” The boyo looked up, conversationally. “I agree that England would be better off without India’s wealthy upstarts.”

“They are cowards who were too busy with extravagance and indulged in worthless pastimes. Most of them are upper class people in this so called Great Britain.” While Lord Randall seemed to share the boyo’s opinion the distaste didn’t wane. Mouser made another trip with the papers, delivering the second batch to Sebastian, standing next to him, carefully watching the coppers, the crowd and the ones that walked by. No one of her ilk that might be of help walked about.

“Upper class... how worthless...” The boyo was unimpressed, reading the missive pinned to the victim’s ropes once again. “Anyways what is this mark?” He noticed, tongue darting out for a moment in mimicry.

“He is making a fool of us British and the queen.” Lord Randall’s voice rose in fury, startling some of the nearby people. “What an idiot! Targeting only those who return from India means this criminal can’t be anyone other than a common Indian barbarian.”

“Commissioner Randall please calm down...” Aberlain said, gesturing, his expression frightened, unsettled by his superior’s outburst.

“So that is why I was called out here.” The boyo closed his eye for a moment, thinking, glancing at the Scotland Yard, smirking slightly. “The majority of smuggled in Indians are located in the East End. I can see that even the Scotland Yard has no idea how many or where they hide in the dark streets. So I’ll make a move in my own way.” He sighed, finishing his appraisal of the Queen’s task, tapping the cane once more, looking irked. “I want to return to the manor house quickly. Sebastian did you memorize those documents?”

“Yes.” Sebastian organized the papers, returning them to Aberlain with a slight nod. “Thank you very much.”

“Let’s go then.” The boyo turned away without further comment, waiting until they were a bit farther away to glance at Mouser. “Mouser.”

“Oui?” The thief said, distracted, looking towards him, her voice slightly rough. She stopped for a moment, frowning, blinking a couple of times in bafflement.

“You know where they are?” The boyo asked succinctly, not really noticing.

“Aye.” Mouser said slowly and deliberately, grinning slightly within a sideways glare at Sebastian, after a soft cough, clearing the tone.

“Take us there.”

“Aye, aye.” Now she just sounded slightly amused if a bit bored.

The streets were deserted but that was to be expected. Possibly an ambush was in place, seeing that the boyo looked very much like his rich self. In the narrow corridors in-between dilapidated buildings that could spell disaster. The grey clouds allowed little light through and promised snow. Old snow was either accumulated on whatever shady place it could find melted or shovelled away.
The boyo was so distracted looking at the squalor that surrounded him, at the people that glanced away as the group passed or just kept on walking, that he did not notice the Indian man that had purposely placed himself on his path, smacking into him, staggering back.

Mouser steadied the boyo with no comment, examining the man who doubled over, pretending to groan in pain, attracting the rest of his comrades. Sebastian allowed an exasperated sigh to escape, glancing at the rushing Indians that started to surround them.

“My ribs! They are cracked.” Bad, bad acting. Mouser looked around, carefully, appraising the trap. Sloppily done, most likely a loose plan coupled with the spur of the moment... The boyo didn’t have the bulk to crack an egg if he walked over it.

“Someone come and help!” The others started to talk, tightening the circle, participating. “Are you ok?” Voices and faces had no relevance, their words mingling. “What is wrong?” Some whispered. “He is so cruel.” Others added, furthering the situation. The tones they were using still failed to convey any sense of surprise and reality.

Mouser kept her arms crossed under the cape, hands around the daggers’ hilts.

“Showing in a place like this.” The Indian that supposedly was in such a terrible pain grasped the boyo’s cape, scrunching the fabric, dragging him towards himself. “You’re asking for it.” The man sneered. “Those are some nice clothes you got there young man. A noble heh?” Ciel slapped the thug’s hand away without care, glaring.

The man recoiled to strike, forgetting the pantomime they had been performing. Sebastian moved, two fingers poking his forehead, knocking him into the ground effortlessly. The surprised Indian took the chance to further his act, remembering the trick he was supposed to play.

“Pay me consolation money.” The Indian demanded, sitting, faking weakness, helped by his compatriots into a standing position. “Strip off everything you have and give it to me.” He demanded greedily.


“It seems we are caught amongst some loutish thugs yet again Young Master.” Sebastian stated calmly, looking down at the boyo, pausing, waiting for commands before pressing the issue. “Shall I...”

“Dispose of them right away.” Ciel stated calmly, tapping his cane once more, lips thinned into an annoyed line.

“As you wish.” Sebastian acquiesced, pulling his glove into place, smirking.

“I’ll tell you... all of us here despise noblemen.” The play was over, a knife drawn. “They brought us all the way to England and then dumped us like trash. All you British are selfish.”

“That’s right.” An ominous chorus started to pipe in, agreeing with every word.

“Because of you guys we ended up living like miserable gutter rats. Our country was walked all over by your shoes. We’ll give you a taste of how it feels to be plundered and humiliated.” Rage, hatred, petty vengeance. Any of them had reason to perform the inverse hangings.

Mouser frowned, looking around, appraising the increasingly agitated mob. But they looked like the regular kind of street brutes. It was unlikely that this group had done the beating and hangings without any further vandalizing of the places where the victims had been found. Also leaving a
letter didn’t seem like their style.

“First of all I have something to ask.” Another voice cut through the angry mutters but the words were ignored, weaved through the angry ranting. “If the answer is useful I’ll treat you to some delicious food as reward.” The same voice continued, apparently unable to read the mood.

“That’s right tasty food!” The mob seemed to have grasped the more attractive idea.

“Fish is good” A voice said, while still keeping the tone threatening.

“I feel hungry.” Another piped in.

Mouser chuckled softly behind her hand, back to back with Sebastian, the boyo in-between them.

“Wait...” they began to catch on, looking around, dumbfounded, improvised weapons lowering as they exchanged glances. “That’s not how it goes...” the Indian crowd parted slightly, turning around towards the interloper.

Mouser’s eyes widened and she purred. So many sparkly golden jewellery that one could steal and pawn away... and as the Yard and coppers did not care for Indian even if he complained, even if he looked rich and important... so many jewels... then her eyes shifted towards the man that accompanied him. Bodyguard, clearly. The law of England might not have prevented her from waylaying that walking meal ticket but the presence of the white haired Indian that stood deferentially behind the richly dressed young man would definitely made her reconsider the target.

“We’re searching for someone.” He began, showing a childish drawing of a woman to the confused mob. “Have you seen any Indians who look like this?” There was a very polite tone to use on an angry armed group.

“What the... you’re in the way you bastard!” The man that had started the play advanced, the knife brought to the young man’s face height.

“How rude, calling me such impolite things.” Either he had no sense of fear or he was that confident on his companions’ capabilities. Either boded badly.

“What are you guys joining in the fight too?” As a fellow Indian he should, that was the man’s reasoning. The young man looked beyond his countryman for the first time, examining the ones that were being threatened. “Hey you’re ignoring me!”

“He has a khansama...” His thoughtful whisper reached them as he straightened, adopting a more regal, demanding air. “You are a British nobleman?"

“How rude, calling me such impolite things.” Either he had no sense of fear or he was that confident on his companions’ capabilities. Either boded badly.

“What are you guys joining in the fight too?” As a fellow Indian he should, that was the man’s reasoning. The young man looked beyond his countryman for the first time, examining the ones that were being threatened. “Hey you’re ignoring me!”

“He has a khansama...” His thoughtful whisper reached them as he straightened, adopting a more regal, demanding air. “You are a British nobleman?”

“So what if I am?” Ciel answered curtly, displaying his own noble-forged attitude.

“Then I shall side with the people of my country.” The young man stated, tilting his head slight towards the white haired man, sure that any request would be answered. “Agni...”

“Yes.” Agni had a deep voice and a calm countenance.

“Defeat them”

“Jo anja.” He complied, bandaged hand placed over his heart, bowing his head slightly. “I will swing my fists blessed by God for my master’s sake.” He began to pull the fabric that covered his tanned hand free
“What the...” The boyo shouted suddenly as Sebastian picked him up by the waist, like a toddler, the top hat falling, as the butler defended himself from the fast strikes using his free arm.

The demon’s red eyes narrowed suddenly although his expression didn’t change. Agni moved from attack to attack and although Sebastian hadn’t even considered retaliating yet it was clear he couldn’t do so with an armful of Young Master. He shoved the boyo into Mouser’s arms as she moved out of Agni’s way.

“Sorry about that.” She whispered, amused, readjusting the boyo whose face had landed squarely on her chest, dodging one of the Indians that had first threatened them.

“Don’t forget that we are here also!” The one with knife was shouting, aiming for Sebastian’s back. Nonchalantly the demon dodged Agni’s strike, making it land squarely on the man’s face, knocking him flat.

“I’m sorry brother I’ll tend to it later.” Agni moved on after that quick apology. Sebastian either dodged, making the Indian take out his own kinsman or defending each precise strike of his hands. Agni stepped back, his position still a combative one, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I’ve hit your marman countless times. Your arm should be paralyzed. How is it you can move?”

“Put me down.” Ciel demanded as Mouser sidestepped another man. She obeyed, grabbing a wrist, pushing the man to the ground, driving her heel down on his crotch, making him howl in pain. “Hey.” The boyo shouted, getting the attention of the one that had ordered the white haired bodyguard into action. “We had barely set foot on this place and those guys picked a fight with us. Do all Indians act like barbarians and indiscriminately attack the British?”

“What?” That caught the young man’s attention. And he didn’t seem pleased by that bit of information. “You lot. Did you really attack this kid for no reason?”

“A reason?” one of the shabbily dressed man that had stopped fighting asked, looking to his companions, confused.

“That’s not right. Picking a fight for no reason is childish.” The bejewelled Indian stood taller, his voice scolding. “Agni. Our brothers are the ones wrong here. We shall help this kid now.”

There was a quick flurry of punches and movement as Agni disposed of the Indians, piling them in a stunned heap of dazed man. Ciel stared in shock. Mouser’s eyes were wide in frank admiration of the force and precision needed to both keep up with Sebastian, even he hadn’t taken the offensive, and dispose of a group. Sebastian looked impressed too, possibly confused about the sudden change of heart of the young man.

“It’s done lord Soma” Agni exclaimed happily.

“That’s right.” Soma said, nodding in approval, walking over to them, picking up the boyo’s unarmed top hat. “So you guys I hope you’re not hurt.”

“No” Sebastian answered for the confounded boyo after a brief hesitation.

“Also this kind of area isn’t a place for a kid to wander about.” Soma plopped the hat on the boyo’s head much to his annoyance. “Anyhow I’m in the middle of a search I need to attend to. Goodbye.” And so he and his bodyguard disappeared on the twisted streets.

Sebastian shook his head, approaching the pile of men, examining them. Mouser sighed and looked around. Knowing the place something else might be lurking around.
“Well seems like our first job is to deliver these people to the Scotland Yard.” Sebastian pointed out, straightening, glancing at the boyo.

“I am completely drained...” The boyo complained as Sebastian helped him out of the cloak. Mouser closed the door and got rid of the protection too, pulling the gloves away from her hands, flexing cold fingers, walking towards the small decorative table and its silver tray where letters were accumulated after delivery, waiting for sorting. “This is so tiresome... and snow is beginning to fall.” Ciel continued to complain while Sebastian put the coats and cane away.

“The criminals may have been among them. Let’s wait to hear Commissioner Randall report.” Sebastian was using the plain, empty conciliatory tone that should be used to calm ones’ master. Mouser shrugged, doubting such a simple solution.

“Calling me to London because of such a boring case...” The boyo continued his rant, walking towards the stairs.

“Young master.” Finny peeked happily from the corridor, the servants attracted by the noise of the carriage and door.

“Welcome home.” Bard followed the gardener-boy, smiling.

“Indeed.” Meyrin flattened her skirt, skipping along, smiling, adjusting her glasses as the three walked into the entry hall, bowing in a formal greeting. Mouser put the letters down, lighting a cigarette relaxing a bit, looking towards the door as the sound of steps came from the outside. She frowned slight, counting before the door was pushed open.

“Ah earl you really did come.” Lau greeted happily, RanMao nowhere in sight for once, walking towards the boyo, placing his hands on his shoulders amicably, giving him a quick appraising look. “Well you can’t help but bark if there is some sort of threat to the Queen. This is part of being a pitiful watchdog, isn’t it Earl.” Lau hid his hands on the large sleeves once again, ignoring the anger that was building within the boyo.

“Why is it you’re always unannounced.” Ciel finally said, turning towards the Chinese. “I keep telling you. If you’re going to visit at least send a letter or something first.” Mouser shook her head, the smoke following her gesture. Most likely he did it on purpose to see the boyo’s face red and raging.

“Have you said that?” Lau tilted his head, chuckling softly, looking sideways. “I see you have brought the servants this time...”

“It would be troublesome and an eventual burden if we left them at home.” Sebastian stated, his expression grim. Thinking about the burned wing that had greeted them last time. “Also we somehow acquired a guard hound.” And he still was not happy about it. Mouser chortled quietly and glanced at the doorway. She could have sworn... ah. “Since we have guests now and the Young Master is likely tired from the cold, I shall prepare some tea.”

“Fine.” Ciel relented, touching his forehead, eye closed in resignation.

“I prefer an English chai blend.” A new voice interrupted.

“Fine.” The boyo said once more before glancing at the speaker, his expression dropping into absolute shock, staring. Mouser blew smoke softly as Agni closed the door, the man that held his
obedience standing proudly on the foyer, looking around critically, whispering to himself about the town house’s narrowness, looking slightly disappointed.

“Ah I met them around the corner. They said they wanted to meet the Earl.” Lau stated happily, turning towards the newcomers, hands still in the sleeves.

“Why in blazes are you here?” The boyo shouted, finally cracking.

Sebastian stood next to the Young Master, looking slightly aghast. Most likely had though, like her, that the other set of footsteps had belonged to the hidden guards that sometimes followed Lau. As Sebastian had taught sometimes one needed to ignore parts of the world or their senses would be overwhelmed. It was simple instinct.

“Why? We got acquainted earlier did we not? Did you forget?” The young man said. Mouser frowned a bit. He had a slightly skewed view of reality, didn’t he now? The other servants were staring, eyes wide and bright, dazzled. The jewels tended to give that effect to pretty much anyone. “Besides I saved you. In India it’s common to welcome and entertain benefactors. We even have a saying for that: *Entertain your guests even if you have to sell your treasures.*” The teen announced dramatically before resuming his looking around. “Oi, where is the bed?”

The white haired bodyguard disappeared when he heard the last sentence, going upstairs.

“Why are you looking for a bed?” Lau asked, keeping the conversation flowing while Ciel seemed to be too incensed to speak.

“In my country we sit together with the guests on the bed.”

In this country any kind of bed talk would be seen as rather raunchy, Mouser pondered.

“Prince! Prince I found it!” Agni came downstairs, grinning happily, pleased with his discovery, signalling his master to follow.

“Listen to me!” Ciel shouted suddenly as the man started to go upstairs, following his servant.

“Meh... However narrow I decided I’ve decided to stay here.” Soma announced, condescending, disappearing into the upper floor.

“Wait a minute why do I have to look after you guys.” The boyo continued to shout, following, half running to catch up as the Indians went towards one of the guest rooms.

“I didn’t really consider staying at an inn.” The guest’s voice reached them smoothly.

Mouser’s eyes widened as she and Sebastian reached the doorway, staring at the increase in valuable baubles that were being displayed by the young man’s removal of the cloak.

“Is it common for England to throw their benefactors out in the cold?” Soma was asking while lounging carelessly on the bed, smiling smugly.

“Apart from that just who...” Ciel still hadn’t managed to regain his quintessential British gentleman countenance. “Who the hell do you think you are anyway?”

“Me?” Soma moved, peeking, laying on his side, displaying his wealth and style. “I’m a Prince.” He stated slowly, rolling the word.

“A prince?” Sebastian stated, slightly surprised.
“This person is the twenty sixth child to the King of the Princely State of Bengal. Prince Soma Ashman Kadar.” Agni stated, formally introducing the prince.

“I’m going to stay for a while now, little one.” Soma announced as if an honour beyond imagining was being bestowed on them. The boyo froze, his expression of absolute horror and annoyance darkening the room. Mouser chuckled, rolling her eyes as the other servants peeked into the room, trying to see the cause of the ruckus.

“Then as a symbol of our new friendship I will serve chai.” Agni stated happily, producing a ginger root from his cloak. “On a cold day chai tea with ginger can’t be beat. May I borrow your kitchen?” He continued his speech, walking out of the room followed by a slightly bothered Sebastian.

“Wait... serving tea is my thing...”

“Amazing... are you really a prince?” Finny was unable to contain his excitement for a moment more, looking with bright eyes at the foreigner.

“A Prince?” Meyrin whispered in awe, hands clasped in front of her chest, her expression reverent behind the lenses. Those were the creatures that populated the overwrought romances the ladies read.

“This is the first time I’m seeing a prince...” Bard mentioned, arms crossed, caught between being impressed and concerned.

All in all Soma was being eyed like some exotic creature. He seemed to enjoy the attention though.

“I shall allow you to come close.” The Indian Royal said with a wide, practiced gesture. The servants weren’t shy about acquiescing, surrounding him, showering with admiration and questions.

“So what kind of place is Bengal?”

“It’s an Holy country that received the blessings of the goddess Kali and the Ganges River.” Soma elaborated solemnly, caught on his own importance and the beauty he saw in his kingdom.

“So you’re a prince from a holy country?”

Mouser smirked, shaking her head, pressing the small ember of the dying cigarette against her knuckles, the pain sharp and brief, the burn dissipating quickly.

Lau walked into the room, standing behind the Boyo, smiling blissfully.

“It seems like there is going to be some lively times ahead eh earl?” The Chinese asked with perfect innocence plastered on his features, ignoring the thundering around Ciel’s small frame.

“Get out!!” The latest shout had no more effect than the ones that had preceded it. Ignored he groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Mouser.” She hummed, acknowledging his call. “My orders... keep an eye on them.” She smiled, lowering her head slightly, eyes flaring red for a moment as she glanced down at him.

“Aye, aye.”
Chapter 15

The boyo’s scream reverberated throughout the mansion two full hours before he was supposed to be awakened. Mouser looked up from her secretarial duties, exchanging a glance with Sebastian who leaned over her shoulder as the day was adjusted according to the needs of education and work. And adding to that the boyo’s demand to spend as little time as possible with their unwanted guests.

“Those are some lungs...” Mouser whispered in admiration, closing the black planner, leaning back on the chair as Sebastian checked the clock with an aggrivated sigh.

“It seems the Young Master was awakened a bit earlier than usual.” The butler stated, closing the silver piece, slipping it into his pocket, waiting for her to stand, both leaving the study, the bound volume left behind, waiting for a moment after whatever crisis disturbed the morning had been dealt with.

“He’ll be grouchy all day, no doubt about it.” Mouser retorted, resigned, as Sebastian knocked politely on the door behind which the commotion continued, made mostly from the boyo’s shouts, grunts and protests.

“Excuse me...” Sebastian pushed the door open. “Young...” He was cut midsentence staring at the scene inside. Mouser stared too, standing behind him, eyes widening in surprise and amusement. The boyo in his sleeping clothes, bedraggled and disoriented, squirming as Agni carried him towards the doorway either happily ignoring the less than sunny disposition or outright unaware of it. He hadn’t stopped shouting his confusion, demanding to be set down.

“The food will get cold if you don’t hurry.” The Indian was saying, smiling.

“Wait a second...What the hell?” The boyo was shouting after a moment of quiet, processing the words, noticing his butler suddenly, taking note of the lack of any action to correct the situation. He would not believe an excuse like too stunned to act. Mouser on the other hand was having a moment of too stunned to laugh.

“My, my... it’s been lively in here since earlier this morning...” Lau joined the group by the door suddenly, smiling happily as the struggle continued, having walked out of his assigned guest room. It was unclear why he decided to stay when his house was in London and as luxurious as the Phantomhive town manor, if not more. Most likely he had wanted to see as much as the Ciel vs. Foreigner spectacle as possible.

“Sebastian!” The trio of servants came running through the corridors, panicked, the thundering steps muffled by the thick carpeting. Lau’s blissful smile widened a bit more as the events overlapped.

“Can the three of you please remember we are in the presence of guests.” Sebastian scolded, twitching in annoyance as they stopped, panting and gesturing in front of the butler, trying to convey urgency. “What’s wrong...” He pressed one hand against his forehead, sighing. “did you... again?”

They were complaining, loudly, close to a panic.

“It’s weird.” Meyrin was the one that spoke clearly first.”

“The food, the clothes.” Bard continued, chewing nervously on his burnt out cigarette.
“The yard.” Finny said after the cook, hands clenched in front of his chest.

“What?” Sebastian repeated, careful about the word, gesturing them to lead the way.

“Put me down!” Behind them the struggles continued, the shouts growing a bit more frantic. Lau tilted his head, choosing what scene he preferred to watch.

Mouser took a deep breath, stopping Agni, smiling politely.

“What happened?” Sebastian asked quietly, almost to himself as he looked around. There was a very definite Indian feel to the new decoration, to the scents on the dining room, to the snow statues he could see in the garden, through the windows. All was perfectly done and placed, prepared to impress.

“It was presumptuous of me but I have prepared all this myself.” Agni walked into the dining room, bowing slightly. Mouser walked behind him, looking around too, apparently fascinated by the new environment. They had heard moving about but dismissed it as the servants going about their routines...

“Oh you shouldn’t have. Please just relax as you are our guests.” Sebastian walked towards Agni, clearly trying to keep him out of his tasks. Mouser smiled. He could be slightly territorial in certain situations.

“Oh but it’s nothing.” Agni justified, reassuring him, smiling politely. “The prince is of course excluded. However I am a mere servant. So I think the least I can do is lend the hard working Sebastian a hand.” Bright, sweet, just a bit of shadowy spots... Such a pretty soul. Mouser shook her head, blinking when that overwhelmed her usual sense of sight. Control... breathe and close the eyes because they had certainly gone red.

“Agni...” Sebastian said slowly, his tone rather surprised, staring at the smiling solicitous man.

“He’s the fairy-tale version of you...” Mouser whispered, peeking when she felt anchored in normal perceptions once again. The sugary ones the benefactor Lady of the orphanage read to the girls as part of her yearly socially demanded good deed.

Sebastian glanced at the dazzled servants, his expression growing a bit frigid before developing into a sweet bright smile. Mouser bit her lip, trying to keep from shuddering in foreboding or crack up laughing like a loon.

“Why don’t you all kneel down on the ground and beg for even a mere scrap of Agni’s talent. Perhaps it would improve even you a little.” The butler said, his voice dripping honeyed sarcasm.

There was a slight pause before the trio mobbed Agni, eagerly, voices mingling into an indefinite
mumble of words, sentences and pleas.

“Gimme scarps, some scraps”

“Me too...”

“Save some!”

“What’s wrong?” Agni was saying, confused amidst the pleading typhoon.

Tanaka just uttered his trademark slow chuckle and watched.

“You really should know better.” Mouser smiled. “Sarcasm does not work when they are distracted.” It led to situations like that, the words taken too literally and next thing one knew they were on their knees picking broken crockery with a trio of apologies echoing on the background.

“Aren’t you going to beg too?” Sebastian allowed a bit of amusement to gloss over his annoyance.

“I do enough of that with you.” Mouser stated playfully, had sliding into his pocked, a bit intimately, sneaking a caress on his thigh, over the fabric, picking up his watch, groaning as she checked the time. “Go help the boyo. I’ll try to keep any more damage from happening here.”

“So... how long do you intend to stay in my house?” Prawn curry and French toast with ginger were placed elegantly on the table before the guests and the boyo. Mouser and Sebastian stood behind his chair while Agni stood by prince Soma’s side. Lau was simply enjoying the food, sitting to the boyo’s left, pretending to be unaffected. Ciel tone was curt and acidic.

“We’ll leave once our work is done.” Soma said, chewing on some sort of flatbread, the words muffled.

“And that is?” Ciel prodded, anger starting to show on his features.

“Aren’t you two looking for someone?” Lau piped in helpfully, tasting the curry, using chopsticks. Where he’d gotten them was anyone’s guess although Mouser would bet on the sleeves. If anyone knew where to hide trinkets were the underworld dwellers.

“So what if they are...” Ciel began, glaring at the Chinese for interfering, noticing once again the aggravating presence that was still not clear. “And why do you need to stay here also?”

“What’s wrong with me staying here?” Lau laughed, carefree, shrugging.

“Yes. We’re looking for a lady. This lady.” Soma ignored the side argument and took a drawing from his coat, showing it. It was the same childish doodle with big eyes, big nose and mop hair. “Her name is Meena. She was a maidservant at my palace.” Then he glanced at the page with a small proud smile. “I drew that. I drew it so good that once you see her in person you’ll recognize her for sure. Isn’t she a beauty?”

Mouser pursed her lips, saying nothing.

“Sebastian can you find her from this?” Ciel asked, gesturing him to take the paper.

“Even for me that’s...” Sebastian managed to hide a grimace, straightening formally after a moment of analysing. “I’ll try my best...”
“Well I’ve never seen such a beautiful lady.” Lau said, looking at the drawing, using all his skill as a people pleaser, smiling, nodding and looking very agreeable.

“Of course. She was the most beautiful lady in my palace.” Soma stated proudly, cleaning his hands before clapping them together in front of his chest. “Thank you for the meal.”

“So why is this woman in England?” Ciel began only to look away enraged when the pair ignored him, kneeling in front of some strange idol Agni had dragged into the room, a continuous murmur coming from them. “Listen!” Still ignored the boyo groaned, staring at the statue, confounded. “What the hell is this all of a sudden? Where did they get that statue from?”

“It seems they are praying to that rather surreal figure of a god.” Lau stood, watching the ritual as the boyo approached. Sebastian moved closer too, curious.

“A figure of a god?” The butler said quietly, pressing his fist against his chin, tilting his head. “It’s just a statue of a woman who is holding a man’s head, wears a severed heads necklace and happily dances on a man’s stomach.” Sebastian described thoughtfully.

“Something like that.” Lau commented happily.

“That’s how I see it.” Sebastian finished calmly, rubbing his chin, the gesture mostly meaningless. Mouser approached, walking around the table, peeking.

“This is a statue of Kali from the Hindu religion we have faith in.” Agni explained, interrupting his prayer, turning towards them, his expression calm and kind.

“So it’s a god from India?” Ciel asked slowly, also appraising the statue more closely.

“Our Kali goddess is the wife of our god Shiva and also the goddess of power. She protects from misfortune and give us lots of benefits.” Agni gazed at the statue before continuing his explanation. “A long time ago a demon recklessly challenged the goddess to a fight. Of course the victory went to Kali. However her destructive urges didn’t settle down after his defeat. The goddess became absorbed in destruction and massacres, making a necklace of the man she killed, drinking their blood.”

“So the damage the goddess made was greater than what the demon did. That’s surprising.” Lau interjected, nodding.

Mouser glanced at the heads and hands that adorned the statue. A rather gruesome taste but she knew a guy who collected the knuckles of his kills. And then there was another who pickled the tongues of the ones that owed him money.

“Other gods couldn’t stop the goddess who had decided to destroy the world. At that time in order to protect the world her husband the god Shiva lay down at her feet.” Agni continued, engrossed into the story.

“Ah. So that’s why he’s being stepped on.” Sebastian concluded. “Of course... it was just a matrimonial quarrel.”

“So if I’m ever angry at you I should knock you down and jump on your stomach?” Mouser whispered behind him, listening to a slight chuckle.

“Maybe he should have done that before so many were killed.” Ciel stated, unimpressed.

“Having stepped on her husband with unclean feet the goddess calmed and the world returned to its
peaceful state. In other words Kali is a great goddess who defeated a demon after a time of struggle. She is holding the head of the defeated demon as proof.” Agni finished, hands together, bowing slightly, respectfully.

“So you say.” Ciel said calmly, glancing at Sebastian’s thoughtful expression.

“If such a strong person exists I should be careful when I go to India.” The demon pondered, ignoring Agni’s confused look.

“So I finished praying now.” Soma stood, dusting his knees, quickly making a grab for the boyo, tucking him under his arms, walking towards the door. “Let’s go little one. You'll be my guide.”

“Why me?” Ciel shouted angrily, squirming in the teen’s grip. “Besides I have a name. Not little one. I am Ciel…”

“Then Ciel I order you to lead the way.” Soma was undaunted.

“I am deeply sorry but it has already been scheduled for the young master to study and work today.” Sebastian intercepted with an apologetic face, the surprise of his sudden appearance in front of the doorway allowing the boyo to get free, adjusting his coat, huffing, walking towards his butler. Mouser picked up the planner and joined them.

“As you can see I’m very busy. If you want to look for that person do it yourself.” He walked out at a dignified pace, leaving a pouting prince behind.

“Now... during our stay in London instead of Governess Addams and the others I will serve as your tutor.” Sebastian had donned a pair of glasses, tucking part of his fringe away, a violin and its bow on his hands. The music room was bathed in sunlight. Ten in the morning, right on schedule. The instruments and musical sheets were in place.

The boyo had picked his own violin, looking none too pleased.

“It is very hard to contact all of the tutors and have their answer in time when your duties summon you so abruptly to London.” Mouser answered his glare calmly while sifting through the mail. According to Sebastian it wasn’t the first time he fulfilled those jobs towards the boyo. Or her. French lessons... shudder.

“Firstly let’s practice the second suite of the violin solo.” He tapped on the music sheets with the bow.

“Bach’s chaconne?” Ciel stated after a quick appraisal. “This piece of music is extremely high level. How can I play...” He was interrupted when Sebastian’s bow tilted his chin up, exposing his throat,

“Because it is hard if you can do this you’ll gain confidence. That is my method as a tutor. Basically I’m a hard trainer.” Mouser shivered in reaction, staring at the paper. “Do you have any problems with my education policy?” Sebastian was smiling, an empty expression of challenge. Mocking. Ciel frowned, using his own bow to shove Sebastian’s away slowly and with purpose, glaring. He performed better when riled, wanting to prove the challenger wrong. “Ready? Then prepare the bow.”

The boyo started to play with just a bit of hesitation, the tempo slower than stated but still keeping
the flow tight and unbroken.

“The important thing for D minor is to express the tune with severity and piety.” Sebastian instructed, checking the notations. “That’s it. You’re doing very well.” A bit of formal praise and encouragement as the role he was playing demanded, but also mirroring the progress of the boyo. As he had said it was a complex piece. “Express the tune with intense emotions...”

The demon continued, adjusting the glasses absentmindedly with the violin’s bow, ignoring the dissonant sound that suddenly began to whisper. “At the appropriate time use the sound to represent anger.”

Mouser looked up from the letters that she had been reading, finding the odd sound distracting, eyes widening as she caught the source.

“Oh bugger...” She whispered.

When the dissonant music grew louder, interrupting the violin’s melody. Sebastian turned, eyes narrowed in annoyance. The boyo didn’t look pleased either.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian asked coldly staring at Soma who played a sitar and Agni who sat behind him tapping the tabla blissfully, distorting and interrupting the classical piece. The prince smiled and stood.

“Hmm? I just think it would be good to spend some time with Ciel today.” He smiled, as if proud of his idea, starting his bragging. “I am also talented when it comes to musical instruments.”

“Get out.” Ciel growled, shoving the Indian’s out, whipping the violin bow.

“Look for the balance and calmly bring out the depth.” Sebastian instructed after placing the items in the most aesthetically pleasing positions, adjusting the light. The scheduled eleven A.M. art class should proceed as planned. The Young Master frowned in concentration, holding the charcoal firmly.

“What? Drawing a bottle is boring isn’t it?” Soma piped in, sitting behind him. “Drawing a picture is better with a naked woman right?” He concluded, looking at Meyrin, pointing regally. “So woman! Undress.”

Meyrin shrieked, startled, when she heard Soma’s order, almost dropping the tray she had brought the items to be drawn in.

“May I help?” Lau volunteered.

“I will only undress in front of the man I love!” The maid said, gripping her clothes, running away, hiding behind Mouser who stood at the doorway, returning from the study to check progress, blinking surprised at the sudden development in the day’s events and the maid that shivered behind her, hugging her waist tightly. Sebastian sighed. The boyo was close to exploding in a rage.

“Well... excuse me while I go hide out in a closet for the next hour or so...” She said, smiling, prying Meyrin free, retreating, dragging the maid with her.

“Get out!” Ciel shouted pushing Soma and Agni out of the room again.
“The samples of the limited Christmas goods from the Yorkshire factory have arrived.” Mouser took over after lunch, showing the toys to the boyo after placing them in the game’s room. Plush toys, doll houses, wooden trains, wooden animals and soldiers. The boyo went for the Peter Rabbit, picking it up in a hug. It was one of the highest demand toy.

“Hmm... it feels good now that they remade it.” He considered, giving it to Mouser. She snuggled the plush white creature in a waistcoat and bowtie, black nails caressing its ears slowly.

“It really does.” She murmured as the Boyo checked another item.

“You seem happy.” Ciel smirked, staring for a moment at his secretary. Mouser just smiled with gentle looking eyes, keeping the Peter Rabbit pressed against her chest with one arm, flipping the page on the notepad, checking the next item of business.

“Next... the production plan for next year has arrived from headquarters.” She tilted her head towards the stacks placed on the hexagonal card table. “But those can wait for a bit as you should focus on the Christmas sales. It seems new products like the Christmas cracker are having favourable sales at the Herriot department store.” She mentioned too, checking the sales table and projections.

“Though since our kid costumers are the majority we need to keep producing new toys.”The boyo stated, testing one of the crackers with a loud pop, sparkles and streamers brightening the air before falling down gently. Mouser took a few notes on the side.

“I almost loathe to suggest this after what we went through but... why not increase a bit on the doll production? New hair and eye colours, new dresses...” Girls liked dolls far as she knew.

“Collectables do have some appeal. But new is also needed from time to time.” The boyo continued. Mouser wrote down the small list of needs to put the plan in motion.

“That’s it.” Soma shouted loudly, barging in with Agni carrying some papers and Lau tailing along to watch more of the daily drama. Mouser gripped the bunny a bit harder, biting her lip with a chuckle. “I have a thought of a business plan for you. Look at this!” The childish doodle of an elephant. “The doll is the image of the Indian god Ganesh. But get this... somehow...” Agni changed the paper. “The nose moves!” and they waited for the answer with happy smiles.

“Get OUT!!” The boyo shouted, repeating the day’s favoured action, slamming the door loudly after they were on the corridor.

“Humph... what time will you finish?” Soma complained, dragging the words, lounging on the colourful carpet, watching the fencing lesson, clearly bored. “And just what the hell are you doing?”

“Shut up! I can’t concentrate!” Ciel shouted, stopping, turning his back on Sebastian, stomping his feet.

Mouser looked up from her book, sitting on the chaise longue near the guests. It was nearing tea time and barring any sort of crisis she had the formal work dealt for the day.

“Eh? No need to get mad.” Soma pouted innocently. The boyo would have none of that.
“I get it.” He growled swiping the fencing foil from Sebastian’s hand. “If you want my attention that bad then be my opponent.” The boyo challenged, tossing the foil.

Soma was fast enough to catch it, staring at the practice weapon for a moment, playing with it. Mouser marked the page, closing the book. From what she had learned about that sport his grip was wrong. From what she knew about actual combat he was holding it like one would hold a slashing weapon.

“Have it you way.” Soma said, walking towards the centre of the ballroom, swishing the weapon, proudly, displaying a bit of skill even though it was wrong for what he was holding. “I have only studied martial arts like kalaripayattu and silambam though...” He adopted a combative posture. Agni smiled, encouraging him gently. “So if I beat you... you will play with me?”

“Only if you win.” The boyo had a frown of focus plastered on his face. “If you lose then you must stay quiet and keep out of my way.” Ciel stated the prize calmly, glancing at Sebastian who sighed and explained.

“Five bouts in three minutes. The one with the highest score wins.” The opponents walked to their positions. “Now begin.”

“Take this!” Soma attacked almost immediately, aiming for the legs with a horizontal slashing movement. The boyo didn’t bother to move, letting the foil strike against his leg, bending under the speed and movement.

“That is not a valid point in fencing. Too bad.” Ciel stated smugly, moving swiftly forward, using the opening to thrust. Soma was actually quick enough to dodge, a slightly panicked expression crossing his features.

“What the hell are valid points? You coward. I don’t even know the rules.” Soma was shouting angrily but was still managing to dodge.

“It’s your fault you don’t know the rules. A match is a match.” And the boyo was having fun. Mouser chuckled. Sebastian had taken a place near the armrest against which she leaned, watching the fight with a slight amused smile.

“You bastard.” Soma growled, annoyed. “This sword is hard to use when you swing left and right.” He complained, waving the fencing foil around, stopping his attacks for a moment.

“Thrusting forward is the basic idea of fencing. Not to scythe the sword horizontally.” Ciel stated calmly, blocking another attack before moving in for a strike. But in an actual fight he lacked flexibility, sticking to the balanced practice moves and unmoving while Soma floundered and tried to strike, each hit non-valid. In a real fight she counted nine wounds so far and two of them potentially lethal or at least very crippling. Soma was yet to be hit. “Your torso is wide open.”

“Prince this is dangerous!” Agni moved suddenly, throwing himself in the boyo’s path, his fingers jabbing his Ciel’s arm sharply, making it go limp, the foil clattering on the tiles, the boyo’s face surprised and slightly pained. “Sir Ciel!” Agni noticed what he had done suddenly, looking flustered, trying to apologise frantically. Sebastian approached slowly with Mouser on tow. “My deepest apologies! My body moved on its own when I thought the prince was going to lose...”

“Are you all right?” Sebastian asked, placing one knee on the floor, lowering himself to the boyo’s level. Mouser watched his movements, before helping, kneeling next to the boyo, rubbing his arm gently, trying to chase away the numbness, cooing to annoy him further.
“Agni you have protected me well.” Soma laughed despite Agni’s panicked look. “I praise you.” The prince turned to Ciel smugly. “Agni is my khansama. He’s all mine. In other words I won.”

“That’s...” The boyo began, annoyed, struggling to lunge. Mouser held him back by the numb arm, smiling slightly.

“Now you have to play with me.” Soma demanded as Lau picked up the fallen foil, balancing it on his palm.

“My, my... here you should take reprisal for your master, butler.” The Chinese advised tossing the training blade. Sebastian caught it flawlessly with his left, inverting it, placing the tip on the tiles, keeping a loose grip on the pommel, looking down at the boyo, sighing.

“What are you going to do, Ciel’s khansama?” Soma asked, excited by the prospect of a fight.

“Indeed this happened because you were being mean to a novice who didn’t know the rules.” Sebastian began softly, still glancing down, closer to a glare. Mouser said nothing, adjusting so she was not on the line of scolding. “However... when the master is injured like this... a butler of the Phantomhive family can’t ignore it.” He stood, whipping the foil into a combat stance. Mouser helped the boyo up. “Moreover we’re behind the planned schedule by ten minutes.”

“That’s your real motive isn’t it?” The boyo groaned, annoyed. Mouser chuckled, guiding him to the chaise longue, making him sit, taking the glove away, rolling his sleeve to check his arm. There was going to be a pretty purple bruise there in a few minutes.

“Interesting. This is good. I shall allow this duel.” Soma chirped happily, walking towards the sidelines as his butler took his own fighting form. “Agni in the name of the goddess Kali you cannot lose.” The prince ordered solemnly.

“Sebastian. This is an order. Silence that brat.” Ciel countered, gritting his teeth, blue eye alight in annoyance.

Mouser watched both men with an interested gaze, still working on the boyo’s arm, feeling the blood flesh and bone underneath her fingers, answering to her careful touch. Ciel’s fingers twitched when she pinched him, the feeling and reaction returning.

“Jo ajna.” Agni said deeply, a calm focused look on his face, ready.

“Yes my Lord.” Sebastian said slowly, smirking slightly.
Chapter 16

Battle of the butlers.

Mouser leaned back, the tip of her tongue playing against the sharp edge of her teeth, eyes narrowed, roaming over their forms, trying to pinpoint any flaw in Agni that could be used. Both lordlings seemed confident in their servant’s abilities. Soma was smiling openly. Ciel had his smug sneer plastered on his lips despite flinching from time to time as she worked on his bruised arm.

Sebastian was smirking slightly in a sharp contrast with Agni’s frown.

“Now then. Please go kindly on me.” The demon stated politely, adjusting the stance, arm raised, body sideways, fencing foil tilted forward.

Agni attacked first, barefoot, getting a better grip on the polished floor, thrusting forward, the movement made to increase the hit’s strength.

Sebastian dodged to the right, riposting swiftly, even before Agni had time to recuperate.

Their strikes were fast, short and precise, dodged by either at the last moment in an almost impossible accuracy feat, their expressions cold and unchanging, the movements fluid and sharp. The foils were aimed towards each other’s foreheads, both tilting backwards, avoiding the blow entirely, gracefully.

Mouser allowed a low whistle out, impressed. Just keeping up with Sebastian was hard enough. Being able to strike back in the pace he was setting was something else. The boyo’s grin had disappeared entirely, morphed into a frown. Lau nodded along, interested. Soma did not seem to consider the actions strange, just looking with puerile enthusiasm.

They stepped back, stopping for a moment before thrusting forward once more, the covered tips of the foils connecting with a small clack, the metal bending harshly as they both applied pressure. With a clatter they snapped, both pieces of broken metal twirling upwards, much to the onlookers shock.

“Oh my... the foil broke.” Sebastian said chuckling, catching the foil’s shard, looking at it with a smile, his eyes narrowing subtly.

“This means that it will be impossible to compete anymore.” Lau said, clapping slowly. “So this match ends as a draw. What a pity.” He continued, shrugging slightly.

“Ciel’s khansama is also pretty strong.” Soma praised after a chuckle. “Agni is the strongest fighter in my city. This is the first time someone fought him to a draw. I’m impressed.” He stopped, taking a deep breath and adopting princely posture, talking to Sebastian. “Seeing you are so skilled we shall stop for today.”

“It is my honour.” Sebastian bowed formally.

“Mr Sebastian thank you for exchanging blows with me.” Agni approached, smiling, clapping his hands together, bowing quickly, eyes closed.

“I feel the same way. Mr. Agni really is a fast learner.” Sebastian praised as Ciel approached slowly, his face still set in a frown. “I can’t say the results would be the same if you were not a
novice.” The demon continued, as Agni gestured embarrassed.

“No, that’s not the case.” The Indian stated before pausing, glancing down, turning towards the boyo. “Sir Ciel I am sorry for what I’ve done.” Agni apologised in earnest. “Does it still hurt?”

“No it doesn’t.” Ciel stated dryly, staring at the man up and down, carefully,

“That’s good.” Agni smiled, relieved, bowing once more, rejoining his prince who gabbed happily with Lau, recounting his khansama’s accomplishments.

“Sebastian.” Ciel called carefully, trying not to be overheard. Mouser approached too, slowly, adjusting her sleeves over the daggers. “That guy... what exactly is he? Don’t tell me he’s... that kind again.”

Grim Reaper... According to their stories Grell had been one of the few so far that had come close to battling Sebastian in semi-even ground.

“No. He is human.” The demon confirmed, smiling, amused by the supposition.

“Really.” Ciel sighed, bored before letting out startled shout when Soma grabbed him into a choking hug, almost lifting him up from the tiles.

“Hey Ciel we should compete again!” He announced happily.

“What?” Ciel grunted out, dragged away.

“I won’t lose this time.” Soma continued, ignoring the mood.

“How many times must I tell you that I am busy?” Ciel shouted, struggling.

“Is he?” Mouser continued the conversation, arms crossed.

“Yes. However he possesses abilities that we do not naturally have.” Sebastian smiled, tilting his head towards Mouser. She huffed, glancing at the struggling boyo. “That’s what I presume.”

“Power.” She mused, mirroring a tone from not so long ago, suspicious.

“Indeed.” Sebastian acquiesced.

Bard gathered the cooking tools eagerly, holding the skillet as if it was a sword, balancing it against his shoulder, smiling. Mouser watched, tilted on the bench, smoking, boots propped on the table, peeling the onions slowly, tossing the pearly white globes into a bowl as soon as their skin was removed. The boyo should be doing his homework and it was time to start dinner preparations if any semblance of the afternoon schedule was to be maintained. Soma was napping and Lau was gone for the moment.

“All right! I can’t lose to that guy from India so I shall display my wonderful skills today.” Bard announced boisterously.

“There is no need for that.” Sebastian walked by, having removed the tailcoat and put on an apron to cook stealing the skillet casually. “I’ll take care of the preparations. Kindly stay by the side and watch.” Still annoyed at the thirty minute delay it seemed, Mouser thought, moving on to the potatoes, tossing the blade into the table, sinking the tip of it in the wood, letting it stand upright,
picking a new knife.

“Hey! What the hell is all that about!” Bard shouted. Sebastian stopped, grimacing as the cook gestured, growled and snarled. “Today I was going to prepare my special dish! Are you listening? Are you listening?!

“Really now. Can you please be quiet?” Sebastian sighed, walking by Mouser’s side. His gloved hand slid around Mouser’s ankle, giving it a little tug. “Feet of the table.” He chastised softly. She huffed, rebalancing.

“Mr Sebastian I hope you don’t mind the interruption...” Agni opened the door, peeking inside with a smile. “I was just thinking if there is something I can help out with...” He walked fully into the kitchen, glancing around quickly before focusing on Sebastian.

“Mr Agni there is really no need for you to...” Sebastian began conciliatorily, smiling slightly. Mouser allowed a bit of smoke to escape, moving on to the carrots.

“Two pairs of hands are always better than one!” Agni offered again, undaunted. “Feel free to order me around.”

Sebastian relented. Mouser stood up, walking towards the sink to wash the knives.

“In that case may I trouble you with the preparations of the berry sauce for tonight’s fish dish as well as the cottage pie?” Sebastian asked, seeing a chance to gain some time.

“Sure.” Agni smiled, eager.

“The recipe is here.” Sebastian opened one of the drawers, picking up a small pile of papers, placing them on the counter. “I wrote it down. We shall substitute the meat for chicken.” He added. Indians did not consume pork or beef according to the research he had made, so a butler had to take that into account, seeing who their guests were.

“Thank you for being so thoughtful.” Agni bowed a bit, approaching, reading what was written as Bard raged silently, struggling to get the words out. Sebastian curbed his rant once again.

“Bard you’ll get in the way. Kindly stay away.” He instructed, walking towards the inner section of the kitchen.

“Why are you letting him help out and finding me a nuisance.” The cook finally managed to shout.

“You will get in the way.” Sebastian said coldly. “Busy, busy.” He mumbled in a singsong way, marking the utter disdain for the rant. Mouser smiled, catching the slight disguised glare he threw Agni’s way as she began dismembering the chicken.

“Chef? Mr. Chef?” Agni called softly as Bard grumbled, sitting down on a barrel, arms crossed, almost chewing on his cigarette. But the word caught his attention, spawning big bright eyes.

“Me?”

“Of course.”

“Chef...” and his eyes grew a bit watery and emotional.

“I’m not familiar with English cuisine. Do you mind helping me out?” Agni asked politely, placing the recipe down, smiling.
“Leave everything to me.” Bard volunteered immediately.

“In that case would you help chop the onions?” The bowl was passed and accepted.

“It will be easily done because I am the chef.” Bard picked up a knife and pulled his goggles up, shielding his eyes as he enthusiastically began to mince the vegetable.

“You are very reliable.” Agni commented, obviously understanding what made Bard work efficiently and without complaint. “You seem skilled in this...” The Indian commented after he placed the potatoes in the pot to boil, preparing the skillet to fry the chicken and all the bases needed for the sauce.

“I have no skill in cooking but the knife work I can do.” Mouser smiled, separating the meat, the skin and the bones for the stock and actual pie filling, twirling the knife, plunging it into the cutting board as she was done, walking towards the sink to wash her hands.

Agni smiled nodding in understanding, continuing his tasks.

“It smells delicious...” Finny said, peeking from the door that led outside, smiling happily. “What’s for dinner today?” he asked, entranced by the scent of the food.

“Young man... you came at the right time.” Agni stopped, turning away from the stove. “Are you willing to help out in making dinner?” He proposed, smiling kindly.

“Me? Uh but I’m too strong so Mr. Sebastian forbade me from touching anything in the kitchen.” Finny looked a bit crestfallen, fidgeting, glancing around.

“It’s good that you are very strong.” Agni praised without malice, holding the pot with the potatoes, getting them out of the boiling water into a bowl. “In that case please use this spoon to smash the potatoes before sieving them. “This job is extremely taxing in one’s strength. Can I count on you to do it?”

“It requires strength? I can do it. I wanna do it. Please allow me to do it.” Finny grabbed the spoon enthusiastically, standing in front of the potatoes, starting his job with small giggles.

“Thank you.” Agni said, patting his head.

“Sure thing.” Finny cheered, continuing.

“Umm... is Sebastian here?” Meyrin asked softly, walking in. Most likely she had finished the cleaning duties for the afternoon and was looking for new instructions.

“No, Mr Sebastian is cooking in the inner kitchen.” Agni informed politely.

“Oh. Then I shall set the table.” Meyrin decided, happily.

“Use the ones with the blue flowers.” Mouser said, staring at the large closet that held the crockery and cutlery. She didn’t know their brand or maker but they were beautiful and the set that hadn’t been used in front of the guests yet. “Also the new Lorraine book came out. Do you want me to pick it up?”

“Really?” Meyrin was dragging a chair to reach the high places. “Yes. I really want to know what happens next.” She chuckled girlishly, muttering to herself as she climbed onto the chair. “The big plates and the salad plates...” as she pulled them out the wood creaked and the maid started to lose her balance.
“Careful!” Agni moved fast, catching Meyrin and the falling plates without a single loss. “Miss maid I hope you aren’t hurt.” He helped Meyrin stand while still balancing the plates. “The big plates should be rather heavy for a young lady. When taking them down from high places you should do it one at a time for your own safety. It will not be good if you fall and hurt yourself.” He admonished without anger or hurries, smiling politely, no traces of annoyance. The maid was blushing softly, caught somewhere in her imagination. Mouser smiled. Sweet, sweet soul.

“Mr. Agni how are things going?” Sebastian walked out of the inner kitchen, cleaning his hands on the apron. “Can you cope?”

“Yes. There shouldn’t be any problem.” Agni looked up from the table where he was rolling the dough.

“Sebastian! Look at this. I smashed the potatoes that are going into the pie!” Finny presented the bowl proudly, buzzing with excitement,

“I was the one who chopped the onions and now I am preparing the side vegetables.” Bard saluted with a knife, smiling proudly.

“I polished and prepared the tableware.” Meyrin piped in, fidgeting, glancing at the pile of shining tableware next to her, adjusting the glasses, smiling shyly.

“Thanks to everybody we will be having a really delicious meal tonight.” Agni praised once again, allowing everyone to return to their respective tasks.

Mouser almost wasn’t able to hide the laugh that bubbled on her throat when she noticed Sebastian’s utterly baffled expression as she lit a new cigarette, leaning on the counter, watching the pots boil and the food sizzle on the pans.

“Mr. Sebastian?” Agni asked, noticing the pause.

“It’s nothing.” He was able to shake his bewilderment. “I’m just amazed how you actually managed to get this lot to be of some help.” The butler joined the Indian, starting the preparations on the fish.

“They are good people and work really hard.” Agni said calmly, looking around, proud of his accomplishment.

“They are not bad by nature but...” Sebastian knew what he was dealing with. But knowing still wasn’t enough to get the best results, especially when they were overeager to comply.

“Everybody is born with a different talent, abilities and propose in life. We are guided in this by the gods. Humans just need to abide by god’s will naturally and slowly in order to complete what we have to do.” Agni said, clearly imparting what he knew, what he had learned, what he believed in.

“I don’t know how to put this but... Mr. Agni you really are a very capable person.” Sebastian continued, still glancing around from time to time while working, waiting for disaster to strike.

“That’s not true. Before I met the prince I was a hopeless idiot. What I owe him cannot be repaid in this lifetime.” Agni took a deep breath, clapping his hands to shake away the flour, his eyes growing a bit distant, nostalgic. “My family were the Brahmans and in the cast system they are the highest, the ones able to serve the gods. Hoverer... I saw my father’s greed and desires and lack of faith. I took advantage of my social status, committed sins... they kept pilling up. And finally the day where I had to pay for my crimes came.” Mouser knew the sudden face he made. The criminal
that had been caught and resigned himself to their fate. “I had no lingering affection for the world. No attachments. No faith. And in front of me who had decide to throw everything away a god appeared... He allowed me to understand that god existed inside of him. I saw god emitting holy light inside of the prince.”

Mouser smirked, making a ring. After being arrested and underfed most people did get a bit unsteady. Hallucinations and flights of fancy were not unheard of.

“Mr. Agni the pot is boiling.” Sebastian also seemed to be ignoring the pious devotion the man was dramatizing, continuing with the dinner preparations.

“I’ve served the prince ever since that day.” Agni concluded his tale, helping out once more, stirring the vegetables. “The prince is my king and my god. Even if it costs me my life I will do anything to protect the prince who gave me a new lease of life. I hope to help in fulfilling his wishes in any way I can.” The Indian smiled proudly.

“Eh. But gods in reality are all useless in a sense.” Sebastian grumbled in an aside, peeking the bubbling stock. Mouser sniggered. He should know, shouldn’t he?

“Did you say something?” Agni asked happily.

“No, nothing.” Sebastian sidestepped easily, covering the pot once more with a mild smile in place. Agni had returned to his chores. Mouser walked by Sebastian, sliding her hand down his spine firmly, feeling some traces of his territoriality towards the butler’s job and puzzled distrust towards Agni’s efficiency, before leaving.

“So who is this woman you are looking for?” The boyo asked as the second dish was placed on the table. Lau has made himself a guest once more.

“She was my servant ever since I was born. You can say she was a nanny.” Soma began, picking up where he had interrupted his explanations that morning. “We have been together for as long as I can remember. My father has no interest in me and my mother only strives to attract my father’s attention. I was always left on my own while in the palace.” There a sad expression on Agni’s face as he stood calmly behind the prince, ready to serve. Mouser’s eyes narrowed slightly in suspicion. “But Meena was always by my side. She’s cheerful and pretty and taught me about a lot of things, like she was my older sister. I don’t feel lonely as long as Meena is with me.” Soma had a small nostalgic smile as he described the woman. Then the seriousness returned. “I love Meena and Meena loves me. However that man... after the arrival of the British nobles... they took Meena with them.”

“What exactly happened?” Lau asked, encouraging him to elaborate.

“The ruler of India, Queen Victoria recognizes that Bengal is a political autonomy. But in fact more than half of political matters are decided by political consultants sent by England. In reality we are just like any other English-Ruled colony.” So he was more aware of his countries’ situation that the goofy act and youth let on. “Around three months ago that man came to pay a visit as a consultant. He showed interest in Meena... he took advantage of my absence and shipped Meena to England.”

Shipped... Mouser frowned. So there should be official documents to learn the woman’s location.... Or if it was just interest and the attraction had already waned they should check the Ratcliffe Highway. It was not a fate Agni would want to show the prince though.
“In other words he brought her back to England.” Ciel said calmly, leaning on the table, thoughtful.

“Correct. And I’m definitely going to bring her back to our country with me.” Soma stated determined.

“You are just making a big fuss over a simple female servant.” The boyo said in a deadened tone.

Soma stood up, enraged, slamming his palms on the table.

“This is not just a minor matter. The palace is just an empty box without Meena.” He shouted, walking towards Ciel, hoisting him up by the shoulders, shaking him. “Do you know the despair I felt when forced to separate from Meena? I never felt so...”

“I don’t.” The boyo said calmly, unaffected.

“Wha....” That stopped Soma.

“The meagre feelings that arise from that degree of matter I cannot and do not wish to comprehend.” He shook Soma’s hands away, coldly. “There are some things that you can never get back no matter how much effort you put in. And there are some feelings of despair you can never ever shake off.” He clenched his hands, turning his back on the prince, walking away. “You’re probably unable to comprehend.” He finished touching the doorknob.

“But even if that is the case I still do not wish to be alone in that palace.” Soma finished as Ciel closed the door quietly behind him.

Mouser walked out, going around the corridor, meeting the boyo as he stared into the darkness, clearly caught on his own. She placed her hands on her waist, tilting towards him, poking his nose.

“Are you going to say something?” He asked dourly, moving her hand away.

“Why would I?” Mouser answered, smiling.

“Ain’t you a sight for sore eyes.” Smiling Jack stood, hugging her in front of the crowd. She chuckled, hugging back, receiving a lot of harsh pats on the back and head from her former gang. Some of the onlookers just stared in shock, and recognition, at her clothes and at the fact that, after she removed the cape, sitting in front of Jack, feminine curves were very apparent. Nor they failed to notice the amount of weapons strapped to her person. “Little Mouser back to the hunt?”

“I need to track someone down and I just have a name and a very vague date...” Mouser sighed, accepting the rum, downing it easily. Cheap, tasteless and burning. Apparently even when drinking Sebastian was spoiling her. The rum he supplied was dark and slightly sweet, high quality stuff. Sadly she nowadays needed at least four bottles before her system even got a smidge inebriated. “Meena. An Indian woman. She should have been brought to London in the last three months. By a noble apparently if it’s any help in narrowing it down.”

Tobias meowed, rubbing against her ankles, tail twisting before jumping onto the table, presenting a dead rat, placing the mauled body on the wooden surface, looking proud. Mouser chuckled and rubbed under his bloodied chin. He took it as an invitation and hopped onto her lap, curling, demanding caresses. She obliged, petting the big cat lovingly.

“Investigatin’ the hangin’ incidents eh?” Jack murmured grimly. It brought the pressure of the
coppers to the East end and docks and no one was happy about it. “Bloody cat…” He tossed the rat on the floor. Tobias hissed, displeased. Mouser just hugged him, rubbing his furry cheek against hers, purring. The cat calmed down, returning to his regal demands of cuddles.

“That’s the Watchdog’s task.” Mouser toyed with the short rough glass cup with the hand that was not busy on the furry creature purring on her lap. “A pair of fancily dressed Indians has been asking about her too. Spread the word so no one attacks them no matter how much their jewels sparkle. The white haired bloke is too strong.”

“Ya know how these chaps are…”

“Yes. But I thought I’d spare you a few deaths or doing porridge.” Mouser smiled, refilling their cups, toasting, gulping it down.

“Ah. I’ll send one of the boys if I find anything.”

“Thanks Jack.” It would cost her but they deserved some of her perks too.

“Indian doxies or Indian wives?” Charlotte stopped her preparations to the opera for a moment, waving her maid away. The young girl smiled and skipped on the way out. The courtesan’s green gown was fluid and eye-catching. She was on the prowl that night, preparing for display at the Opera House, as some of her idiots tended to feel guilty and break liaisons when the holiday season began. Mouser nodded, sitting on the brocade armchair, near the window, booted feet bobbing up and down in the air. “There are a lot of harlots in the brothels... I know there is also a good number of them being kept as mistresses... now wives... there are very few.”

“Can you name them?”

“I can have a list for you tomorrow afternoon.” Charlotte said, smirking, fluffing her hair, glancing at the mirror, applying the jewelled accessories with the precision of the military. “Now... do you want to come with the opera with me? I have this red dress that would be perfect...”

“I’d rather jump in the Thames...” Mouser grumbled, standing. “Thank you for your help and I will go shopping with you as previously agreed.”

“And wear a dress.”

“We’ll see.”

The events that were being held were more than enough to keep the streets busy, allowing Mouser to be ignored and overlooked by passersby. The Yard building in Whitehall might be well guarded but it was not the first time she did that kind of quick burgle job.

Ice made the slanted rooftops slick and treacherous but it had been her choice of entry. It was rather easy now. She chose a window, dropping down, balancing on her tiptoes on the narrow windowsill, using a penknife to unlatch the simple bolt, slipping inside, closing it again, looking around carefully. A distant thud of boots, screams of the imprisoned on the lower levels, faint words, coming from the guards and officials, the patrols moving around as steadily as the Big Ben’s hands...
Lord Randall really should know better than to keep information from the boyo. One of his servants was bound to come and retrieve what was needed without his old lordship’s authorization.

The archive was vast and some parts of it were sketchy and disorganized. Through the dark she looked for the documents, touching the files lightly, picking the folders that interested the boyo. Arrested Indians, list of victims, suspects and commotions. Reports of sights and suppositions… Not one carried the crest of the Spider. Not like before when the old man’s grubby fingers were everywhere. Ever since his death actually the Spider’s presence on the street power game was rather faint. Usually Sebastian supplied the information but surely… Mouser shrugged, closing the drawers and locating another window. That was what was needed for now.

As the clock began to chime the patrol closed in.
“None of the Indians that attacked us were responsible. Muggers.” Mouser read from the Scotland Yards’ purloined report sitting cross legged next to Sebastian on the counter as he ironed the paper carefully and slowly. “That was to be expected. A large group would be immediately reported in those fancy zones...” The next pages, after the frightened words of the interrogated Indians, contained self praise, speculation and little more. “I should have something about Meena this afternoon with some luck.” Sebastian stopped moving for a moment, holding the page open. Mouser peeked. “Ah. That is going to sour some moods.”

“What can be put on hold in today’s schedule?” The demon asked, placing the iron on its stand as he finished, refolding the paper into its proper position.

“Almost everything seeing you are doing the tutors’ job...” Mouser sighed, leaning forth before hopping off the perch. “Can’t help to think we should have kept a closer eye on those two instead of chasing the bird.”

“Perhaps.” Sebastian said calmly, preparing the tea cart methodically, walking with her through the corridors after everything was in place, stretching the silence for a while, pinpointing the whereabouts of servants and guests. “And the unavoidable duties are...”

“A meeting at Harrods’ in the afternoon and the planning of the charity event.” Mouser frowned as they stopped in front of the boyo’s room. “Although we could... ignore the charity for now. It’s for January and as scarily competent as you are...” She smiled, shrugging.

“We will adjust, depending on the Young Master’s wishes.” Sebastian voice sounded resigned as he knocked, pushing the door. “Excuse me... Oh. It’s rare to see you awake so early.” Mouser slipped in after that, opening the curtains, letting the dim winter light in, noticing that more snow had been piled on the outside and Finny struggled to get the stone pathways clean.

“I was feeling irritated so I had trouble sleeping.” The boyo complained, leaning against the pillows, arms crossed. “It seems those two stayed out all night. What exactly are they doing all night...” The boyo huffed before opening the Times that displayed proudly the news of another attack, frowning intently as Sebastian prepared the Keemun Xin Ya black tea.

“So... heh. To be honest those two were suspicious from the get go.” Lau stated after the boyo had relayed the new information to the Chinese. The household was mostly quiet and the breakfast preparations underway. The guests were stirring. They had perhaps ten minutes before they came down.

“That is true though... each day a new of these...” He complained giving a quick appraisal to the letters and invitations Mouser brought in, giving them to her again after opening them, barely glancing at the text, for further appraisal, uninterested in social events. “I just can’t see why those two would cause trouble.”

“A grudge against colonial rule?” Lau suggested, reclining, hands hidden within his sleeves, seemingly uncaring, just adding to the conversation.

“Doesn’t seem likely. Even if they do have a problem with the Anglo-Indians returning to England,
attacking them in such a fashion is just too risky. Most of all if they were the criminals why would they come to stay with me of all people? They really aren’t that suspicious at all. Right?” The Earl considered, thoughtfully, the words slow, frown still in place.

“Well then... it would be pretty good if it was night anytime soon, don’t you think?” Lau chuckled merrily, still reclining.

“Sebastian...” Mouser entered the kitchen, calling his name softly, looking around to make sure they were alone, as Sebastian placed the finishing touches on the cake’s sweet decoration. She walked over to him slipping a finger over the edge of the cream bowl where the thick sweet custard gathered, licking the tip with a sigh, leaning against the table, eying the treat. They had just returned from the meeting at Harrods’ and the boyo was currently dodging Soma’s playing requests. “My friend found the tart...”

“Is it relevant?” He asked, putting down the utensils as she sneaked a few more dollops from the bowl, making small sounds of contented bliss.

“Might be... Take a look.” She produced a small list from the trouser’s pockets, caressing the silver lighter in the process.

“Interesting.” Sebastian smirked as he reached the names that mattered.

“Too many connections to be left alone innit?” Mouser said with a chuckle.

Following the Prince and Agni was uneventful. They seemed to truly be searching for their missing nanny, walking around in circles, entering the crowded places whose warmth drew people in, away from the bitter cold. Pubs, clubs, bars. Agni was making sure not to let his charge drift anywhere near the hells or brothels.

“In this country the best place to look for that person would be a pub of a club.” The boyo muttered, bundled in his winter cloak, peeking over the corner as the pair moved on. “It really seems like they aren’t up to anything.”

“They are looking at the wrong places. That would work for a man.” Mouser mentioned. “To find a vulnerable woman in this country they should have gone to a brothel first. And pray to their gods she isn’t too damaged or hasn’t been killed already.”

“It is now 1 AM.” Sebastian consulted the pocket watch calmly, watching the pair disappear, rounding another corner. “I predict they will return home soon. We should go home also.”

“2.45 AM. As expected he is moving.” Sebastian said crouching on the edge of the roof, the bitter wind and snow making the tails flutter like dark banners. Mouser stood a bit behind him, looking down at the skulking Indian and his snowy footprints, enduring the cold, trying to overcome the feel of it. They had been there for a while, waiting.

“Do you want me to follow?” The thief asked. It would take a few moments for the other pursuers
to get ready. It just seemed like a reasonable precaution.

“Do not lose him.” Sebastian advised.

“So... he went inside this building.” Lau, The boyo, Sebastian and Soma gathered against the high wall of the city manor, looking up. The Chinese mentioned the location casually as they approached.

“Indeed.” Mouser jumped down the high wall where she had been perched marking the weakest point of the Manor’s vigilance, standing next to the group, looking around quickly, searching for the bright beacon of the patrol. Noticing nothing she continued in hushed tones. “He entered and the master of the household was warned. He was told to wait.”

“Maybe finally we can see what is going on.” The boyo whispered, his eye narrowed.

“What’s going on? Who lives here?” Soma asked, forgetting his voice. Lau smiled, placing his hand on the Prince’s shoulder carefully, hushing him.

“Settle down prince. No need to panic. If you go in you shall see... the horrible truth... and... ah...” It began at a dramatic tone and pace, degenerating suddenly to a sleepy, hesitant look.

“In saying that you mean you have no clue about what is going on.” The boyo caught on that time.

“Yes. So who lives here?” Not a hint of shame from the Chinese.

“This is the home of Harold West Jebb. He is involved in the import of various goods. I’ve only met him once. Nothing more than a detestable rogue.” Ciel was the one to fill in the blanks. Everything in his tone made clear the distaste for the man.

“Petty bullying of competition.” Mouser shrugged smiling. Not part of her world but one hirer of brutes.

“Imported goods? So we are in the same line of business.” Lau perked up, joining in.

“Why would Agni visit such a person?” Soma looked towards the building, confused.

“He mostly imports spices and teas from India. He runs a general store called Harold trading. He also runs Harold Hindustani Coffeehouse. Meena’s name appeared on some of Lord West’s documents.” Mouser smirked, exchanging a glance with Sebastian as he spoke. “According to what I read business mostly took place over the Bengal area. The hanging incidents may have hurt his business. However... it seems such damage was avoided due to Lord West being absent while the events took place.”

“I guess we’d better go in.” The boyo said, looking up.

“If it’s your wish.” Sebastian didn’t sound particularly eager.

Mouser moved away, towards the same entrance she had used to sneak in the first time.

“Hmm... Gentlemen... you are the worse thieves I have ever seen.” Mouser said softly, in a soft
“You did a good job.” The cultured British accent was coming from the office smoothly, clear. “Why give me that expressionless face? Take a cigar and loosen up a bit.” A chuckle and the sound of a wooden box opening, followed by silence. The tension underlying it was unnoticed by the speaker. “They are grade Havana cigars. I got these babies from James Fox. He has a Royal Warrant. Oh well... your loss.” The box was closed and the unmistakable sound of a lighter clicked on the air. “Everything is going according to plan. In one week it all will be decided. Only with this Right Hand of God will I realize my dream. I’ve been planning this for three years.” Gloating and moving around. Mouser glanced at the four men that were peeking into the room, closing a golden filigree bracelet over her wrist, sitting down, placing the box on the thickly carpeted floor.

“So I will compete and if I help you accomplish this Meena will...” He sounded torn, hurt, desperate. Mouser frowned. She had no room for more earrings, especially those heavily bejewelled and droopy ones... So into the pockets they went. At the name every one of the males snapped into attention. Soma however broke away from the stealth effort, pushing the door wide open, barging into the room.

“You said Meena?” he shouted.

“You fool!” The boyo hissed, almost prepared to follow, held back by the butler, his mouth covered before he could continue insulting the naive newcomer.

“Shhh. He would recognize our faces. Let’s just wait for now.”

Mouser slid some rings over her gloved fingers methodically emptying the jewel box while humming inside her head as the drama unfolded in the office. As soon as she was done she shifted her position peeking.

“Prince” Agni whispered in a choked tone, both men surprised.

“Agni what’s going on? You know where Meena is?” Soma demanded, gripping Agni’s lapel, shaking him lightly, lacking a bit in strength.

“Ah. So this is your master Agni?” West mocked, examining the prince.

“You... you’re the one who took Meena!” Recognition shone suddenly in his eyes. Soma let go of Agni, turning aggressively towards West, taking a deep breath, pointing harshly, growling. “Agni beat this guy!” There was a deeply silent pause, his order unanswered. “Agni what are you waiting for?”

Smirking as he watched the play of emotions in front of him West leaned against the settee.

“Agni throw out this fussy prince.” He ordered, voice velvety smooth. Soma’s face was a study of shock. Agni was still looking darkly conflicted. “Can’t you hear me?” West prodded further.

“It seems they are starting to argue...” Sebastian mentioned, letting go of the boyo, watching the study. “But back what we were talking about it seems Lord West is involved. It also seems this has something to do with the black market.”

“So this really is the Earl’s jurisdiction.” Lau whispered.
“Indeed. Reporting this to the Yard could be problematic.” The boyo whispered, examining the scene. “We should just go home now... but I want to watch West a while longer. This time I will save that troublesome prince.”

“Leverage boyo?” Mouser whispered tilting her head a bit, whispering near his ear. He frowned at the amount of new jewels peppering her outfit.

“But won’t he recognize you?” Lau asked.

“Yes.” Ciel admitted, moving a bit, trying to stand.

“Then leave it to me. I have a good idea.” Sebastian placed a hand on the boyo’s shoulder, moving.

“Agni what is the meaning of this? Explain at once.” Soma was demanding, having found his voice.

“I don’t want to say anything. Please leave this place.” Agni pleaded, looking away, trembling.

“What did you say?” The prince was confused.

“Good kid.” West said through the cigar smoke.

“You! What have you done?” Soma’s attention turned sharply towards the man he perceived as the enemy, grabbing him by the jacket, shouting, shaking the nobleman.

“Please just stop.” Agni grabbed his prince, dragging him away.

“Let go of me Agni.” Soma was struggling, distraught, confused. “Why are you doing what this jerk says?”

“Darn. You put a crease in my new Gieves and Hawks suit.” West groaned, his hands sliding over the expensive fabric, looking down at the prince who struggled against his khansama’s grip. “Why show your pain to someone who will not understand…” West said thoughtfully, before smirking once more. “Agni. Beat the voice out of this prince.” Agni’s arms went lip with shock, letting Soma go, staring at the man in disbelief. “What’s wrong? I’m not asking you to kill him. I just want him to shut up. Am I not kind?”

“Agni...” Soma whispered, the conflicted look in Agni’s eyes... Mouser shivered suddenly when Sebastian moved past the small group at the door as Agni’s hand was poised to strike. He was stopped by a masked Sebastian, everything in the room brought to an abrupt, shocked stop.

“Who the heck is that?” West shouted, badly frightened by the deer head the Demon was using to shield his identity.

“I am a deer sent to collect the prince.” Sebastian said politely, turning to the badly startled man. Mouser covered her mouth with glittering fingers at that phrase.

“Using a stuffed head of a deer. Good one Mr. Butler.” Lau commented.

“How is it good?” Ciel grumbled, rubbing his throbbing temples.

“Hides the face.” Mouser whispered.

“This is probably one of the spies!” West was backing away, pointing. “Agni!”

“No I am just one hell of a deer.” Sebastian continued in a puzzled tone.
“Destroy him!” The house lord demanded, dragging Agni, forcing him to stand in front of him, to defend him.

“Destroy... but I can’t...” The Indian stammered, obviously seeing past the flimsy disguise.

“Shut up! Do you want me to take back my promise? I order you to do this.”

“I... I...” Leverage at work there.

“Do it now!”

“My god... I only wanted to serve him.” Agni’s conflict reached a breaking point, bloody tears sliding from his eyes. “This right hand I use only for your sake... I’ve chosen this sin... betrayal...” he whispered, covering his bandaged hand, standing, preparing, a faint glow erupting from him. Mouser’s eyes widened as his soul burned suddenly brighter, looking away uncomfortable, one fang cutting her lower lip.

“Agni...”

“Please forgive me...” He shouted, attacking, fast, strong, devastating. Sebastian moved, grabbing Soma, dodging the attack without hesitation, leaving the man in the middle of a wreckage. Mouser sighed, looking away. Time to go she thought, tossing the jewel box into the wrecked office, using the fight and the mess it was creating, standing up while West shouted.

“Not the chest I got at General Trading! My one of a kind Tiffany lamp! My Wooster tableware! My top hat!”

“It seems things are getting a bit wild. We should leave earl.” Lau suggested, sharing the same thought as the thief, used to such a ruckus, picking up the boyo.

“This way please.” Mouser moved, guiding them. “It’s a bit faster.”

“My Thomas Good glasses! My Maissan cups! My custom made desk! My house...” It was the last whisper she hear as the sound of shattering glass echoed, closing the window discreetly behind them, going back to the town house.

“...It was incredible. He was beyond human.” Lau commented excitedly as Sebastian served tea, a soothing Silver Tips Ceylon white tea. Soma was brooding and the boyo seemed to have forgotten his sleepiness, plotting. Mouser was allowed to sit down a bit away from the men, playing with her newly acquired jewels, separating them by colour, shine, value, desire and utility.

“It’s called Samadhi. Anyone with it has that power.” Soma said, his voice barely containing the shards of his anger. What had happened had shaken his confidence badly.

“Samadhi?” Ciel asked, tasting the word, picking the tea cup carefully.

“It has to do with their religion.” Sebastian began to talk, thoughtfully “It is like entering some kind of trance isn’t it?” There was slight imperceptible sigh in his voice before he continued. “Humans are strange creatures. Their blind belief, that they call a strong faith, can bring forth enormous strength from within. The Vikings of the past called upon Odin. The Holy Knights and the Crusaders fought in the name of Yahweh. For Agni... his belief in his one true god, Soma, allows him to use such a power.” Mouser looked up, feeling called. “Something we could never obtain,
bred from love and belief. The power of “faith”.

Faith was for the foolish. Power, however, was alluring. And if power was needed, wanted, there was always a way to cheat, to finagle a way around the original purity for a self serving purpose. Mouser smiled, understanding the lesson. Demon matters when he chose to share were at least easier than the damnable French classes.

“Then tell me why did he betray me?” Soma growled suddenly, his hands on the wooden table, fingers twitching. “How could he leave me behind so easily?” The prince shouted suddenly, sweeping the polished surface, the fine porcelain crashing and shattering on the rug, the tea soaking and staining the delicately woven pattern. The boyo and Lau moved, avoiding the worst of the scalding beverage and sharp ceramic as Soma continued his rant. “Why? Why does everything around me vanishes? Why? Why?” The prince sobbed suddenly, standing, dashing away through the darkened corridors.

“Are you all right?” Sebastian asked politely, keeping the silver platter under his arm.

“Yes. We dodged.” Lau answered proudly. The boyo just brooded, slightly angered. Sebastian discarded the tray on the cart, looking around, appraising the damage quickly.

“Oh... the Havilland tea set I went to the trouble of picking out for the young master. I guess... I should teach him some manners.” Sebastian moved towards Mouser, extending one hand, bowing slightly as if asking her to dance. She looked at him with a slight frown before placing her palm against his, black nails gleaming daintily against the white of his gloves, standing. “One should not neglect their manners.” He instructed playfully. Mouser smirked slightly.

Soma was curled under the covers, like a child, as if the fabric fortress could keep away the harshness of the world. Mouser sat down in one of the chairs, leaning against the table after placing them right way up, crossing her legs. It seemed a small storm had raged through the room. She lit a cigarette, picking up a shattered piece of ceramic to use as an ashtray, watching as Sebastian drew close to the bed, grabbing the covers, a sharp tug, dragging them and the prince to the floor.

The teen grunted as he hit the carped with a dull thud, turning sharply, glaring, clearly unused to be on the receiving end of any kind of harsh treatment.

“You rude...” He began to shout, gathering all shreds of dignity and princely ways, interrupting himself suddenly, shrinking against the floor, buckling quickly in fright when Sebastian glanced coldly at him.

“Who here is rude?” The butler asked in an icy tone. “Tossing things all over as though it’s nothing... how troublesome.” He mentioned, turning his back, making the bed until the covers were impeccably flat, ignoring the startled youth. Then he turned, standing tall and formal. Mouser noticed the deepening of the shadows around them. The only lights that bathed the room came from the faint moonlight outside, the curtains left open and the slight shimmer of the candelabra Sebastian had left on the corridor. “We are in England at the Phantomhive Manor. Not your palace back at home. I do not have to follow your orders.” He stated coldly as the prince stood on shaky legs, staring wide eyed. His status as guest had been revoked by his rudeness so Sebastian as a butler felt no need to hold onto formality and deference. “You are nothing more than a brat. Without Agni you’re as powerless as a baby. And he has betrayed you.”

“That’s right. I have nothing left. I’ve lost everyone.” The prince whispered slowly, close to
weeping.

“Lost?” Sebastian allowed himself a quiet chuckle. “My... what a persecution complex you have. You didn’t lose them. They simply were never yours in the first place.” Soma’s expression was one full of fright and confusion as the Demon continued. “Your social status, servants, palace were all given to you by your parents. From the very beginning you have never had one thing that was truly your own. Isn’t that the case? You did sense something was going on with Agni. And yet you lacked the courage to find out for yourself. Because you knew this...”

“No...” Soma screamed, running towards the door that had been left slightly ajar, as if promising a way out. It was slammed shut mercilessly before he was able to reach it, a smirking Sebastian leaning over the prince who stepped away, losing his balance, falling to his knees.

“It is true nevertheless.” Sebastian said calmly, fuelling the breakdown. “Even now, in this situation, you are playing the hero in a tragedy. You really are just a spoilt brat.”

“No... everyone said... everyone was there for me.” The Indian whispered, shivering.

“Lip service. Isn’t that the duty of a house servant? I believe they looked after you rather than looking back. Back at the slums they lived in before working for you. There is no reason to serve someone for no personal gain.” Amen. Mouser thought allowing smoke to drift pass her lips again, ash falling. He was very good. It had been quite a while since she’d seen someone being verbally lambasted so thoroughly. “No one ever really loved you.”

“That’s how it is then...” the boyo said, interrupting, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed.

“Young Master.” Sebastian acknowledged his presence, the menacing aspect of his nature fading slightly.

“That’s enough.” The boyo continued, walking in. “I may have turned out like Soma...” He admitted quietly as the prince stood, shivering, looking around. “If it wasn’t for that month...” Mouser’s eyes narrowed slightly. Was he being compassionate or just feeling like forcing someone to grow? “I was being kept and humiliated as a pet... my house was burnt, my family killed... I was such a powerless kid.” The boyo gritted his teeth, hands fisting. Mouser shrugged, snuffing her cigarette, standing. “Therefore I returned to this place in order to make those people who put me through such a fate taste the same humiliation. Three years prior they killed my predecessor. So they will come to me as long as I am the head of the Phantomhive family. The family that stands in their way. I am waiting for them to come and try to kill me here.” The boyo sated, bitterly, proudly.

“Why... why do you have to go so far?” Soma whispered, staring.

“Moping around filled with sadness and sorrow... what will come of it? Dead people can do that.” The boyo continued, walking into the room, stepping over the shards that had resulted as Soma’s fit. “However I’ll live and stand on my own two legs. If we are to die one day, wouldn’t it be better to have no regrets? I’m not saying that getting revenge for my predecessor is an admirable thing. This is all just a game of mine. It is a game that can be won by either... them or me as the Earl of Phantomhive.” Mouser moved next to Sebastian who watched impassibly. Most likely it was something he had heard time and again. Soma’s heartbeat was still loud and frantic because of the fear and sorrow. The boyo’s was picking up, riled, exited, determined. “Even though I was put in an abyss of despair, a place likened to hell... a chance as thin as a spider’s thread was sent to me, offering a choice to crawl out. I decided not to give up and reached for it. We humans have that strength.” The boyo sighed, arms crossing once again, eye closing lazily, in reflection. “Though grasping the thread of not is up to the person. This boring speech is over.” He finished as Soma
looked on in awe. “Sebastian, Mouser. We need to talk about West. Come.” Both demons exchanged a glance before following. Mouser smirked a bit, looking up when she heard the prince’s bare feet carry him through the corridor.

“Ciel…” The boyo half turned, waiting. Soma was breathing hard, straining before straightening and continuing. “I’m so embarrassed. I’m already seventeen but I’m still a fool who knows nothing compared to you. I have been spoiled with luxuries… so I have never tried to understand other people. Although I noticed that Agni was worried about something I never bothered to ask… so this time I want to know.” A flicker of backbone and determination. So the boyo had indeed pushed him to grow despite Sebastian having almost reduced him to a weeping puddle. “I want to meet them directly and confirm their reasons to leave my side. That’s why I ask this of you! Come with me…”

“I refuse.” Mouser snorted, covering her mouth to avoid an outright laugh at the prince’s shocked face. “I’m sorry I can’t even look at someone who knows so little about the world as you do. There is no way I’m dragging your weight around. Meh… I suppose the living room door isn’t locked anyway.” He turned away.

“Ciel!!!” Soma shouted suddenly, a hug dragging the boyo against the prince, laughing in gratitude. Ciel just growled and fumed, annoyed. “I… Ciel I’m sorry for lashing out like that before… please forgive me…” The prince then glanced at Sebastian, hiding behind the boyo suddenly. Mouser chuckled into her fist. Sebastian seemed slightly amused by the new wariness his simple presence created. “about those broken cups… please forgive me. And I’m so sorry.

“No... don’t worry. This is quite interesting.” Sebastian said as the boys walked away. “Such an amusing person…”

“Who?” Mouser whispered, slipping her hand into his pocket, checking the time, tugging the chain.
Chapter 18

Mouser snuggled into the green sofa with the book she was trying to finish. A widow caught between revenge and love. Lau had not left the living room, too comfortable in the armchair, smiling calmly as they returned, acting as if very little had happened. Sebastian prepared a new tea, a stronger black, most likely an Earl Grey, placing the cups carefully. The shards of the other tea set had been removed and the carpet taken to the laundry room.

“Well then. Shall we continue this discussion where we were before the prince interrupted?” Lau stated, opening his arms wide, encouraging the talk. The boyo grunted in agreement, plopping down on his own armchair, leaning against his palm, thinking.

“Firstly, isn’t it almost certain that those incidents were caused by Agni under West’s orders? With his physical ability it is possible he could have done it alone. So far what we have from West’s speech is the three year plan, the completion of his plans in one week...” Soma flinched away from Sebastian when he placed the cup in front of him. The demon just glanced at him without emotion returning to the boyo’s side. “Agni’s Right Hand is essential. Of these the most important is in one week.”

“Using his Right Hand of God... he might want to strike at a big event.” Lau suggested, thinking for a moment. He shrugged. “The Queen’s jubilee is over already... And it’s winter. All the large events are over.”

“Mouser. What events are taking place in one week?” Ciel asked. Mouser looked up from her book and took a deep breath, thinking. No one had glanced at her, just waiting for her answer.

“Seeing your station you received invitations for everything happening in this town...” She nipped her lip for a moment. “A choir concert organized by the Sophia Choir Institute at Westminster Cathedral, Wagner’s Opera at Convent Garden Opera House, a Prospering Exhibition of Indian Culture in the Empire at the Crystal Palace, the World Currency exhibition at the British Museum...”

“Indian” The boyo interjected before she continued enumerating the remaining eight invitations.

“Young Master... reading your own letters thoroughly no matter the content is the way of a gentleman.” Sebastian chastised. Mouser smirked, returning to her book. Most nobles didn’t even know how much they were worth or had in their possession. It was considered unfashionable. That was why butlers, secretaries and house staff in general knew more about the master’s life than the master himself.

“Give it a rest.” The boyo grumbled at his butler, waving away the scolding. “Details.”

“Next week the Prospering Exhibition of Indian Culture in the Empire at the Crystal Palace has a main program of displaying the achievements and production of the English in India. As part of this event a curry contest is scheduled. You were also invited to be part of the judges... apparently you were also not listening this morning when I asked about this to forward the answers.” Mouser continued, flipping the page. Chapter Twenty. In Which Bitterness Descends Upon Our English Rose...

“Several companies competing against each other to see who makes the best curry.” Sebastian continued, picking up the idea easily. “There are rumours that the queen loves curry. She might come to the Exhibition...” Which could make her a target. “Other than that would you like me to
investigate the other venues?”

“Indian curry. I think it is kind of obvious.” The boyo said grumpily, glaring at Sebastian.

“It looks like you also noticed Earl.” Lau whispered calmly, in all seriousness.

“Three years. The show... there is only one answer to explain what West, who is obsessed over brand names, is thinking about, right?” The boyo sighed, glancing aside. “I can’t believe this has turned out to be such a boring case.”

“Ah. So it really was a pointless visit.” Lau nodded along in agreement.

“Hold on. I don’t understand. Explain it to me...” Soma asked, looking from one to another, confused.

“Calm down prince. From now on we will explain everything in order.” Lau was the one to assuage his doubts. For a moment. “Well the Earl will.”

“You just pretended you knew again, didn’t you?” The boyo deadpanned, not amused by the gimmick. “The Hindustani coffeehouse that West owns has a main meal of curry. In other words West is trying to get a Royal Warrant with curry.”

“Royal Warrant what is that?” Soma frowned, trying to understand the cultural difference.

“That’s right... the prince has no idea about such things.” Lau acknowledged softly, reclining.

“In England we have an interesting system. The Royal Family will give a certificate to stores they are pleased with. That is a Royal Warrant. Those stores can display it on their signboards. It is the same as a guarantee of quality. The stores that receive the warrant will certainly see a growth in sales. I was just only thinking that it is about time they awarded them to stores dealing in confectionaries and also toys.” Always with his owns interests in mind. Mouser chuckled. Self-serving. A true businessman. “It seems that some stores have seen their sales grow three times their previous figures. Queen Victoria herself has a particular interest in the popular trends from fashion to cuisine.” The boyo sighed, eye closed, the signs of sleepiness showing once more. “The curry boom has also declined recently. He must want the certificate so badly he’ll do anything.”

“I understand why he wants the certificate. But what does it connect to the incidents?” Soma was twisting his hands together, looking around, a bit lost.

“There are two conditions to getting the Royal Warrant.” Sebastian continued, taking over the explanations. “The first one is the quality recognized by the show and the second is that a free service must be delivered to the royal family for three years. In other words he’s destroying the competition to assure there is no one able to face him in a week.”

“Then those incidents that occurred with soldiers, who have nothing to do with this, were just to make the incidents seem like the work of Indians with a grudge against colonial rule. Maybe Agni was told to take part in this plan at Meena’s expense. All for his god.” Ciel said calmly, clearing the picture. Soma’s expression just held confusion. Mouser peeked from her book and stood with a sigh, walking out, returning as fast as she could, giving the boyo one of the notes from the crime scenes. Sebastian nodded in slight praise. Speed control. “These were the papers left at the crime scenes containing a strong symbol without masquerade. Here.” He gave it to Soma. “Commissioner Randal go quite angry at the sight of this, thinking it an insult. But the real meaning to it... That statue you guys pray to...” He encouraged Soma to think.

“So it must represent the goddess Kali who sticks her tongue out. So then the god Agni wrote this
“Everything is for his god. Don’t you think that contains the signs of a prayer and apology?” The boyo said slowly. Mouser returned to her book.

“Even after Agni left he still has faith in you. He lives for you. You have had a good butler.” Sebastian complimented.

“Agni...” Soma whispered.

“How wonderful...” Lau clapped, enjoying the show.

“Well... let’s retire for now.” The boyo said, stretching, hiding a yawn behind his palm.

“Should we take this information to the Yard and leave them to take care of it?” Sebastian asked softly.

“Wait... but what of Agni and Meena?” Soma shouted, startled.

“What of it?” Lau asked, smiling.

“The way I see it this case has nothing to do with the underworld. We don’t do philanthropic work.” The boyo chuckled, reclining.

“Darn... I understand. This is my problem. I’ll try to solve it myself.” Soma’s hands fisted, clenching his teeth, thinking.

“Nice to hear. Then I should do what I should do.” The boyo glanced back, looking smug, anticipating the game. “I was called to London in the winter for such a boring case... don’t you think I need compensation?” Mouser peeked over her book. Ciel was grinning with malice. Sebastian was smirking. Oh dear... “The show is only a week away and fortunately all the capable rivals have been removed. A Royal Warrant is granted according to the result of the show. In other words my Funtom Company will enter the competition and win against West. The Royal Warrant shall go to my company.” He made a slight pause, recovering the sheen of boredom despite the lingering smirk. “I’m thinking of expanding my business into the food industry in addition to toys and confectioneries. It will certainly spread through the news if I become the purveyor of the Royal family from the show at first.”

“Definitely. The Funtom Company launching into the food industry will also deter competitors. However you have only one week from now to create a food department. Will you have the time to find a curry specialist, a store and equipment?” Lau, as a businessman, intervened, questioning the plan’s logistic.

“There is no need for all that. Isn’t that right Sebastian?” Mouser scoffed. Also she had the early drafts of that plan filed away for early March deployment.

“How could someone that serves the Phantomhives not be able of such a thing? Definitely a Royal Warrant...” Sebastian began with his usual smug self-assuredness.

“That’s impossible.” Soma broke the monologue coldly, looking worried. “West is competing in a curry contest? There is no way you can win.”

“Why not?” Ciel asked, unused to be so bluntly denied.
“He has Agni. With his Right Hand of God.”

“Of course the destructive power of the Right Hand of God is impressive but this is not about martial arts. It’s a curry contest.” The boyo said. As Soma didn’t understand the references to the Royal Warrant he didn’t understand fully what Agni could do.

“That’s what I mean though. It’s not about technique like fencing. Because it’s a curry contest...” Soma began, hesitating a bit, thinking how he could explain. “You don’t know much about Agni’s ability or real curry. Real curry is defined by the spices. In real curry there are a few carefully chosen spices selected from the hundreds available, combined together in just the right amount. According to how it’s done the taste, the smell, spiciness, the colour... everything will be different. There are countless alternatives. Cooking the best curry is like revealing the secrets of the universe. However Agni can do it. With a fingertip he can combine and bring out the best of the spices. The curry he creates is a miracle. The power to create a world from nothing is an ability reserved to the gods. That’s why Agni’s hand is called the Right Hand of God. I have never had a curry more delicious than curry.”

“In other words the Right Hand of God... Is not about god level strength but god level capability?” Lau summarized calmly, glancing at the boyo with doubt.

“It seems that way.” Ciel sighed, a bit resigned. “Sebastian?”

“Oh well... it looks like things are about to get though.” The butler said thoughtfully.

“Eh? Sebastian you are up early... what are you cooking this morning?” Bard groaned sleepily as the servant trio walked into the kitchen. Finny chirped his good mornings happily as did Meyrin.

“Curry.” Sebastian barely glanced, dividing his attention in-between the boiling pots and the cookbook.

“That’s a rare choice for you.” Bard rubbed his head, starting the coffee from the stash he kept for himself. “What kind of curry will it be?” Finny and Meyrin had started their own breakfasts, awaiting instructions. Mouser entered the room, yawning, sniffing the air, going for the leftover cake from the day before.

“Prince Soma is here also so I’m making a chicken curry. I have rarely cooked it because the Young Master doesn’t like spicy foods. Now...” Sebastian closed the book and began to work, quickly and methodically.

Meyrin and Mouser walked out to prepare the dining room, returning as soon as that was done.

“Wow... yummy...” Finny was saying when they returned.

“Smells good.” Meyrin piped in, rushing towards the plate, admiring Sebastian’s work.

“With this curry that guy will be no match for you.” Bard was praising, patting the butler’s back.

“Yuck...” Soma groaned after the first bite into the English curry, looking utterly disgusted.
“It doesn’t please you?” Sebastian asked, looking slightly disappointed. Soma jumped on his chair, startled.

“Ah... no it’s just very different from what we have in India.” He tried to cover his faux pas.

“It’s all right. Please continue.” Sebastian encouraged. If the book had resulted in that reaction he needed more information about the food he was currently experimenting with. Soma sighed, shivering but slightly reassured, taking a deep breath to fortify his resolve.

“Firstly the taste is too weak and I can’t smell anything. I can still feel something rather like powder in my mouth. Such a thing is just not curry.”

“That is weird. I used only the finest curry powder...” Sebastian replied thoughtfully, rethinking each of the points.

“Curry powder? What is that?” Soma shook his head for a moment. “I’ve never seen such a thing India. Agni didn’t use it. Maybe...” Soma tried to explain once again. It seemed that last night he hadn’t been explicit enough about the nature of the curry... “Spices are the base of a curry. The scents will fade away if you don’t grind the spices. In my palace we have servants just for grinding.”

“Oh. So it’s out of the question to use already ground spices.” Sebastian understood the issue, frowning for a moment. The Young Master’s dislike for spicy foods and the English way of cooking might hinder him a bit... So how to manage...

“Agni’s curry has different tastes and colours depending on the ingredients. He combines them carefully, thinking of each flavour.” That much he knew. It was Agni’s art.

“Well then... firstly we need fresh spices of high quality.” Sebastian began.

“Then West has the advantage. He controls the distribution of his own company so he can secure such things easily.” The Young Master grumbled, annoyed by the setback.

“We don’t have much time. We need to contact a trading company.” Sebastian completed. All three men glanced at Lau who around looked blissfully unaware. He was the president of a trading company after all.

“I have something for you.” Mouser whispered showing a pile of papers, leaning against Sebastian who was curved over a stack of books about Indian cooking and curry, her arms sliding around his waist, chin on his shoulder. Compiling knowledge while waiting for the spices seemed like a sound move on their part. “These are the curry recipes from eliminated competitors and the ones still in the game. I also took the liberty to snoop around West’s house again.”

“Were you careful?” Sebastian picked up the papers and read some of them, putting the one that demanded the use of curry powder aside. Mouser chuckled.

“No one cares about the scullery maid. I dressed for the part.” She reassured him. Agni hadn’t seen her. And others would be hard pressed to remember what she looked like. It was a normal method used to map a house before a burglary when bribing the servants was too risky. Just steal some clothes from the pegs and mingle.

“So the scents are still fresh in your mind?” The demon inquired, reaching up, caressing her neck
slowly, making her sigh against his ear. The townhouse, the guests and the approaching contest didn’t create the best environment for any kind of escapades.

“I will go in again, nearing dinnertime. It seems West has Agni practicing his recipes tirelessly so nothing can go wrong.” She sighed and slumped a bit against him, appreciating the soothing touch. “For now I have a favour to repay.”

The attack wasn’t entirely unexpected even though she was standing in front of the bookstore. Mouser simply dodged, sharply, ignoring the people that walked around, some shocked gasps and murmured insults, and made her assailant slide into a secluded alley, away from prying eyes, before huffing a smoky cloud and smirking.

“Quite a pleasure to see you again poppet.” The thief said, her voice smooth and even. The Grim Reaper hadn’t used anything near full strength. It was a greeting, not a proper attempt.

“Evee.” Grell said evenly, straightening dramatically, showing a unique grin. Before plunging a death scissor towards her throat. Mouser moved away, clasping hands behind her back, keeping her own smirk in place.

It was to be expected. Now… how to play with it…

“Jealousy does not suit you poppet.” She teased, dodging with a quick backwards jump while Grell struck, the blades sinking on the cobblestones, pulled out quickly as her focus didn’t waver. People just walked by, uncaring or unaware. Perfect then.

“I cannot allow you just to stay there, alive…” The Grim Reaper informed ruefully, stopping, snapping the scissor open, closing them with a dry sound, chuckling, hair dramatically tossed away before charging. “Mine and Sebastian’s love…” Mouser gripped the Grim Reaper’s wrists, stopping both blades, just deflecting the blow, the rush backing her away towards the alley wall. She glanced back, grinning for a moment despite the strain in her arms.

“Poppet I believe you are misinformed about the nature of our relationship.” Mouser whispered in a low tone, slipping slightly closer, rather intimately, coming face to face, blowing a strand of silver smoke against Grell’s lips.

“Covenant!” Grell shouted and shrieked as Mouser loosened her grip, the death scissors sinking into the wall, plummeting deeply enough for even the most smooth blade to be pulled out effortlessly. If she wanted the Scythe back there would be a great deal of exertion involved. “What’s there to be wrong about?” The Grim Reaper continued, glaring down, forgetting the struggle to get the main weapons out to slash the competition. Then, trying to use the fact that they were face to face, Grell tried to slam her forehead against Mouser’s.

Mouser chuckled, ducking suddenly, allowing the Grim Reaper to slam the hard head against the brick wall, letting go of the weapons, dazed, pieces of masonry falling in flakes around her. She mule kicked upwards, catching Grell in the gut, eyes flaring red suddenly, her strength enough to toss her across the alley against the opposite wall, jumping forward quickly, pinning her to the ground.

“It’s a contract for mutual benefit.” Mouser said sitting on the Grim Reaper’s back, playing with a lock of red hair without a care, ignoring the writhing and bucking under her, adjusting accordingly. “He increases his power and status as a demon and I get to have power. Sure we have a connection
“And we do share a bed but…” Grell was finally able to shove her away. Mouser recovered, straightening, avoiding the following attack. The Grim Reaper had been able to pick up one of the scissors. “Again this is part of a selfish contractual obligation that happens to keep demons strong.” Mouser spat out her spent cigarette, stepping on it. Smoothly she manoeuvred within the next dodge, slamming Grell against the wall with just a bit of nudging, pressing herself bodily against the Grim Reaper’s back, tilting her head to whisper against Grell’s ear. “Wouldn’t you want a strong demon? One who can overpower you, overwhelm your senses?”

Grell moved half heartedly, slashing. Mouser stayed still when the Death Scythe nicked her cheek, some of her memories slipping out, exposed. A dramatic record… She thought, amazed at that strange thing, watching a shard of her own life.

Blood covered the floorboards in a glossy coating, fresh and bright under the candlelight. The man was still alive though, begging. The plea had changed. No longer a cry for life but a supplication for death. Mouser looked down, drawing patterns with the tip of her worn boot, thinking, keeping the edge of the orphanage dress away from the congealing puddle despite the fact that blood stained her whole body.

Jack was watching over her shoulder, smiling slightly, the effect widening his Glasgow grin to frightening proportions. She was six at that time. This was her fifth kill, the one who had woken up and fled before she could deal with him. But maybe this was the proper way to do it. Long and slow, returning every bit of the pain he had delivered. She had explained why she wanted to catch this man. Jack had agreed, his own story driving him to help and protect his little Mouser, but said that men like him would never go away. Mouser knew there were others. But dealing with that group might give some a bit of pause before purchasing at Mrs. Packard’s.

“Are you going to finish it luv?” Jack asked.

“No. Let him bleed.” She answered, putting the swish-blade in her pocket with a sigh.

Mouser let go suddenly, her seeds planted, walking away, leaning against the wall, fishing out a new cigarette, clicking the lighter, outwardly ignoring her for the moment.

Grell seemed to have calmed down somewhat, considering what had been said, adjusting the glasses carefully, dusting the jacket and checking her appearance carefully, surveying the damages, mostly self inflicted as Mouser hadn’t drawn a weapon, recovering the second scissor.

As Sebastian said the attachment to the Death Scythe that had been taken away crippled that particular Grim Reaper greatly. Like those men that only knew how to shoot a gun. Give them only a knife and come morning dead in the gutter they are.

“Love… ah poppet, I make no claim of it nor do I pine for such a thing.” Mouser finally continued, gesturing dismissively.

“Why would I believe you?” Grell huffed, making the death scythes disappear, crossing her arms, rocking a bit on the heels, leaning against the opposite wall, mirroring.

“Why would I lie over such a triviality? Mouser shrugged in response, catching on the opportunity that was being offered, smirking.
“It is not trivial.” The Grim Reaper’s hackles rose, going into drama diva mode. “Love is what makes my maiden heart throb and the passion that leads to the struggle of life and death…”

“Right. Yours. Don’t get your bloomers in a twist now poppet…” Mouser drawled. “Males are troublesome. Human, Demon, Reaper…” Mouser shook her head slowly. “But I’ll say this again. Why lie? Especially when I offered you help before.” The Grim Reaper seemed thoughtful, gloved hand fist under the chin, tilting her head, pouting. “And when I went through some trouble to get you a thank you present seeing the Young Master felt no need to honour his verbal agreement…” The gold and ruby necklace gleamed between them. Grell’s eyes widened in appreciation, walking away from the wall, leaning closely, sharply and suddenly, making a squealing sound of joy. “Isn’t it gorgeous? Blood red stones that would suit you so beautifully.” Mouser approached, slipping the metal around Grell’s neck. The Grim Reaper stayed slightly bowed, allowing her to lock the jewel in place. “I cannot give you Sebastian. And I will need him for the next century as I’m little more than a child. What I’m offering is a friendship, an alliance of sorts. Tit for tat.” Mouser stepped back, extending her gloved hand. “Have we got a deal?”

Grell huffed for a moment then grinned, extending her hand, clasping Mouser’s before pulling her into a hug. The thief’s jaw clenched, twitching for a moment.

“Evee dear…” Grell started, rocking her back and forth, rubbing cheeks. “Of course. It will be the proof a Demon and Grim Reaper can work together and that Sebastian’s love can be mine.”

“Oh my. Sir… I would advise you to let my Evee go. She has this oddly intense dislike for being touched by anything vaguely resembling a male. Also I do not know if you notice that there is a pistol pointed at your stomach.” Charlotte’s voice said calmly from the entrance of the alley, wearing a simply bronze day-dress with a high collar made of transparent fabric, a sweetheart neckline and long, fitted sleeves, looking fashionable, elegant and calm.

“Charlotte… am I late?” Mouser smiled, slipping the gun back into the under-arm holster, parting from Grell. Frankly it felt no different than being hugged by Charlotte despite the factual male body but female-ish mind. The pistol had just been an instinctive reaction and safeguard.

“A bit but I understand. One grows used to the attempted murders.” She examined the scene, deciding if her interference was needed or not. “Introduce me to your friend.”

“This is Grell Sutcliff. Madam Red’s former butler.” Charlotte seemed barely phased. Mouser smiled. “Now that is done you must excuse me Grell as I have… to endure whatever Charlotte wants to do with me.”

Charlotte grinned suddenly, fluffing the loose curls that bounced under the wide-brimmed hat.

Mouser’s blood ran cold.

“I see you neglected dressing like a woman once again although I must admit that this feminine appearance is a great improvement. Would you like to come shopping with us Grell Sutcliff? Maybe combining our wits we can force her into a dress.” Charlotte walked forward looping one arm around Mouser’s right, under the cape.

“Maybe a deep crimson one would suit Evee best.” Grell took the left, doing the same, smiling for Mouser’s friend nicely, appreciating the style, the jewellery and the invitation.

“You have excellent taste dear.” Charlotte praised as both dragged Mouser towards the stores.

“Frankly I’d rather be killed if one of you wouldn’t mind…” The thief complained meekly.
“I thought you were going to West’s house.” Sebastian didn’t look up from the research as he heard Mouser’s steps accompanied by an odd soft rustle. He checked the time. Nearing dinner preparation hour…

“I’ll be needing a bit of help first.” Mouser said, stopping, clearly fidgeting.

“Mouser? Damn girl… you’re a beauty.” Bard entered the kitchen, carrying a bag of potatoes, stopping, smiling at her. A pained sound came from the thief. “Like a doll.” The cook continued, nudging Sebastian companionably.

Sebastian finally looked, confused.

She was wearing a dark red dress looking very vexed and pale. The deep colour was accentuated by black lace on the edges of the trumpet sleeves and layered skirt and the border of the square neckline and stand-up collar. Black velvet buttons decorated the front. It had no train as it was a day dress. A sur la tête pillbox black hat accentuated by marquise cut a garnet was delicately placed and tilted on her head. A pair of colourful boxes, for the dress and for the hat were placed next to her, containing what she had been wearing before, the man that had accompanied her leaving on an elegant black carriage.

They forced her in a dress. At least they allowed her to keep her own underwear but the corset was imposed and tightened and the layers of fabric came next. Grell took a very sadistic delight in cracking two ribs or more to put it on as she was manning the lacing up. On complaint Charlotte just said she was being blinkered and to shut up and let the fashionables do their job. Mouser had said something along the lines of death, evil, threats and drowning.

Charlotte had been considerate enough not to burden her with a tail or jewellery.

The seamstresses had buzzed with excitement, fawning over Charlotte’s generosity and demand that the dress be ready that same afternoon, in fact that they walked out with her in it. Then the hairdressers with evil curlers and haberdasher… they allowed her to choose the hat. Actually Mouser rather liked the hat.

“I will steal everything you have in our next game. I will force you to walk around on the nude for this…” She threatened. The cook just chuckled, leaving when Mouser picked up the bottle of rum from the cupboard, taking a swig, cussing for a moment. The demon watched with slight amusement at the lady-like appearance and the street gestures. “Now Sebastian please get me out of this corset. I’m not used to not breathing and we need the info…” The thief pleaded softly, placing a hand on the unwieldy structure under the silk.
"Amazing… these are all the spices you would see in my country." Soma stated in surprise and awe as Lau’s men delivered labelled bags of scented herbs, spices, ingredients. The backyard smelt like the docks without any of the unpleasant tangs of the still water, rotting fish, dirty bodies, tar and smoke.

"It all smells wonderful." Sebastian stated after opening one of the bags, gloved hands sifting through small dark orbs of pepper. "These are premium spices." Anyone with experience in the kitchen could tell. For Mouser it made no difference. They were just nice scents and tastes that could be sold by a very nice profit in the black market. One would be surprised on how much some were willing to pay for a handful of nutmeg.

"To prepare them all in one day. The Earl sure has a rough way to use people. I’m not even an expert in spices." Lau chuckled, surveying the delivery, watching the boyo carefully. He was smirking slightly, satisfied.

"You are only useful in times like these." Satisfied enough to say something that could be considered as a borderline nicety.

"Meh it’s never a bad time to do the earl a favour." Lau shrugged, displaying the cunning of a street-dweller. Mouser smirked, making a note on the list as Sebastian, Finny and Bard carried the bags inside, keeping the inventory straight and neat. From the recipes they had a list of the most commonly used spices. If any of those were missing they would have to be procured some other way.

"Then I’ll begin cooking some curry right away." Sebastian turned to the guest, pausing a bit on the procession of spices. "Prince Soma. Only you know Agni’s godly curry. Could you please give me some advice regarding the taste of it?"

"I don’t mind." Soma straightened, clapping his hands, clearing the scented dust of the dry spices away, looking around, slightly concerned, eyeing the amount of exotic things placed about. "But does a British person like you know how to use all these spices?" His nightly encounter kicked in suddenly, making the prince take refuge behind Ciel, shivering, trying to clear the air. That kind of back-pedalling when talking to Sebastian was rather amusing. "It’s just something one should fool around with… I just thought it could be hard since you aren’t used…"

"I understand your concern." It was a valid point that was easy for the demon to concede without harming his pride. "Give me a little time and I’ll what I can do. Please just wait for me to finish."

"Is it really alright?" Soma asked in a hushed tone as the spice carrying resumed.

"Who knows." The boyo shrugged, yawning, walking towards the house. "Let’s take a nap." He proposed.

"Homework." Mouser called, grinning. The boyo stopped for a moment, glaring. She made another mark on the list. "You know who has a crop?" She sing-sang softly, looking at the page as if the issues were unrelated.

Mouser helped the Sebastian place a sample of each spice on a small plate, the scents filling the
kitchen, rather overpowering in a way, more so than when they had been outside, growing even sharper as they ground some to a fine or coarse dust, the long table looking bright and colourful. Bard and Finny stored each burlap sack in the pantry after the spice had been taken and displayed. Meyrin was still completing the morning routine, most likely attending to the cleaning of the rooms. Tanaka watched, looking curious about the preparations.

Tanaka, Bard and Finny were then given a supplies’ list and sent to the market.

Fresh provisions for other recipes Sebastian said.

A way to get them out of the house for the time it took to cook something, more likely.

He snapped his work gloves in place, examining the table, tasting each of the spices speedily.

No other ingredient was out yet so no other scents or tastes interfered.

“That’s fairly revolting.” Mouser commented, sitting back on a bench, sticking her tongue out, feeling as if powder had been stuck to the back of her throat, picking up the book. It was a few minutes before Sebastian was done, looking thoughtfully at the plates. The demon had two days of delay in any attempts. Recipes only got one so far especially when the flavours and scents of some of the ingredients were an unknown.

“Start dicing the onions.” Sebastian asked, taking the pots, pans and tools out, preparing a veritable assembly line, placing the spices in groups.

“What’s the plan?” Mouser asked, preparing the knives, dragging the basket out of the pantry.

“I’ll start by replicate Agni’s curry from that morning. Then if none is suitable I’ll need you to point the scents that you remember from West’s house so we can try something different.”

Soma was staring in shock at the curries displayed on the table as Sebastian explained the logic behind such a massive variety. The prince’s reaction marked just how inhuman were the speed and quantity produced. The servants just reacted with enthusiasm, having been asked to be a part of the tasting. In any event Sebastian knew exactly which words to use to encourage Soma into tasting every single recipe and give an accurate comment.

Mouser juts took an occasional bite of each, reading, relegated to a corner of the spice-scented kitchen, her senses seriously affected by the amount of onions she had to chop previously. She sniffled for the murdered pearly orbs and flipped the page, moving on with the soiled dove’s descent into despair.

It didn’t take long for everyone to be defeated by full stomachs, groaning in culinary agony.

Sebastian was having entirely too much fun force feeding people, smiling brightly while carrying the next variation of the recipe.

“Now the next curry is ready. Cardamom and garlic.” he placed the next plate next to Soma’s head. The prince was resting after the last plate, breathing slowly, completely flat on the table, arms limp over the edge. But something made him perk up, sniffing the air, the soft wisps of smoke coming from the plate, carrying the scent of that curry.

“This curry!” His voice came out different too, no longer choked in too much samples. “Is different
from before.” He mumbled while carefully picking a piece, his eyes loosing focus for an instant.

Mouser peeked. The others had similar expressions of bliss in their faces, but not one was as sharp as the prince’s.

“Prince Soma?” Sebastian asked, snapping the man away from the reverie.

“This curry is very similar to Agni’s curry.” The prince finally pronounced, after a couple of head shakes, clearing his mind, a slight crease of focus appearing between his eyebrows as he carefully considered what he had just tasted, trying to keep up with the description he had provided so far.

“You did it Sebastian.” Bard praised, having cleaned up his plate.

“As expected from our butler.” But no one could match the appetite of a growing boy like Finny.

Tanaka was nodding, having done pretty much the same as Mouser. A couple of bites out of each variety was enough after all.

“You made such a complicated combination.” Meyrin praised, twisting her apron.

“But it’s still different.” Soma finally spoke, looking a bit crestfallen. “The smell, flavour and spices is indeed similar but something is not right…”

“Something?” Sebastian sighed. Even a demon couldn’t take that much amount of failure in a row although they were only failures in comparison to something so wondrous that was called the curry of God.

“I don’t know how I can explain… even if you ask me…” Soma took a deep breath, absorbed into his musings. “Well… the best I can say is that Agni’s curry has a deeper taste…” Something akin to awareness flickered in his eyes. “That’s it. Substance. There isn’t enough substance.” He announced, proud that he had figured out his own riddle.

“Substance?” Sebastian stopped after whispering the word, tasting it, thoughtful, glancing at Mouser. She shrugged, returning to her book. Human she might have been but she also belonged to the lower tiers. Delicious, delightful, substantial, fulfilling and pleasant were very far from her mind as a child. Gruel had to be endured and gulped as fast as possible, not appreciated. Boiled vegetables without flavour... well until she had found Jack she though they had no flavour and just floated about in some brownish soupy broth like oddly shaped grey lumps. And you either ate them or were beaten for being ungrateful. Then went to bed hungry.

“How’s it going?” The boyo’s smug voice rose from the kitchen’s door, Lau peering in over his shoulder, walking into the warm place, tasting a bit of the curry that had been considered almost good enough.

“Young Master” Sebastian acknowledged his presence calmly. “You shouldn’t come down here right now…” As a butler he should be dutifully horrified that the master of the house had descended to the servant’s area.

“Three days until the contest.” He challenged with a smirk, amused by something that was running through that twisted little head. Mouser smiled slightly. Still a boyo despite all. “It looks like you’re working very hard. Oh by the way… for today’s desert I’ll have gâteau chocolat.” He demanded before leaving haughtily.

“As you wish.” Sebastian acquiesced.
“I’ll get the things…” Mouser said softly, abandoning the book, gathering utensils and ingredients, opening a work area as Sebastian continued to focus on the curries, displaying them as he liked it, measuring the ingredients according to the recipe she found in the drawers. Sebastian took over soon, telling her to keep an eye on the bubbling pots.

“I am totally stuffed…” Bard groaned, rolling out of the chair, stretching. The cake mixing was giving them a small breather away from the spicy food. “I should do some exercise…” He mused.

“Let’s go to the garden prince.” Finny said excitedly, grabbing Soma’s hand, dragging him towards the door was the prince waddled.

“I’ll finish my washing.” Meyrin stated, adjusting her glasses and headpiece, covering her mouth for a moment.

“Everyone… the next curry is finally ready to serve.” Sebastian announced cheerily, nodding at Mouser to take the one with the golden-red colour away from the heat.

There was a brief moment of panic amongst the tasting group. *I can’t take it anymore* seemed to be the verdict coming out of their lips.

“Be ready in ten minutes.” Sebastian said with a threatening smile. How could anyone look so ominous while wearing an apron, holding a bowl of chocolaty goodness, a whisk and a smile was anyone’s guess. He managed to do it.

“What exactly is there not enough of…” Sebastian murmured in the quiet kitchen. Mouser dried the plates quietly as he walked around, gathering what was dirty, dumping it into the sink, organizing the table and counters. “From all of these experiments I figured out how to make the right colours, spiciness and smells by combining various spices.” He cut a bit of the cake that was leftover, placing it next to Mouser who happily stopped her work, grabbing the fork and plate. “I also figured out how to use the softness and sweetness of fruits, sourness of the yogurt and mildness of dairy products.” He had tried all the recipes he had gathered, all the hints his senses provided, used all the memories Mouser could recall of Agni’s cooking in West’s house. “Even so the depth that the curry of God has is a completely different thing…” He stopped, wiping his gloved hands, taking the gloves away, revealing the skin, the nails, the contract seal. Mouser’s eyes followed him when not closed in bliss. “This is not a good place to finish… unready…”

In silence he washed the dishes, the methodical activity leaving his head free. Soma and the servants would be useless for a while, stuffed to the limit of what was humanly possible. Except Finny but the gardener was not a very picky eater and did not know Agni’s curry as deeply as the prince. The thief made small purring sound and moans from time to time along with the sound of the metal fork and ceramic platter.

“What is it with you and chocolate?” Sebastian asked amused for the briefest moment.

“It can be so bitter and dark… and yet it satisfies my sweet-tooth and feels so good when it’s coating my tongue… then you feel its sweetness… almost as good as when we… ah.” She made a fake playful shiver shake her shoulders, continuing her consumption gâteau. “Also I never got any treats before this job so back off or I’ll bite you.” Mouser smiled and joined him in washing silently, companionably, bumping his hip playfully to make room.

The Young Master was, of course being difficult. They both had heard his win-win scenario.
Mouser had just shrugged saying he was a child after all and asking what did the conditions of his contract say about a lie that was not a lie till it became a lie.

“The problem is the substance…” That was where all the recipes seemed to be failing, a hurdle that came again and again, after each tasting. “Something that does not destroy the complicated combinations of various spices and yet leads to a high level of fresh flavour… such an ingredient…” He looked down at the bowls. Then at Mouser whose tongue was touching her lip, absent-mindedly, catching some flakes of the chocolate cake.

Sebastian caressed her cheek softly, taking her attention away from the task, leaning down, pressing her lips against his, cupping the back of her head, keeping her tilted while languidly tasting her, tongues twining wetly, and the idea that had slipped into his mind, her hands gripping his shoulders for balance. Bitter darkness and a sweet aftertaste. It could work.

“What did you say? You made the curry of God? You found a way to bring out substance in a night?” Soma was in shock after Sebastian announced the progress, bringing the proof into the dining room. The boyo seemed slightly broody about it. Ambivalent most likely.

“Indeed. I am just a hell of a butler.” Sebastian smirked slightly, platting his masterpiece. “Please have a taste.” Soma’s expression changed to pure bliss after he tasted the first piece of the chicken, eyes gazing, seeing something far away. “Does it please you?” Sebastian asked when the Prince glanced at him with a small, watery-eyed smile.

“This is not Agni’s curry.” Soma said softly, his words calm. “This is a curry that contains complicated flavours and spices like Indian curries but it also has a depth and fresh taste only a British could make.” The prince made a slight pause before clearing his throat, sighing. “This curry is worthy of competing with the curry of God.” He pronounced it regally before easing into a softer mood once more. “It’s delicious butler. But how did you do it in one night?” The oddity of the achievement was bothering his mind once again.

“This is the answer.” Sebastian said simply, slipping out a bar or Funtom chocolate.

“Chocolate?” The three men in the room looked confused, shocked, looking at their plates.

“Cacao in chocolate was originally used as a spice which provided a special sweet flavour. The chocolate has milk butter and sugar added to it, blended perfectly which added the deep substance the curry needed.” Sebastian began, explaining his reasoning carefully. “Also the Phantomhive Company has the best chocolate made with a large dose of pure cocoa. To make our curry there isn’t a more suitable ingredient.” Publicity stunt at its best. “I noticed when I was cleaning the cake the young master requested yesterday. So I am thankful for your help Young Master.” The demon bowed slightly, mockingly. Master and demon knew it.

“Amazing Ciel… your butler made the curry of god in just one week…” Soma’s eyes shone brightly with admiration.

“Yes but you can’t beat him just with this. To replicate is different from winning.” The boyo interrupted the praising session with his usual dour plotting. “You are on par. Isn’t that right Sebastian?”

“Indeed. As things are now.” The demon admitted easily without losing his smile.

“That face tells me you have a plan Mr. Butler.” Lau, the wearer of a similar expression on
occasion caught on easily, pointing it out much to the boyo’s irritation, resting his face on intertwined hands.

“Yes.” Sebastian admitted once more without preamble, more as a challenge to the Young Master than a confession.

“It’s no lie?” The boyo demanded, inquiring further, suspicious.

“Of course not. I do not tell lies.” Sebastian said offhandedly, straightening. “On my name as a butler of the Phantomhive family our company will definitely be the one to take home the Royal Warrant.”

The Exhibition was an elegant event for those who went with an invitation so Mouser was ordered to put a more proper appearance as there were business partners and possible future allies walking around the Crystal Palace. She was not happy about it but the dress Sebastian provided was much more practical than the red behemoth Charlotte and Grell had forced her into.

It was a three piece composition and only one of its parts needed help to be placed on her body. After the underwear, petticoat and boots were in place Mouser braced herself as Sebastian slid the black corset embroidered with a delicate and discreet pattern into place and pulled the lacing until it moulded her form, cut off most of her air supply and re-cracked the ribs Grell had mangled almost a week ago. Most of it would disappear under the skirt’s high waist that was buttoned on the front, the grey fabric draping deftly around her hips, sliding down to her ankles gracefully, black lace fluttering delicately around her boots, trimming the edge. The last piece was a bolero with wide sleeves and high neckline that left a window of skin and cleavage exposed, trimmed in simple black lace that matched the skirt’s.

“Pin you hair back and wear the hat.” Sebastian said after adjusting the minute details of the outfit. Mouser just nodded, focused on breathing, slow and careful, the steel boning completely unyielding, almost as bad as the other dress, while the demon left to attend to the dressing of the boyo and the last minute preparations.

Guns were out of the question, too bulky to conceal anywhere but under the skirt and once there the only way to reach them would be to either drop the fabric or just pull it up. Also if she wanted the guns they should have been worn before putting on the girly section of the outfit. A couple of derringers fit nicely right under her bust but that was about it on the ranged section. The daggers around her forearms would be easily concealed by the sleeves. She just had to watch how high she moved her arms because, unlike the shirt, there were no cuffs to prevent the fabric from slipping away from its place. She snapped the gloves in place before strapping the belts, flexing her fingers, disliking the loss of flexibility. Then the black and silver folding knife was placed between her breasts, the thief jumping a bit, muttering against the cold before addressing her hair, going through the familiar motions, perching then the hat, the red attracting the attention amongst the black and grey. Instead of a reticule she had a hardcover notepad and her fountain pen that, like a fancy-lady’s fan had a bracelet to keep it dangling from her wrist.

Mouser walked out of the room, complaining in short growls, walking into the hall. Everyone seemed to be in high spirits and in their fanciest clothes. Soma had added even more jewels to his already exotic outfit and the boyo was in a sharply cut tweed suit. Sebastian looked like he always looked. She, the prince and the Young Master got in the official carriage, the demon driving. The servants went on the secondary one with the cooking utensils. The ingredients should have been already delivered to the contest location.
“I am so going to demand a bonus for this…” Mouser mumbled, forced to sit very upright in the carriage, hands on her lap, fingers twitching irritably. Although the skirt only demanded a very light and thin petticoat it was still an annoyance.

“It can’t be helped.” The boyo said without any particular intonation.

“Fine. Next time you wear the corset.” A vague, uncomfortable look crossed Ciel’s face before he looked away from the fidgeting thief. “What’s with people and cracking my ribs… maybe I should just gut myself, reach inside and get them out of the way.” And at the end of that she was gasping for air, annoyed.

“You look rather nice.” Ciel experimented with flattery. He would be using some of that throughout that day when dealing with customers, judges and the polite world in general so maybe some practice was in order.

“And you look like your aunt in hunting gear.” Mouser was not going to be deceived. But then she smiled as the boyo shook his head. “It could be worse though.”

Soma was staring at her thoughtfully. Mouser and Ciel seemed to share some kind of odd kindred. Strange as it was because they barely had anything in common that he could see. She was a strange woman. Her behaviour was fluid, sometimes formal and cold, sometimes acting like a big sister or a playmate. He’d seen her hide Ciel a couple of times when he felt no will to work or didn’t want to play with him. He’d seen her being vindictive, smiling while dumping armloads of paperwork for him to do. But that was not as strange as her relationship with the butler. That Soma could not pinpoint beyond the fact that they seemed to work in harmony.

Finn was immediately distracted by the colours, sounds and strange creatures on display leaving Soma to have a long moment in the spotlight as he explained what the animals meant for Indians, where his country was, what was like being a prince. The trio was entranced, gleefully ignoring Sebastian’s advice to not wander away.

“Ah, Earl.” Lau met them, walking calmly around the crowd, RanMao moving next to him, looking around without any sort of reaction, standing out as usual, dragging looks from prudish women and lustful men. “It’s time for the big showdown right?” The Chinese asked politely, leaning in conspiratorially.

“You brought your girl to a place with clients?” The boyo asked in slight irritation, surveying the Chinese doll, a light blush dusting his cheeks.

“But RanMao is like my cute little sister.” Lau whined playfully, hugging her around the waist, poking her round cheeks. “I though I could treat her to some curry.”

“I see.” The boyo said simply, giving up on the chastisement, moving on.

“So the Prince’s butler is really serious?” Lau continued, shifting his focus to the more business like matters.

“He betrayed the master he regards as a god. Of course he’s serious. It’s safe to assume that this is all for the prince.” Ciel stopped and looked around. His servants were looking in awe at a snake charmer while Soma explained the trick, looking a bit more at ease. “He was probably told that the girl will be returned to them once the plan is complete.” The boyo finished his reasoning, cane tapping on the tiles for a moment. Mouser stopped, adjusting her skirt with a slight kick, taking a
deep breath, feeling a bit of give in the corset now. All the movement and travelling had finally warmed and softened the fabric, possibly loosening the lacing.

“If so it sounds like a lie to me.” Lau mentioned thoughtfully.

“Well, should his plan succeed, letting Agni go after the Royal Warrant would possibly mean the leaking of his deeds. So if I was West…” the boyo continued, nodding politely to some passer-by that was important enough to earn his attention.

“You would have him killed?” Lau piped in merrily.

“You really think it would be worth killing someone over?” Ciel snorted, annoyed by the assumption.

“I’d do it if it was me.” Lau shrugged, glancing at RanMao, calling her closer for a hug.

“Why bother rewarding a useless loose thread?” Mouser completed the though, tapping the fountain pen against the cover. “Just snip it free.” That was the risk of reward upon completion. More often than not all that was given to you was a bullet in the head.

“I’m more interested in your strategy for today butler.” Lau shifted again, turning to Sebastian. For all the curry he had tasted and experiments he had witnessed… no one in the household had seen his secret to win. Mouser had to admit her curiosity was also peaked.

“That is…” Sebastian began in a playful tone, smiling lightly before stopping, glancing over his shoulder, turning stiff and formal once again.

“Oh my… if it isn’t Earl Phantomhive.” West was walking towards them, cane and hat in hand, smiling openly, perfectly styled and dressed, the appearance dazzling through effort and money.

“Lord West” The boyo acknowledged listlessly.

“Long time no see. It has been almost a year since the last social event if I recall correctly. It is an honour to meet you again.” He laughed loudly, chattering non-stop, clearly liking to be the centre of attention and the one who received all of it. “You never change, always wearing a well tailored coat. So what brand does someone of the Earl status wear?”

“My butler picks out all of my clothes. I care nothing about things as brands.”

“You never change.” He laughed again, dismissing the cold shoulder with ease, looking at Mouser for an instant. “Hired a lady secretary? They are becoming quite popular in our circles. Sullivan’s Secretarial School right, Miss?” Mouser just blinked and curtsied slightly. It was the fashionable place to get one, after all and someone obsessed with names and brands would think that. Lord West moved on, having arrived at the topic he wanted to pry in. “Come to think of it… isn’t your group competing in this contest?”

“Yes. I am considering expanding my business into the food industry.” Pleasant colloquial conversation, no true substance.

“I was rather surprised to learn that you would enter. Did you go on the hunt for a talented chef?” Still prying. When it went unanswered he changed once more, this time to self-praise. “My company can not loose. We have hired a curry specialist.” Bragging words.

“Is that so…” And they were starting to grate on the boyo’s nerves. Good to know.
“Between you and I…” West leaned carefully, looking around with a theatrically spooked expression “some spies broke into my home. They tried to disguise it as a burglary, taking a few baubles from my wife… It was terrible. One of my Galle Lamps was broken along with the chess set I bout at General Trading. It scares me even to think about it.” He shuddered then recovered with a sharp cough against a gloved fist. “Luckily the secrets of the curry were kept safe. I get shivers knowing the criminal might even be here.” A pair of smiling demons was chuckling to the side, looking innocent and succeeding at it. Ciel chuckled too, acting as if the last part was indeed the joke the lord had meant it to be. “Enough about that. I heard the Queen might be attending.” His tone had shifted to a greedy drawl, hands rubbing together in glee.

“And?”

“Well… Since Albert’s passing the Queen does not make public appearances often. I’d like her to taste the curry we are so proud of in front of an audience before I receive the Royal Warrant.” He chuckled once more, finally noticing he was getting very little from the conversation. So it was time to walk away and try to schmooze other higher placed noblemen. “Oh… this chat has gone on for so long… I will see you in a moment Earl.” He was polite in his retreat, leaving behind the heavy scent of cologne.

“Before you receive the Warrant?” the boyo said quietly with disdain.

“Cocky little prick ain’t he?” Mouser supplied, opening the notebook, scribbling a few notes.

“I can’t wait to see his face when he realizes he has lost.” The boyo smirked slightly, anticipating another win.

“Yes, my Lord.” Sebastian acknowledged the request with a bit more formality, looking around then. “Then I will head to the competitor’s room and wait.”

Sebastian disappeared amongst the crowd quickly enough.

Lau and RanMao looked around, examining every place.

The servants and Soma had wandered away, fascinated by the different culture, guided by the native.

“Do you want me around boyo?” Mouser asked softly.

“Go. See if you can find something else to give us an edge.” The boyo tapped the cane and walked away.

“Aye, aye.” Mouser whispered looking around before walking the other way, approaching at every display, curious.

It was an elegant thing, carefully prepared. People walked about and talked, well dressed children played about. Fashionably impure, the mistresses, paraded the jewels and made their patron sweat while walking with their families. Well dressed children ran or played, hiding in corners, their voices heard over the other sounds. Exotic animals shuffled and made their presence known, vendors peddled their wares, trying to grab attentions. It was a market just much more elegant.

Such a different world. The thieves there were all crafty businessmen and bored nobles. Some of them were deeply into debt and kept digging themselves deeper just to show the world the appearance expected of a title. Mouser smirked slightly when they acknowledged her with tilt of the hat and pleasant smiles. She was a thread that lead to the Phantomhive’s after all.
It would be few hours before the contest started and Mouser was expected to be near the boyo by then. He shouldn’t be able to get in trouble in that place but if he did his soul was the easiest to find.

The glitter of gold, silver and bright stones caught her attention and she started to walk towards a jewellery display, curious about the style and value before stilling, the scent of brunt feathers and talcum covering decay reached her. It was too fast for her reflexes, the tug brusque and a long sharp blade of a rapier was pressed against her neck, against her skin, one of the man’s arms locking her into place, around her waist. Too strong to be human, the scent around... a different instinct welled up, the need to kill growing sharper by the moment. Her free hand, the arm he had failed to grasp, dug into the wrist that kept the blade steady, nails sharpening through the glove’s fabric, staining the lavender cuff as red as her eyes.
“Filth.” The man was whispering in an angry saddened tone, close, a warm breath against her ear, the cold blade biting into her skin. Mouser was not struggling, just digging her claws deeper into his wrist, lacerating the flesh to the bone, eyes darting around, looking for a way out. As busy as the Palace was there were still shadowy spots where few looked... that nook was one of them. “You were pure yet you allowed a demon to take you.” Not human she reasoned once again, not struggling, breathing slowly. A human would already have lost all semblance of grip because of the mauled flesh and nerves, not to mention blood loss. First of all she needed to break away, have a clear look of the assailant and no blade immediately threatening her life.

Mouser went limp, with a sudden sharpness, unbalancing him, dead weight, the fabric of the dress bunching while she slumped, making the man struggle, trying to take a firmer hold of her. Usually ladies went stiff before swooning. She used the lack of tension to break free, letting go of the bloodied wrist, slapping it, and by default the rapier, away, crouching, freed, pulling the skirt a bit to kick at the shins, hopping back, praying her heel didn’t get caught on the skirt’s trim as she stood.

A white haired man with purple eyes wearing a white suit, the colour slightly darkened, more greyish than white, like sooth stained snow, smelling of burnt feathers and decay. She showed her fangs, instinctively, a blinding hatred that was not hers coursing through her, having fished out the black knife from her cleavage the blade opened. It had been the easiest weapon to reach. He seemed surprised and then angered. A zealot’s fire burned in his eyes. She had seen their ilk in several shapes and walks of life. The one he most closely resembled was a priest, a few years back who went to brothels and claimed all was sin while abusing the women there. She had heard that he had burned down the house after locking chits and patrons inside, claiming that was the only way to purify their stained bodies and black souls. It had been in Irish territory and the boyo’s predecessor and the trigger happy O’Donnell hadn’t taken it lightly. The fire had almost killed two children of a noble house that enjoyed the Queen’s favour.

“Corrupted child.” The man said, staring her down, whipping the blade to the right.

Mouser huffed, changing knife hands, reaching the bloodied and torn glove to her lips, gripping the fabric with a fang, pulling it off. The blood had the same repellent scent, overripe, rotten... And having been called much worse and with a lot more creative spins to the assessments over the course of her life Mouser was actually more interested on a few facts of that little attempt to take any kind of offense.

So let’s see how far we can rile him with my perceived filthiness she thought.

He was not a Grim Reaper nor a Demon.

And if those existed...

“I was born of a whore and an adulterous man.” The glove fell to the floor. Purple eyes followed, the blade pointed towards her unwavering. She repeated the process with the other. Her claws hadn’t receded yet, easily double in size and as sharp as her blades. She felt suddenly hungry with all the souls flaring around and homicidal just because that man was standing there. While creating an attitude of nonchalance she was still keeping the small blade trained on the twitchy man. He was hesitating? Maybe the crowd a few feet away was giving him pause. She knew he was strong... so why hadn’t she been dispatched already? “I am a thief, a murderer and a liar by choice and profession. When was I ever pure?”
The man moved fast, aiming for her chest. Mouser defended, deflected, stepping back, twirling, noticing his back was now towards the crowd, gripping the skirt with her free hand, yanking it up to step around. The black knife was keeping the rapier at bay, locked near the handle in a tense standstill at neck height. Her left hand had been quick enough after letting go of the fabric, holding one of the daggers, pressing it against his crotch.

Next time instead of the ridiculous petticoat she would use weapons to stuff that idiotic pouf on the skirt and be utterly uncaring about dropping the damnable piece of fabric.

“I could purify you, all this world...” He was saying in a soft voice, covering his insanity with a pleasant demeanour, trying to show her that was right... It was a familiar tone in such a different voice... grateful girls are thankful and do as they are told. Mouser’s eyes narrowed, his soul flickering, different. It was... bitter, oily, putrid, reeking of a corruption that she had no name for.

“Once your master is dead and his demon chained... get rid of the unclean, unwanted, barren.”

Mouser eye widened in clear recognition, pressing the dagger harder. That gave him pause. Not a memory of a past. That was recent, that was a tower of dead girls and a dark place of twisted logic and a master that cared nothing for those who served him, discarding loyalty with ease and scorn.

“Get rid of you.” She snarled with hatred, mirroring her words.

The clicking gears of a gun being cocked gave her a bit of pause, her grip on the knife trembling.

Interlopers could get hurt...

The man glance back, his expression murderous.

But he eased away, sheathing the sword, regaining a more controlled look, straightening.

“We do not want to make a scene do we?” Charlotte said sweetly, smiling while her ivory and gold embellished gun was pressed against the back of his head even as he moved through those gestures. She was wearing a dress made of purple velvet and silk, the hat tilted on her head without a care, hair curled. And behind the perfectly sweet doll appearance was the ruthlessness she had learned. While Mouser had always been the one at ease with blood and taking a life, doing the knife work as some said in the streets, Charlotte preferred the indirect way, a bit too squeamish in those early days.

“Unclean whore…” The man spat out, disappearing quickly into the crowd. Either he did not want to create a scene or deemed them not worthy of his time, neither to talk nor to kill. Or had another goal in mind that forced him to avoid an execution he was so clearly craving.

Charlotte slipped the gun into her reticule, looking smug. Mouser smiled slightly, noticing that the farther away he got the quicker her demonic traits returned to their camouflaged state.

“You’re loving the fact that you are paying back all the times I did that for you on the streets.” All the rescues from thieves, rapists, kidnappers, men that wanted revenge for some of Mrs. Packard’s petty schemes...

“Quite.” Charlotte preened and snapped her fingers, her manservant walking into view, picking up Mouser’s gloves and notepad, returning it to her, bowing with a pleasant smile on his square jawed face. “Come. We’ll go to the powder room to talk in peace.” Mouser hid her weapons once more, concealing the carefully, following Charlotte who was giving orders. “Thomas... Warn the boys. I want information about that man and I want it before sundown.” The guard left, taking the bloodied and torn gloves with him. They walked out of the nook into the sunny display areas of the
“What do you want?” Mouser asked in amusement, dragging her words, smiling with narrowed eyes.

“I saw the necklace you gave to Grell. I want emeralds for that info.” Charlotte adjusted her sleeves elegantly, pouting playfully. She greeted some of the passerby’s, glared at others. Men who were involved with her or had been in the past shivered and veered away. Some politely tipped their hats. Women who knew glared back. Those who did not envied her clothes.

“We’re magpies.” Mouser said in regards of the sparkle obsession, chuckling. Charlotte laughed, stopping, waiting for the manservant in a formal suit to open the door, gesturing Mouser to walk in first.

The powder room was for the ladies to relax, gossip and fix their outfits. It was a light pink and decorated with flowers and overwrought mirrors. Maids walked about, ready to help if it was required. Ladies paraded their colourful dresses. Some scolded their children. Gossiping stopped when Charlotte walked in, replaced by either awe or revulsion, restarting when she sat down on one of the armchairs. Mouser occupied the one in front of her with a sigh of relief. The corset had loosened somewhat, letting her breathe a bit more easily.

“Who was he?” Charlotte cut to the chase, assuming a more business-like stance. A maid served tea, a floral blend with oolong, its scent soft and feminine. The china cups were simple, resembling a lily. They took their cups and saucers and waited till she was away.

“I do not know exactly.” Mouser opened the notepad after placing the cup on the low table, scribbling. “But from what he said I’m sure he was the one behind that kidnapping case I told you about.”

“The dolls?” Mouser nodded. “And he had the gall to call us filth.” Charlotte’s hand fisted, glaring. Anything with little girls hit a smidge too close to their scars. But moving on…

“We’re about as clean as a chimney sweeper after a factory run.” Mouser noted.

“True.” Charlotte chuckled, discarding the past just as easily. “There is something else, isn’t there?”

“I’m seeing way too many people that look similar and have white hair and purple eyes… and are linked to Phantomhive cases… Can you in your search see if he had any link to a place called Houndsworth?”

“Why?” Charlotte sipped the tea. “There is your little chit.” She pointed out as a bejewelled Indian woman walked by haughtily, self assured in her fashionable clothes and clearly valuable ornaments, knowing her exotic appearance would make the others talk.

“Not really my issue for the moment.” Mouser sighed, following with her eyes, casually, as if only checking the other female’s fashion choices. “For now I’ll say twin.” Mouser frowned, returning to the more pressing issue. “I’m finding it odd that he went after me when he had previously shown interest in killing the boyo…” And then he finished nothing even though his strength was clearly greater.

“Why is that?” Her friend supplied conversationally.

“If the Houndsworth connection appears I will say it was because he ruined a cunt’s plans. And later because he obliterated the dollhouse.” Mouser shook her head, intertwining fingers. “And the
boyo’s vulnerable today. Sebastian is with the chefs, I’m here, the servants are with Soma and he didn’t even bring a gun… I suppose that being with Lau and RanMao might keep some away.”

“We know RanMao.”

“That we do.”

Mouser joined her group in the area that had been prepared as a stage and kitchen when the blonde announcer was starting the formalities. The owners of the participants were gathered, most of them beaming with anticipation and pride for persevering even through the devastating attacks that had been perpetrated against their coffeehouses. From the list she remembered it there were quite a few dropouts. The thief stood next to the boyo adjusting her skirts with a light flick of the wrist, picking up the notepad and fountain pen, opening the page where she had been placing random thoughts, sighing, making sure no sign of the quick scuffle was showing. Apart from the missing gloves everything seemed to be unstained and in place.

“You’re late.” The boyo complained, cane tapping with impatience as she scanned the crowd, looking for the white haired menace amongst the ladies exotic hats and the tall top hats around them.

“And I am sorry.” Mouser answered with a small, quiet smile, looking at him. “But you do have a notion of how hard it is to walk in this thing?” She swivelled her hips for emphasis before looking towards the stage where the theatrics moved on. It was the same joyous man that had overseen the Ice Sculpture Contest in the Frost Fayre.

“Now today’s judges are... a Palace Chef who will know no compromises in taste, Chef Higharm, a Tax Collector currently serving in India Mr. Carter and Viscount Druitt who has a great love for arts and food.” The female portion of the crowd exploded in giggles, whispers and fanned harder. Mouser stiffened, raising the pad to chest level, covering her exposed cleavage. Ciel shivered, uncomfortable. “And these are today’s contestants. Persian Tabb Company’s Chef Tarpin, Dormitory Vill Company’s Chef Lach, Dahlia Company’s Chef Rickman, Lippcilin’s Chef Wollest, Harold West Company’s Chef Agni and the butler Sebastian form the Funtom Company.” He stopped, pausing for a moment, looking back, in doubt and maybe a bit of awareness. “Butler?”

“Yes. I am no chef. I am one hell of a butler.” Sebastian answered smiling pleasantly with a light bow.

The announcer just smiled, covering the break in the rhythm and continued, turning to the crowd.

“With this group of contestants it will be an exciting contest and we can expect some delicious curry. Let the contest begin!” There was some polite clapping as the cooks began their tasks.

“I guess we just sit back and wait for the curry.” Lau said, keeping RanMao in a hug.

“Can’t you wait silently?” The boyo complained, tapping with his cane, looking around, gauging reactions.

The crowd seemed to be fascinated by Agni’s skill, adding to West’s smug smile, dramatically announcing that that was Kali’s right hand, the sure sign of an easy victory. Although a fair share of the awe also went to Sebastian’s fast, confident movements. The spices began to scent the air, almost dizzying.
“Looks like we won’t lose easily...” The boyo said, changing his opinion once more about what were his desires as the contest’s outcome.

“What a bully...” Lau noticed too, chuckling.

Mouser smiled in agreement and scanned the crowd, uneasily, still feeling rather uncomfortable. But even stretching her senses she was not being able to catch that repulsive soul and scent again. And walking around with bloodied clothes would be rather noticeable. She shook her head, giving up. If he wanted to attack then he would. Just come and play with us she thought.

“What is he doing?” There was a bit of shock going around in surprise as the chocolate was added, the brand clearly visible. As expected people were not convinced. Except the children. They immediately drifted towards that and started asking for chocolate. The Funtom Company might see a bit more sales in that day and throughout the next weeks, even more than the standard Christmas numbers... Christmas... she had made some purchases but... what exactly would she give a demon? As she told Grell over the tea the duo of fashionistas had dragged her to have, the Grim Reaper had it easy if she wanted to give Sebastian a present. Just put some souls in a box with a pretty bow, like one would give candy.

“As expected of Funtom, a company that makes toys and sweets. It’s surely a way of advertise.” But despite that comment by West, one voice in the crowd, Agni seemed concerned as he reached for something that had a salty sea scent, hidden under the workstation till then, pulling out a blue lobster much to the shock of the crowd. Such a thing was rare and reserved for the noble and rich.

“That... is a blue lobster... A Royal Blue Lobster... a creature only found in the clear sea waters off the coast of Britain and France.” Druitt was in awe and stood dramatically to let everyone know it, and distinguish how splendid such a thing was. “The colour is only comparable to the famous Chartres Blue... splendid like a beautiful lady wearing a blue evening dress. And under that beautiful shell is a firm body that fascinates people with its delicate sweetness.”

“I feel queasy...” Mouser whispered softly. Ciel groaned, nodding.

West smiled smugly, raving on and on about Agni’s skills and the high quality of the main ingredient.

“This is bad... we are going to lose the competition.” Soma said suddenly as the time neared its end, staring at some sort of dough Sebastian was balling.

“How so?” Ciel asked softly, frowning, looking away from the stage.

“It’s true that Ciel’s butler’s curry is the real thing.” Soma said looking at the dough doubtfully. “But only the curry is perfect. The problem is the naan.” He shook his head, not explaining more, eyes closed. “One week to master the art of making curry it was too short...” Soma said morosely, shaking his head.

“Time’s up.” The announcer shouted after maybe half an hour. “Now to invite the judges to the stage.”

It went surprisingly similar to the tastings at home, starting with the criticism of the use of curry powder to unbalanced spices, lack or overpowering flavours and the pressing issue of the substance. The judges were merciless, even Druitt despite all his flamboyant behaviour. Then again if the result was for the Queen to enjoy some high standards were surely in action.

It soon was Agni’s turn.
Soma’s khanasama was looking very different from the cheery man from only a week ago, glum and sombre while placing his curry in front of the judge panel, taking the silvery dome away, revealing the lobster, pale steaming rice and a ring of colourful curries.

“My curry... Blue Lobster and seven types of curry. An imperial feast.” Agni said loudly enough to be heard but without any spark to his voice.

“A whole homard bleu with red, yellow and green curries... what kind of delicacy is this?” The Palace Chef was suitable impressed but he had been the harshest so far in every critic.

“I made a variety, each with its level of spiciness and flavour so you can sample each to your liking.” Agni explained. “All the curries were made to go perfectly with the lobster.”

“Seven authentic curries made by an Indian and served with a homard bleu... such extravagancy...” The Palace Chef tried it, pausing, eyes growing wide. “It’s delicious.” Soon he composed himself. “The meat is suitably springy and a subtle flavour lingers after, permeating the entire mouth.”

“And it’s sweet, and spicy and rough... each a facet of what curry is... and all accomplished without compromising the flavour of the lobster.” The Tax collector praised it next after a few bites, each coated a different colour.

And Druitt was not about to be left behind.

“Like the beautiful lady, unexpectedly met with seven precious stones enhancing her beauty...” He announced, flipping the blond fringe away from his blushing face. “A gold brooch shaped like a dove, a bracelet made of sapphires and pears, a garnet necklace, a cameo medal and a diamond and emerald ring on her exquisite finger... by you my heart has been stolen. Simply amazing. This is the best curry.” He declared after all the theatrics, continuing with his metaphor. Ladies swooned. A lot of them most likely made a note to buy more jewellery. Mouser kept her face still, lips grimacing in distaste. His prattling was harmful.

“Many thanks for your praises.” Agni answered humbly, eyes closed, pained.

“So has the winner been decided?” The announcer said excitedly, praising the competitive spirit, involving the crowd into the moment, turning towards Sebastian. “Last to the stage is the Funtom Company.”

“This is my curry.” He announced, placing the plate down, removing the dome to reveal a smooth oval of pale dough. It was met with silence, the tree judges were left staring, confused.

“This... is... what is this thing?” The Chef asked, blinking slowly, breaking the silence. Sebastian moved, pulling a pan of oil and its fire, dipping the dough in it with a pair of long tongues, calmly despite the confusion voiced around him. “What are you trying to pull?”

“Deep fried?”

“Ciel! What in heavens is your butler doing?” Soma said, eyes wide, confused.

“Is he trying to make a doughnut?” Bard gripped his hat, worriedly, chomping on his cigarette.

“It’s ready.” Sebastian pulled out a golden brown orb, putting each on its plate, perfectly centred before placing it once again in front of the judges. “This is our Company’s curry.” He announced again watching the confused reactions of both crowd and judges.

“But where is the curry?” The Chef was still confused.
“Wait a moment... the curry from the inside...” Druitt noticed, cutting through the crust.

“This is the curry our company proudly presents to you. The curry bread.” Sebastian was smiling faintly, mockingly. Mouser shook her head. Crafty... Novelties even if they were not good sold quickly just because they had never been seen before. Even if no one ever bough them again the profit had been made.

“What in the name... I have never seen that kind of curry before...” Soma was whispering, staring.

“Well let’s have a taste.” The Palace Chef began, taking a piece. “It explodes in your mouth... the crispy exterior, the soft interior texture combined with that sticky curry creates several layers of heavenly taste.” He gave his appraisal with shock and pleasure in his voice, staring down at the plate.

“And the fantastic curry on the inside... ingenious and fragrant, blended together so that when you slice that crust a heavenly scent spills out. And the generous chunks of chicken... really. A perfect creation.” The Tax Collector talked next, digging into the curry with undisguised gluttony.

“The young girl at the ball that makes me want to love her tenderly.” Druitt stood suddenly, still holding the fork, arms opened, voice resonating with emotion. “The mischievous mockingbird singing like a child in daytime but in the evening shows her true colours... the heartstring-pulling smile behind your mask... I really want to... hold you tightly in my arms.” He sat back down, coughing slightly and regaining his panache. Mouser glanced at the side, noticing a shivering Ciel next to her. So the prattling was claiming its next victim. “Fresh innovation and undoubted quality. This really is the Funton revolutionary curry.”

“I thank you for your praise.” Sebastian bowed softly.

“Now the time you have been waiting for: the tasting.” The announcer took over while the judges retreated. “Please help yourselves to whatever curry catches your fancy.” He said to the crowd amicably, gesturing towards the tables that had been placed with samples of each of the curries, making the nobles and bourgeois scatter around, pick what pleased them and regrouping into gossiping rings. The chefs were taken to the back so they could not walk around, fixing their curries with stray spices like demented pixies. The judges were talking, the hum of their voices dim and broken by so many other sounds. But it was clear enough, especially in contrast with the gloomy silence in the cook’s room.

“They are torn.” Mouser whispered placing a little piece of lobster and green curry in her mouth, watching the area blankly. It was very good. Her hunger had been stirred by the previous encounter and seeing all the praise that Agni’s curry had received and the fact that she had never had lobster… Another bite with golden curry. No wonder they smuggled those things at such shocking prices… “It is really between Sebastian and Agni.”

“Aren’t you being treacherous eating that?” Ciel asked coldly, teasingly.

“It’s good.” She shrugged. “You want some?” She tried the bright red curry on the ring around the lobster, feeling fire on her tongue. She hissed between pursed lips, sighing, feeling like she could let out a little fire tongue. Rough and biting, leaving a sweet aftertaste. Wonderful.

“I dislike spicy foods.” The boyo said coldly, huffing, checking the amount of people that tried Sebastian’s curry or went immediately after the delicate promise of the lobster.

“Wimpy.” Mouser teased.
“Sorry to keep you waiting.” The announcer came back to the stage, commanding attention. The excited buzz of the crowd started once again as they flocked back, murmuring, comparing the tastes they sampled. The Royal Warrant at stake made the whole contest something extremely exciting for the beau monde. The chefs were back on the platform as were the judges, the prize displayed, a small statuette, more symbolic than anything. What they truly desired was the paperwork.

West was humming with anticipation a few steps away from them the cane he held moving like a pendulum.

The prince was nervously twisting his scarf.

The boyo was as cold as ever, staring.

“After much debate... the winner of this curry show is...” Pause for dramatic effect. “Harold West Company and Funton Company. A tie...” The announcement was unexpected, creating a sudden silence of disbelief. Amongst the shocked faces, the anticipation, the gasps of the crowd a slithering sound caught Mouser’s attention, making her turn sharply, hands sliding inside her sleeves, grasping the daggers. A whip was curled around the prize, pulling it towards a man clad in a white uniform and a riding mask. She relaxed a fraction. He carried the insignias of the crown, the same she had grown used to see in the letters the Queen sent to the boyo.

“Please wait.” He said in a calm voice as the crowd jumped away, frightened, opening a ring around the new arrival. “The victor...” the sound of hooves echoed, the horse that appeared behind him knocking him to the ground with a loud thud. A kindly but regal looking old lady in a riding dress was pulling the reins, calming the animal.

“Who is that funky old gran?” Bard whispered, adjusting his beaten leather cap.

“That is...” Lau began carefully, hand touching his chin, thoughtfully.

Mouser shook her head, looking around sharply. She had seen that face in paintings, right next to the patronesses, used to fool the rich ladies into believing Mrs. Packard followed the Queen’s doctrine. But what if the boyo hadn’t been the target of that white haired not-human? What if his goal had been to reach higher? He said purify the world...

“Your Majesty!” The boyo was recovered enough to talk, taking his hat off as sign of respect, walking towards the fidgety horse. And that woman ruled a very large chunk of said world... “Why have you come here?”

“Hello everyone.” Queen Victoria seemed surprised to see him but smiled pleasantly, taking of the ridding goggles. The surprise seemed mutual within the crowd, everyone scrambling to curtsy or show respect.

“I am done talking but it seems her majesty has something to say.” The man under the horse’s hoof said, straightening a bit, getting up slowly to help the Queen dismount.

“Thank you John.” Victoria said pleasantly, adjusting her attire with a few pats, looking around, eyes clear. “This curry show was indeed exciting.” She appraised, walking towards the stage, the crowd parting in awe, accompanied by bows and whispers of awe. “The fragrance permeating the air reminds me of the curry me and Albert shared in White Island...” She opened a pocket watch, stopping for a moment, staring lovingly into it before crumpling to the floor, sobbing, surprising
“Majesty please pull yourself together...” Her aide was immediately by her side, trying to comfort the Queen, pulling out a hand puppet in the likeness of the deceased king, using a deeper voice, making it move. “I want to eat curry with you also...” The puppet said, seemingly bringing some comfort to the Queen.

“Her Majesty seems to be a rather complex character...” Lau appraised softly, smiling as the show continued.

“Don’t talk like that.” The boyo intervened. He also looked slightly mystified but was not going to say anything against the woman he owed loyalty to.

“As I received an invitation to be one of the contest’s judges I get one vote do I not?” The Queen dabbed at her moist eyes with a delicate handkerchief, coughing politely to settle her emotions before announcing in a pleasant but powerful voice, uttering the words that would break the tie. “I have chosen... Funton Company’s butler, Sebastian.” She took the prize from her aide’s hands, walking towards Sebastian, gifting him with the statuette, smiling. “This is for you.”

Angi was silent in his shock.

West was loud and angry, rushing towards the Queen.

“How can this be?” West was mumbling, dejected, fallen to his knees.

Mouser smirked and glanced at Agni’s shock, trying to see what would he do next.

“Nice work Sebastian!” Bard cheered.

“Typical of him...” Meyrin whispered, blushing a bit.

“You should try some too Young Master...” Finny turned to the boyo, offering one of the breads.

The boyo just groaned without taking it, glancing at the stage, eye narrowed, trying to gauge where the idea had come from.

“Congratulations chef Sebastian. Could I have a few words?” The announcer picked up on cue, turning to Sebastian.

“I am no chef. I am one hell of a butler.” The demon answered with a smile.

It didn’t take long now for the crowd to disperse, the contest over, the prize given and the whole
exhibit still offering exotic sights and baubles. Some other events were also starting, taking the attention away from the previous happenings.

“I... Lost...” Agni was still shocked, dumbfounded. The terms of his agreement had not been met, which meant all his efforts had been lost, turned to smoke. Speaking of smoke... Mouser frowned, tapping her heel. No reticule, no cigarettes, no authorization to smoke in there for that matter.

“Mr. Agni, wasn’t it?” The Queen approached the Indian softly, smiling, placing a reassuring hand on his arm. “Your curry’s flavour did not lose. It was also a curry I would like to enjoy at the White Tower.” The reasons for her choice had been derived not from personal taste but from the reasons that should concern the head of the empire.

“I am not worthy of such words...” Agni bowed humbly

“The Royal Warrant...” West was mumbling, in utter shock, having his dreams ripped away from his grasp.

“My Lord...” A female voice rose suddenly, an Indian woman running towards West, expensive fabric fluttering around her as she moved, a whiff of exclusive perfume, jewels clattering softly, melodiously, a sad, worried look on her face.

“Meena?” Soma said suddenly, a happy disbelief in his voice, recognizing her, eyes wide in relief and hope.
“Meena…”

“Prince Soma…” The woman turned away from West, facing the teen.

“I… I finally found you!” Soma called, happily, hugging the shocked woman tightly, close to tears of relief. “I’ve been looking for you for such a long time. You must have been so worried and frightened when you were kidnapped to England. You don’t have to worry anymore. Let’s go home together.”

“Prince…” She pushed him away suddenly, the shock wearing away into a bitter, angry expression, glaring at the prince. “Are you some kind of idiot?” Meena stepped back, edging closer to West, raising her voice coldly. “Who the hell do you think you are, coming this far just to get in people’s way.” She huffed, hands on her waist, bracelets clinking harshly, the gold gleaming. “Go with you? Don’t make me laugh.” She looked away, her dark eyes cold and hard, mirroring a life that had left very little untouched. “Who would want to return to a place like that?”

“You were hiding this, weren’t you?” Soma stuttered, shocked, realization hitting him, his posture growing limp and defeated.

“Sorry for not wanting to live my whole life bound by my social class. I even took great pains to sneak out of India.” A gold-digger one with aspirations, expensive tastes and a mean disposition. Mouser arched an eyebrow, identifying the sort easily. Most of the maids and valets that would sell their hirer’s secrets were that kind of person. Higher or lower all had a price, or an emotion that could be used to obtain what the blackmailer wanted.

“Then you wanted… with West…” Soma looked at the man behind his former nanny, starting to understand a bit more of a world he had not seen until that moment.

“That’s right.” She preened, looking proud of the result of her scheme. “Even a child could understand what is better. A rich wife or a servant.” She glared at the prince, flicking her hair, arms going around West. “I’m sick of looking after a selfish master.”

Agni wept, the defeat, the broken promises, the dashed trust weighting on his mind. It was obvious what kind of deal had been made between Agni and West for the Prince’s sake.

“So that was why.” Soma whispered, shaking his head, walking towards Agni, his eyes moist and soft. “Sorry.” He whispered to his manservant, making him look up, confused. “We were that close and I did not understand her feelings.” Soma walked to Agni, leaning, placing one hand on his shoulder. Then he turned to Meena, serenely “I am sorry for never thinking about being a bother and chasing you all the way to England.” The prince flinched a bit but faced Sebastian nonetheless, walking past the woman he had crossed half the world to rescue. “And… thanks for everything until now. Until now… I always blamed other people. Being alone in the castle was my parent’s fault. Meena leaving was West’s fault. But I was wrong. Even though I was gnawing at my parent’s ankles I did nothing but complain. There’s no one who would love a brat like that.” He sighed softly, turning back to Agni, smiling kindly. “But you stayed on my side even though we were separated. I’ve given you nothing but trouble until now. Will you stay and be my khanasama Agni?” He asked softly.

Agni’s tears changed, his tight expression loosening, the burden simply fading.
“Jo Ajha” The Prince’s khanasama said, bowing.

Mouser smiled slightly, glancing at the discreetly retreating figures of West and Meena. Lau was smiling and nodding. RanMao was chewing on a last piece of curry bread. She caught the Chinese’s glance and smiled. Good. She wasn’t the only one thinking about it.

“It seems somehow everything ended up for the best, wouldn’t you say...” The Queen had been watching the scene unfold with quiet curiosity. She was smiling, clapping in calm acceptance. “Isn’t that good... boy?” She spoke chuckling. Mouser glanced at Queen Victoria suddenly. That was such a motherly tone to use and... boy. The thief smiled. The other servants also seemed to find the moniker hilarious much to the boyo’s dismay.

“Your Majesty I humbly requested you stop referring to me that way.” He almost shouted at the Queen, flustered, gesturing hard.

“Is that so?” She chuckled, covering her mouth with a glove. “But you’ll always be a cute little boy to me.” The Queen added playfully.

“Your Majesty...” Ciel managed to put the trio in order after a quick bout of discipline. Mouser kept hidden behind him to avoid any sort of retaliation. “Why did you come all the way out here today?” He managed to finally ask, top hat in hand, looking humble.

“I was at St. Sophia University’s choir concert.” The Queen explained, still smiling, still looking as though she was full of life and hope. “But when I heard your company was coming to the curry contest I had to come and see you. You only send letters and never come visit after all.” At that she took on the appearance of a granny, a normal woman scolding her child. Ciel was not softened, looking down.

“Someone like me shouldn’t be around your Majesty too often.” The Earl of Phantomhive admitted calmly.

“Please don’t say such things.” The Queen placed a gentle hand on his cheek, looking kindly at him. “You are still young but you perform your duty so seriously, just like your father Vincent. Besides that it has been such a long time since I’ve come to the Crystal Palace.” She looked around, walking a bit, the skirts rustling. “It seems like only yesterday that Albert and I were here for the opening ceremonies... Aaaaaalbert...” Victoria fell back into her sobbing mood.

Cue puppet. Her aide was immediately at her side, using the toy to calm the Queen.

“I wish I were here today too...” John Brown said through the puppet, until the Monarch was recovered.

“Oh dear... I must be leaving soon.” John brought the horse back and helped the Queen onto the saddle. “I’ll have the Grand Chamberlain’s office send you the authorization documents for the Royal Warrant. I’m looking forward to eating curry bread in the Royal Salon as well.” She pulled the reins and dashed off, waving “You have fun now boy.”

John Brown stayed behind for a moment, earning a slight glance from the boyo.

“Shouldn’t you be going too?” Ciel mentioned. The man seemed startled before breaking into a run, following the woman he served, leaving the ear shaking his head. “She’s the same as always.” He muttered to himself, placing the top hat back on his head.

“Ciel.” Soma approached solemnly, Agni close by. Lau and RanMao were missing. “Thank you for winning. You have my gratitude.” The prince placed his palms together and bowed slightly.
“It was not for you. It was for my own sake.” The boyo repeated. “But your babysitter coming back was killing two birds with one stone. He shrugged despite the grateful look Agni was beaming his way.

“Ciel… if I had never come to England I probably wouldn’t have learned all sorts of truths.” Soma continued, caught in a net of growth. “If I had never met Ciel I would still be ignorant of the ways of the world. From now on I want to learn all sorts of things and become a great man. I won’t lose to anyone. I’ll show you.” The Prince was now showing off, looking excited and ready to move on.

Mouser chuckled, shaking her head.

“If you just say it, it won’t happen.” Ciel said dourly.

“If I say it, it will happen!” Soma rebutted, arms shaking, going for a hug which the boyo was trying hard to avoid.

“My, my… how bustling…” Sebastian walked down from the stage, joining the commotion, immediately hugged and pampered by the trio.

“Sebastian!” Meyrin clapped. “Congratulations!”

“How do you want to celebrate?” Bard was saying, patting the butler’s back hard, chuckling. “We should celebrate!” Finny was dancing with the trophy being scolded by Bard as soon as the cook saw. Sebastian disentangled and got away, surprised when Agni stood in front of him before kneeling down.

“Sebastian… I wonder how I should apologise for this, for everything…” The Indian began, contrite.

“Mr. Agni. There is no need for that kind of thing.” Sebastian spoke warmly, crouching to the other man’s level, offering one gloved hand. “Please raise your head.”

“At first I regretted accompanying the prince to England. But now…” Agni looked around. Smiling faces, a prince willing to grow… “I think it was a very good thing. We both have learned a lot from you all. I feel I must thank you somehow.”

“You have been apologising from the beginning. I fought for my own reasons and you fought for yours. That’s all there is to it. There is nothing to thank me for.” Sebastian stressed his selfishness once again before continuing, closing the issue. “The goddess Kali you believe in and Shiva realized their faults through their mutual pain just as you two are doing now. Ah… the sun is already setting.” The butler said, as if just now noticing, turning to the Phantomhive household. “Shall we go home?” He gave them some time to gather, Agni walking silently next to him. “And as they say «no pain no gain».” Sebastian added, glancing at the boyo. Mouser smiled, rolling her eyes. Enough time had passed now…

“That’s right. The evening sun as seen from the banks of the Ganges… the sunset in England… it has the same beauty.” Agni nodded, seeing nothing behind his words, accepting their face value
“Meeenaaaa!” Soma began to sob suddenly having grabbed Ciel in a death-grip hug. Agni smiled slightly, hands clasped.

“It’s good we came to England. Both the prince and I were able to make good friends.” He continued as the servants swooped in an tried to comfort the prince while the boyo seemed interested only in escaping, struggling like a fish out of water.

“Friends, is it? It’s the first time anyone said that to me.” Sebastian noticed with a bit of shock, showing then a simple calm smile as he watched Agni move in to pry the Young Master free.

“That touched you.” Mouser whispered embracing Sebastian softly, relieved the day was coming to an end and that no other disasters had struck. The demon nodded slightly, caressing her cheek before she parted from him. “I’ll be home soon.” Mouser said, sneaking away.

“Damn it! They spoiled my plans…” West was shouting angrily, like a child in the middle of a tantrum, slumped against a brick wall on the alleys, face covered by the expensive gloves, out of view. The sunset was low enough for the area to be shrouded in a purplish shadow.

“Cheer up… there is always next time.” Meena was trying to soothe him seeing that he still had enough money and status to be of some further use. He had enough to buy her kindness. The wife had crouched down, patting his knee softly, the skirts spread around her. Neither of them seemed aware of the possibility of a mugger or worse being close by.

“Yes, yes.” Lau’s voice came from the narrow entry of the alleyway, eyes still closed, giving him a calm and blissful air while he approached. The smile he was wearing on the other hand was one that he had rarely shown the boyo but that was known and feared throughout the Underworld. “Always next time.” He mused, gesturing, the sleeves dangling casually. “Thank you for your hard work.” He praised with a quick clap.

“You are?” West stood. Meena stood. Both faced him, unaware of the little shadow that was approaching from the other side of the narrow street.

Lau shrugged, opening his arms. He had been there all the time. His features, outfit and RanMao had been flashy enough to be seen. And yet West had seen nothing beyond the Earl’s fancy title and rich clothes. But it was not something he took much offence in.

“The Earl said that there is no point going after the small fries but someone who tries something once will try it again. Letting them go… that sort of thing is going too easy.” Lau chuckled, opening his eyes. Cold and merciless. A lot of people had seen them. Most of them were dead. Others attributed the iciness to the opium, being too drugged to separate the reality from their smoke-dreams. Others were simply not surprised that the representative of the Chinese crime world was such a cruel creature. “Well that’s the boy’s cute point though. I’ve got to exterminate the bad rats infesting my city. So I keep a cat.” RanMao slammed Chinese decorative clubs to the ground, splintering cobblestone. Then she attacked. “Meow.” Lau chuckled, raising a closed hand, mimicking the feline, glancing to his left, to another alley as his assassin took care of the annoyances. “And nowadays so does the Earl. Isn’t that right little kitty?” He asked playfully.

Mouser huffed, lighting a stolen cigarette, leaning against the wall, walking out, staring at the soon to be corpses and then at the closed windows around. It would take some time for them to be found and the clear meaning.
and reported. They were also very mangled, still twitching, a low groan or whine coming out of them. She blew smoke into the air casually.

“It seems you dealt with it before I could.” She noted. Lau moved near her, patting her head like she was RanMao. She shook his hand away, clicking her tongue in annoyance. “I’ll let the boyo know you are helpful.”

Letting someone like that live was a mistake. Spiteful and petty.

People like that would always stab each other on the back.

It was just a matter of time.

One thing they were quick to learn on the streets was to just let them die. Or kill them. Whatever worked best.

So she had thought about taking the root of future problems away. Finding them, following, waiting till they were home and then making it look like a burgle job gone badly awry. Stolen valuables, broken furniture, murdered owners, blood everywhere, a couple of shots fired to make it look like there had been some struggle, the whole picture painted properly and primly for the servants to find.

Lau seemed to have thought roughly the same although method veered towards a vengeance or payback due to the state of the bodies and the still present baubles. Maybe by the time they were found some scavengers would have absconded with the glittering jewels.

The Chinese’s original intentions were more on the selfish side, to protect his own status on the street and climb a slight notch on the favours to the boyo. Never a bad time to get on his good graces he often said.

“And I appreciate it.” Lau waved her goodbye, walking back towards his East End den.

Mouser glanced at the corpses, noticing the cinematic records leaving in thin black and white stripes, showing glimpses of their past, their schemes, floating upwards, disappearing into some sort of blade. A Grim Reaper was standing on the rooftop, looking down with those gold-and-green eyes wearing a prim and pristine dark suit. Not Grell then. Too bad she could use another supernatural entity to ask questions to. Mouser smirked for him and walked away, slipping her hands into the sleeves.

The ambient of the kitchen was heavy with cigar smoke, the coils of silver moving lazily against the flickering light of a gas lamp and the scent of alcohol. Bard was chomping down on his cigarette, slightly nervous, staring at the cards occasionally taking a swig of cheap whiskey.

Mouser balanced her cigarette in a smug smirk, fanning herself with the cards, the rum bottle next to her elbow.

“Woman you’re ruthless.” The cook threw his cards down in frustration wearing only his apron, the last piece of clothing he had been able to retain throughout the game.

“I had to follow through with my threats.” Mouser poked the butt of the cigarette on the cracked clay ashtray, snuffing it out. Throughout the night she had taken his money, his weapons, the stashes of ammo, some war memorabilia and his clothes. She had been cheating mercilessly, tilting the game to her side and getting him good and drunk in the process. Still as a former soldier Bard...
was hard to put under the table. “Now parade.”

“I give.” The man chuckled and stood carefully, fidgety. He dropped the apron and slammed it down, making the piles of trinkets and coins topple, defiant till the bitter end.

Mouser laughed and poured him the whiskey, covering her eyes with the cards. His physique was still that of a soldier. Undeniably he was handsome.

“Come on.” She pushed the glass towards him. “A round for the naked guy.”

Bard laughed too and downed it, sitting once again.

There was a sudden gasp and stutter from the entry.

Meyrin stood there, red faced, in her nightgown, staring. Mouser sipped her rum slowly, waiting for the explosion.

“B…B…B… Bard!” The maid shrieked suddenly, covering her eyes, hand on the lenses. The cook jumped and tried to cover himself, stuttering. Mouser laughed starting to gather the cards.

“Let’s call it a night then…” She whispered as Bard managed to run off from the kitchen, hurriedly and embarrassed, leave a blushing maid behind. They might as well stop, the thief thought checking her watch. Nearly two… and they would be leaving for the Manor in the morning. Finny had gone to bed early, tired and exited, talking non-stop about seeing Pluto again. Mouser also felt a bit of need to see Pluto and try again to take that collar away from its furry neck. Oddly enough neither Finny’s massive strength nor her claws had been able to pry the thing away when they tried, after the dolls’ incident. Mouser hadn’t asked Sebastian and because nothing had come of it she had nearly forgotten... but the voice and the threat… it was a dangling loose end that was bothering her. “Something you needed?”

“Water.” Meyrin said softly, walking in a daze to the pitcher. “Why was Bard naked?”

“I made him gamble until he had nothing to bet but his clothes. And then I continued.” Mouser lit another cigarette. They had been gambling from the moment the boyo’s dinner had ended and the dishes were done. After she managed to pry herself out of the dress. The servants had questioned her a bit about why she hadn’t returned with them to which Mouser simply answered that she had been running some errands for the boyo. “I’ll return them in the morning though. I don’t have the heart or the visual fortitude to watch him walk around naked in winter.” She stood and stretched.

“How’s the chapter?”

Meyrin blushed again.

“I’ll give it to you tomorrow.” The evening paper where each week the next chapter of Mrs. Levant’s adventures came out. It was Meyrin’s turn to read it first. The Wicked Dove it was called, about a woman that murdered and disposed of her husbands as soon as she felt unloved. Going by the crimson maid’s expression the hunt for victim number four had been completed.
“Chapter 22

“You have three late invitations for Christmas soirées...” To add to a rather long list of refusals. A large amount of noble families chose to spend the holidays in quiet family time. But some of their young sons and daughters preferred the glitz and glamour of society. “And you might have to consider the Midford...” Mouser flipped through the last of the mail quickly, the rhythm of the coach under her sharp and quick as the distance to the manor shrunk.

Soma was quiet but very active, looking out each of the carriage’s windows on his side, murmuring in awe at the white countryside, seemingly amazed by the white-powdered roadside. Everything in England should look quite foreign and exotic to the Indian prince. Then again that was what England thought of him.

Agni and Tanaka drove the second carriage with the servants and luggage.

Sebastian was in charge of the vehicle that was used to parade the boyo around town with all the symbols and heraldry.

“The note was penned calling on you as a family member.” Mouser mentioned answering the discomfort the boyo was displaying. She snuggled deeper into her cape. Early winter morning, snowing... it was not good travelling weather. Most carriage drivers would either hesitate or ask for a great amount of currency before heading out to the outskirts. “There are nine New Year parties that ask for your attendance...”

“Already?” The boyo interjected, frowning. Christmas had not passed yet and they already wanted... the Earl shook his head in annoyance. Yes it was convenient to receive the confirmations ahead of time but still... “Anyone I must see?”

“Not necessarily. Two of them are from your business partners and I assume the invitations are just common courtesy. If they know you at all they won’t be expecting anything but a negative.” She smiled at his harsh frown. “The others are from social butterflies.” Catch the prizes and brag about it over tea and crumpets.

“I’ll have to tell aunt Frances I’m busy.” Ciel pondered after a moment, tapping with his cane nervously.

“Suit yourself. I won’t play any part on that.” Mouser said, shrugging. Somehow she believed a pretty signed card would not cut it... She made more notes, the cabin quiet except for the occasional rustle of Soma’s clothes.

“I... If it were you... well...” His voice faltered slightly, knowing it was somewhat out of character but... Elizabeth was his fiancée and family and he had not given her anything after her life had been threatened... And Christmas was a passable excuse for gift giving. “What should I give Lizzie?”

“Boyo... You won’t like my answer.” Mouser warned with a small smirk, placing the pen down, intertwining stained fingers. Still he was waiting for the reply with an inflexible frown. “You. Your physical presence at the family gathering and the Midford celebration. Preferably looking cute.”

“I am busy.” Ciel said defensively, staring at the letters.

“Right... come now boyo.” Mouser clicked her tongue and stretched before bundling up again. “Let me take a stab at your Christmas plans. Wake up late because it is Christmas. Brood, brood, brood, glower, glower, glare at lunch, read. Pester Sebastian with sweet demands then...”
“Enough.” The Boyo said coldly and with finality.

Mouser moved her ankle out of the way before he reached it with his cane tip, chuckling, locking it in her heel, shrugging and pulling the last letter out, handing it to the boyo unperturbed by the tugging underfoot.

“Lord Randall sends a note requesting a meeting.”

“He must want to settle the latest incidents.” He read it, crumpling it on a gloved fist and tossed the paper back at her. Mouser caught it with indifference, straightening and stuffing it back in the pile of mail. So he was over the awkward moment about his fiancée.

“Or just spew a few random insults.” Mouser got the ledger from the business briefcase, opening it, uncapping her pen, scanning the slightly less crowded entrances. “When?”

“After Christmas.” Even though he did not celebrate appearances should be kept so no rumour tainted his façade reputation. Nobility had its perks but a flawless image should be used at all times which limited one’s range if they were not used to subterfuge and intrigue. Or were not as frightening as Marchioness Midford.

“Twenty seven... about six o’clock?” Mouser waited for his nod before penning it down. “Now... about the charity event... stop frowning.” Mouser chuckled slightly at the sour glare she was receiving as she exchanged the paperwork needed. “I’m keeping you from having to make casual conversation.” Her pen pointed towards the fascinated Soma. Not that the prince seemed to be in the mood to talk. Most likely he would wait until they arrived and then force the boyo to a question session and a guided tour of the manor. “Also you’ll have some free time in today’s schedule if you deal with these issues right now.” Mouser picked up the newspaper after a few moments of grumbling and checking options. “I believe you will like this.”

The boyo smirked smugly when the headline was within his sight. The front page was an article of praise for the Funtom Company, its curry and the achievement that was a Royal Warrant. To attract new investors there would be nothing as perfect as that. It had been a publicity stunt and next months revenues would prove its success. And it could be used when the foundations of the food sector of the Funtom company was ready to start its business.

Pluto was very exited to see them back, dashing towards Finny immediately, barking, howling and slobbering, fluffy fur further bleached by the snow, red eyes closed and tongue lolling. Just one happy pooch. The gardener boy hugged him and quickly subdued him before he jumped and upturned the carriages and spooked the horses any further, rubbing his tummy, giggling. Finny was quickly chastised by a fully clothed Bard, asked to help carry the luggage into the house. That did not dampen his happiness. He just giggled, letting go of the devil dog, telling him to sit. The devil dog obeyed, the tail tapping the ground till the snow was pressed or gone.

The boyo disappeared almost as soon as Soma opened his mouth.

That made the prince pout and give chase through the labyrinth of corridors that created the manor.

It would be a stroke of luck if he actually found Ciel.

Agni was ever so helpful in the procession of trunks, boxes and suitcases.

Meyrin, as soon as she had dropped her luggage in her room, went immediately towards the
cleaning products closet and pulled out the broom, mop and feather duster. Rooms and linens needed to be aired out before being in suitable condition for the Young Master and guests. Then there was the dust that was bound to have collected...

Mouser hopped down from the carriage and looked around. The snow was mostly undisturbed and there seemed to be no corpses littering the grounds. The house looked undamaged. So the guard dog had either worked well and hard or no one had targeted the empty house. Although no one had targeted the city house either.

“So...” The thief called quietly when he returned for another load. The demon did not stop, acknowledging her call with a hum. “Did you try to pry that collar loose even once?”

“It is locked with unearthly power.” The demon supplied as he walked inside with an armload of luggage, unperturbed by her inquiry.

Pluto was the one locked so he could not pry himself free.

Mouser looked at the dog that was now being introduced to Soma and Agni, the prince returning after a failed attempt of tracking Ciel down. The devil dog’s tail was wagging while Finny and then Soma scratched his neck.

The one that placed the seal would be the one that could remove it. Which meant the man that had been in the tower and then in the Exhibition. Or they had to get another devil dog.

Neither option was appealing or feasible.

So there was nothing to do about that issue but wait for disaster.

Mouser sighed, snuggled into her cape, picking up the documents from the cabin and went inside, walking into the library, stealing a dust cloth and broom from Meyrin. After a quick cleaning of the place she had to bunker down and pen all the letters to deny hostesses and hosts, hire the theatre company, book the theatre room, invite the charities, orphanages and nobles that would loosen their purses and talk to make others give money.

“Young Master.” Sebastian got into the usual routine once again, opening the curtains, preparing and serving the tea while the bundled up boy groaned and peeked. “It’s time to wake up.” He called once more, pouring. “Today’s tea is Harrod’s White’s Darjeeling.” He walked towards the bed with the tea and the day’s newspaper. Front page proclaimed and detailed the arrival of the Noah’s Ark circus to London. And further in the charity play had its first announcement printed.

“Looks like the Manor is settling down.” Sebastian commented causally.

Christmas was gone. The servants had been given the day off as propriety and just a hint of generosity demanded. A monetary compensation had been added to their wages, as a gift. Meyrin had taken Finny to church. Bard grumbled but played escort. Mouser had spent it sleeping with a Peter Rabbit, the Young Master’s present for her instead of money, dressed in a black waistcoat and a skull pin on its bowtie and bright red eyes snuggled in her arms. She was tired after experimenting with her budding demonic energies. Surprisingly Mouser had been able to feed him already.

The Young Master had also surrendered to sloth. Soma and Agni knew little to nothing about the holiday so they did not bother the Young Master. The Prince had also spent the day sleeping with Agni tending to his wishes.
“So it would seem.” Ciel said simply, glancing at the nightstand. A sapphire and white gold brooch with the Phantomhive coat of arms, something that had been stolen three years ago, rested on the top of the wooden surface. Mouser’s gift. She also used the Christmas as an excuse, claiming it was only gratitude.

“Boyo?” Mouser knocked on the door softly before entering. Her heels clicked on the floor lightly before she stepped on the carpet, holding a letter with the Queen’s lacquered symbol. “This just arrived.”

The boyo frowned, accepting it, opening it carefully.

“Circus tickets?” He spoke softly, confused as the pieces of printed paper were pulled out of the envelope. For the same circus that was announced on the newspaper.

“Couldn’t it be a Christmas gift for a little boy?” Sebastian teased, smirking. Mouser grinned.

“I’ll kill you both...” Ciel groaned in annoyance, glaring at the pair that made a living out of mocking the hell out him, slipping out of the covers, placing the letter down after only a quick scan and irritated face.

“Today’s schedule.” Sebastian asked, keeping the formality, getting the clothes and starting the dressing up ritual.

“Oh… right.” Mouser frowned slightly, straightening. “Let me see…” She took a deep breath and started. “First is validating the new merchandise proposal. The dolls new collection, I believe. The updated cost estimate from Food Department and the Hindustani restaurant has arrived as well. In the afternoon you will have piano lessons with Mrs. Bright and French Lessons with Mrs. Rookin. And finally Lord Randall’s visit at six. Afterwards we should all be free to discuss the Queen’s mission.”

Ciel nodded, still glancing occasionally towards the letter and the tickets inside as Sebastian helped him dress into a casual house suit. Something more formal would be prepared for the meeting later on.

Mouser looked up suddenly when the floorboards outside creaked, a stampede coming towards the room. Sebastian did a better job of hiding the sudden reaction to the sound.

“What would you like for today’s snacks…” The butler was saying and Mouser walked a few steps back, cringing at the noise, before the door swung open, an exited Soma appearing, invading the sleeping quarters, grinning widely.

“Ciel!” The prince shouted, eyes sparkling in anticipation of mischief, going for a great hug.

“Shut up.” Soma was kept away, the boyo pushing him back. Still the prince responded to the feeble attempt, stepping back, buzzing with pent up energy. Like a puppy. “Don’t yell so early in the morning.” Ironic that Ciel was shouting that back. “And when are you two going home to India?”

“Going home? What are you saying?” Soma looked around, confused. Then he stood taller and placed his hands on his hips. “I am staying in England for your sake. Didn’t you say you didn’t believe me when I said I’d become a great man? So I’m staying until I become one so I can show you.”

Mouser chuckled and glanced at the door. Flawless logic there.
“Prince Soma?” Agni’s smiling face peeked from the frame before the Indian walked in. “Here you are with Lord Ciel. You weren’t in your room so I was wondering...”

That made Ciel shout again.

“What do you mean his room? I don’t remember saying you could live here. Listen when other people are talking!”

The thief chuckled and extended a hand to Sebastian who sighed, looking put-upon. They chose to simply sneak out and move on with their daily duties.

“In any case…” Sebastian was finishing the lecture and the tasks distribution. “At six this evening Lord Randall will be visiting. We cannot do anything to cause embarrassment to the Young Master or Phantomhive House.” Sebastian continued looking around. “Meyrin polish the banisters on the front stairway. Finny knock the snow from the trees in the courtyard. Bard please find a chicken for the soup for tonight’s diner. Mr. Tanaka please take it easy. Mouser have the reports ready to be returned. Everyone please do the duties assigned to you is that clear? Do not waste your energy in other tasks.” Sebastian paused suddenly, staring at the doorway. “Mr Agni?”

“Since I am also being a burden on this household please let me do something to help.” The Indian walked him, bowing slightly offering his help without reserves. Sebastian frowned. Mouser leaned against the table, watching as the house staff moved, gathering what was needed for their tasks.

Finny walked out with a large broom, humming.

Bard had disappeared into the servant’s quarters looking for a jacket for the frigid weather.

Meyrin was in the supply closet.

Tanaka was still in the kitchen, sipping tea.

“What about prince Soma?”

“He is… in a daze with everything here so I left him in the library.” Agni supplied happily. Note for the boyo: Avoid the library room. Still he was mostly out of the Young Master’s way.

“Well would you be willing to clean the windows? Since you’re taller than me after all.” Sebastian asked after a moment of silence.

“Of course. Leave it to me.” Agni agreed eagerly, joining Meyrin in gathering cleaning utensils.

Sebastian sighed, looking around.

“Can you keep things controlled here while I deal with the dog?” He asked. Mouser shrugged.

“As much as possible.” She checked his clock. The boyo should be finishing his breakfast.

“I can’t reach…” Finny was growling in effort. A sudden yelp and a crash made Mouser glance through the window, her attention dragged away from the tedious documents she was forced to review with the boyo. “Ah it fell down…” Finny was jumping around frantic. “What should I do.
“Sebastian is going to be mad again…” he bawled. Mouser sighed and stood, reaching for the latch.

“Boy! What’s wrong?” Agni? Mouser opened the window and peeked. The Indian was hopping out of the window he had been working on, walking towards the gardener, smiling while he listened to his sobs and explanation. “If that’s the problem you should speak up.” Finny was suddenly hoisted onto Agni’s shoulders. “How’s this? You can reach right?”

“So tall!” Finny giggled, swatting the tree with the broom, making the snow fall and pile around the trunk. “I don’t know my own strength and I keep making mistakes. Trees are living things so we should treat them kindly.” He was prattling happily. Mouser smiled and looked back at the lines of math and English, bored once more, still picking up the conversation.

“Treat them kindly?” Agni asked, the rustle of his clothes telling her he had placed the gardener boy down.

“Before I came here I don’t think I would have understood.” Finny whispered quietly. Then he laughed. “But now I feel like I can do it.”

“By the way how did you become a gardener?”

“A little more than a year ago I was picked up by the young Master.” Mouser frowned. The way he behaved… she could have sworn he had been there for more than that.

“Picked up?” The expression had Agni baffled. Finny barely noticed.

“Before I couldn’t go outside like this. Now it’s so fun… I can do it everyday. I can touch trees and bugs and people… but at first it was scary. It was really hard for me to touch something without breaking it…”

His strength… Mouser sighed. He was a bit self conscious. To be honest from time to time she felt that way too. Her nails sliced things easily and her strength grew to the point that she felt that she could crush a rock to fine powder with little effort. Sebastian eased that tension as she knew he could take whatever she delivered and showed her how to adjust the pressure to the material she was handling. Still it was baffling to throw a punch and, as he dodged, see a fist sized dent on a granite wall, both her skin and bones barely hinting the blow.


“We forgot the other side!” The gardener said, clasping his gloved hands to his head.

“How careless…” Agni laughed, good natured.

Mouser shook her head, her eyes going immediately to the figure in black that approached from the edged of the Phantomhive lands. Sebastian was not looking pleased. The thief stood, placing the documents down. The boyo glanced at her, also bored but working diligently.

“I’ll get you some tea. Also could you double check this entry…” Mouser pulled another report out of the briefcase, opening and pointing to the specific lines. “It has been happening for a couple of months now… I think one of your factory bosses is embezzling.”

Mouser helped Sebastian out of his dog fur tainted clothes with nary a comment, having another set of his prim uniform out. It was a bit of pampering for him, seeing that he had to dress and
undress a bratty boyo every day. Then there were the perks of staring at his mostly naked form. She settled on the bed, legs crossed, eyeing him greedily but lazily. Sebastian had a smirk on his lips as his sleekly muscled form disappeared within the black and white fabric of the layers of clothes. Playing valet for her was all about the ogling and teasing.

“Anything happened?” The butler asked as they left the room.

“Quiet day so far. I’m taking a break and I promised tea to the boyo.” She paused and yawned.

“Tired?” he noticed, reducing his stride’s width.

“You can be incredibly demanding.” Mouser chuckled, smiling without complaint, as they approached the kitchen, Bard’s voice echoing clearly as he grumbled.

“Ah… what a bother… separating the bones from the meat… take way too long. And there are guests coming… I’ll add the chef’s special touch.” There was a sudden metallic click as they neared the doorway, a whoosh of air and the scent of flame. Mouser’s eyes widened suddenly. Sebastian pulled her against him, sidestepping the explosion that blasted out of the opening, pressing her body against a solid wall, covered by his.

“Chef! Are you all right?” Agni’s voice called through the thick smoke that covered the corridor and was likely thickest within the kitchen.

“Flamethrower?” Mouser whispered against Sebastian’s shirt, clutching him.

“I’ll have to lecture him about the toys that should be used to defend the manor and not while cooking.” The butler groaned, leaning down, resting his head against hers, sighing, put upon.

“I used a little too much fire power so a bunch of stuff got scorched too.” Bard was laughing in an apologetic way. Agni was moving within the kitchen, the sounds of pots, pans and cleaning reaching the pair in the corridor.

“Chicken Gala Soup tastes better if you boil it slowly.” Agni was saying, the sound of a sweeping broom whispering through the air, accompanied by the clatter or window’s latches and the creak of the panels opening.

“I know that in my head.” Bard retorted. Over the burnt scent the click of a lighter and the scent of tobacco traced a new layer. “But before I came here I never cooked eaten slowly.”

“Going fast means making mistakes.” Agni chastised without anger in his voice. Seemed more like a sad recommendation, a tired counsel.

“I’ve gotta get used to it. This feeling of peace.” Bard’s voice acquired a bit sadder undertone.

“Kidding.”

“Kidding. Let’s get this place cleaned up and start the cooking again. You should go back to your job too.”

“I’ll help you tidy up.”

“No way. You’re supposed to be where you’re supposed to be. Protecting that place is your job.”

Mouser sighed and looked up, pecking Sebastian’s lips, trying to call him back and ease the frown that darkened his eyes.
“Let me go now. I’ll use the secondary kitchen to make the tea.”

“Go back to the Young Master. I’ll deliver the tea momentarily.” Sebastian said, stepping back, walking away.

Mouser shook her head and chuckled. Oh that jealousy…

“To make it shiny all I have to do is wax…” Meyrin was humming to herself while sweeping the rag over the wooden surface, seeing nothing wrong with the movements.

“Miss Maid!!!” Agni shouted suddenly, startling her, making her land, rump first on the wide step, looking around, fiddling with the askew glasses. Then she noticed it.

“AH! I did it again…” In the pale wintry light the wood was noticeably darkened. Meyrin frantically made a grab for the cylindrical can she had picked from the closet. “I mistook the shoe polish for the wax…” She blabbered as Agni joined her with clean rags. They started to wipe the polish away, hopping it hadn’t stained the wooden surface already.

“It does seem your eyes are bad.” Agni said kindly, satisfied with the progress. Behind the lenses she seemed to betraying hard to focus.

“I am extremely far-sighted.” Meyrin smiled and continued with the task. “And these glasses don’t really fit anymore.” She sighed.

“Then why don’t you ask for a new pair…”

“No… these are my precious glasses that the young master bought for me. These maid outfit as well. Before I came here I had never worn anything like a skirt. I am so happy I’m a maid now…” She leaned back, clutching the skirt. “Mouser said I’m being silly. That if I asked for a new pair it would still be the young master’s gift but…”

“It seems like everyone here really loves this manor.” Agni smiled and resumed his help. Sebastian frowned and walked away. It was still amazing how Agni could make the servants work properly. And it was still amazingly grating.

Darkness was falling fast. So it was time for the last details. Lights were lit, everything was clean, everything was presentable. Fresh flowers from the greenhouse were displayed, embroidered linens were shows, the plates and silverware had been chosen and polished. The boyo had bathed and been dressed and was reading in the library. Soma was fascinated by the toys in the game’s room.

“What did you just say?” Agni asked suddenly, stopping, staring at Sebastian.

Mouser placed the documents on a side table in the dining room and looked around. The two butler were setting the table. The warm fire was crackling and the room had the scent of spices and flowers. No hint of smoke from either the chimneys nor the earlier kitchen explosion.

“When the guests arrive and remain within the manor would you please stay in your room?” Sebastian repeated.
“Why?” Agni asked in shock.

Sebastian continued the mechanical gestures of table setting.

“The guest is the commissioner from Scotland Yard, Lord Randall. He is the lead investigator in the Anglo-Indian incidents.” Two sets of cutlery and crockery on that end of the table, one set on the other side. Candles and a floral arrangement in the centre of the table. The pictures were straight, the chairs had no flaws.

“Could it be that he’s come to capture me?” Agni asked a bit agitated.

“Of course not.” Sebastian dismissed the situation stepping back as well, giving a last appraising look to his finished task. “He does not know the identity of the culprit of those incidents. Please calm yourself.”

“But even though I was acting on orders those were entirely my fault.” Agni’s hands were tangled, gripping and letting go, nervously. “Shouldn’t I be punished properly to make up for my sins?”

“If you were not here what would happen to Prince Soma? Will you break your promise to stay by Prince Soma’s side?” Sebastian used what would be the most convincing argument in his arsenal.

Mouser glanced outside. Open curtains or closed… Stare into the darkness or claustrophobia for the guests?

“But...” Agni tried once again.

“Everything is over and the incidents won’t occur again.” Sebastian cut him before he could start. “Leave the rest to us and stay in your room. Is that all right?” He softened the tone.

Agni nodded and then walked away. Mouser pursed her lips.

“His conscience is going to nag him. He’s going to interfere.” Sebastian nodded in agreement. Still it could go either way.

“You travelled a great distance.” Sebastian greeted the guests as they walked out of the carriage. It was not snowing but the wind was picking up and night was growing colder.

“What a great manor...” Detective Aberlain was looking around, in awe, holding his bowl hat to keep it from dragging it away.

“Don’t praise them and stop looking around.” Lord Randall was as sour as ever as he stepped out of the cabin, barely glancing up. Mouser closed the doors behind them, waiting. “I didn’t even want to come to this devil’s lair.” The man continued, looking around. The faint candlelight added to a slight sense of ominous.

“Then I shall call my master so please wait here for a moment...” Sebastian was headed for the side door, closing it almost immediately, his face going into a blank polite look. Mouser bit her lip. Last she’d seen that the Marchioness had almost found out the rose massacre. The pair from the Yard on the other hand was distracted.

“Mr. Agni what’s going on? You should be out of sight.” Sebastian was saying sternly at the door, keeping a firm hand on the doorknob. Mouser groaned as rubbed her forehead.
“I’ve thought about it many times since we spoke. And I think I should turn myself in.” Agni’s voice was muffled.

Mouser began to walk on her tiptoes towards the stairs. Then she sped up, opening the door of the study, grabbing the boyo by the scruff and dragging him out, leaving him before turning the last corner.

“Listen to me. If you give yourself Prince Soma will react foolishly and that would cause problems for the Young Master. Do you understand?” Sebastian was saying when she arrived on the bottom of the stairs, the boyo walking out, staring down at the pair of arrivals, clearing his throat before speaking up.

“Well, well Lord Commissioner.” Ciel Phantomhive’s tone dripping of condescendence. Mouser pursed her lips and glanced at the demon, sighing. “Welcome to the Phantomhive Manor. Preparations for dinner have been completed. Come this way.” Ciel continued, walking down the stairway and gesturing towards the corridors. Mouser smirked, relieved by the recovery and accompanied.

“Please behave yourself and stay out of sight.” Sebastian said again, following, tailing the group, closing the doors behind their passage. Mouser on the other side of the party opened them.

“The truth is you probably don’t want to dine with me.” Ciel was saying, still smugly walking through his halls. “But since it’s traditional you came anyway. It’s rare you brought someone with you... is Aberlain your successor? You’re arriving at that age aren’t you.”

“If you stopped appearing at crime scenes he would still know nothing.” Lord Randall grunted out.

“I don’t particularly care if he knows or not.” Ciel shrugged. Sebastian dashed back suddenly. Everyone looked back, surprised.

“My apologies. The door was open.” He bowed slightly. Mouser closed her eyes, whimpering. Oh dear…

“Repair it if it cannot shut properly.” The boyo noticed finally what was happening, teeth grinding.

“Yes.” Sebastian said out loud as the group moved on. “Agni...” His tone was growing darker and annoyed not even lessened by whispering.

“If I carry on like this I will disappoint my god...” Agni was saying, desperately.

“Please watch your actions.” The demon asked again, harshly.

Mouser closed the door this time to muffle Agni’s voice.

Sebastian would catch up soon.

“Such a magnificent corridor and these paintings...”

The conversation amongst guests and host was helping in disguising the events but still…

“He actually uses such morbid paintings for decor. Really this is a devil’s nest.” Lord Randall was not letting go of his animosity.

Aberlain was impressed. The boyo was impressed that he actually knew the titles, the names, the times. That he appreciated the art and its meaning. Ciel smirked and used the amazement of the
detective to further needle the Commissioner. Succession, age, incompetence. The easy targets. Lord Randall in his arrogance took the bait, downplaying Aberlain’s credits.

Sebastian breezed in, closing the curtains, blocking Agni who seemed to have moved his chase to the outside.

“Everyone... this way please. Diner will be ready soon.” Mouser called after a quick eye contact with Sebastian, walking into another hall with four double doors, the chandelier illuminating the area.

Soma’s voice came suddenly from the upper floor. Sebastian vanished. And next thing they knew all was black. Mouer noticed Agni standing in the doorway, felt the scent of the night air. Maybe he had broken a window to get in. It mattered not. So she moved too, pushing him to the ground, grabbing Sebastian’s rope as he ran to her side and helping him with quick knots, tossing Agni into a hidden corner, behind the closed half door. Quickly she handed him her lighter while kicking the last of the chopped candles into the same place.

“My apologies.” The trio of light of a candelabrum illuminated the area. “It seems the lights went out.”

“The wind or something Sebastian?” Ciel asked, the cane tapping, slightly nervous. Or annoyed. His face was a blank for the guests. Aberlain looked utterly spooked. Lord Randall was still angrily glaring around, disciplining his subordinate.

“Yes. Not the wind. Or something indeed. Let us move on to the dining room.” He gestured, guiding them through the faint candlelight.

Finally everyone was seated behind closed doors in a quiet dining room.

As tradition stated business before pleasure Ciel started, Mouser and Sebastian behind his chair.

“Now then. As everyone has settled down shall we move on to the main topic?” The Earl asked. Sebastian picked up a silver platter and went to Lord Randall. Mouser waited until he was returning to walk to the Scotland Yard and placing the purloined reports next to the Commissioner’s elbow. He barely reacted. He also had to pretend nothing had ever been stolen from his subordinates.

“That’s right. I never want to visit this eerie dog house.” The man was grumbling as Ciel opened the envelope and checked its contents, smirking.

“Well then it was this degree of case?” He considered staring at the bank note.

“That’s...” Aberlain was shocked enough to forget etiquette and stand up, staring.

“The successor does not know yet?” Ciel smiled a bit too openly and slouched back on his chair. “The Commissioners have been used by the Queen for ages. He brings the treats to the doghouse.” He was having a kick out of the dog metaphor wasn’t he? “To sum it up the Phantomhives are a secret committee that carries out special duties. Because of that we cannot be rewarded by the national funds. So the Scotland Yard is in charge of providing such treats. Think of it as a police dog.”

“But that’s... like bribe money.”
“Not like. It is genuinely bribe money. It is a long standing tradition.” Ciel shrugged. It was just the way things were done in the Underworld. “Now to commemorate today’s settlement of the case I’ve prepared some champagne.” Sebastian fetched the bottle, presenting it properly, slightly tilted, ready to be opened. “Won’t you celebrate with me?”

“But the culprit...” Aberlain was confused by his sense of justice.

“Enough Aberlain. If Her Majesty and the Phantomhive say it’s over then... the culprit no longer exists.” Lord Randall declared, knowing how it worked. How it always had worked.

The doors were opened loudly.

“The truth about the case...” Agni stood there, shouting, pieces of broken rope dangling from his frame.

It was not every day one could see that look of shock in the boyo’s face. Mouser covered her face with her palm, groaning. A loud pop echoed to her right, the champagne opened, the cork hitting Agni squarely in the throat, making her wince as she peeked at the events. It made the Indian fall backwards, voiceless. Sebastian caught the cork on the rebound, smirking before placing a concerned mask.

“My apologies. Are you all right?”

But before that could end another disasters struck.

“I’m hungry... before they find me I could...” Soma wandered into the room mumbling, stopping, eyes widening. “Who are these people?”

Mouser closed her eyes again.

“Please lie fast boyo.” She whispered. Because she would let them go to the chokey as fast as they could blink as long as she escaped. Well... she might break them out after. But still her skin came first.

“They’re Indians?” Lord Randall was saying, surprised.

“Lord Randall I apologise for the fuss.” Ciel hand waved the incident. The attention was on him once again. “These two are Prince Soma of Bengal and his servant Agni. They’re good friends and are staying here while they study the English culture.”

“Ciel!!! You admitted! You really think of me as a friend.” Soma jumped into a hug, laughing merrily.

“To settle this incident you also went through many difficulties. Please let me offer this as congratulations.” Sebastian covered those events serving the champagne, smiling. “Then for resolving a conflict once again... cheers.” Mouser sighed as the flutes were raised, hoping for a break in the succession of disasters.

“I’m so very sorry.” Agni was grovelling. “If Sebastian hadn’t stopped me then...”

Ciel was sitting on a high back chair, looking furious, still keeping the black clad pair of demons on either side of him. Not one of them had a pleasant expression on.
“If you turned yourself in at a place I am not connected with I couldn’t care less.” They boyo was lecturing angrily, arms crossed. “As it is I would be caught in it too.”

“That’s right Agni. Don’t trouble my friends.” Soma scolded, not understanding that he was also a target of the Earl’s wrath. “And you are forbidden from turning yourself in. That’s an order.”

“Jo ajna.” Agni bowed and started to smile, little by little.

Mouser groaned. Sebastian rolled his eyes to the side, frowning. Ciel made an exasperated sound. Why hadn’t they thought of that little exchange before?

“Now let’s go to bed.” Soma finished, at ease.

“Fine.” The boyo seemed to have remembered something else. “I’ll let you stay however people who don’t work cannot stay.”


“Indeed. In return I will pay you. Money earned for your hard work.” The boyo was smiling now. Mouser chuckled. Sneaky little boy… “You want to become a great man, free from your parents, correct?”

“That’s right!” Soma stood, encouraged. “What should I do?”

“Let’s see... how about managing my town house in London with Agni? It’s a very difficult job. I would not ask of anyone else. Can you do it?” The boyo placed the last piece in game and leaned back, letting them celebrate.

“I’ll do it! Leave it to me!” Soma was shouting, dancing about. They left finally, going to bed early and would be shipped away in the morning.

“Quite a splendid job of clearing things up Young Master.” Sebastian praised, amused.

“I’ll go to sleep too.” The boyo complained, standing, tapping his cane in annoyance. “We’ll discuss work tomorrow.” He slammed the doors closed to the best of his ability, the steps fading away into the corridors.
Chapter 23

To my cute little boy:

Did you pass this year’s Christmas enjoyably? I made a Christmas pudding with my Philip. It was a grand thing and even John and Grey praised it. Next time you will try it too, won’t you?

Did you know that a travelling circus has come to London? In any case this time I have enclosed a ticket. It seems they are a troupe that has visited several places but somehow in each city they have performed in seems there have been incidents. Children have gone missing, simply disappeared.

The government is searching to the best of its ability but the children’s whereabouts are still unknown. Apparently the children just disappear suddenly in the middle of the night. Really… it’s as though they have been kidnapped by the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

The unbearable sadness of being separated from their precious families…

I am asking you to return them to their families as quickly as possible.

Victoria

“What you make of it?” Ciel asked as the pair finished the letter, leaning on his study’s chair, tapping the desks’ top with impatient fingers.

“I’ll make you a bet.” Mouser started, placing the letter down. “They were taken for a noble’s use.” It was typical and a rather large blind spot for the Scotland Yard as they had to respect the noble kind when there was no proof of their involvement. And the barest hint of scandal could make the coppers’ life quite miserable. Nobles were vindictive. As for the circus it was or wasn’t involved. Frankly without anything more in the information department it could go either way.

“What makes you say that?” The boyo asked, his eye clear and sharp.

“Remember my origin? Girls disappeared all the time.” Mouser had an empty smile on her lips, eyes dark. Most were taken by the Underworld, yes, but then there the auctions and the direct fancy buyers. Until the boyo had brought Druitt down, as futile as that had proven to be as his survivability to a brush with the Phantomhive seemed to be unusually high, rarely a noble had been flagged. Mouser could name several. Had killed a good handful in her time. Charlotte made even more of them pay for it. “But when you found them they could no longer be considered girls. At least not in the eyes of society.” She sighed. “Anyhow the most blatant case of missing kiddos was the boys that the Spider took. From time to time you found their corpses though. This” She poked the letter and the files. “mentions nothing about skeletons.”

“It could be something like the girls that were turned into dolls.” Sebastian considered.

“If so… it isn’t that similar. It’s not just girls this time. Look at the files.” They had been sent as soon as the boyo sent his answer, guaranteeing he would assuage the Queen’s sorrow. “Boys and girls. The ages are matching somewhat but there is more leeway. From eight years old to fifteens…”

“The dolls were all in their thirteen’s, fourteen at most…” Sebastian agreed going through the
words and images once more. “We will need access to the Scotland Yard Archives.”

“I can ask around but I am not sure anyone will know a lot seeing that no one seems to have gone missing in London yet.” Mouser considered. The first to go missing would be street dwellers. Jack would know about it almost immediately.

“Young Master if this deals with Underworld will we be visiting his place once again?” Sebastian placed the documents down and straightened.

“To be honest I want to avoid it. But…” Ciel sighed heavily. “If this has to do with the Underworld there is the possibility that they are already dead. How soon can we have everything ready to leave?”

Emeralds cut in squares with a deep colour, set on a choker of twisted gold, little diamond droplets falling around the base of the structure. That should be enough for Charlotte to spill whatever information she had. The thief had also managed to acquire a ruby and pink gold hair clasp to further butter-up Grell in any chance meeting. She had acquired them roughly at the same time she had been browsing Christmas gifts for the other inhabitants of the Phantomhive Household. She had given Bard a new decorated but fully functional Colt single action revolver, a scarf with little embroidered birds for Finny, a bejewelled brush and comb set for Meyrin and a delicate green tea blend for Tanaka.

Those were the last things that she packed to the London trip in the trunk with its many drawers and layers. It was different from the old one that they had thrown out and it was surprisingly how much it could hold. All of her wardrobe, dresses and all, although a couple of secondary boxes were needed for the shoes and hat. Sebastian also had his trunk packed, the wardrobe empty. The Young Master’s luggage was a bit heftier with three trunks that barely held a fifth of his attires and many boxes with the respective accessories. It was all placed in the foyer, ready to be hoisted onto the carriage.

It had taken a couple of days to get everything ready even though they were travelling lighter. Leaving the others behind meant leaving supplies, instructions, schedules and duties. There was also the nervousness of returning to a crumbling manor. It seemed to be a persistent fear that. And the boyo was not particularly eager to return to the townhouse to be pestered by Soma. Especially so soon after having the bright notion of banishing him there. He was grumbling through the corridors about annoying princes.

In the end they left, leaving the servants with some praise and responsibility and very little of hope on Sebastian’s part that the Manor would still be in one piece on arrival.

“It’s convenient that Lord Randall isn’t here.” The Boyo was saying, standing amongst the shelves as Sebastian and Mouser perused the entries, slipping some documents out of place, matching them with the info they had already. Aberlain had wandered into the archive’s room, shocked to find them there, trying to talk some sense into the Earl’s head.

“Please forgive me but if the Commissioner knew about this…” There was a very real sense of urgency in his tone. The poor man was shocked and confused.
“Its better if he doesn’t.” Ciel stated simply, looking around with impatience.

“In the first place how did you get to the third floor file room?” Mouser smiled at this, kneeling down next to Sebastian, comparing efforts. It seems that would be everyone… The Scotland Yard really should invest in some substantially stronger window latches and review their unchanging patrols’ pattern.

“How does it look Sebastian?” Ciel asked, noticing their lack of movement and the hushed conversation while handling the papers.

“Of the children we’ve been tasked to investigate there appears to have been no increase in corpses.” The butler stated, straightening. Mouser did the same, taking his hand when it was offered.

“If you’re finished we should leave.” The boyo then turned to the flustered detective. “If you have to talk about this just say it was me.” He instructed.

“I’ll still be scolded!” There was no going around that point. Still it would be none of their business.

“Anyway. Thank you for today.” The boyo stated, starting to turn around, to leave.

“A token for your cooperation.” Sebastian waited for a moment before picking up the detective’s hand, leaving a nice little sum as bribery much to the man’s shock.

“I don’t need this.” The detective shouted suddenly, returning the coins. Mouser shook her head, one finger sliding over one of her gold earrings. Every other copper she had encountered, barring rare exceptions, had always been so vulnerable to a spot of bribery. And yet this one was shocked and appalled to be on the end of a mere token that required nothing of him. Not even looking away. “I knew you used whatever methods necessary to solve the cases but this… this is…”

“There is something to be said for flexibility.” The boyo advised.

“Boyo you are stiffer than a rafter.” Mouser considered very softly. “In fact I wager if you ever try to be flexible you’ll snap in half like a brittle dry twig.” Ciel gave her a slight glare before returning his attention to the detective.

“In any case hurry up and get promoted Mr. Aberlain.” They were walking away with those words, closing the door silently, leaving the man sputtering in confusion. They slipped into the hackney after a short walk away from the Yard’s den. Ciel scoffed tapping his cane on the ceiling, signalling the driver. Just a few more places to go and get the bothersome task done before he could return to his manor.

“Are you here Undertaker?” Ciel called as they entered the funeral parlour, looking around warily, knowing the man’s preference for jumping out of somewhere in hopes of spooking the visitors for his own amusement. But by both being prepared for it and the giggling of anticipation shattered any semblance of surprise that could have existed.

“Welcome Earl. Did you finally come for one of my special coffins?” The Undertaker appeared behind them, juggling a couple of bleached skulls, one of them falling down with a clatter. He just shrugged, gesturing with a long sleeve, still playing with the other skull on his hand. “Well have a seat. I just baked some cookies.” He plopped the skull down, next to the cookie jar, fishing out a
golden bone, munching on it happily while the boyo outlined the situation. “Children corpses?” He asked slowly, confirming the words, leaning back on a creaky chair.

“The surface world had yet to find these corpses it seems.” Sebastian added. Mouser sat on a coffin, her feet dangling and balancing like a pendulum. Ciel had sat down on a lower coffin, leaning forward, placing his weight on his arms and cane, glaring in distaste and annoyance.

“And in the Underworld children corpses are an everyday occurrence.” The Undertaker completed. “Which the earl knows everything about. And so do you.”

“Jack did the best he could.” She said gently. Not many cared about the kids that ran around and ended up joining. The Undertaker relaxed a bit his expression, nodding.

“Never enough.” He retorted with a slight giggle.

“We’ve brought the documents.” Ciel gestured. Sebastian placed them on the work table. The Undertaker leaned and tilted, poking them before fanning and flapping the pages, humming. “Are there any children you’ve «tidied up» amongst those?”

“I wonder... were they there... If I saw something interesting I would remember...” He chuckled suddenly before turning to the boyo, smiling greedily. “A first rate laugh. If you do that I’ll tell you anything you want. You understand don’t you Earl?” He poked Ciel’s cheeks merrily. “You have to give me that.”

“Sebastian...” Ciel called, looking sickened and annoyed. Sebastian sighed and adjusted his gloves. Mouser stood up, dusting, ready to leave. The Undertaker laughed a bit, leaning, half sprawling on the counter.

“So you are relying on him again? I wonder...” He muttered. “If the butler wasn’t here would the earl be just a child who can do nothing?” There we a slight peek through the blinding fringe. “Though if it is amusing I don’t care who delivers.” He finished, waiting still.

“I’ll do it.” Ciel snapped, his jaw clenching.

“You... will?” Sebastian asked, taken slightly aback.

“Leave. Don’t you dare peek. That’s an order.” Ciel bossed them with a tempestuous demeanour.

“Yes My Lord.” Sebastian answered, walking outside, staring at the door and the sign for a moment. Mouser had settled on a barrel, crossing her legs. “What on earth is happening?”

“Soma has been pestering him.” Mouser said, leaning against the wall, closing her eyes. “In its essence what the prince is saying it’s true. The boyo is rather helpless and can’t really do much without help. At least when it comes to tasks like dressing, cooking, cleaning, physical exertion, running, killing...” Mouser smirked. “On the other hand that is not at all different from any other noble and I would bet good money that Soma himself is just as bad. Agni covers for it as you cover for the boyo. I believe he is tired of having those failings pointed at him so blatantly.” She jumped off the barrel. “This looks like it will take a while... I will go work on my sources. If I can’t find you here when I’m done I’ll either return to the house or meet you at the circus.”

“Lovely.” Charlotte pulled her hair up, smiling at the gleam of the emeralds, turning slightly, preening and cooing. Mouser chuckled and sipped her hot chocolate. It was thick, sweet and
creamy, perfect for the frigid winter weather. “Unfortunately I don’t have much for you. And it irks me.” Her friend finished watching her new acquisition sparkle around her neck and sat down, expression changing to a grim frown, placing a few sheets of paper onto the desk, retrieving them from the desk drawer. “I’ll keep at it.” Charlotte assured, smiling a bit.

Mouser nodded, skimming over the words for a moment and placed the cup and saucer down with a soft clatter.

“I have something else in mind now but this is more up Jack’s alley.” The thief confessed. “At least the more obvious part.”

“Can you share?” Charlotte poured the chocolate for herself, leaning back onto the plush armchair of her study, sipping. A slight kick and muffled oath told Mouser she had stubbed her toe while crossing her legs.

“There has been a rash of missing children that somehow disappeared with no witnesses.” Mouser said after allowing her friend time to get over the annoying pain.

“Class?”

“Across.”

“Dead witnesses.” Charlotte reasoned.

“Most likely. Going pirate here but there is a reason for dead men tell no tales.” Mouser agreed.

“Nobles.”

“You too?”

“We remember.”

“Of course.”

“Anyone in London and outskirts?” Charlotte sipped again.

“Not so far. But if the connection with the circus exists… well, it will be only a matter of time.”

“Did they look like specific targets?”

Mouser frowned, thinking about it for a moment.

“Now that you mention it… You are thinking like the Baron of Wylde thing?” Charlotte nodded. It had been quite a kidnapping case about five years ago. The three children of the man had been taken, the nannies and servants of the children’s floor eliminated. “But there have been no ransom demands. Unless they were selected for looks.” Like the Spider dolls. But those all came from orphanages and were purchased. Actually by digging deep enough Mouser was sure she could still find the acquisition slips. “It does make me wonder if there are more than what was reported.”

“There is always more.” Charlotte said bitterly.

Sebastian was still standing in front of the Undertaker’s store a couple of hours before sunset.
Mouser arched an eyebrow. She had time to visit Charlotte and then Jack, who had been alarmed by the missing kid news but said no one had truly disappeared yet. Two boys had died with the cold that month alone. Which was good. Less than last year. Less than last month. Some were sick. Six had been taken out of the streets by coppers after a badly botched thieving attempt. A handful had been found and taken to orphanages. But everyone in Jack’s turf was accounted for, dead, alive or imprisoned. He had said he would ask the other groups. He also said no outsider corpses had appeared.

“Not a funny bone in his body.” Mouser said softly, hoisting herself onto the barrels once again. Sebastian greeted her with a small smile, acknowledging the joke and its truth. “I have nothing. Which means they are either alive or someone did a very good job hiding the bodies.”

“Do you know anything about the circus?”

“We usually check the circuses… thieves could start competing with them for targets or cut a deal. Good place for cutpurses to act too. The Noah’s Ark Circus is very recent and has never had a show in London so far.” Not unusual either. Circuses usually started small and approached London as they grew in popularity. If lucky and within the Season they could have a few of their artists called to entertain in a soirée.

“You seem increasingly troubled.” Sebastian noted, approaching, adjusting the hat gently tilted over her hair. Mouser smiled ruefully, taking his hand, pulling it down, playing with her fingers over the cloth. “Is it about the encounter at the Exhibition?”

“Not all of it. Although something did snap when it happened.” Mouser admitted.

“Your growth was spurred a bit too soon.” Sebastian explained. Too much of that could drive a covenant insane. Mouser was mildly annoyed at best. Like a bellyache she had described. Still he had to be vigilant. His hand caressed her cheek, leaning to place a kiss over her forehead. It would be humiliating and rather distressing for a demon’s reputation to lose such a promising demoness to something as trivial as madness.

Night and fallen and the moon and stars were out when a slight chuckle came out of the funeral parlour. Mouser opened one eye and straightened, slipping away from Sebastian, blinking for a bit before focusing. She had been napping with her head on his shoulder. Sebastian picked her up, adjusting his arms around her frame and placed the thief down, letting go and opening the door, peeking. Mouser did the same, slipping under him, the height difference working in her favour.

The boyo was panting and sweating, having removed the outer coat, the jacket and rolled the shirt’s sleeves, raking his fingers through his hair, looking utterly tired and more than a bit aggravated.

“My… the Earl Phantomhive would go that far…” The Undertaker was just chuckling in a subdued tone. It told them that is was funny enough.

“What on earth did you do?” Sebastian asked, going easily into butler duty, helping the boyo straighten his appearance and dress.

“Don’t ask.” Ciel groaned in annoyance. Sebastian noticed as well as her the change poke fun.

“But for the sake of the Queen you’ll perform and even do this kind of things. You really are a dog.” And he did it with a calm, subdued flair.
“Shut the hell up.” The boyo groaned again, pulling the jacket’s lapel and turning to the white haired man. “There. I gave you your reward. Now. About the children.”

“There aren’t any.” The Undertaker stated simply, taking the boyo aback. Sebastian frowned, seeing the worst case scenario confirmed, as more investigation was needed. And more investigation meant a grumpier boyo. “Not one of these Children were my clients. And I haven’t heard rumours from the Underground companies.”

“So in other words you know nothing.”

“That’s not it. I know that I don’t know.”

“You deceived me?” The boyo was annoyed and suspicious.

“I didn’t deceive you. It’s a great clue, isn’t it?” The Undertaker pointed out, smiling, playing with the sheets.

“Certainly.” Sebastian considered. “You know nothing of the case means that there is no truth to the idea that they were murdered in the Underworld. If corpses haven’t shown then there’s a high probability that they are still alive.” He glanced at Mouser. She nodded, noticing the same pattern. Maybe it was just because the missing children had not been located in London. Corpses were harder to find in the countryside.

“So it means we do have to examine the circus firsthand.” Mouser finally said, sighing, checking her clock. They had time to make it to the night show.

“Let’s go Sebastian. Contact me if any information surfaces.” Ciel instructed. The Undertaker chuckled, calling him back.

“Earl. Keep your soul safe at least.” The man advised, intertwining fingers.

“I know that.” The boyo stated sourly.

“Really? I wonder…” Mouser heard the Undertaker say as she pulled the door closed.

The circus was placed in a closed off ring created by panels of black and white lozenges. The entrance was under a billboard, lamps and beads adding to the ambience. Booths, balloons, toys, games, people and children walking around, mingling with the colourful and exotic circus people. Some gave demonstrations of skills to attract clientele. The central tent was big and decorated, the space inspired by the gothic ambience of the epoch’s style. The central ring was illuminated by round lanterns and three chandeliers. A great one in the centre and two others flanking it.

“Is this it?” The boyo whispered as they took their seats, painted wood in a vertical stripe pattern, going around the tent, cut by a few corridors for access. “By all appearances there doesn’t seem to be anything unusual.”

“Ladies and Gentleman! Boys and Girls of Every Age!” The show was starting, a rust haired man walking into the light, juggling. One of his hands was skeletal, peeking out of the cuff or the white shirt. All of him matched the aesthetics and was colourful enough to command attention. Yellow bow, purple jacket, black and white waistcoat with a diamond pattern. The pants were black, the seams decorated with a similar design and the boots matched the tone with white spats and a curled toe. “Welcome to Noah’s Ark Circus.” His voice was rich and sounding, proper of a master of
ceremonies. “My name is Joker. If you’ll look here… whoops.” Accidentally on purpose the balls broke their juggling ring, falling on his head, creating a chuckle on the crowd as the night’s line up appeared around him, preening and prowling. “The whole circus is jostling for a chance to give you a fun show.”

Fire eating by a strongman, flying blanco with two small kids, knife throwing, rope walking, snake dancing. The show moved fluidly with Joker’s voice commanding the shift and rhythm.

“There is no music or anything particularly special.” Ciel commented, seemingly disappointed.

“Indeed.” Sebastian agreed neutrally, scanning the crowd. “Mouser. Ignore the tent and try to see the perimeter.” Sebastian asked. She nodded and closed her eyes, frowning slightly. Double checking his own perceptions more likely. Still it was hard to ignore all the souls sitting around.

“There is no sign of the disappeared children.” The boyo considered, his voice slightly muted by her focus. “If they don’t intend to make a show of them perhaps the movements of the circus are a coincidence.”

“Maybe they just bake them into pies.” Mouser whispered, opening her eyes. The only children souls she had perceived outside had all been paired with an adult whose soul seemed to be warmed by the others’ presence, signifying connection. For a while she could see them. Then it started to be too much and she had to back away before getting a headache.

“And finally the star of the show…” Joker was announcing as a woman with curly dark hair adorned by a red flower, wearing a black leather corset, showing her voluptuous figure, a red skirt-sash falling around her hips. Fishnet gloves and thigh high stockings with diamond-shaped adornments on the garters accompanied the deep crimson makeup. She carried a whip as she walked out of the draped artist’s entrance, the high heeled boots creating a swaying sleek stride, cages of wild felines dragged out with her. “Our wild animal tamer!”

“In the end it appears the show has no connection to the children. This visit has been a waste of time…” Ciel was still grumbling.

“For this act we will need a volunteer from the audience.” Joker was announcing.

Sebastian stood suddenly.

“What is it? Did you find something?” Ciel asked, startled.

“That really distinguished gentleman in the tailcoat. Please step on the stage.” Joker called, his skeletal hand extended dramatically. “Now… come down.”

“Go…” Ciel whispered, nodding, his eye growing calm in calculation.

“Yes.” Sebastian acknowledged.

“That’s a big kitty…” Mouser whispered when he was near the circle. A tiger waited in the ring, its tail waving slowly. Ciel gasped and turned to her, horrified, understanding that the situation had nothing to do with the Queen’s request.

“Ah… such round eyes. I’ve never seen such soft and vivid stripes. How lovely.” Sebastian was entranced, ignoring the ringmaster and the animal tamer, going directly for the feline, petting the tiger like one of the strays that flocked to the Phantomhive gardens. “What’s this… your claws seem to have grown a bit long… your pads are plump and exceedingly charming…” The tiger seemed to dislike having her pads touched because it lunged forward and gripped the butler’s head,
generating a shocked hush on the crowd. Ciel was hiding his face, embarrassed. Mouser was
chortling, trying to stay quiet.

“Betty! Let him go!” The woman, Beast as she had been introduced, shouted, swinging the whip.
Sebastian grabbed it before it snapped, stopping the punishment.

“She did not do anything wrong.” Sebastian whispered said, his voice dropping into a seductive
purr, rubbing the tiger’s neck softly, making Betty let him go. “In the face of such loveliness I was
unintentionally rude.”

“Look at that…” Mouser whispered, noticing the slight play with the whip and the frustrated and
blushing tamer. “He’s already working.

“What?” Ciel groaned.

“Sebastian already found the easiest one to manipulate. She is easily angered, you can see that right
away. And there is something terribly vulnerable in the flickering of her soul. If the circus is
involved…”

“And besides that… if you simply reckless swing the whip you’ll never be able to train her.”
Sebastian was still making his move, voice deep and fluidly. And then the tiger jumped again,
placing its paws on Sebastian’s shoulders and biting the back of his head. “My, my… what a
tomboy.” Sebastian chuckled at that, ignoring the panic in the tent.

“Who said you could go that far.” Ciel was screaming in anger as they gout of the tent, heading to
the outside. Sebastian was smiling, pretty much in a blissful dimension.

“My apologies.” Sebastian said without particularly meaning it. “I’ve lived for such a long time but
it’s only cats whose fickle emotions I cannot read…” He continued in the way of explanation.

Mouser chuckle turned into a short laugh when Ciel started to sneeze loudly.

“What ere you thinking being more conspicuous than necessary.” He was still trying to scold
before being interrupted by another loud sneeze. “You know I’m allergic to cats. Walk further
back.” The boyo ordered, storming away proudly, the exit broken by a few more sneezes.

Sebastian bowed slightly, stopping to let the boyo walk ahead. Mouser turned to him.

“I keep getting nothing.” Mouser admitted as people walked around. The only children there were
present for the show. Mouser could feel older ones than what was on file but those could belong to
the circus staff, aspiring artists, orphanage runaways looking for a better life… there were more
options.

“In you opinion what would be the best approach?”

“Circus folk are tight. And they are in Hobson’s area.” They were under protection, most likely.
“Infiltration would be best.”

“There you are.” A voice came from the crowd. Joker’s voice… “Hold on a sec’ you in the
tailcoat!” The master of ceremonies caught up to them. Mouser noticed the top hat of the boyo
disappearing behind a tent, peeking as Joker talked. “I am really sorry for earlier.” The man said,
smiling slightly ruefully,
“No. Please accept my apologies instead.” Sebastian said, smiling carelessly.

“I was surprised that you got so near the tiger. You all right from that bite? Anyway we got a special doctor here and I was thinkin’ he should check you out.” Mouser’s eyes narrowed slightly, both of them exchanging a glance. “C’mon round to the back.” Joker suggested, gesturing.

“You really must. We shouldn’t go back to the Town House if you’re hurt.” Mouser said softly.

“In that case I will.” Sebastian smiled slightly, acquiescing.
“Righty. This way.” Joker was saying while crossing the side of the circus society did not like or wanted to see. Cages, tents, props, supplies, materials other performers and some of the ones that acted that night. Lights over each tents entrance illuminated the area rather nicely. Everything seemed to be mostly in the open. “Sorry it’s so dirty.” The man chuckled ruefully. “Watch your step. Oh.” He stopped suddenly, peeking between two tents. “Snake.” The snake dancer, the young man with fair hair, like white gold and scaly pale skin was sitting over some crates, feeding a couple of snakes who wrapped around him like thick, brightly coloured scarves. It contrasted with the black and white scheme of his clothes, the high collared and open jacket, black pants and thigh high boots. “Is the doctor in the first aid tent?” He said nothing, glaring for a bit before averting his slitted eyes shyly, one of the snakes moving its tail. “Oops bad timing.” Joker announced, looking in the undulating tail’s direction. “He’s on business…”

“Huh… isn’t that the guy who got bit by the tiger?” The girl that had performed the flying blanco act was saying. She was still in the stripped pink and black dress trimmed in white ruffles from the act, brown hair tied in two big buns, adorned by a small black metal crown. A bow fluttered around her neck and ribbons adorned her arms. Her crossed legs accentuated the black tights and the pompoms that bobbed on the tip of her shoes. The eyes seemed a vivid shade of auburn in that lighting, enhanced by the fake bedazzled eyelashes and three diamond shapes under her left eye. Mouser stopped for a moment as Sebastian kept his pace even with the master of ceremonies.

“It really is. The stupid guy.” The pair of the act answered, smirking. He was also still in his performing attire. A blond kid wearing a feathered hat, a short pouf-sleeved shirt with a big ruffled collar and pumpkin shorts embroidered with starts. His tights were white and he wore no shoes. Matching his performance partner he had inked diamonds under the right eye. His clear eyes held more disdain than his partners’ but looked no less knowledgeable.

Mouser tilted her head. Odd. Their eyes were so much older than their bodies… It was not a strange phenomenon in the streets but there were some differences between actual age and aged eyes. And somehow they seemed to have both sides of the occurrence at the moment.

“Ah… here he is.” Joker announced. The doctor was a dark haired man in a wheelchair. He was tending to the knife thrower’s leg, leaning over it, the glasses perched near the tip of his nose, the white lab coat covering a simple suit that was missing its jacket. He turned around when he heard them, smiling welcomingly.

“Hey Joker. Is there something wrong with your arm?” The doctor asked.

“No. Today’s nothin’ to do with me.” Joker chuckled a bit hesitantly, rubbing his head.

“Ah… I was wondering who was that but isn’t he the man whose head was bit by Betty?” Dagger, as he had been introduced onstage, still wearing the long-sleeved, white and black striped shirt with a jabot, and the plain grey waistcoat, the black pants rolled up the boots placed next to him, the show skirt around his hips bunched and twisted, said suddenly, after pulling his appearance together, putting the boots on, plopping the red and black hat back on his head. His makeup, the dots under his eyes were slightly smudged.

“By Betty?! That’s terrible we have to get him to the medical office immediately!” The doctor reacted as any other hearing that news grabbing Sebastian by the arm, dragging him into another tent, making his sit down before examining. Mouser followed silently. Joker was still present as the one that had offered. Dagger came along too, most likely spurred by curiosity. There was a long
silence as the doctor scanned Sebastian for wounds, growing less frantic but more puzzled. “Were you really bit by a tiger?” The doctor asked, confused. “I can’t find any marks… at all.”

Sebastian smiled, remembering the event blissfully, allowed free from the probing hands.

“It was merely a play bite.” He said dismissively. Mouser covered her lips and faked a sigh of relief. Flanking her the two circus men seemed everything but convinced of that statement.

“Well… if it isn’t serious we don’t need to head out there…” So in his panic the doctor had thought of rushing them to a hospital or something of the kind. The wheelchair backed away slightly, the man looking around carefully.

“It’s really great yer right…” Joker said, looking relieved. “If I’d let a customer get hurt the ring-leader’d have my skin.”

“You’re not the ring-leader?” Sebastian asked, following through the given opportunity.

“I’m a bit like a hired shop manager.” Joker answered with a chuckle, leaning against Dagger who smirked with crossed arms. “The ring leader is a different scary guy.”

“You say that kind of thing and he’ll be mad later boss.”

“Doctor…” The tent flap was pushed aside, a female voice calling out. Mouser glanced that way. The beast tamer. She smirked a bit and stepped back, leaning against the crates. “I was wondering if you could take a look at my leg…” The woman was saying.

“Big sis!” Dagger called out happily. But Beast had spotted something else. “That I would be feeling bad in the same time and place as big sis…” He did not seem to notice he was being thoroughly ignored. “It’s like we are connected by the red string of fa…” Mouser pressed her lips together. Another one? “Huh?”

“You…” She growled, advancing furiously towards Sebastian. “You’re that gentleman from earlier. Why are you here? Thanks to you the show was…”

“Beast.” The doctor interfered, showing authority over the circus performers. Mouser’s head tilted slightly, curious. This circus had to have a generous patron. Other places she had seen never had an actual doctor… “What are you saying to our guest? In this case if you weren’t able to control Betty wasn’t that your own carelessness?”

“But he recklessly…” Beast retorted, trying to prove her point.

“There are no buts about it. You are a professional. Deal with your animals.” The doctor scolded.

“Now, now doctor… don’t yell in front of the customer.” Joker said, cutting into the conversation.

“That’s right. Instead please take a look at big sis’s leg…” Dagger pleaded, the circus makeup that accentuated his eyes making him looking rather boyish.

“Ah… well.” The doctor sighed, frustrated. “After this you must discipline Betty again.” He asked of the tamer who did not look pleased at all, glaring away from Sebastian who still sat on the examination bench, unfazed by the events.

“Fine.” The woman agreed.

“Right then. Let me see the prosthetic.” The doctor asked, pointing towards the examination table.
“Prosthetic?” Sebastian asked, standing.

“There is a bit of a reason behind this circus.” Joker explained, smiling, glancing at Beast. Dagger was fawning over her while she took one of the stockings down and explained whatever was wrong. “Folks with some sorta problem gather together here. I’m missing an arm too but thanks to the doctor I’ve got this. Cool no?”

The demon seemed surprised by that knowledge. Mouser glanced around once again, reviewing the medical supplies displayed around the tent. Much more generous than the average art supporter then.

“It’s because you use that hand so much and with so little respect that it goes bad quickly.” The doctor was grumbling while working on Beast, sending a seething glare towards the Ring Master. “Makes me want to readjust your whole body.” Joker smiled sheepishly.

Sebastian approached, examining his work.

“You’re the one who made the prosthetics for the circus?” He asked, leaning, eyes narrowed, the tone shifting lightly as he examined the new thing in front of him. Mouser glanced outside for a moment, keeping silent.

“Yes, that’s right. Since I do everything from the carving onwards… it’s hard work.” The doctor reattached the leg and moved the joint a bit, eyes narrowed behind the glasses.

“Carving? In other words… are they wooden?”

“Nope. Ceramic.”

“Ceramic…” Sebastian reached for the ankle, sliding his gloved hand over the surface. The cotton barely made a sound, barely snagged against the surface.

“I’ll say the ceramic is made from a special material that makes it light and durable.”

“It is truly finely made. They move smoothly with a ball joint like a doll’s limbs. It also feels good.” He was very unaware that the woman the leg was attached to was gritting her teeth and glaring daggers at him, blushing slightly. And was unaware the other woman was having a slight difficulty to avoid cracking up laughing. “This hallmark is…” he murmured suddenly, moving a bit to stare at the metal piece that connected the flesh to the ceramic. Mouser covered her mouth and chuckled. Beast was beet red now, ready to explode. The angle was not helping but the demon was absorbed in his curiosity. A little too much to notice he was placed right between her legs.

And Beast did what most women in the list of those who wouldn’t have already fainted would have done. She aimed the kick for the head while screaming bloody murder.

“What are you doing you pervert!” Beast shouted, the perfectly articulate leg moving flawlessly. Sebastian simply dodged, a small smirk appearing on his face. He had just added up the events into a single picture.

“Ah excuse me. That was rude.” The demon admitted, sidestepping a punch. “Yet I have never seen anyone so shameless react so modestly so…” That was enough to bring out the whip.

“You bastard!” She shouted, trying to hit Sebastian.

“Stop it Beast! You’re attacking a customer!” Mouser stepped away from the path of the leather ribbon, a minor adjustment in her position, mostly unnoticeable, as the Doctor moved frantically on
his chair, waving arms, looking around, finally focusing on Dagger and Joker who stared. “You
guys stop her.” Joker stared. Dagger seemed ready to lose his temper.

“You touched my big Sister’s transparent skin even though I haven’t touched her!” The knife
thrower shouted, upset beyond outrage, drawing his knives, tossing them quickly, in succession,
applying a spinning motion for greater effect. Without training that could either result in the blade
going into the victim or the handle thwacking them in the nose in a mildly bruising attack but
mostly embarrassing. Mouser preferred a direct toss.

“In all fairness I was not actually touching her skin.” Sebastian somersaulting, dodging, balancing
himself on a rope, one of the support structures. “Somehow it seems I might as well have been.”

“Dagger stop. At this rate the tent…” The doctor wheeled himself closer to Dagger.

“More important than the tent is sis’s purity.” The man shouted, throwing another volley of knives.
Sebastian moved, catching each one, still keeping his balance with perfect poise and malicious
smirk. “No way…” Dagger whispered, his arms falling, losing to shock.

“Don’t get carried away!” Beast shouted, her arm making the whip snake, readying to strike. Joker
moved, standing in the way, his cane intercepting the whip. There was something in his eyes for a
moment. Mouser caught the cold glare. She smirked privately. He might not be the circus main
boss but it was clear he was the one with more control in there. At least at the moment. Then the
harshness vanished as the turned to magic.

“Here!” He exclaimed happily, the top of the cane bursting into flowers, offering them to Beast as
he clapped, brushing the incident aside. “Okay that is enough.”

“Boooss…” Dagger whined.

“Why didn’t you stop them before!” The doctor shouted in frustration.

“But he…” Beast was trying to defend her actions once more.

“Now, now…” Joker said in a playful manner, hugging her from behind. “This pretty leg… it’s not
like I can’t understand wanting to touch it.” He continued, placing a kind hand over the beast
tamer’s thigh, just brushing the diamond pattern fabric of her garter. Beast blushed, a less violent
tone than before, looking away, her lips tightening slightly. She cared for him Mouser noticed.
More than cared. He was unaffected on the other hand. Cared enough but his affection ran in other
paths. “Anyway…” Joker turned to Sebastian who was returning the knives to Dagger. “You’ve
got some great reflexes. I kinda want to scout you.”

“Really?” Sebastian said suddenly, approaching. Mouser tilted her head, catching the shift.
Sebastian had put on a long suffering look, sighing ruefully he began to scheme. “The truth of the
matter is that our current master is spoiled and rather shocking.” Mouser fidgeted noticeably and
looked away, as if embarrassed. Everyone from the bottom pits would know about such dealings.
Most servants could be abused without fear by their masters because they would be too afraid to
speak up to an authority and risk being sent away without references. So let them make their own
stories and then feed them if they ever asked.

“Your master… you’re a servant at some manor?” Joked glanced at Sebastian and then at Mouser
with a bit more of attention. “With yer nice appearance I thought you were a gentleman…”

“Me, how absurd. I am but a hell of a butler.” Sebastian chuckled, dismissing the claim.

“Gentleman like their servants to be pretty though. It reflects nicely on their status when they
parade around.” Mouser said, shrugging.

“So a moment ago when you said you’d like to scout me, is that true? If it is I would like to accept it but…” He glanced at Mouser. She looked away, still playing uncomfortable. Joker was thoughtful.

“Are you serious?”

“Aren’t I always?”

“Yer pretty funny.” Joker chortled patting Sebastian’s shoulders. “I like you. I wouldn’t mind you coming, anytime.” He turned to the thief. “Do you have a talent?”

“Well… it’s rather embarrassing to mention this in polite company but… I’m extremely bendy.”

“Show me.” The ringmaster encouraged.

“All right.” She slipped out of the cape, took the hat down and unbuttoned the waistcoat, placing them on the nearby empty table. The knives were hidden under the sleeves and she had chosen to place pocket knives under the fabric for once. There were no holsters in her person either. Mouser took a deep breath as the circus folks looked at her with curiosity. “If you hear anything crack it’s because I’m not warm.” She warned with a bit of playfulness.

Mouser bent over backwards until her hands were on the ground, shoulders and head looped between her legs, right way up. Her arms were squeezing her breasts, making them look perkier, the swell peeking on the slightly unbuttoned shirt, hands placed on the floor, fingers fanned, perfectly parallel, the tips of her thumbs touching. It was also more challenging for the balancing act as she allowed her feet to leave the earth, in a perfect V, toes pointing forward in a dainty arch, creating a slight arabesque as she straightening one leg upwards, bending the other so the black toe of her boot touched her chin. With a quick undulating flick both her legs were bent and tangled together, tilting to the right, before straightening and curling, her feet almost touching the crown of her head, held there, inches away, her torso curving in a D form. Carefully she shifted her weight and freed one hand, moving that arm up, twining it with her leg, straightening them both forward, holding the position.

“Contortionism?” Dagger asked to the air, staring.

Mouser smiled and winked, resuming an upright stance. She had been flexible once but never to the point of being a contortionist. It had been a skill that helped with chains, ropes and binds. The closer she had seen to what she had just done was in a circus and RanMao. Being not human helped.

Joker chuckled.

“That was amazing too.” He praised, clapping. “We would love to have you as well.”

“I noticed in you didn’t have one in the show…” Mouser mumbled, the blush over her cheeks more a result of having been upside down than anything else.

“Wait a minute Joker… what are you doing deciding so quickly…” Beast started, angrily

“But he’s got outstanding talent… and she’s an act we don’t have.” Joker justified sheepishly.

Sebastian coughed, interrupting as Mouser was dressing.
“The truth is there is someone else I’d like to introduce too.”

“If you’ve got another person that’s great. But, as you saw, we’ve got an entrance test.” He winked at Mouser. “You would have had to take it too if what you did a moment ago wasn’t so hard to get.”

“Why is it hard to get though?” Mouser whispered thoughtfully.

Joker shrugged.

“Heck if I know.” The ringmaster said with a chuckle. “We get some flexible folks that train a lot but they never seem to be able to bend far enough for it to be amazing. But about that person… Just bring him. We’ll see if he fits.”

“I understand. Tomorrow I’ll bring that person.” Sebastian said, waiting for a moment more as Mouser placed the hat on her head. “Thank you for today’s hospitality. You needn’t see us off.”

Sebastian allowed the flap to close behind them, looking around. The area was a bit deserted now. The circus people were either training or already asleep.

“Well then.” He considered, looking around.

“We have a way in.” Mouser considered. “Should we risk it?”

“It would be faster if we did.”

Several tents. Several wagons.

No sign of the quarry.

And still everything was just slightly askew. Something told them everything was not truly fitting together.

A sudden hiss caught their attention.

The snake charmer was standing there, staring at them, one of his snakes moving closer.

“Entrance past this point is forbidden. Is what Wilde just said.” He spoke in a calm, sweet voice, deeply shy, averting his eyes after the first warning. “The exit is that way, says Goethe.”

“Thank you for your assistance.” Sebastian smiled politely, moving away.

“Goodbye. Says Goethe.”

“No choice then.” Mouser said calmly as they headed towards the entrance.

“Indeed.” He paused, one gloved hand sliding slowly down her spine. She arched into it and then away, purring in approval. “That was quite an interesting display.”

“Well… I was not staring at Joker’s crotch.” Mouser smirked.

“No. But he stared for a bit at you cleavage.” Sebastian retorted as they reached the hackney where the boyo was sneezing occasionally.

“The point of a circus is to flaunt assets. Just ask Beast. Now…” Mouser said as he opened the door for her, offering his hand. She steeped onto the box. “Is the order forcing you to travel outside
“Why did it end up going in that direction?” Ciel grumbled as he was informed of the circus situation and the attempt to infiltrate them in the morning, adding him to the roster.

“You say why but…” Sebastian pointed out as he helped the boyo out of his cape. Mouser closed the door behind them, starting to unbutton her own trappings, taking the papers away from the pockets.

“I mean…”

“Ciel!!!!” Soma interrupted, bursting into the foyer, moving in preparation for a hug, skipping merrily and without a care. “You’re late. Are your plans for the day over?”

“Welcome back.” Agni greeted them no less happily but a bit more formally, bowing his head slightly, hands pressed together in the Indian way.

“Teach me how to play chess today…” Soma asked, getting sidestepped by a hasty Earl followed by Sebastian. Mouser followed, curious to see how the conversation went.

“When did I give that order?” Ciel was scolding, aggravated as they neared the stairs.

“Is that a problem?” Sebastian was not really answering, waiting to see what kind of complaint the boyo had that time.

“In this case…” He started, turning his head slightly as he climbed the steps.

“What’s up Ciel, that is a really sour look.” Soma was giving chase, pouting. “You should at least greet me with a smile…”

“Shut up. I’m busy right now so shut up.” The boyo snapped, finally unable to stomach the annoyance any longer. Mouser smirked as Soma mumbled something, closing the room door behind her. Ciel went straight for the bed, plopping down on the soft mattress and plump sheets and covers, trying to ease the annoyed frown, getting out of the lighter jacket, pulling on his bowtie. “What I’m saying is how did I end up signed up for the circus?” He demanded, finally getting the privacy needed to discuss the issue.

“You were not. You were signed up for the entrance test.” Sebastian pointed out, standing by the door still, next to Mouser. She was looking around, distracted, sniffing the air for a moment, making a slight sound of surprise before returning her attention to the matter at hand.

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“Just you or her infiltrating isn’t enough?” Ciel groaned as neither answered. “Living in a tent? What a joke…”

“Would that really be all right?” Sebastian asked with a slight smirk, playing the game. “Me, living according to my own free will rather than yours?” Letting go of control… One thing the boyo despised.

“And with us gone you would have to stay within the town house and rely on Agni and Soma for… well…” Mouser smirked too, adding to the fire. “Everything. From food, to bathing, to dressing… Are you willing to give Soma that much teasing material?”
“I guess you’re right.” Ciel eventually groaned out, glaring, displeased. So the matter was settled. Sebastian went to help the boyo change into nightclothes. Mouser shrugged and grabbed the jacket, going towards the closet. “But you need to perform in the circus, right? I can’t do that sort of thing.” The boyo pointed out, leaning back was his boots were untied and pulled.

“How true.” Sebastian chuckled, walking towards the dresser for a clean sleeping shirt. “Well do as much as you can and please give your best at the entrance test.” Sebastian encouraged. “As your butler I’ll be rooting for you from the bottom of my heart.” He completed the formality of the caring servant, bowing behind the boyo’s back, catching him glare before groaning, relenting, starting at his winter socks.

“It can’t be helped. I’ll do it.” Ciel accepted. Mouser closed the curtains softly, waiting with her back turned until Sebastian touched her shoulder, both walking out of the room, the door closed silently.

“You just want to make him miserable.” She pointed out. Seeing they were both in the circus already there was really no point in dragging the boyo there other than the amusement of watching him fumble. It was his way of paying back for some comment or action.

“Quite.” Sebastian admitted with one of his smiles.

“Wicked creature…” Mouser whispered sweetly, bumping his hip while walking.

“Whoa… you brought a really cute kid.” Joker said as Sebastian and Mouser walked into the back of the circus, a sleepy Ciel walking in a very contrary state behind them, wearing the simplest commoner clothes they had been able to get. The ones that would be easier to dress. Except for the buttons. That had been Sebastian’s idea or additional mischief. Personally Mouser would have just given him pull on jumpers. Wool ones. Her idea of mischief was making him itch like a circus of fleas was dancing on his back. But it would be “shove the head in and arms out” as it were. “Huh…” the ringmaster was considering staring at the dark haired boyo that stood stiff and uncomfortable under scrutiny. “Are you a boy?”

“Yes.” Ciel said, looking up with a blank face. “I was a pageboy at the manor. My name is Finnian.” The story concocted was simple and using the gardener’s boy name. Other members of the circus had gathered to see the trials. Some congratulated Sebastian, females ogling him outright. Others asked Mouser about the rumours of her flexibility, asking about tonics that could be used to make one more malleable. Snake Oil was a particular favourite in that inquiry. Rumours spread fast, apparently.

“What a grand name. If you join we’ll give you a stage name.” Joker said, dismissing the question, going into a more serious mode. “But cuteness isn’t enough to join the circus. If you can’t perform that’s it.” He coughed, examining the Boyo once again. At first glance all he seemed to have was the cuteness factor. “What’s your strong point?” Joker finally asked.

“Darts?” Ciel said in a bit shaky and unstable voice.

Mouser lit a cigarette, shrugging the morning cold. One of the circus man, dressed in a colourful burgundy, black and blue outfit coughed slightly, getting her attention.

“Can I have one?” He asked with a smile.
“Sure.” She slipped another one free of her pocket, picking up the steel lighter, clicking the flame to life. “Light?”

“Thanks.” He used it, leaning towards her, cigarette held on his lips, winking.

“In that case let’s do some knife throwing.” Joker finally said, apparently deciding to put him through a plethora of trials as he had seemed so flabbergasted about his selection of skills. “Dagger lend him a blade.”

“Here ya go.” Dagger pulled a knife out of his outfit with a flourish, placing it one the boyo’s palm.

“Hit that target from over there.” Joker asked, stepping back, pointing towards a wooden board a bit away.

“Ah boss you’re mean. With those skinny arms he can’t reach…” Dagger appraised, arms crossed, smiling.

“It’s not mean. It can’t be closer for the show.” Joker was smiling too.

Ciel got into position, staring at the target painted on the wood.

Mouser blew the smoke away, glancing at Sebastian. He would have to act, would he not? Darts were lighter and the target would be usually closer. While he had aim with guns the power of those came from the weapon itself. And skill with guns would be too suspicious to show in a cover story that said pageboy. Although she had heard gun parading and trick shots were popular in American circuses. To make matters worse he tossed the dagger with a spin and it was leaning heavily to the left, unbalanced. And the said skinny arms were clearly failing. The dagger flew a good distance but it arched down too soon.

“Yep…” Dagger was saying as the blade was veering towards the ground. But it suddenly picked up speed, angling upwards, sinking into the target’s head much to Joker and Dagger’s shock. “Hah? No way!”

It did the same again and again. Mouser smirked, hearing a very small rush of fabric and the gravely sound of a pebble against Sebastian’s glove, noticing the lightning quick flick of the stone. It was a good cheat and the effect was making Ciel look valuable for a troop.

“Is this all right?” He asked smugly as the knife set came to an end.

“Seems like you have control over it.” Joker smiled, praising. “All right.” He grabbed Ciel and dragged him towards the tent. “Next. Tightrope walking.”

Ciel gulped, looking up before walking towards the stairs, climbing, looking uneasily down the perch.

“Doll tie the lifeline tightly. It’s dangerous if a beginner falls.” Joker shouted upwards then he stopped and looked at Mouser. “Miss… Would you be able to contort like you did yesterday if suspended from… like… a big metal ring? To add to the shock.”

“I never tried but if you think it’s a good act I could do it.” Mouser answered, shrugging with a small smile.

“Can’t I do some sort of music test instead?” Ciel shouted as Doll, the tightrope walker in white finished the preparations. Joker chuckled.
“D’you wanna retire already boy?” the ringmaster teased.

“N…no but isn’t there something else…” he was still looking down. Sebastian looked up, calmly, calculating.

“If you’re serious don’t dawdle. Do it fast.” Ciel started, losing his balance almost immediately. Sebastian helped him through, pelting him with the same trick he had used on the knives, making him react in pain and regain the footing through instinct. He would be akin to a Dalmatian in the morning. “That’s great. I didn’t think you’d be able to do it.” Joker clapped as Ciel finally came down, groaning and looking dismayed.

“Don’t demote this cute lil’ kid yet boss.” Dagger laughed patting the boyo’s head repeatedly, excited.

“Not yet.” Joker nodded. “But he hasn’t done something real important. A big ol’ smile.” He was smiling for show too. Sebastian had his back turned now, containing his laughter. Mouser chuckled and snuffed her cigarette, standing behind Joker, staring at Ciel and giving him a grin, pointing to her cheeks. “C’mon… smile.” Joker encouraged again.

After a small groan of frustration, a laughing demon and a grinning female Ciel managed to smile brightly, openly and without his face cracking.

Mouser was standing half naked, hair down, in the tent that held the fabrics and outfits. Everything could be matched, adjusted and worn to perform. Doll, Beast and Wendy were the ones with her in the quality of First Tier members. Which meant they knew best what to put her in and how to paint her even though they welcomed input. After all how could one act if the clothes were constricting? Beast went for the sensual, Wendy for the showy but practical and Doll, being younger, advocated the pretty and practical. Her outfit was white, the wig of smooth white roses, long pale feathers and beads adding to the allure, the long fake eyelashes fluttering innocently, adding to the white dress, trimmed with big roses around and under it, the neckband and detached sleeves. She also wore ballet shoes as it was proper for a rope walker and her socks were mismatched, one plain white the other traced by black stripes. All agreed though that if her act was moving her body and showing its impossible flexibility the clothes should be plastered on her.

After a war of outfits they had settled, placed the pieces on a chair, told her how to use the makeup brushes and left her alone with instructions to be at the main tent at dusk, a couple of hours before the performance to be introduced to all of the troupe with her new style and name and to be given the tour.

Pink, lilac, purple and magenta with white fabric trimmings. Her outfit was made of ballet pumps, one pink on the end of the leg that had the lilac and black horizontal stripe sock, the other purple, tipping the pink and black vertical patterned stripe sock. Garters with the same colour scheme held them in place, adorned by the spade symbol. She had gone with the gambling theme and the death card in that accessory. Long gloves with the same colour and pattern of the socks were worn on the opposite arm. Lilac on the pink sock side, pink on the lilac. A dress of black and magenta lozenges covered her from the top of her thighs to the under bust. A deep purple short halter top covered her breast area, black ribbons crossing over her chest and down her back, coming from the edges of the neckline, connecting to a black and white choker.

Mouser glanced at the mirror making a face, walking towards it, sitting on a bench, the frills and ruffles of the white shorts under the dress that matched the trims, in a trick to show nothing to the
public but would make them wonder while she bent out of shape, rustling. With black ink she lined her eyes, extending the line outward and inward like the lynx’s markings, the feline she had seen in a small cage outside. She then pinned her hair and a pair of flat buns on either side of her head, tying it with the ribbon that had the two main colours of the outfit.

“I think I’m ready…” She called the trio outside for a last appraisal. She could move in that…

“Everyone. From today we have some new friends.” Joker called, making the tent go silent, everyone waiting. “Newcomers Black.” Sebastian bowed, taking his top hat down. The black of his outfit was more shimmering that the usual butler uniform and the tailcoat had a showman’s flare. The ribbon around his neck sparkled and the pin was a small skull. Like her bunny’s. His makeup was simple. Heavily traced black ink around the eyes and a sharp line cutting the right.

“I’m Black. It’s a pleasure.” He introduced himself with a smile, twirling the top hat, before placing it on his head with a theatrical flip.

“Silk.” Mouser chuckled as Joker named her.

“Hi. Name’s Silk” Mouser curtsied and smiled sweetly, tilting her head, making the ribbons shimmer. Contortionist equals fluid piece of fabric to tie in knots.

“And this one is Smile.” Joker finished turning to the boyo.

“What!” He was wearing a pouf sleeved, frilly front white shirt with black vertical stripes, a bow tied around his high neckline. A short waistcoat with a single button and big pointy lapels covered her torso. Pumpkin shorts in deep blue with same colour suspenders and an embroidered blue draping over his left hip, mismatched stockings with lace trim to covered his legs, one solid black the other vertical thick stripes in black and white from the white boots with black bows. A boat-hat with big feathers was perched on his head. The makeup was a line of blue diamonds under his eye. He looked drained and unhappy, cringing at the stage name he had been given.

“Let’s get along everyone.” Joker smiled and looked around.

“Come one Smile. Greet your elders.” Sebastian did not resist the joke, patting the boyo’s shoulder.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Ciel gritted out.

“C’mon Smile, smile.” Joker encouraged, chuckling.
“Now I’ll take you for a quick tour of the backstage area. Follow me.” Joker smiled after the introductions were done, twirling his cane, pointing towards the circus area. “First there are the tents you guys’ll sleep in. It’s where the backstage workers an’ newcomers, the “second tier” members, live. ‘bout two or three people share a room.” He opened a flap, letting them peek into an empty tent. “There’s the mess hall and store room. An important job for new recruits is making the grub so… good luck.” Mouser sighed. Orphanage rules once again. Sleep, work, cook, work and sleep again. “The centre of this area is the first aid tent.” He stopped and reached the richer looking tents, separated from the other by a beaded fence. “And there is the main cast private tents.”

“Private?” Ciel asked, looking at the area, frowning.

“You get a private room if you’re real good.” Joker chuckled, tapping his cane and then pointing with his bony hand towards the first tent. “And that’s Snake’s tent. There’s a buncha poisonous snakes roaming free so if you get bit even once is off to the underworld.” He chuckled, lighting the mood, explaining further. “Snake and his friends ’re still shy, ya know… Careful of their poison.” They were doubling back, towards the secondary tent. “By the way…” Joker stopped, turning towards the Boyo “What happened to your eye Smile?”

“Ah… this… there… was an accident.” The boyo hesitated and stammered, touching the eye patch. It was a mix of surprise and concocting lies.

“Is that so…” Joker’s eyes looked saddened, touching the boyo’s head, brushing his hair back. “So young and having been through a lot…” he ended up smiling, patting him. “Everyone here had been through something so you’ll get along well with ’em.”

“Did everyone join during the tour as we did?” Sebastian asked as they moved on.

“S’ true for most everyone.” Joker answered looking over his shoulder. “But the first tier members ’re from the same hometown. We’re all childhood friends.”

That explained why they called each other brother and sister.

“Childhood friends?” Sebastian continued the information extracting known as conversation.

“Yeah. But Snake’s still a new face. His snake charmin’s none too shabby and we didn’t have a snake handler so he quickly became a member.”Joker smiled and poked Mouser’s cheek, throwing a friendly arm over her shoulders. “Kinda like Silk here will be if she gets a pretty act lined up right quick.”

Mouser chuckled and played with her ribbons.

“Thanks mate. But competing with Black there is gonna be hard on all of us.”

Joker laughed slightly.

“True. But well… The perks are much sweeter if you’re a first tier member an’ you don’t gotta worry about the survival of the fittest. You even get a private tent. That’s the reason everyone is working so hard an’ competing to become a first tier member.” He stopped right in front of the second smaller tent that rang out with noise of training people. “Right… this is the practice tent. The second tier and new ones practice an act here aiming at making a debut in a real public
performance.” They entered and Joker pointed out some of the acts and props available. “Work on the basics first. Warm up carefully and…”

“Joker!” Beast peeked from the entrance. “It’s almost your turn.” She took her time to glare at Sebastian as she waited for Joker to join her.

“Yes’mam. Go ahead an’ go all out…”

Mouser chuckled. The woman was going to be easy to manipulate if the need arose. Dagger would be next on her list, being generally friendly and his clear crush on the woman leaving a vulnerable spot and a good manipulation advantage.

They walked out of the way of the other practitioners, starting a simple routine.

“The poisonous snakes are at the entrance for the first tier tents. So instead of a guard dog is guard snakes…” The boyo was groaning and they had barely reached the third exercise, He sat down, complaining, legs apart, trying to reach his toes, left first, right next. “To enter the private tents you have to become first tier.” He groaned in annoyance and a bit of pain as Sebastian pushed his shoulders forward, to stretch his torso. “If it’s you poisonous snakes should be not be an issue, correct? You can see if the children are here or not…”

“They are not.” Sebastian answered simply, his hand still applying pressure on the boyo’s back, making it look good. He had to at least look like he was trying hard to compete.

“Never have been in any moment we have visited.” Mouser said, adding to the conversation. Ciel glanced at her, gasping suddenly, sitting up straight. She was resting on her chest, chin on crossed arms in front of her, her legs stretching forward, her lower half over her head, feet very near the ground. More… she looked comfortable.

“How are you doing that?”

“You don’t wanna know…” The thief smirked, stretching her arms forward, yawning. “Also I don’t rightly know.” There were some murmurs and stares aimed at her. They seemed mostly appreciative. “Blame him though.” She planted her feet on the ground and started to straighten seemingly using only her ankles, uncurling with a sigh.

“I could not feel any sign of the children’s presence either last night or today.” Sebastian continued, making Ciel move as they linked their arms, bending backwards over each other to lengthen their spines.

“Even so we have no evidence there’s no relation to the children’s disappearances. You haven’t thoroughly searched every nook and cranny.” The boyo demanded ignoring Sebastian while the demon practically pulled him out of the ground.

“That’s right.” Sebastian admitted, thinking. “There is the possibility that they’re in a condition that makes me unable to sense their presence.”

“Dolls.” Mouser suggested, balancing on one leg, doing a vertical split.

“Don’t say such unlucky things. She wishes for the children’s safe return.” Ciel chastised the pair that shrugged unapologetic. She could wish for whatever she wanted as hard as she fancied. Reality did not bend just because the queen wanted another outcome.

“Understood. By the way instead of sensing the children’s presence I…” Sebastian started.
“Heey… don’t stretch so sluggishly you guys!” Dagger appeared suddenly. Mouser resumed an upright position and waited. Sebastian and the boyo did the same, stopping with the fake warm up.

“Boss Dagger what about your performance?” One of the other hopefuls stopped a juggling routine to stare at the first tier member, surprised by his presence.

“Today I was top batter.” Dagger shouted back. “I am already done and observing practice.” He smiled and looked around, brightening when a ring was pushed inside. It was metallic, maybe a meter, meter and half of diameter, suspended perhaps two meters away from the ground. “Silk that’s for you. Joker asked for you to make the act with it.”

Mouser nodded as the ring was fixed to the floor. It was like a little pedestal.

“Any positions he wants to see or do I just wing it?”

“Try a lot of things. All right.” He turned to the boyo as Mouser climbed onto the ring, asking for help from one of the men, the one who had asked for a cigarette earlier in the day. The place where the circle connected to the pole there was a small circular platform. It would be enough. “First you decide your program. What are you hoping for?”

“A program that does not involve me using my body for something like tightrope walking would be good.” The boyo was saying, looking pained. Sebastian was chuckling quietly. “Seriously.”

“You could strap him to the wheel and throw daggers at him.” Mouser suggested, her legs open in a perfect split, keeping her suspended in the middle of the ring, twisting her torso slowly, testing the area and movement range available. She leaned completely backwards over her thigh, one arm going around the frame, upwards, the other free, moving over her shape gracefully, attracting some glances from the men towards the frills that spilled under the dangerously short skirt, before going down, gripping the ring, her leg moving around the circumference in an over split.

“You seem weak, yeah.” Dagger laughed, agreeing, the glare Ciel was throwing any of their ways unnoticed. “Then I’ll be earnestly teaching you knife throwing.” He took hold of Ciel, slapping his back. “What about you Black?”

“I really don’t have any preference.” Sebastian shrugged.

“You’ve got good reflexes don’t you? If there’s something you see that you like give it a try.” Dagger suggested.

“Yes.” The demon nodded, running past the circus performer, starting to do each of the arts in quick succession, going from the trapeze, to juggling, pole climbing, fire jumping, the wire act, trampoline, stopped when he reached fire-eating.

“Enough, enough…” Dagger was signalling, shocked. The crowd of performers was awing and cooing, praising.

“You’re getting too carried away… act a little more like a new…” Ciel was scolding, annoyed as the demon walked towards him again, finished with the display.

“Another super newcomer… really…” Dagger was smiling, amused. “I won’t lose to you guys y’know…” He challenged, looking around, looking for someone. “See, he already has his eyes on you…”

“Another?” Ciel whispered, following the pointing finger towards one of the high wires.
Mouser’s eyes narrowed slightly, standing on the centre of her pedestal, balanced on one foot. She sniffed the air, staring. Not human. Interesting.

“Hm. There’s this amazing guy that just joined.” Dagger was saying as the wire walker was staring them down. “He was some sort of government working and he’s totally serious. Heey… come down for a second Suit.”

“I thought I sensed an unpleasant aura. So it was you.” The man said in a cold, almost monotone voice. Mouser sat down in her ring, watching. “Honestly…” The pole-tool he had been using as part of the balancing act cut a path downwards, sinking into the ground, in-between Sebastian and the Boyo. Grim Reaper mouser reasoned after putting the pieces together. “I did not think we’d meet again but honestly… what did you come to fish around this time you demonic fiend?” He had jumped down and was now pointing the Death Scythe at Sebastian. Mouser’s eyes narrowed further, her lips twisting with a curse.

“Demon…” The whisper was going around, creating confusion.

“Even under the best circumstances in this Grim Reaper shortage times…” He seemed rather unaware of the commotion he was causing.

“What are you talking about…” Ciel interrupted, trying to quell the question.

“With a demon appearing like this I suppose it will throw off my schedule.” The man was complaining, annoyed.

“Grim Reaper? What…” Dagger was still trying to understand what was happening.

“No… this is…” Ciel was still in damage control.

Mouser chuckled from her ring, laughing out loud, falling upside down, her arms loosely dangling on the side of her head, keeping herself looped onto the structure by the leg with the pink stocking. Ciel looked around, disoriented. She was soon followed by Dagger and the rest of the performers.

“Give it up forehead…” The knife thrower said, still chuckling, slapping said Grim Reaper’s forehead, mussing the perfectly coifed hair. “You said it with such a straight face that I almost couldn’t tell it was a joke.” A comb was immediately working to keep the perfect appearance. “Since the first day this guy says the weirdest things, telling jokes like… how about this soul… Hardcore occult fan.”

“Though they’re not actual jokes.” The man said, looking absolutely put upon.

Mouser let go of the ring, dropping on the ground lightly, turning mid air like a cat, approaching.

Most of the second tier members were returning to their chosen routines.

“I’ll introduce you.” Dagger offered. He hadn’t been there apparently… “This guys joined today. The small one over there is Smile. The cutie is Silk.” Cute? Mouser mouthed, aggravated. She supposed the pink gave that impression… “The big one is Black.” He clapped, standing between them. “We’ll bond over our hopes and get along.”

“Sorry but there is no way I’ll get along with a savage beast.” The Grim Reaper stated, turning his back on them, walking away, a few steps followed by a shouting Dagger.

“No way? Circus is all about team work.” The knife thrower was saying.
“Why is a Grim Reaper in this place?” Ciel groaned, surprised, suspicious and wary.

“If one is here, a Grim Reaper personally infiltrating this place… Now we know one thing for sure. There is something in this circus after all.” Sebastian answered.

Mouser grimaced, examining the man. His suit was crisp but whimsically decorated with some stars and moons on the cuffs and pant legs. Not very flexible nor a subtle infiltrator. She twirled the ribbons, tilting her head waiting for instructions.

“There could be some value in speaking to him. Sebastian…” Before he could say anything else Dagger grabbed him in a hug, smiling.

“Heey what are you doing Smile? You gotta practice if you don’t wanna loose to Black and Silk.”

“Yes… huh…” Dagger dragged him away much like Soma did, towards the target practice area.

“As you wish.” Sebastian nodded, understanding the order even if it had not been said. He glanced at his covenant. Time for some Grim Reaper - Demon etiquette lessons. Unlike him she was still safe from any harm. Demon aesthetics and Grim Reaper rules claimed so. And so she could function as his shield if things came to blows. “Pardon me…” Sebastian approached politely as he was reaching the rope stairs for the trapeze. “There is something I’d like you to tell me.”

“I have nothing to say to you.” The Grim Reaper said dryly, glancing at them.

“Don’t say that. Let’s go outside.” Sebastian gripped his hand, dragging the man.

Mouser skipped after them.

“What’s up with them…” Dagger looked up in the middle of his explanation. “Ah. Getting along?” He stated, smiling. Mouser smirked before closing the tent flap.

“Honestly…” The Grim Reaper stared them down as they stopped behind the tent, near the storage space. His distaste was very plain.

Mouser approached, moving into his space easily. Taller than her as almost everyone. She looked up, blinking a couple of times. He stepped back suddenly, startled to find her so close, staring at him with dark eyes. She smiled, showing fangs sweetly. His hand twitched for the Death Scythe but he did nothing but straighten and adjust his glasses.

“So you’re the handsome man with the cold sadist eyes.” Mouser said, going back to Sebastian, sitting on a crate, crossing her legs, toes pointing daintily forward. “Say what you will about poppet but she has excellent taste. On some things.” Then again the dress was also to Charlotte’s taste so maybe Mouser was the faulty material in that line.

“This is William T. Spears. You recall?” Sebastian introduced the other man, keeping appearances.

“The Grim Reaper that broke the fight with poppet and took responsibility for her actions.” Mouser repeated. It was not the one she had seen take Meena and West’s souls. Sebastian nodded, smiling slightly.

Spears tskd, lips thinning.

“Even though the London division is understaffed due to the vacancy and punishments in the
collection divisions… sending me from the management division… what a disaster.” He complained rubbing his forehead as if a migraine was starting to form.

How many was an understaffed division for London? Mouser mused thoughtfully.

“Then why is someone as busy as you in this place?” Sebastian inquired politely, arms behind his back.

“I’m having to clean up after that trash officer that’s still undergoing punishment.” Spears clarified, the information clearly valueless. To be given so freely it had to be so. Also they had encountered Grell before, carrying the said punishment. Still in a circus Mouser thought sending the flaming red flamboyance herself would be a bit more fitting than that stiff accountant.

“Don’t say bad things about poppet.” Mouser pouted, containing a chuckle.

“I didn’t expect special treatment but I don’t think I’d be forced to field work just because we were in the same class.” The Grim Reaper continued his complaint.

“For a Grim Reaper to sneak in and investigate… is this some sort of special situation?” Sebastian insisted.

“There is no way I’d release information that concern souls to a demon.” The man scoffed, his grip growing tighter on his weapon. Mouser stiffened. Her claws sharpened slightly. Sebastian was still very calm. She eased too. “It’d be like throwing a rabbit in front of a carnivore.” He adjusted the glasses with the sharp bladed side of the pole, grimacing.

“I have no interest in poor quality souls.” Sebastian said with a shrug.

“Nicely said for a starving demon.” That comment made Sebastian stop, his eyes shifting, the pupils turning tighter and the red starting to shimmer more clearly. Mouser sighed, feeling the pull. “That female may be able to keep you strong but from what I can see is still too young erase the hunger.”

“I tired of the behaviour of messily sampling every dish available long ago.” Sebastian waved away the claim. “If you’re hungry the extent of the hunger determines how delicious the dinner is.” He moved closer to Mouser, leaning over and around her. It was both telling him she was his and a trick to try and crack his attitude. Stiff people frowned and got flustered before displays of closeness. “But one cannot risk collapsing…”

“What poor taste.”

Sebastian chuckled slightly and stepped a bit away.

Mouser huffed and smiled, leaning forward.

The flow of power was one of the first things cemented between them. She was steadily increasing hers as the change took place. He replenished his every time they had sex and helped her adjust at the same time. Sometimes even simple contact was enough for a spark to pass. A touch, a kiss. Feeding was something new in that array of powers. What she had to give him for now could be called a snack.

“Besides that… I am now collared.” He pulled the glove away, showing the contract mark, arching an eyebrow as if to say as you should know. “So please do not worry yourself.”

“All right.” Spears said after a long pause. “Since the evil appeared before the job I’ll get to the
point. I’ll say it clearly. In a few days there will be an inspection of a large number of souls. This is a special case so please refrain from getting in my way.”

Mouser’s eyes narrowed suddenly behind her makeup. So it was already decided then. But was it around or entangled? Sebastian seemed thoughtful. Still he was not going to let go of an opportunity to tease and throw his opponent.

“My my… how difficult to handle alone.” He exchanged a look with Mouser. “But this large quantity of souls…”

“The female cannot feed.” Spears stated, the Death Scythe slashed in front of him for emphasis.

“Of course not.” Sebastian played the offended part. “Only crass and classless demons would force their covenant to mature like that.” He played with her ribbons, leaning to kiss her affectionately. Spears twitched. “Mouser has no appetite for souls yet as I seem to be quite enough.”

“More than enough sometimes you greedy hell raising tosser.” Mouser grumbled looking away with a slight blush and a small smile.

“Shall a demon like me offer assistance?” Sebastian continued.

The Grim Reaper groaned, annoyed, moving, the Death Scythe extending in an attack. Sebastian lost his hat. The blade swerved near Mouser who merely extended her arm when it was retreating, retrieving the captured top hat, balancing it on her head with a flick, looking serious.

“I won’t forgive any overtime. If you interfere I’ll reap you.” The Grim Reaper threatened, resuming a more neutral stance, adjusting the glasses with the blade again.

“It’s not as though I want to be involved with a Grim Reaper by choice.” Sebastian took the hat from Mouser, placing it on his head, tilting the brim slightly, his eyes covered by the shadow. Mouser leaned, placing her chin between her hands, elbows on her knees. “As I said… I have no interest in poor quality souls.”

“Hey. That noisy knife thrower is calling.” The boyo walked into the discussion, looking haughty and still very annoyed.

“I don’t see him as high class goods. Honestly. Demons are so…” Spears pointed out, continuing his derisive rant.

“You.” And Ciel found the target for his own rant. Unless Spears wanted to be punished the boyo’s humanity defended him from temper attacks. He might look stoic but there were some cracks and Sebastian had been poking them. “Stop saying things like that here. If you make us suspicious to the rest of the circus we’ll do something about it.” He delivered his own threat without a flinch. “It’s good they thought you were joking.” Ciel glanced at Mouser who waved with a smile. “But not being able to blend with humans… you’re worse than that vulgar Grim Reaper.”

“Poor poppet.” Grell was really taking a gossip beating within that group.

“Really we shall not interfere with your job as long as you keep from doing the same to ours.” Sebastian suggested calmly.

“I am grateful.” Spears recognized the truce offering but it seemed his morals would not leave well enough alone. “But I don’t intend to let you out of my field of vision.”
“Perfect. Then tonight it’s decided that we will absolutely not interfere with each other.” Ciel stated.

Mouser yawned ignoring the tense and charged atmosphere. Her cigarettes were in the small suitcase with clothes, underwear, the usual pair of daggers, six pen knives, three colts and bullets to last two weeks. She wanted a smoke… wonder who is willing to gamble around here…

“Then, Smile…” It was Ciel’s time to twitch. “I’ll ask you to keep your dog tightly leashed.” Spears said.

“I don’t want to hear that from a glasses that can’t even sneak in properly.” The boyo teased harshly.

“It’s not glasses. It’s Suit.” He turned to Mouser. “As for you… I doubt you’ll go after souls presently but thread lightly.”

“Or you’ll reap me?” Spears twitched again, angrily. It was not a threat he could carry out without repercussions. And they were both aware of it. Mouser grinned slowly. “Really… then it would be another Grim Reaper running around with scissors. How humiliating…”

“Let’s go.” Ciel ordered, fed up.

“Yes.”

“Aye, aye.”

“Thanks for waiting.” Joker returned after the show was over and the outsiders’ crowd drained out of the circus area. Dagger had been drilling the boyo non-stop. It was noticeable by the way he dragged himself to a sitting position when Joker called them to gather. Sebastian had been experimenting all the possibilities around while asking harmless questions. Mouser had stayed in her ring, talking to the acrobats. It was clear that whatever they knew was too little, too generic. Most of them were just trying to get away from the slums, from menial or factory jobs. It was just survival. Brought back memories too. “It’s time for new arrivals room assignment.”

“Yeah…” Ciel groaned from his spot. Joker chuckled and looked at the boyo for a moment.

“Ah… Smile is not very cheerful. Smile Smile.” He encouraged laughingly, waving some papers. Mouser patted his head, cooing, sitting next to him, offering a bit of support. For some reason he really did accept it without any of the usual fuss, leaning against her shoulder. “For fairness we did this as a lottery. Smile.” He called. Ciel was barely able to lift his head, looking blearily forward. “Tent eight. Here’s your roommate Freckles. Black’s in tent nine…”

“Seba… Black and I aren’t rooming together?” That alarmed him immediately.

Mouser smirked. Another unexpected kink in his plan as it were. The request, the lack of information, the forced adhesion to the circus, the cold outside typical of January and the irregular bouts of snow, having to sleep in a tent, foregoing the comforts of home and servants, the forced physical exertion, the promise of early mornings and compulsory labour… Either they would gab their way out of repercussion or she could already see the Phantomhive manor floor being scrubbed with tiny cloth pieces.

“Ahhh Smile really sticks close to Black.” Dagger sing-sang playfully.
“That’s not…”

“You have to be independent soon.” Dagger chastised, ignoring the boyo’s shocked face.

“Black and I should be together because…” He grew silent when Mouser’s arms went around him.

“Hush now boyo.” The thief pulled Dagger’s sleeve, looking away after calling his attention. The knife thrower and Joker stared at her. “It’s only natural seeing Black was the strong one in the household…” Mouser whispered and fidgeted, pulling one knee to her chest, still holding the boyo. Ciel glanced at her, confused for a moment.

Dagger nodded, looking sombre for an instant. Joker’s eyes went immediately towards Ciel’s eye patch.

Sebastian kept a stoic expression. Implied abuse indeed explained why they would clump together. And in a circus where most of the members admitted that their pasts held pain it was something to link them, make them feel more comfortable and closer to the newcomers.

“Black’s roommate is Suit.” Joker continued after a small cough, regaining his energy and smile. Mouser let go of Ciel, grinning for a moment as they boyo tried to contain a shriek of absolute shock. Both the Grim Reaper and the Demon were staring at each other with absolute disgust, distaste and disbelief.

“Black, Silk and Smile already get along.” Dagger picked up again, completely ignoring the atmosphere of the glaring supernatural beings. “So you have to make new friends.”

“Silk. You’re in tent twelve with Dove.” A young woman with bleached blond braided and beaded hair and a poufy pink dress. One of the tight-rope walkers she had been stretching and chatting with earlier. Mouser waved, receiving a warm smile and wave in return.

“This is the worse.” Spears was saying, annoyed, adjusting his glasses, still glaring.

“I’ll say the same to you.” Sebastian retorted, teeth clenched.

“Nice to meet you.” The freckled boyish girl was saying to Ciel. Mouser’s eye narrowed for a moment and then placed her. Having dressed and acted as a boy herself for years and having met lots of others doing the same in the streets it was easy to spot a similar minded person. Then she caught her scent. A small chuckled escaped her lips as the boyo struggled to be both a normal boy and civil.
“You ain’t goin’ to bed yet?” Dove asked, throwing herself onto the dishevelled bottom bunk after undressing, handling the circus attire with more care than the thick nightgown she slipped into, complaining and shivering all the way. It was the woman’s tent to start with so there were already possessions and marks of living scattered about. Clothes, a blade a few personal mementos. Dove moved a few props and trinkets out of the way, stuffing some on the travel trunk that belonged to her before letting Mouser arrange her bedding and push her trunk to an empty spot.

“No. I’ve gotta walk around a bit or the legs are gonna cramp on me.” Mouser slipped back into her street accent easily after changing into a more comfortable set of clothes, looking out, holding the flap open, seeing no one outside and some faint shadows inside the other tents, cut by the gas lamps. Everyone would be preparing to sleep.

“Is that one of your tricks?” Dove asked, stretching and slipping deeper into her covers.

“One of many.” Mouser smiled. Sebastian was pinned and the boyo would be unable to do much. “I won’t be gone long.” Plumes of white rose from her lips as she walked out, the fabric falling behind her, sealing the way, going through the paths created by the tents, catching fragments of conversations, reaching inside her pockets and getting a cigarette, mixing the cold plume with a grey wisp of smoke and a small sudden flickering flame.

It was an eerie empty place without the warm light and sounds that created a circus during the day and early night. A few rats scampered in the dark, their paws scratching the ground. A cat seemed to follow them with bright eyes from a perch. Still no target-child. She could not search the places where scraps of information would be stored as it was much more difficult to sneak and rummage through possessions if the room was small and shared with the victim. She was also leery of the snakes. Mouser had no idea how resistant she would be against exotic poisons. On the other hand it was highly unlikely information would be found anywhere else.

So what could she do while her companions were virtually incapacitated?

“Can’t sleep?” The thief stopped walking when Joker’s voice reached her, turning slightly. The Ringmaster seemed to be doing his own rounds, seeing if anything was amiss before retiring. He was smiling as he came to a halt next to her, arms crossed under the jacket that covered his shoulders, appraising, thinking of why would she be out and about in the cold night. Mouser looked straight ahead sighing smoke and fog. Could be a useful encounter is she played her cards right.

“Not until I know where I am.” She whispered calmly, conversationally, breaking his smile. He understood. Why would he not with all the hints that had been given.

“There is nothing to be afraid of now.” Joker placed his bony hand on her shoulder. The prosthetic moved without a hitch, giving a reassuring pressure.

“I’ve heard that before.” Mouser snuffed out the remains of the cigarette against a nearby crate, shoving her hands into her pockets, head down.

“Silk…” The man whispered. Then his smile was back, patting her head playfully, like one would do to a little sister, like she used to do to the kids that came to the Dancing Pig, begging for a way out. “I’ll show ya around.”
Sleep was indeed a luxury. That being said Sebastian had no particular attachment to such a thing at the moment. He was neither severely beaten nor waiting for Mouser to snap out of her shortening slumber cycle and pretend to linger lazily and sleepy while nuzzling him like a kitten. The lack of said occurrences coupled with the ridiculous rules the Grim Reaper had established ended with the demon staying still as a corpse, arms locked next to his body, staring at the cloth ceiling with a frown.

Delays and annoyances… But the Grim Reaper said they needed sleep. So theoretically it would be easy to sneak away once he had entered a deeper slumber. Sebastian sat up, moving stealthily and slowly, edging towards the foot of the bunk. It was also annoying that childish notion that passed for division of “territory.” As he reached it the Death Scythe extended with a hiss, blocking his path, the Grim Reaper peeking from the bottom bunk, placing the glasses on his face, slipping it over the bridge of his nose, glaring, the usual pristine appearance slightly dishevelled.

“Where are you going?” He demanded stiffly, angrily. “It’s well past lights out time. Truly… I cannot tolerate you soul stealing so please limit you wandering without a master while I sleep.”

Sebastian frowned and scoffed, moving backwards, annoyed.

There was just the barest hint of sound as Mouser sneaked in, stopping to check her surroundings, to see what was where, climbing onto the top bunk without effort, the mattress and structure dipping a bit, creaking with the added weight. Sebastian smirked for a moment as she came closer, smirking, snuggling, getting comfortable over the thin covers, against his shape.

“I have no way to sneak in. Not with them inside, the snakes loose. There are some anti-thieves traps but they’re simple rope-and-bell, easy to avoid.” She yawned. “There will be better chances during the day while training and putting on the show. If so we should check the tents one by one taking advantage of the one that’s empty at any given moment.”

Apparently she was there to simply report.

Although there was fun to be had in the aggravating of the man in the bottom bunk territory. Done with the official nature of her presence she sighed sweetly, pecking Sebastian’s lips, moving a bit closer, the bedding creaking under them. The Death scythe pierced the mattress suddenly, next to their heads. Mouser smirked, letting go of the tension the startle had created. Sebastian slid his hand over her hair grinning too.

“Refrain from intimacy while I am forced to share the tent with this vermin.” Spears said a bit angrily, pulling the bladed part of the Scythe out, a bit of stuffing pouring out, glaring at them, rearranging the glasses. Mouser sighed and moved towards the lower edge of the bunk, hanging upside down, staring at the Grim Reaper.

“Hush. Up here is his manor as you demarked. If we wanna bonk we’re gonna.” Mouser paused smirking, watching him fume. Then she hopped down the bunk and slapped her clothes straight. “Still I’m clearing off. Good night.”

“What is it with your outfit?” Mouser asked playfully while carrying a bucket of apples that shone, recently polished and washed, red with yellow streaks, placing them on the long table that served as
the preparation area. She was not one to talk because the thief had returned to her layers of street clothes. Everyone was busy preparing what they had or carrying what they had left to buy from the markets and shops nearby.

“It seems your remain unaccustomed to changing clothes on your own.” Sebastian walked by condescendingly with a large tray full of clean snow and fish.

“I was hurrying.” The boyo groaned, his clothes and hair in disarray, struggling with a bucket overflowing with potatoes. He was not going to admit anything. Sebastian chuckled as he placed the fish down, looking at the mess. The buttons had obviously gotten in the way. He was also shivering in the chilly morning air, still sleepy, unaccustomed to such an early morning start.

“Oh dear.” Sebastian kept his tone low and even, slightly chastising, slightly mocking. “You are going to have a difficult time untying a dead knot on your own.” He scolded while retying the not of the medical eye patch, ignoring the confused stares and the work that stopped around them.

“Smile!” Freckles called, laughingly. “Black ain’t your mum!”

“Might was well be.” Mouser poked Freckles shoulder, both laughing as the boyo grew flustered.

“No!” The boyo was quick to shout, getting away from Sebastian, stiffening and blushing. “It’s a habit… sometimes…” Mouser gave Freckles a little push, encouraging the circus member to join the preparations, winking at Ciel, letting him be for the time being. “Sebastian. Don’t treat me as your master while we’re here. Leave me be.”

It had been a whisper but Mouser was not sure he acutely understood how difficult for him that was going to be.

“Understood. I shall at once.”

The groups were working quickly to put a hearty meal on the tables so everyone would have the energy to train and act. The first tier members were not doing much but they did do something from time to time. Snake was moving around, shyly. Mouser took an apple from the pile and approached, peeking around the corner of the tent, to the gap where he had holed himself up.

“Here. You really should eat more. I can see your ribs under that jacket of yours.” The snake charmer seemed to be surprised, eyes flittering about when she addressed him, as if making sure. He reached for the fruit with a scaly hand, looking at it before taking. He wouldn’t have to fight for a share but he did seem like a sort of man that often forgot to take care of himself.

“Thank you.” There was a pause, a long one. “Says Oscar.”

Mouser crouched so their eyes were level.

“Which one is Oscar?” there were at least four snakes wrapped around him.

“I am Oscar. Says Oscar.” There was no pause this time.

Mouser extended one hand to the snake whose head was tilting upwards, dancing in front of her, emerald green scales and big yellow eyes. A long tongue slipped out, tasting the air. She smiled.

“Can I pet him?” Snake seemed surprised, exchanging a glance with said snake named Oscar. Mouser kept her smile on, moving one hand. It was rather frightening to see and actually be asking that but even if Joker felt sympathy for her and asked her to show a complete act by noon, Dagger seemed willing to play and gamble and Doll taking a shine to Ciel and Sebastian being the most
likely to make it quickly to the first tier it would be best if all the members felt that they were trustworthy.

Snake was the tricky one, skittish and shy. Jumbo was a kind giant, willing to help the newcomers, seemingly feeling closer to Doll. Beast, despite the animosity she showed Sebastian, seemed to have little to nothing against Mouser.

“I would like that. Says Oscar.” Mouser scooted closer, shoulders almost touching with Snake, reaching for Oscar. His head felt smooth under her fingers as he undulated under them. He snaked around her wrist for a moment, tasting the air again with a quick tongue before returning to Snake, wrapping around his shoulders.

“I’m going back to help out. Please eat.”

“Smile what’re you plannin’ on makin’ with them potatoes with peels thicker than the meat?” Freckles shouted suddenly. The peeling had proven to be a disastrous choice for the boyo.

“Uh…” He looked up, holding the knife and a small sliver of the potato.

“What do ya think you’re doing? You peeled that many?” Freckles was panicking about, staring at the bucket of thick peels, uncut potatoes and the shards he had already tossed to be eaten.

“I… I’m sorry…” The boyo was stammering, embarrassed.

“Interesting.” Sebastian mentioned while watching the scene, his sleeved pulled away while gutting and cleaning the fish. It did not matter where he were. The movements and purpose were still as sharp.

“What is?” Mouser glanced at the boyo, cutting the carrots.

“With the exception of you, because of your prior experience…” The butler began.

“I was housebroken, you mean?” Mouser interrupted, adding the sliced vegetal to the pot of what would become stew.

“I would not be so crass. But every other of the Phantomhive servants made that same mistake the first time they stared at a gross of potatoes.” Mouser chuckled and moved on to the spinach.

“Cor Blimey what part of this can we eat?” Freckles asked sourly, turning and twisting the white shard.

“It cannot be helped. I shall deep fry them and make them crisp.” Sebastian walked in and picked up peels and cores, walking towards the boiling pots. “Then turn them into fish and chips.

“Cor! I love those.” Freckles followed, enthusiastic, peeking around him as he placed the ingredients near the frying pan.

“That is good to hear.” Sebastian said, smirking.

“Look, we’re going Smile.” Freckles was dragging Ciel through the crowd as soon as the little brass bell was rung, signalling that everything was ready for eating. It was barely seven thirty in the morning and London’s fog was still thick around them. “If we don’t hurry we’ll miss the meat.”
It was indeed a war to gather whatever they wanted to eat, piling the plates and getting away before anyone toppled over their loot. Someone as thin and light as Ciel was easily pushed around unless he was fast and a dodger. He was not much of a dodge adept though. He was a complete mess by the time he reached the tables. Mouser smiled as he and his bunk mate sat down, a bit farther down. Snake was hovering nearby, holding his plate. The thief smiled lightly. He sat down nearby but without approaching.

“What? Look like you only got bread in the end.” Freckles was chuckling, showing a plate filled to overflowing. “Well that’s that. I’ll share some of my grub with ya.” She plopped a few slices of meat, fish’n’chips and couple of greens on his plate. “You’re skin’n’bones and so tiny. Eat up and grow some.”

“Thank you very much.” Ciel said a bit begrudgingly.

Mouser sipped her water quietly, pushing her meat pie towards Snake. Dagger was fawning over Beast. Peter and Wendy kept to themselves even amongst the first tier, Jumbo was eating less than Freckles and Joker was talking to the Doctor, moving his skeletal hand in small movements. Maybe he was having it checked.

“Anyhoo… Black is so good at cooking.” Freckles was praising in-between bites, trying to coax answers with full sentences out of the Boyo.

“I see…” Success was dubious.

“I heard he’s an ex-butler. Can butlers even cook?”

“They should know.” Mouser piped in, picking up her plate, walking by. “Butlers have to know everything needed to take care of their masters. Usually a household can live without any servant but the butler.”

“Really?”

“Aye. But that’s an incredibly amount of work for just one man.” Mouser moved on, waving, going towards the training tent.

“Well… He made you failed potato peels this tasty!” Freckles laughed.

“I see.” Ciel still was unresponsive.

“Awrighty. I’m done. S’time for practice.”

“Already?” The boyo jumped, staring at the empty plate while he had barely made a dent into his own food.

“Ow…” The boyo groaned, smacking into the ground, falling from the ball he had been trying to balance on.

Mouser looked up from Charlotte’s papers. She was taking a small break after experimenting with routines. It really was too little information and she could see why her friend would be angry. It was almost an insult to her network.

Angela had left Houndsworth a couple of weeks after them. People, when asked, knew nothing
about it. No personal effects or relatives left behind. From asking around a few sightings had been spoken of. One near a bridge at dawn when they were leaving the doll house, another leaving London to the outskirts just after the Curry contest… She had left to the opposite side of the Phantomhive manor. As for the man there was only memory of him near the Angel Wings Antiques, spotted by a couple of resident whores in the area and in the Crystal palace itself but no one that had been asked, servant or noble from Charlotte’s contacts had memory of seeing him get in the Exhibition. Interestingly enough they had memory of Angela getting in. Now unless the woman had sneaked him under the skirts things were getting odd.

“Oy… where’s your sense of balance from when you took the entrance test?” Freckles had finally managed to grab the runaway ball, returning it to the boyo that sat down, rubbing his rump. “This is the basics. The basics.”

“Black is amazing!” There was a sudden shout. Sebastian was balancing on three balls, keeping them rolling smoothly,

“Suit ain’t bad either.” Someone else said. The Grim Reaper was doing the act, using the Death Scythe as part of the act.

“They’re amazing. You need to hurry up and get your act together. Have you seen Silk too” Freckles was drawn again towards the act they were putting. “That ain’t no human feat.”

“Amazing…”

“Oy.” Joker walked in. Mouser put the papers away into the pocket of her ratty jacket, standing. As asked she had put on the showy sequence that she had thought out the day prior. Joker and the other first tier members had watched. But there had been no opening to use when it came to exploring the tents. “I have news.” Everyone seemed to be staring, curious. According to the murmurs during breakfast that was the time where the night’s debut would be announced. They liked to have a different act each night. Kept the public excited and returning to see what else they could show them. “Silk will debut tonight.”

Mouser blinked a few times, surprised, looking around, creating a slightly shy and reserved look on. There were cheers and congratulations going around. Sebastian nodded, satisfied with the outcome. Hers was a more specialized skill so the odds had been in her favour towards being the first to debut. But it did not mean she would make it to the first tier yet. But it was a good step for the Young Master current plan

“Ooh. I’m all sweaty.” Freckles sighed deeply, wiping the sweat away from her brow, laughing lightly. “Why don’t we go take a shower Smile?” She offered while Ciel was wheezing and panting leaning against one of the balls. He glanced up, trying to find his voice.

“There are showers?” The boyo managed to get out of his mouth, peeking up.

“Yeah, there are.” Freckles gripped his jackets’ sleeve, dragging him out and cutting through the tents, going for the back area while explaining. “Cuz it’s cold at night you better get in during day time. See. Here.” She pointed towards an open area with water buckets, tins and table with towels.

“Shower is this?” Ciel asked in disbelief,

“Hey Smile strip down. I’ll wash your back.” Freckles teased, grabbing a bucket.
“Outdoors in the dead of winter with that water?!” The boyo was shocked.

“It’s water, and?” Freckles answered easily, smiling a bit mischievously. “If you just splash it down and wipe yourself off immediately you’ll be fine. Them aristocrats say ice swimming is good fer you. It’s all the rage now.”

“I’ll pass…” Ciel whispered, turning away.

“What? I said I don’t mind…” Freckles answered, grabbing his arm again, the bucket swaying, splashing a bit of water around.

“No… it’s not that I mind…” The boyo was trying to say while they wrestled about, growing a bit panickef, frantically trying to get away. It ended about as well as one would expect. While trying to get away the boyo tripped on a tub, Freckles tripped on him and the water fell over and around both, splashing around, the hard winter floor growing soaked and muddy.

“Ugh… blimey you even got me all soaked fighting back like that… Augh it’s cold…” Freckles was complaining, the fabric of the clothes producing a sloshing sound.

“Won’t you please move…” The boyo whispered, dripping wet.

“Geez we’re soaked. Just give up already and strip.” Freckles chuckled, brushing the moment away, still pulling on his clothes. “Here we go…” She shouted victoriously as her fingers finally found the edge of the shirt.

“Wait. Stop… please stop that.” His voice was growing anxious and pleading. He was out of the moment.

“You’re gonna catch a cold like that…” She went silent suddenly, staring at the boyo’s marked back, seeing him shiver, loosening her grip. The boyo bolted, running away, keeping the clothes pressed against him. “Smile!” Freckles called, worried.

Mouser sighed uncrossing her legs. Sebastian nodded, both moving towards the hiding spot the boyo had found. They had been watching, seeing no chance to do more than wait and plot. But as the events had unfolded the boyo would want someone to listen to his complaints.

“You’ll contract a cold.” Sebastian stated, throwing a towel over the boyo. Ciel was sitting against a big wheel, amongst the cluster of still carriages, shivering, still dripping, snow melting around him.

Mouser moved closer and rubbed the fabric against his wet hair, more a play than care. He would be fine as long as they worked fast and dragged him to the mess hall tent to get warm.

“Someone as dainty as you should be more careful.” She teased, frowning when he would not stop shivering.

“Let me give you a change of clothes.” Sebastian continued, said change already on his arms.

“Ough…” The boyo scoffed, bundled inside the towel. “Enough already. I’m going to feel queer if I continue to live like this.” The complaint came out easily.

Mouser extended her hand.
Sebastian sighed slightly, in defeat, and patted it as if acknowledging something. “Oh dear, you are surrendering already? You are quite lacking in endurance.” Sebastian showed a concerned and disapproving face before smirking slowly. “To feel queer at this extent… isn’t like the Young Master.”

“Not like me…” Ciel whispered, his eyes growing dull and distant. Then he scoffed and straightened haughtily, staring at the pair. “That’s certainly so. It shouldn’t be like me, the head of the Phantomhive family to live like this. Let’s bring this to an end quickly.”

“Yes sir.” Sebastian gave the easy answer, waiting.

Mouser shrugged. Warmth and a full belly was sometimes all the motives one needed to do something.

“Anyways… we just need to investigate the troupe’s tents and we can go home.” The boyo reasoned tossing the towel away, aided out of his clothes by Sebastian.

“I though you were patiently aiming to be promoted through the troupe.” Sebastian reiterated the plan tolerantly folding the wet fabric, patting the boyo dry patiently.

“I cannot do something that will take too long in this environment. My patience is at a limit.” Mouser scoffed, amused. Not to mention the lack of skills for that kind of life. With time he could be decent at knife throwing but what were the odds of a noble giving up his status and money for the circus life?

“As for me I cannot go out at night since the Reaper obstructs me.” Sebastian mentioned the annoyance with a frown. “Forcing our way through would be the easiest.”

“But it would raise a commotion. What if they aren’t’ the ones?” Mouser placed the option to be thought over. “We would run the risk of spooking the prey.”

“But the Reaper here we still haven’t determined if they’re the perpetrators.” Ciel agreed on the part of the iffy involvement of the Noah’s Ark “So be patient.”

“Yes. If that’s what we’re aiming for we’ll do it during the show when all troupe members are out of their rooms.” Sebastian suggested. Even if they had to wait for one or another to go into scene. If they timed it right there was a good chance of success.

“First of all we need to think of a way to shake off that Freckles who is stuck to us.”

“There is no way for Freckles to follow you during the show, believe me.” Mouser said as the boyo finally got into the other set of clothes.

“I must make my move or all will be pointless.” The thief frowned. There was something iffy about his breathing pattern… “Let us get back soon. I want to eat sweets while drinking warm tea.” Ciel demanded, growing calmer as he expended his lordly airs and bossiness.

“I shall prepare them when we return to the estate.” Sebastian said in a reassuring tone, bowing. Mouser shrugged. That night she would not be of much help on the infiltration plot but inside the tent while performing and waiting she could gather and delay the first tier members, trying to give the boyo and demon a greater chance of success.
“Everyone get ready. The performance is about to begin so hurry up.” Joker had called, making the whole troop go into a frenzy, dressing up, putting the makeup on, finding the props and trying to work out the last details. Mouser finished her hair, make-up and adjusted the ruffles under the skirt. Even though she had odd experiences in her bag performing in a circus and with a skill that was so new to her was something of a novelty. So she easily admitted some jitters while sitting down in the corner and watching the activity.

“D’ya know where my headdress is?” Wendy was asking tying the ribbons around her arms, walking around, peeking under discarded clothing and props.

“Here it is.” Sebastian gave her the black crown, smiling politely, watching everything. He was still a perfectionist despite not being a true part of the troupe. So if the show was to go on he would have to approve of everything.

“We don’t have enough knives. Where are the spares?” Dagger was shouting, already with a bunch in their colourful casing.

“Here ya go guv.” Someone ran by, placing another set down.

Ciel was jumping around, attending to requests, preparing things as he was asked and trying to avoid getting trampled. Joker whistled suddenly, the crowd leaving the tent, the crowd dwindling to nothingness, the requests quieting down.

“Ah… will I get around to investigate that tent or will I keel over from overwork first…” Ciel whispered to himself, finding a bench. But he could not complain nor rest unless he wanted to attract suspicion. “Excuse me… what should I do while the show is going on? Huh?” Empty… all the performers of that night and all the first tier members were away, in the main tent, the sounds of the show’s beginning reaching them. “Sebastian.” He shouted, seeing a chance, going to the demon that was organizing the clothe racks. “We have a shot. We don’t know when the next chance will be.” Sebastian lowered his head in thought, listening to the sound on the outside, ignoring the Grim Reaper that was quietly glaring. “Let’s investigate that tent right now. Have it done in ten minutes.”

“Yes My Lord.”

They ran outside, ready to move on with their mission. Inside the crowd was cheering and gasping. They had time and a cover…

“Black!” Demon and master froze in place, turning towards Joker who walked out the tent, carrying the flying blanco girl, accompanied by Peter who had a very worried expression in his eyes. “Miss Wendy twist’d ‘er ankle so she can’t perform ‘nymore. So Black… Please go out in her place.” Joker asked, clearly in need. “The show will be fine if ye do it. So please, Black… it’ll be yer turn shortly so please git ready soon. Silk is finishin’ her act and then you’re up.”

Ciel was grinding his teeth. Sebastian acknowledged the request and sighed as the trio went to the medic’s tent.

“Pity Young Master. We’ll have to wait for another chance.” Sebastian said, resigned. “Young Master?”

The Earl of Phantomhive was staring at the placard that showed the sequence and times of the
night’s performance, calculating.

“We don’t need to sneak into that place for long. On top of that now might be the only time when one of them is not here.” He sighed after a deep breath. “I have time. The tough part is the venomous snakes. According to the program your debut will end at seven fifty and the encore is at eight. You’ll catch all the snakes, in five minutes from now.” He checked the watch, frowning. “Appear in the show, finish your debut, go back to release the snakes and be back for the encore. I’ll investigate the rest. Let’s go.”

Sebastian just bowed a bit, both returning to the task at hand, going for the first tier tents.

The snakes were easy to catch, stuffed and knotted into a small cage, hissing in annoyance, wriggling, unable to get out on their own.

“This is the last one of them isn’t it?” Ciel peeked into the tent, careful. “All right.” He walked in without fear then, coughing, clearing his throat, shivering for a moment. “You go straight to the show tent. You’ll be suspected if you’re tardy.”

“Certainly. I will be back at once.” Sebastian acknowledged, returning to the dressing tent and preparing.

Sebastian stopped, shocked and annoyed when he saw that the Grim Reaper was also in performing clothes and there to perform. Dagger was standing between them, having just informed the pair that they would have to act together. Mouser was finishing her act on the ring. Joker was on the sidelines, waiting to enter and announce the next piece of circus whimsy.

“Wasn’t only Wendy that was injured?” Sebastian asked in a flat tone.

“Aye it was. But ol’ Peter can’t give ya a hand.” Dagger said, stretching watching the brightly lit arena.

Mouser was finished, standing on the small pedestal of her tall ring, balancing daintily on one foot, arms up finished, the crowd clapping and cheering. Jumbo was the one that walked in, raising his arms, letting her step onto his palms and then hop down with a bow as Joker walked in, cane twirling to take on the master of ceremonies’ role.

“I will not consent.” The Reaper said, huffing in a bad mood, adjusting his glasses, trying to keep his composure. “Why must I be grouped with you?”

“I don’t fancy it either but we cannot help it can we?” Sebastian stated simply.

“For me to cooperate with such a vermin... Really now.”

“Well... seven thirty.”

Both huffed and walked away, taking their places on the trapezes, ready to start.

Mouser walked into the side, glancing at Dagger who was looking up. Doll and Beast were there. Joker was presenting, Jumbo was removing the props from her act, Snake was sitting in the
shadowy corner playing with his snakes, waiting. She sighed, stretching. Peter and Wendy would be with the Doctor. She had heard the tumble she had taken. It was an unfortunate event. Sebastian was aggrivated and she doubted it was just because he had to perform. Most likely the request had interrupted something.

The act had started and already it seemed to be hitching.

“What are you doing?” Sebastian was growling.

“Please refrain from touching my hands vermin.” Spears was huffing, looking away.

Swinging upside down like pendulums was not the moment to have a quarrel like that though.

“That won’t make the show now will it?!” Sebastian was once again worried about the look of what he was doing.

“What are they up to...” Beast was considering while they swung back and forth without anything showier than the fact that they were gripping the wood upside down with their knees. She began to move to get a better view, the corset snagging on one of the beams, the string that both kept the sides in place and decorated her back snapping with an audible sound. “ack... my string tie.” Beast gasped softly, looking over her shoulder with a look of slight annoyance.

“AH” Dagger noticed, looking at her and panicking, waving his arms madly. “y’all ain’t no looking.” That did not keep him from staring at it, wide eyed and appreciative. Poor thing did not notice he was unnoticed.

“There is still time to change... and just don’t make a big deal out of it.” Joker piped in, looking away from the two performers that were refusing to impress the crowd, smiling kindly. Mouser caught the tension that was not hers when Beast acknowledged the request. Everyone was there… which meant the boyo might be snooping about.

“I’ll help Miss Beast.” Mouser offered as the beast tamer threw a shawl over her barely dressed form, nodding in acceptance and walking out with the thief. “With corsets it’s usually faster if two do it.”

“Yes... I tried to have some easy one made but the ribbons can still be challenging.” Beast mentioned, her hands under the shawl keeping the fast unravelling corset from falling from its place.

“Some ladies have corsets that actually need locks to stay in place.” Mouser chattered simply, skipping next to the woman. That dragged a small smile from her.

Cheers and gasps of shock began to erupt in earnest from the tent.

“They’re getting excited.” The woman noted, pausing her stride, glancing towards the tent. Mouser nodded, looking around, noticing the small telltale signs that the boyo had been searching for something. Maybe she should take some time to teach him how a thief worked. If he wanted to go on those escapades without relying on her or Sebastian he needed to get a bit more subtlety, light and fleet of foot.

“They are both amazing in practice. So one hopes that goes well in the ring.” Mouser said with an easy shrug.

“Yes... you... Silk I’d like to ask what your relationship with Black is.” Beast looked away, blushing slightly. While her love went to Joker, Sebastian was worming into her head rather
steadily despite not doing anything actively. It was a mix of aggravation and curiosity. Most likely every man outside the troupe had treated her like an object, a toy, something to be desired and tossed away. The Demon had infuriated her and then pretty much ignored her, behaving with simple politeness and the detachment used for social situations. “You seem close. Despite him being an insufferable bastard.”

“We are a bit like family.” Mouser smiled, tilting her head.

“Really…”

Mouser nodded, still smiling, shivering suddenly when the wind moved through her, the tent flap whispering slightly. Beast opened the flap, entering, letting Mouser through behind her. It was a rather girly and gaudy tent, decorated and full of trinkets and clothes. What one would expect of a performer or actress.

“Aww… and I liked this one.” Beast complained softly as she slipped out of the broken corset. Mouser noticed another one slipping out of the big travel trunk. She kept from chuckling, picking it up, holding it open.

“How about this one?” She suggested, taking the hint. It was a closed one with a big neckline and thick ribbons on the back. It was still loose. Mouser and Beast made quick work of clasps and ribbons and went out again to rejoin the performance, walking away from the first tier tents at a brisk pace.

“We made it in the nick of time.” She still heard Sebastian’s whisper before the crowd’s cheer engulfed them again.

“G’job everyone.” Joker was praising as the show came to an end and everyone gathered, basking in the glow of a job well done. Mouser smiled blending into the overall mood. “Huh… where is Black?” The master of ceremonies asked, looking around.

“He disappeared in a flash when the encore ended.” Dagger smiled, stretching, chuckling. “Ya think he was holding in his wee?” He tossed casually into the air.

“Oh. Maybe that’s the case…” Joker chuckled too. Mouser joined in as she should. The only one that was frowning and suspicious was the Grim Reaper who left as soon as it was possible. There was a collective laugh with hints of understanding, companionship going around, plans to go to the mess hall, to . The debuts were always stressful for the performer.

“Silk, wanna grab something at the mess?”

“Nah. I’ve gotta walk before I loose my legs.” Mouser smiled and winked. “Fell bubbly ya know…” there were more laughs and comments and encouragements as she walked away.

“Hey. What’re you doin’ there?” Doll called out suddenly. Mouser was walking by, already in casual attire, stopping, glancing towards her left, towards a small gap between tents filled with crates. The boyo was crouching there and the tightrope walker was close, lounging forward, pulling him to the ground, hand clapped over his mouth. “Don’t move.” She was whispering, her free hand moving through the dirt.
"Hey, Doll what are you doing?" Dagger called from the other side of the tent with Snake. The members of the first tier were returning to their tents. It was time to sleep. The boyo’s heart was beating in a panic. Fear of discovery and the discomfort of being near someone else. Someone else that was very intimately placed.

"Snake." Doll called out suddenly, gripping a brightly coloured thin snake that wriggled and hissed in outrage. Snake’s eyes widened slightly, fidgeting. “A venomous snake was slitherin’ about.”

"Wah!!" Dagger shrieked, scooting away.

"Didn’t I tell you to not let them loose outside?" Someone, most likely Joker, scolded.

"You’d better put them away in your room properly now.” Dagger was shouting in a very high pitched voice, still away from the creature.

“I’m sorry for my carelessness that could have sent you to the next world.”

Said Snake.

He reached for the snake, allowing it to coil around his arm and then going around his neck. It was still looking and sounding rather irked.

“Yes… put them away I beg you.” Dagger shouted, dodging into his tent.

Mouser almost could hear the shivers. Then her attention shifted again to the hiding boyo and Doll that returned for him, grabbing his wrist, dragging him through the winding corridors between the cloth tents.

“This way. Hurry.” The boyo was cold, shivering, tripping over his feet and the suspicious cough was not leaving him. Mouser doubled back and perched on some crates, watching the scene while gave instructions and led the boyo to the sheltered back area. “Don’t touch that rope.” As they were finally there she did a small reconnaissance, seeing if they were truly alone. They were not but Mouser had a few years and lot of skill training over them. “It should be fine now since we came so far.”

“Why did you help me?” The boyo asked, confused.

“You still don’t get it? It’s me.” Doll pulled the rose wig away, smiling, her hair flopping down around her face.

“Freckles?!” The boyo shouted, surprised. “You’re a guy… yet you wear that costume…” Gender challenged… Mouser chuckled, resting her head on her palms, placing her elbows on the knees.

“How rude.” She bristled, grabbing his hand “It’s obvious I’m a girl. Here.” Said gripped hand was plopped open right on top of a budding boob. Ciel almost shrieked and recoiled as if Freckles was on fire. Mouser chortled, amused. Freckles also thought the reaction was hilarious and did not resist playing wit it further. “You can take a peek downstairs next if you want.”

“No thank you!” The boyo shouted, close to a slight panic attack. Mouser covered her lips. Look who was still very innocent despite all... or maybe still too young.

“So why were you in there anyway?” Doll asked, arms crossed looking a bit more grown, disapproving and stern. All in all in charge, first tier. “Didn’t Joker tell you about the venomous snakes?”
The boyo seemed to be thinking fast.

“About that…” He hesitated then launched into a sobbing tirade. “I’m sorry. I didn’t actually steal anything today though… Please don’t boot me out of here!” now he wanted to be a thief. Mouser smiled and adjusted her position. Doll had been blindsided and was shocked, trying to process that new information.

“Today? You…”

“Before I became a page boy I was actually living on the East End having to do all I could just to survive. I knew it was wrong but I couldn’t help myself. The mansion I worked for previously found out about it… I… If I was driven out of here I would have to live in the East End again…”

So he was using shards of her story? Mouser shook her head. He was also saying entirely too much for it to be a truly convincing story. Too much sobbing. Too much judgements of value, good and evil. No street thief would care about it. Any boy or girl in the east end would slit a throat without a qualm for a warm meal, a blanket, a wallet and the boots the victim was wearing..

“So you really didn’t steal anything?” Doll asked, confirming the facts.

“No… I swear to God.” Ciel said with a nervous glint in his eyes, hands clasped together, fidgeting.

“Oh, well… I have no choice then. It’s ok. Anyhoo I owe you.”

“Thank you so much.”

“I think everyone has things about themselves they don’t want anyone to know. Besides… I did something bad to you today.” Freckles smiled, lowering her head. “So I won’t tell anyone about this. But now we’re even. However don’t steal again no matter what.”

Mouser snorted.

“Yes. But can I ask something? Why is a first tier member like you sharing a tent with me?” The boyo tried to understand what was happening and if something could be gained from the shared quarter.

“Staying with someone helps me sleep better sometimes.” The girl admitted calmly. “I hope you don’t mind it now that you know.”

“Of course not.” The boyo chuckled, smiling.

“Neat. So we’ll keep a secret of what happened today.” Freckles hopped away, leaving him. Mouser chuckled and chose to walk up to him, patting his shoulder, examining his sudden frown.

“Losing the smile trick already?”

“How long have you been there?” He asked calmly, staring at the darkness.

“The whole time.” Mouser smiled and stretched as they started to walk. “I am flattered you want to be a thief although your work in the tents was sloppy and subpar.” She touched his forehead, frowning for a moment. “Boyo?” He was looking sickly and the cough was similar to things she had seen dying from overexposure to cold.

“Come. I need to talk to Sebastian.
“Aye, aye.”

“Young Master…” Sebastian acknowledged when they entered the tent, letting the flap fall. The boyo was shivering now. The Grim Reaper just stared them down with disgust.

“You…” The boyo started, stopping to breathe. “You released the venomous snakes even though you knew I was still there?”

Sebastian seemed taken aback for a moment before smirking slowly, nodding in acknowledgement.

“Yes. It’s because earlier you gave an order to release the snakes as the first tier members returned. What’s the matter?” Phrasing, grammar, double meanings and punctuation. Vital to Demon Dealing. Mouser climbed onto the bed, resting on her stomach, observing. “What is so wrong that you must make that face? Please don’t worry.” Sebastian was mocking while looking all support and understanding. So his temper had been somewhat strained. Mouser yawned and kept looking. The most likely reason was under her, glaring with a Death Scythe at ready. “As long as there is a contract I will protect your life. However if you make a mistake of your own accord you will possibly suffer a painful experience while alive.” So he was still teaching. Most likely considering the boyo had been pushy and overconfident as of late. “You already know that don’t you? Any game becomes boring when it lacks thrills. I though the Young Master who is greedy for games would think the same.”

“It’s in bad taste to play games that make me want to throw up Demon.” Ciel smirked, keeping up the banter.

“It’s an honour.” Sebastian bowed formally, using his butler tone.

“Well. Enough of that.” Ciel coughed and moved deeper inside. “I found a piece of paper with my name on it in Joker’s tent. From what I say they have my rank, my mansion’s address and a simple personal story.”

“So Charlotte was right calling it.” Mouser piped in thoughtfully. “The disappeared children where specifically ordered hits. It shows skill, forethought and thorough planning. The circus is a tool” A good tool full of people with skills that could double in purpose.

“The sender is…” the boyo continued, pacing. The sudden sound and sinking of the blade of the scythe on the ground made him jump away, startled.

“You are intruding on my private property by three centimetres.” Spears stated, irritated. “Incapable of staying away… exactly like a dog and its owner.” He continued grumbling in an insulting way largely ignored by the trio.

“Sebastian. Let’s go outside. Mouser.” The boyo ordered.

“Yes.” Sebastian followed immediately. Mouser groaned and hopped down, raking a hand over her loose hair, pushing it away from her shoulders. Once outside the plotting resumed, the boyo taking shelter and hiding in-between tents, Sebastian standing in front of him, under the light, mouser next slipping slightly into the shadows.

“So the sender’s name is Tom the Pied Piper’s son.”

“Pied Piper’s son?” Sebastian asked, as if confirming he had heard right.

“Like nursery rhyme?” Mouser asked, confused. The last encounter with London Bridge had been quite enough with the creepy singing, thank you very much.
“Yes. It’s a character from Mother Goose.” The boyo expanded on that. “I have no idea what it means. Also there is a hallmark of the horse in the sealing wax along with the initial K.”

“Then it’s the same as what I saw.” Beast’s leg, a mark of possession, the circus as a tool and if they had a crest it was a noble. How much had the boyo bet with her again?

“Normally the sealing is engraved with a symbol of motivation and the initial of the person plus the family crest. People who have their crests displaying horses are usually knights or military.” The boyo grew thoughtful. “It’s not a rule although a crest is impossible to get without a rank of some level. All of this crests are recorded by a heraldry. No matter how many records they have I know you are able to find this information alone.” He sighed, hugging himself, still shivering. “Disappearing children, Pied Piper’s son and me… I wonder how these pieces are connected.”

“Young Master…” Sebastian was starting to see that something was amiss in the boyo’s body.

“Firstly I’ll return to the town house…” Ciel was saying before the cough turned violent, violent enough to rob him of air and pull a retching reaction. Mouser jumped back, circling him, catching his shoulders, steadying him while the lack of air made him fall to his knees.

“Young Master what’s wrong? Young Master?” Sebastian was, for once too surprised to act, unable to pinpoint the source.

“Smile what’s wrong?” Freckles, attracted by the noise ran to them, trying to help.

“It’s asthma.” The Doctor said after the examination, having changed and cared for the shivering boyo. His breathing was a bit harsh and short. Mouser sighed and shook her head. It looked about right.

“Asthma? This is the first time I’ve seen him in this condition even though I’ve been with him for three years.” Sebastian said, thinking, examining the boyo.

“If he hasn’t had this condition for three years it’s considered as being recovered.” The Doctor explained, flipping pages of his notes. “Though all you need is a sudden chill, or time of stress… then if he gets a cold it can abruptly come back.”

“I have seen him suffer a cold once or twice though it was never this bad.” The butler noted, moving his wheelchair, letting them come closer.

“This is probably the main causes coincided. And it’s natural for him to get a cold when he went out bathing with our brutish people…” The dark haired man scoffed. “Oh great… your regained consciousness.”

“Water…” the boyo croaked out.

“Here you go.” Sebastian picked the small pot and helped him drink while Freckles sighed in relief. Mouser smiled and patted his head, sitting next to his pillow.

“Smile… you’ve had bad asthma since you were very young right? There are cases where people have died from it. You should be careful even if you think you are fully recovered. Rest until the fever and coughing has stopped. You guys should get going then.”
“Sebastian?” The boyo groaned, still looking a bit feverish and pale.

Also he had Freckles wrapped around him, snoring slightly much to his annoyance. Even in the sick bay...

“You called?” The Demon asked, appearing. Mouser walked behind him silently, chuckling slightly at the scene as Sebastian neared the boyo and knelt, extending one hand as asked. Sebastian did so and was ordered to investigate the crest and the locations of the archives. He bowed his head and Mouser smiled, both turning, pausing a bit to glance back. “By the way…” The demon whispered very softly. “I’ll keep it a secret from Lady Elizabeth that you shared a bed with another girl. Please do not worry.” His chuckle was smooth and light.

“He did more than share a bed. He copped a feel.” Mouser added to the fun, watching the boyo’s face shift.

“Did he now? How outrageous.”

“You knew from the start didn’t you?” He wheezed out, annoyed and startled. The thief chuckled and blew him a raspberry in playful mood. The butler just left at a dignified pace as if none of that was happening on his back and watch. They walked out, stopping at the entrance, exchanging a glance as they secured the flaps as they were, looking around to make sure no one had followed or was watching.

“Well now…”

“I can stay back and cover for you. It would take you what... a night?”

“If a trip towards the north can’t be avoided...” Sebastian began, calculating, stopping suddenly, pushing her backwards and moving out of the way of the Death Scythe that was aiming at his head. Mouser took a few steps before regaining her balance, hissing. Then she had to make a slight effort not to giggle as William T. Spears in his light blue and white pyjamas stood there with the scythe in hand, adjusting his glasses, looking ridiculously furious.

“Where do you think you’re going? I’m quite sure I told you not to wander around without your owner.” The Grim Reaper was saying, all threat and business.

“I’m sorry but my Master can’t make this move himself.” Sebastian straightened and composed himself. “So he has asked me to do it instead.”

“I am not listening to excuses.”

“What if I vouched for it?” Mouser interjected, smiling between them. She went unnoticed by the tension.

“Get back in the tent.” Spears ordered, his body coiled in tension, the dislike plain. “Until my inspection is finished you are not allowed to carry out any independent actions. One small mistake could lead to lots of overtime.”

“My apologies. I also have my duties as a butler.” Sebastian was smiling pleasantly but moving under his clothes, getting ready for a confrontation. Mouser scooted closer to him. “I must not disturb the sleeping master.” The scythe was unleashed. Sebastian didn’t bother to dodge, blocking it, letting the blade cut through his glove and skin, blood pooling around it, staining the fabric. The scent had changed... Mouser noticed it, staring at the bright red. “You don’t want to cause trouble
either, do you? How about it? Would you make a deal with me? If you let me go for one hour I vow I’ll never eat souls in your assigned area again. It’s only one hour. What do you say?”

It was a smooth, flawless deal with no visible downside. It was good.

“I refuse.” Not good enough for someone who stayed rooted and focused. “You deceive you prey with sweet words and drag them into darkness.” Spears sneered, releasing the blade, letting Sebastian go. “Isn’t that a demon’s signature ability?”

“Indeed.” The Grim Reaper scoffed, leaving them alone. Mouser slid the glove away from Sebastian’s hand, staring at the closing wound. Then she slid her lips over the blood, feeling his amusement. It was a bit instinctive, touching the red, sealing the wound. “As expected it didn’t work. He left me no choice. Let’s think of another way.” Mouser nodded quietly with the taste of his blood on her lips. It was a very different feel from before... but as for the situation... even a tool needed to know the basics to be... well competent was the bare minimum requirement. So they should hunt for the weakest member to snare.
“Where are you going?” The call made both demons stop their wandering, glancing towards the source of the sound, near the beasts’ pens. It was fairly easy to recognise the voice. Beast had been waiting for Joker. It should be assumed that their cover had been somewhat blown. Mouser followed Sebastian to a hiding spot on top of a cage, lighting a cigarette slowly, watching. Either because the boyo had left clues or because their behaviour had been suspicious didn’t really matter.

“I’m off to see father.” Joker answered, turning, approaching her. Beast seemed tense, conflicted. Her mind and heart had clear cracks. Mouser leaned slightly, eyes narrowing while she allowed smoke to slip free from her lips. Just a little push, just a little more of heartbreak, just another crack… all they needed was a bit of vulnerability. “What about you? Can’t sleep?” Joker asked kindly.

“Let’s quit.” Beast said simply, with a definite edge in her voice. So the tool was conflicted about its duty. Perfect. Only added to the wounded spidery cracks that appeared on her soul’s reflection. “We have this circus. We can work it out. So let’s stop doing this things and escape to a place where father can’t find us.”

“Over the hills?” Joker smiled as if recalling a sweeter memory. “That’s impossible.” He sighed, lowering his head slightly. What was there to hold him back? Beast was correct in her assessment. They had all the advantages needed to run. “I don’t have time to talk about such things.” Joker turned, his voice resigned and tired.

“Wait…” Beast called, lunging for him, embracing the man much to his surprise.

“What is wrong? This isn’t like you.” Joker was looking over his shoulder. Then his eyes hardened. It was his determination and promises that were being tested. “This is what we decided. We decided to protect our most precious thing. For that we’ll do anything.” He stated again. Beast only held tighter.

“But I don’t want to see that pained face anymore… because… I…” Mouser tilted her head, blowing a strand of smoke. Sebastian chuckled next to her, taking only a passing interest in a scene. He had experience on his side. Mouser wagered he’d seen similar things before. Was Beast about to say it and break the seemingly eternal stalemate they were stuck in or…

“Did you forget?” Joker turned, stopping her, gripping Beast’s arms, shaking her lightly for a moment. “We can’t turn away now.” He stopped, composing himself, letting o with a sigh, his face saddened. He then forced a smile. “Staying up late is not good for your health.” He said wrapping his scarf around Beast’s neck. Her eyes were slightly moist, hesitating. Joker started to leave.

“Joker!” She called.

“Good night…” Joker said back, smiling, waving slightly, going towards the stables.

Beast just stood there under the gas light alone, conflicted and vulnerable. The scent of tears was salty and bitter. And her soul was tainted by grief and frustration that had been allowed to fester, shimmering pale. Mouser smirked holding her almost spent cigarette. Sebastian was an agile shadow moving on the top of a cage nearer to his prey.

“Oya, oya… are you crying?” He whispered calmly, his voice dropping, teasing, the cruel edge hidden, created to make her answer even though there was nothing particularly aggravating about
the words. Even so no one who presented herself as tough and temper-prone as Beast liked to be so blatantly called on a moment of weakness.

“You…” She growled without turning, gripping the scarf. “This had nothing to do with you. Go away!” She shouted, eyes closed, trying to stem the steady trickle of tears

“But… I think that is impossible…” Sebastian was suddenly very close, startling her easily.

“What?” Beast staggered a bit but managed to stand her ground, even dumbfounded.

If one was to say something that contradicted a lifetime of beliefs… especially if those beliefs were already being questioned by the recipient of such a treatment… Beast was listening. Others would have already ran or attacked. Or even defended. More. She had asked.

“It’s pointless to pursue a human like him.” Sebastian continued, his voice weaving easily through pity and comprehension. Both were sure to rile Beast, make her fall further into doubt and into his trick. “He cannot return your feelings.” And she knew it. Joker was deeply into his duty and that small exchange they had witnessed branded him as fiercely loyal. Whether that loyalty stemmed from adoration or fear was irrelevant. Someone held the leash and left room for nothing else. “He thinks he should treat you nicely at least but he knows it will hurt you in the end. How cruel.” Sebastian grabbed the scarf gently, pulling it, showing it to her without looking like he was giving proof of anything. His black nails were plainly visible as the gloves had been ruined. Small dots of blood marked the white cuff of his shirt, escaped and unnoticed from the closed and disappeared wound. “When did this start? The miserable tears and a relationship that relies on nothing more than sentimentalit?”

That snapped Beast out of her listening daze. And she went immediately into an attack, trying to punch the demon’s offending face. Mouser smirked. Good luck with that. The blighter was tougher to hit than an eel. Also when one did hit he was harder than a brick wall. Was he going to let himself be hit or was he just going to dodge and build her rage?

“What would you understand?” She shrieked, still trying.

“Nothing.” Rage when spent and if there was no clear objective or target left one drained, tired, defenceless as soon as the bout ended. “But there is one thing I know.” Sebastian continued smoothly, dodging and gripping her wrist and arm, standing behind Beast, leaning to whisper. “There is a way to release you from that pain just for a while.”

“Stop kidding. Let. Me. Go.” Beast shouted and squirmed but Mouser noticed that there was not really an effort to get away. She could see that Sebastian’s grip was nowhere near truly tight. The tears had stopped and a blush of both rage and desire was staining her cheeks. Her heart beat was up and her scent was changing. Mouser tossed the dead butt to the ground, playing with the lighter, watching the scene play.

“I am not joking around.” Sebastian continued, his tone still very calm, reeling Beast in. “What will you do with this pile of painful thoughts? The weight of it will neither move backwards or forwards. Even if you desperately try to call out to him he will never look back at you.” From the generic to the actual situation. Each word was hitting home and hitting hard. It was actually possible to see her crumble. “How pitiable. It’s painful isn’t it? Don’t you want to feel comfort?” It was also very interesting to see what he had done to her from the outside. But Beast seemed to be lacking the awareness that it was a game. Or maybe she just had forgotten the most important rule in the streets. “Forget him who is kind and cruel.”

“I… I…” Beast finally fell, eyes closing slowly, surrendering without will.
“Wouldn’t it be good to forget everything?” Sebastian whispered against her ear, making his warmth dance and entice, the whisper too near and personal to be ignored, using her crumbling defences masterfully. “Even if it’s just for tonight? Indulge in pleasure…”

Mouser sighed, stood and dusted her clothes off. That was a done deal. Might as well walk around and deflect anyone who would be looking for either of them. One would not want sweet ol’ Dagger to find out about his beloved Sister’s indiscretions now...

“That was rather quick. By my experience at least.” Mouser said as Sebastian walked out of the tent, looking as pristine as ever, having discarded both gloves now. She was sitting on the crates, legs crossed. A couple of spent cigarettes were fallen near her feet and a third one was being consumed between her smirking lips.

“The information was just waiting to drip from her lips.” Sebastian said, joining her. Smoke, alcohol, the faded scent of card paper, fear and frustration of other men clinging to her, as if desperate to reclaim the money cheated out of them. She had been gambling. “I did not need to do much.”

“I trust she was happy and satisfied.” Mouser shrugged, smirking.

“What satisfaction she gained of this encounter will be short lived and turn bitter soon enough.” Sebastian answered, his eyes shimmering sadistically red for a moment.

“Really.” Mouser blew smoke slowly in a steady silver stream, hopping down, tossing the butt away, glancing around, ignoring the cold air. “Well that was indeed easier than going to the archives then.” She eyed him appreciatively. “You are looking very put together. I’ve seen so many men walk out of brothels with their clothes a mess…” Unable to dress themselves without the help of a valet. She adjusted his tie pointlessly. “Not even this thing is out of place.”

“A Phantomhive butler should look put together all the time.” He joked, approaching, gauging her mood.

Mouser smirked, showing fangs, pulling his tie out of place and pulling him down with it.

“Just because I’m willing to let you play does not mean I won’t mark you next.” Mouser whispered in a condescending tone, patting his cheek.

“Jealousy?” Sebastian chuckled, amused, one hand holding her face, tiling it up, towards his lips. They were close enough to feel each other’s heat. Mouser frowned for a moment. Despite having been with Beast there seemed to be no trace of her scent on him. Either her senses were failing or he was just camouflaging. Not that she cared much either way while his fingers were teasing the skin of her jaw.

“Possession, demon.” Mouser whispered back, kissing him, capturing his mouth, her tongue tracing his lower lip gently before nipping. Sebastian’s arms went around her, pulling her up to keep the lips locked, the sensations of warmth and hunger twining, their tongues touching and trying to outdo each other. It was still a game. But this one meant something. Mouser sighed, parting, her arms around him, as if she was not letting go, leaning against his ear, the words brushing it gently, enticingly. “We have been interrupted by Indians, curry, Chinese, Scotland Yard, Grim Reapers and circus people not to mention the usual boyo that keeps you busy. Do you have any idea how badly I want to drag you to some dark corner?”
“Do tell.” Sebastian whispered back, the air caressing her mouth, teasing her without giving.

Mouser groaned and yanked him back to her mouth, biting hungrily. Sebastian’s arms pressed her against his body, allowing her to do whatever she desired. He could feel her nails, slightly sharpened running over his back slowly, her heath increasing. He understood. He also wanted her. His hands were enough proof of that. While still, keeping her up they were splayed on her backside, making her breasts flat against his chest, rubbing against the fabric with each fevered drag of air.

“I am seriously considering abusing that top bunk and the Grim Reaper under it.” Mouser panted slowly, slapping his chest playfully as she pushed him away, laughing, a light raspy sound, hopping down from his arms.

“Sebastian…” The boyo was groaning in a thin, worn voice as the butler checked his temperature, blinking slowly, trying to focus, shuffling within the thin sheets, sleepy and weakened.

“Good Morning.” Sebastian resumed his butler duties, pouring a cup of water, walking around, gathering the clothes needed. The bags had already been sneaked out. “Your fever has lowered considerably.” The demon appraised. Mouser peeked, smiling. There was no need for lookout and they would not be exactly missed. The news were already around the circus. Smile had a bad bout of asthma and collapsed. Obviously Silk and Black, coming from the same household, would be worried. “How are you feeling?”

“I wouldn’t call it good but it’s better than yesterday.” The boyo rasped out, sitting up, still coughing slightly. His throat sounded raw.

“You ain’t dead. That’s something between your wimpy body and loose snakes.” Mouser pointed out, patting his head with a chuckle. Ciel huffed and sneaked a look at the rumpled sheets next to him.

“She left for breakfast.” Sebastian elucidated. “Have some water.” He gave the boyo a cup, letting him sip.

“Yes… What happened to your gloves?” The boyo noticed, eyes narrowing in suspicion. “I can see your nails and contract seal.” Either of them in the Victorian society would be deemed vulgar and shockingly gaudy. Unless there was money and title. Then they would call it Original and say it was just an eccentricity of the wealthy. Mouser just said that the ink had stained her nails.

“Oh. I got them a little dirty.” Sebastian brushed the matter aside and so did the boyo.

“More importantly… I hope you carried out my request.” Sick and demanding. A bad combination.

“Yes, of course.” Sebastian bowed and picked the boyo up, starting to help in the dressing process. “There’s no need for us to be here anymore.” He reassured him calmly, finishing with the scarf.

“Let’s go while everyone is having their meal. We can talk at ease when we’re back in the town house.” Spears was on their path, glaring at them, as if making sure no demon looked fatter. Sebastian simply walked pass him without any care, giving just a minimal justification out of pure aesthetic courtesy. “We’ve finished our business here so we’ll excuse ourselves now.”

“It’s none of my business where you go with your master. Be my guest.” Spears grumbled, close to unemotional, opening a black note book. “I can move around at ease again.” He mumbled quietly, turning his back on them.
“Ciel where the hell did you go for days without telling me anything!” Soma was there, beside himself with worry, shouting as they walked in. Ciel was still being carried by Sebastian, coughing occasionally, buried on the scarf.

“Welcome back.” Agni said, happy they were back, giving a simple greeting to offset his overwrought master.

“If you were gone any longer I would have had to send out a search party.” Soma continued, shaking, throwing his arms to the heavens. Mouser shrugged out of her jacket, sneaking by unnoticed.

“It’s none of your business.” They boyo tried to shout, but it came out raspy and followed by a fit of coughing, only adding to the duo’s suspicions. Agni lost his blissful expression, frowning as he thought about the situation.

“What happened to you? You look horrible…” Soma approached, examining the boyo under the golden light of the entrance hall, his eyes narrowing slightly then widening in worry.

“Nothing. Get out of the way.” The boyo continued the denial, stiffening on Sebastian’s arm.

“There is no why it’s nothing. You definitely have a cold. Do you have a fever?” Soma tried to approach.

Sebastian sighed and started to move as Ciel complained, trying to deflect the prince’s attention.

“I don’t. My temperature is fine.”

The temper might be an issue though. Mouser thought, standing on top of the staircase, waiting.

“Liar.”

“I’m fine.”

“Ciel!”

Sebastian closed the door of the boyo’s room, putting him down. Ciel fell on the bed, groaning in relief as the butler walked around, preparing what was needed to prepare for an official outing.

“The Young Master certainly has a lot of lies and secrets.” Sebastian was saying. Mouser was simply doing the rest, opening curtains and lighting some extra light sources. The day was grey and darkening although it neither looked like it would snow or rain soon. “The young Master didn’t even tell me about the chronic illness he has had since childhood. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You never asked so I never told you. Besides it’s healed already.” The boyo said with a stiff and annoyed carelessness. Most likely he loathed to show any kind of weakness. Even in front of someone who knew all that was behind the child’s façade.

“Petulance just makes you look childish boyo.” Mouser mentioned, finishing brightening the room, stoking the flames of the small hearth to create a warm environment and placing the poker on its place.

“Is that so?” Sebastian said softly, condescending on the boyo’s attitude, hiding his slight disapproval and frustration.” Still it’s better to be careful. I’ll read a medical book about asthma for
next time.”

“Is that aesthetics too?” Ciel asked with derision, snorting.

“I have to be able to react to any kind of situations as a butler.” Sebastian answered with a simple bow.

“I’ll go get some warm tea.” Mouser smiled as the preparations for the quick bath were ready, poking the boyo’s forehead, frowning slightly. It was clammy and hot. She sighed and walked out, her path crossing with Soma and Agni huddled up in a plotting pose.

“Too naïve Ciel!” Soma’s voice echoed through the household’s main areas. Mouser stopped with the tray in the corridor, staring at Agni’s back as he blocked the boyo’s doorway. So that was their ploy? A bit childish and not really though through. Soma was inside the room, ready to play the obnoxious big brother. “Don’t think you can get out of this townhouse while it’s guarded by me! You have a cold and as the governor of this mansion and your best friend I can’t overlook this.”

“Who’s my best friend? Don’t say such ridiculous things.” Ciel complained grouchily. Mouser arched an eyebrow, placing the tray on a nearby decorative table, pouring tea.

“Agni! Don’t let Ciel pass.” Soma shouted

“Jo Ajna.” Agni answered immediately.

The door was still open, showing the drama.

“Now listen here you… I have a job to do! I don’t have time to play your games. Out of the way.”

The boyo was saying, angrily, the effect broken by the clear weakness in his voice.

“Your job is to lie in bed and be nursed back to health.”

“It’s different! This much is…”

The shouts were broken by a sudden coughing fit.

Mouser sipped her tea as Agni’s shape abandoned the doorway, going deeper into the room. It was a good tea although she had no clue what she had picked from the box of little decorative cans filled with different teas. It had a lovely scent and taste.

“Master Ciel… Please return to bed.” Agni was saying, worried. “That kind of cough is characteristic of asthma there’s no way you’re well.”

“Don’t touch me so easily.” Ciel shouted hoarsely, reaching the edges of his patience. “Sebastian! Get this guys out of my sight.”

“Understood.” Sebastian said, starting to move.

“Mr. Sebastian!” Agni shouted suddenly, breaking the tension before Sebastian obeyed. Mouser sipped the tea again and added a bit more of sugar. “You’re Master’s Ciel’s butler.”

“What?” That caught Sebastian off guard.

“As a fellow butler. No. As a friend I’ll say this.” Agni started solemnly. “Your Master’s body is
your first priority. Even tough it might go against his wishes considering Master Ciel’s condition you should have stopped him. For my master to be healthy… I would risk my life.” The Indian stopped for a moment, emotional, taking that time to stay solemn. “Isn’t that what you would call butler aesthetics?”

Sebastian paused, seemingly thoughtful.

“I though granting my master’s wishes was my job. But… Certainly you have a point in that way of thinking.” The demon admitted after a few moments of careful consideration. Mouse sighed, sipping her tea. And so the boyo was thwarted. The rustle of fabric was sudden but the shout was piercing. The struggle, as weak as it was, due to a weakened condition, fever and bouts of slight hacking cough, was still quite noticeable.

“Why you… why are you being persuaded? My orders are…”

“It’s decided that the patient should sleep.” Sebastian stated.

“I’ll nurse you personally. You should be grateful.” Soma announced gleefully and started to give orders that were quickly answered by both servants much to the boyo’s displeasure. “Agni prepare rice porridge and a herb bath. Ciel’s khansama can get his sleeping clothes and an ice pillow.”

Mouser poured the tea while the man walked by without noticing her, adding sugar and sipping, chortling slightly as she placed the cup down and carried the tray to the study. It was a short while of shouting, fussiness and annoyance as she made some headway into the new novel, one about a haunted manor and a trapped heroine that was being lusted after by some kind of monstrous thing and had a dashing hero fight through some sort of maze to protect her purity. Quite frankly she was not seeing how bloodless carnage entered the field of horror novel but the public of fainting ladies seemed to be a little fussy.

“Here is your tea.” Mouser said gently, walking into the room with the tray.

“Where were you?” The boyo said, peeking from the covers he was bundled in. Mouser smiled, placing the tray on the nightstand, climbing onto the bed, sitting next to him, snuggling shamelessly on the pillows, checking his temperature, clicking her tongue gently.

“I was drinking the other tea.” The thief admitted. It was good that they had postponed the confrontation trip. He would have collapsed in the middle of the event, she was sure.

“Why didn’t you interfere?” The boyo asked grouchily, leaning against her for some reason. Mouser adjusted the covers, scoffing, patting his head.

“Like I could get a word in edgewise. I also believe you should rest for a bit.” Too pale, to thin and too defenceless at that point. Anything that had to be done would be hindered by his condition at that moment. “Do you need anything?” Mouser asked, keeping her tone soft.

“Tell me a story.” Ciel asked. It was clear he was not asking for Cinderella either. Mouser lowered her head for a moment, looking away.

“You haven’t asked that in the longest time…” The thief whispered, her eyes growing dull for a second before smirking. “What do you want to hear?”

“Your first kill.” The boyo did not hesitated. Mouser tilted her head. Why that story in particular?
“Really? That…” Mouser hesitated. He was not in the best state and when the boyo asked for a story he wanted the whole thing. “Are you sure you don’t prefer something else?”

“I can whine, saying I’m sick.” There was something off about that phrase but he could be in a slight delusion.

“So fever makes you have a sense of humour.” Mouser chuckled slightly, ruffling his hair, getting him comfortable. “Very well… I was six.” Mouser stretched lazily and laid down on her stomach, head on crossed arms, eyes closed sleepily. “The headmistress had put me to work on the streets since I was four, no different that any of the others, and Jack had taken me in after a rather ambitions thieving on my part that got slightly botched. But only at six did the headmistress start to parade us about to the buyers. There were two groups in the orphanage. The favourites and everyone else.

The favourites had protection and power over the other girls.

The first time I was prepared and brought out to the buyers was one of the harshest punishments I have ever witnessed in the orphanage. There were others, but nothing came close to that.

We were placed like cattle and examined by the men that came in the scheduled day and time.

There was this girl, Iphigenia. Good stock. Rich family with minor title. Her parents were dead for a couple of months and she was in the orphanage while contacts were being made, looking for her relatives. All that time she had been one of the favourites and she was a mean chit. Liked to sneer and rub her title and position even at other favourites.

As she found out that night her status was revoked. Her relatives paid a lot of money to the headmistress to make her disappear and become unfit to inherit. Her side had just a bit more money that the rest of that lineage. I don’t know if the men had instructions or were just liking her proud nose. She though she was in line with us to keep discipline. But if that was the reason then why was Emma there? Maybe she thought Emma was the one that had fallen from grace.”

Mouser shook her head, groaning, shifting the position of her arms, peeking, finding him still interested.

“I was not scared though. Even then I knew my worth and I had brought a valuable haul that day… A broken, scared thief was not in the headmistresses’ plans.

Iphigenia did not know she was no longer worth anything. When one of the buyers examined her she answered like any noble lady. All haughtiness, slaps and don’t touch me you swine.”

Mouser arched, yawned and turned to the other side of the bed.

“The headmistress gave them permission and they raped her.” She stated simply, looking at the closed curtains. A sliver of sun sneaked underneath it, the room darkened to allow the boyo to rest.

“Why are you telling me this?” Ciel asked. It did seem a bit of a roundabout way to go when talking about a killing. Mouser sighed.

“You wanted the story.” She replied gently. “If you just asked me the name of my first kill I’d said Iphigenia and left it there.” Mouser moved and returned to her stomach, resting her head on her palms, crossing the legs slowly. “I take it you want me to stop?”

“Tell me.” The boyo demanded, an interested gleam in his eye.
“Fine. We all watched. There was no choice. It was a way of disciplining us, added to all the other punishments. Either you behave and do as you are told and be grateful for it or that will be your fate. Some threw up. Others cried. Emma fainted. Her belief in the favourite status was shattered. She became a nicer person for a few months… then she turned sixteen and left. Charlotte never told me what did I do… but seeing I seem to recall everything I believe I just… watched. If I did anything else I can’t remember.

*When it was over they simply continued with their purchases. Iphigenia was a whimpering mess. The sobbing and screaming and crying only started when it was light’s out. Others just ignored it. I went to check on her. When she saw me the begging started. She wanted to die. That’s what society says. If you’re not pure you’re a harlot. And if you have fallen so far it was your fault. And if you’re not strong enough it snaps you inside. She was snapped. She begged me to kill her, to not let those men take her away, take her again. So I did. Jack had given me a pocket knife for protection. I used it on her heart and she thanked me for it. Really… it wasn’t that much blood until I pulled the blade out…*

*Then I went to hunt… the men always stayed overnight. Moving girls was easier in the daylight, as funny as that sounds. Just had to say they were hired guards and be accompanied by the headmistress as safeguard. I killed three of them while they slept. Slit their throats. That was a lot more blood than I was expecting. The fourth woke up. He screamed. He was terrified of a little bloodstained girl”.*

Mouser chortled, rolling onto her back, eyes closed, smiling her fangs were distinct, sharp and noticeable, stabbing her lower lip lightly.

“He ran away.

*I asked Jack. He helped me catch him. That one… I made him bleed. Took him quite a while to die. Even so there were so many after that… so many friends getting raped, killed some of them because they were too broken to care or function. Some asked me to end it too. Others did it to themselves. Others were strong. The survivors are something else… The thing is… I never did stop paying back. Although I freely admit it was not about them.*

Mouser sighed and sat up. Sleepily the boyo leaned against her. Hard to tell what he was thinking.

“Anything else?”

“No.” The whisper was hoarse but the cough had gone away for now and while the fever still burned he was calm. He hadn’t even demanded the tea. Mouser slid her black tipped fingers through the dark tresses gently, smiling. He was out. A small sound from the corridor caught her attention.

“Why... why would you tell him something like that?” Soma was standing on the doorway, wide-eyed and shocked, shivering. Mouser hummed, still petting the boyo’s head before leaning, kissing the forehead quickly to assess his temperature, standing and adjusting the covers under the shocked eyes of the prince.

“Because unlike you he has been hurt before. Sometimes it helps to know that there are others whose pain runs as deep as yours. He was feeling hurt again, most likely due to the fever dreams. Those burdened with pain dislike feeling vulnerable ever again.” Mouser smiled, allowing the teen to come closer. “So I showed him it could be worse. You said you were nursing him to health?”

Soma nodded, speechless.
Mouser smiled.

“Good night then.”
Chapter 29

Mouser woke up tense, silent, her nails deeply imbibed into the mattress, puncturing it, her breath coming in and out shallowly, short shards of gasps. Slowly she relaxed, returning to the plump surface, prying each finger loose, looking at the actions sullenly. When one of her hands was free she covered her face, groaning, rolling slightly, going deeper into the covers as the other hand worked to get out of the piece of furniture.

So it was biting a bit harder than she had been expecting.

Mouser smirked, huffing, slipping out of the bed, looking around.

Sebastian was not there.

It seemed dawn was yet to come too.

Without bothering to put anything else on she walked out, bare feet touching the cold floor, making her wince. As much as it was a sensation she was familiar with and could block out of her mind it was still unpleasant. In any case it was just a quick trip… Agni would not care and Soma was still in the boyo’s room playing the elder brother.

The cabinets were neatly organized as always so it was easy to find the item she was looking for. The rum sloshed inside the bottle. Mouser frowned. It was nearly gone. Groaning in annoyance she placed the bottle in the counter and got to her knees, crawling inside the cabinet to find the backups.

“A troubled conscience is not good for a growing demon.” Sebastian said from somewhere behind her. Of course he would be in the kitchen… Mouser grunted, still checking labels and scents. She resented that accusation.

“I’ll have you know I have had no issues with my conscience in...” She paused the muffled words and backed out of the storage area, not noticing the sway of her hips or the bunching of the fabric around her thighs, frowning. “Actually I don’t recall any instance of such a trouble. I believe I pawned it off along with gold and silver.” Mouser sighed and faked a pout.“Why is the rum gone?”

“I had not expected to return so soon to the town house. An oversight.” The demon admitted, extending his hand so she could stand up. Mouser sighed, taking it and picking up the nearly drained bottle. She did not let go of his hand, frowning when she felt a distinct warmth against her skin. He was not wearing gloves.

“It’s not my conscience. It’s my memories.” Mouser sighed and gestured towards the table. Sebastian sat down, letting her climb onto his lap, sapping his warmth, snuggling. His hands found their way to long strokes down her spine. She let go of the bottle, humming, nipping his neck gently, arms going around his torso, making her displeasure towards the cold that sneaked where they were not touching known. The nightmares were good. She dealt with them easily, out of habit. The terror in the dreams often allowed her to feel no dread when awake. But sometimes… “Some things got dragged out.” It was about as open as she was going to be.

Sebastian caressed her head, playing with the hair that had grown longer. It was still quite uneven when considering right and left. It seemed to fade some of the tension that was still thrumming through her.
Unpleasant memories were natural and something even demons possessed. Hell was not a place where the weak survived. Time gave the demons ample chance to move on and stop caring altogether about events that had befallen them, hardening their minds and emotions to the point they looked unfeeling to the uneducated. Mouser’s concept of time was still human hence her memories, when given the proper and unpleasant prodding, still soured her moods.

It was not a frequent event. Not for her, not for demons in general.

It would pass. They both knew it. So when she fell asleep again, dragged by the simple allure of the activity rather than the need for its restful proprieties, Sebastian simply picked her up, returning her to their bed, placing the Peter Rabbit between her arms. Mouser was smirking slightly as she snuggled the bunny when he adjusted the covers over her. He slipped his fingers through her hair again. The demon would have stayed and perhaps even waited for her to come to again, riling her up until nothing was left but desire to burn away whatever was making her agitated, if not for the nagging feeling he was having about the town house security. Any suspicion on the circus part could trigger a retaliation and as the business was unfinished he should keep his guard up.

“It was a lovely performance Silk.” Charlotte teased, signalling a maid to serve the tea. The young girl couldn’t be more than sixteen and had shaky hands. It was obvious she was still training. Most likely one of the rescued her friend gave chances to. Survivors. Whether they took the chance for a better and stable life or returned to the streets was their own choice.

“Well thank you.” Mouser sipped, feeling the warmth, deciding it needed a bit more sugar, adding as the girl glowed at Charlotte’s gentle praise, walking out, bit by bit less skittish. Maybe that one would take the offered chance.

“I take it is done?” Charlotte asked in a business tone, taking the cup, legs crossing under the light dress.

“No yet. The boyo does owe me a bit of money seeing I won the bet.” Mouser noted, placing the cup down, looking out, seeing snow.

“It was a noble then?”

“Indeed.”

“So you came to ask about it.”

“We’re taking the time while he’s bedridden to get all the information we need for a meeting.” Past, present, house plants, number of servants, where to get keys, how much money he had and where did it flow from…

“I will endeavour to help the Queen’s Watchdog.” Charlotte said formally before grinning. “And get a new set of rings.”

“What kind of rings?” Mouser asked, interested.

“There is a new trend going around…” Charlotte said, winking dreamily. “I know. Magpies. Still… ask away.”

“Baron Kelvin.”
“Really?” Charlotte made a look of utter disgust and disdain. “He was somewhat good… Five years ago he was one of the few that ran decent orphanages and work houses. No one got sold. He actually cared about the kids he picked up from the streets. He even took the ones that were hurt and crippled.” Mouser frowned. Figured the circus was a batch of those, given a second chance at movement. “Then three, almost four now, years ago he disappeared from the public’s eye, dropped all his philanthropic work within the city, emptying the buildings his charities were in, and stayed within his manor. His wife abandoned him. Not only that. They divorced.” Extremely humiliating and damaging for all parties involved. Which was another giveaway that something was very wrong. “Rumours say he’s gone mad.”

“Three years? Why is it that all converges to that point of time?”

“The Phantomhive’s murder.” Charlotte noticed. “There is more.”

“There always is.” Mouser snorted bitterly.

“Yes. After this bit though I’m going deeply into rumour territory. He hired a doctor that was forbidden to practice because he performed unethical surgeries and experiments.”

“Doctors like that usually buy corpses underground. Or experiment on the living poor that no one misses if snatched off the streets.”

It was not unusual as an occurrence. But being backed up by an eccentric patron merited some attention.

“As for the rumours… remember when Ciel Phantomhive was auctioned off?” Charlotte sipped her tea softly. It had been a very private and closed deal, open only to the wealthy.

“Yes. To a cult of nobles playing with things they shouldn’t.” Mouser scoffed. “Everyone was very surprised the pup of the Watchdog had survived.”

“I heard he was part of it, the original cult, but did not attend. Recluse and all. If he did he would be dead and you’d be having no troubles with the fat old fool.” Her friend cheered and stretched.

“Interesting…”

“What are you thinking?” Charlotte asked playfully.

“How much this is going to be worth.” Mouser answered, smiling. “Can you trace the boyo’s purchase?”

“I tried.” Charlotte stared at the tea. “When you started working for him I tried to nose around. Can’t find a shred of proof or evidence… whoever tried to get the Phantomhives off their plate knew what he was doing. Have you tried to contact the Undertaker or the Spider?”

“The Undertaker will say nothing.” Mouser sighed. “He’s a regular contact of the boyo and I’m rather sure he would have asked and taken his answers already. Besides he deals with the dead. His knowledge of the living and events that have no visible victims can be rather sketchy. As for the Spider…” Mouser sighed then groaned. “The old one was off his trolley and the new one is a nutter. Also I wouldn’t be entirely sure the old blighter had nothing to do with the boyo’s disappearance and death of the rival noble family.”

“He liked kiddos.” Charlotte dragged out.

“I’ll bet you five shilling and diamond tiara as he was in that oh so secretive auction.” Mouser
deadpanned pulling out a cigarette, lighting it.

“What would I do with a tiara?”

“Parade around and proclaim you’re a princess.” Mouser answered, smirking amidst the smoke.

“It seems his fever had dropped.” Sebastian assessed after a quick appraisal, making the boyo drink a bit more water without waking him up. Soma was collapsed on the bedside and Agni was helping. Mouser was playing nurse, carrying a tray with water, herbal tea, and some bitter smelling medicines that hopefully would not be needed, both for the sake of the boyo and her nose’s. Sebastian also mentioned that, according to the medical book, some of those could provoke nausea. No one was too eager to try any of it. “His respiration sounds normal too and his colour has improved immensely since yesterday.”

“It’s a relief isn’t it?” Agni answered, picking up the sleeping Soma, carrying him on his back.

“They say sleep is the best medicine for humans. Let’s not wake him yet.” Sebastian said agreeably, walking towards the door, opening it, allowing everyone to pass before closing it just as silently.

“Mr. Sebastian… I am sorry for being so forwards and yelling so loudly at you yesterday.” Agni was keeping his voice down while they walked, discussing the events.

“Not at all. It was a deeply interesting point and good guidance.” Sebastian conceded without embarrassment or worries. It added to the respect and friendship he had started to form with Agni, as odd as that felt for the old demon.

“You shouldn’t say such things. For me to give you guidance…” Agni laughed lightly, still very reluctant to take praise or look anything less than humble. “I think Mr. Sebastian is a far more perfect butler than I.”

“But you’re too mean.” Soma’s voice rose from his khansama’s back, trying to disguise itself.

“Prince… did I wake you.” Agni was immediately concerned. Sebastian glanced at the young man, looking slightly confused.

Mouser smiled.

Mean was a matter of perspective. Paralleled with some old stiff butlers Mouser had met over the years, and be beaten and shooed away by them, Sebastian could be considered warm and loving. And she was not comparing to anything that happened within their covenant. The British butler was usually a glacier of efficiency. Or so the stereotype went.

Soma was shivering and hiding.

“No. I’m sleeping. The one talking right now is Agni.” He hushed his voice further, prodding Agni in an urgent whisper. “Lip synch with me.”

And without missing a beat Agni did so.

“Compared to me you’re not nice for your master at all.”

“Not nice.” Sebastian repeated slowly, puzzled.
“Ciel is still a child. He’s at that age where he wants to be fawned over and cuddled by their parents all day. Especially when sick. But he has no parents.” Soma was explaining, eagerly, masked by Agni’s devotion to him. He fooled no one. But maybe he knew that.

“Miss Crows?” Agni said in his own voice, noticing Mouser’s expression.

“Forgive me but I have no memory of that… I was just finding the notion very odd.” The thief said simply, blinking for a moment, snapped out of a slight trance.

“Well I had nothing like that” Soma admitted, a bit saddened, a bit rueful. “But my grandfather and Meena who were nice and fawned over me… that’s why you should be nice to him and fawn over him with all your might. Be nice. Just do it.” With that he hopped off Agni’s back and ran off, afraid of Sebastian induced repercussions.

“Prince what a kind heart…” Agni called, looking utterly moved. Sebastian just watched, looking calm but confused by the sudden events. Mouser shrugged, taking the tray back to the kitchen as the demon left to stay within the usual routine. She also had to do some work for the Funtom. Three, almost four days translated into quite a staggering amount of correspondence.

“Dark?” Ciel whispered groggily as he stirred awake. “What time is it now?” He finally whispered with some clarity, looking around, pinpoint the butler nearby with a cart and Mouser sitting in front of the fire, reading the newspaper, pen in hand, circling and underlining news. She glanced up when he spoke, placing everything down, turning the armchair towards the bed, sitting down again. Ciel frowned, confused.

“It is 7.14 pm.” Sebastian answered with the proper inflection a servant should display. It made the boyo hope the weirdness of the sickbed behaviour had passed. Still so late...“You finally woke up I see.” Sebastian stated, draping the fluffy house robe over the boyo’s shoulders, lighting the candles next, trying to keep the room in a slightly darker side of the light spectrum. It was just better for the recently awakened.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” The boyo demanded, huffing in annoyance. He was feeling better then.

“It was a decision based on the fact that butler should think about their master’s health first.” Sebastian said. Mouser clapped silently with glee, smirking. Let the show begin.

“Huh?” The boyo was already confused. Perfect. It would add that little impact needed...

Sebastian smiled as if nothing was different and pushed the cart closer, to the bed, revealing the treats he had prepared, presenting them in the usual fashion.

“Today’s dinner is milk risotto with three kinds of mushrooms with pork and wine pot-au-feu. Deserts is apple compote draped with yogurt.” Then it started. “Well the Young Master... say aah.” Sebastian’s voice grew a bit sweeter and he picked up the plate and spoon, treating Ciel like a five year old child. Mouser chortled suddenly, bending forward, trying to contain his laughter when the boyo prickled, panicking.

“AH?! Just who are you trying to be.” He shouted suddenly, eyes wide. Mouser was trying very hard to choke down her laughter, reclining against the armchair’s back, legs pressed against her stomach.
“Is it too hot?” Sebastian continued the nanny act without missing a beat. “I’ll cool it down for you then.” The only way to make any of that even odder and awkward was if he was wearing the apron and frilly cap. Actually Meyrin had gossiped something about a pink bonnet with flowers imposed by Lady Elizabeth... Mouser whimpered, trying to breathe before bursting into a cackle as she saw the completely confused and slightly squeamish boyo squirm like a snail in a salt shaker and the incongruent image of Sebastian wearing anything pink and frilly. “Tsk... Such a troublesome master to fawn over... honestly.” Sebastian added to the show with a slight soliloquy to his public. Mouser covered her mouth, running out of air. But if she took any breath she just knew she was going to laugh. Loudly.

“Grossing me out has its limits!” Ciel shouted suddenly, scooting to the other side of the bed, covered in goose bumps, losing the robe. “Mouser!” That was a plea for help if she ever heard one.

“I am sorry. I’m just here for the show.” Mouser wheezed out, smiling, chuckling again, rearranging her position on the chair, trying to sit politely and watch like a lady. The effect was ruined by the slightly loonish smile she had plastered on her lips and the shaking of her shoulders.

“Oh dear. You will get in a worse condition if you don’t eat and keep warm Young Master.” Sebastian said with a voice dripping sweet and helpful gentleman, bundling him in the robe, adjusting the sheets and patting his head. Again like an overly doting nanny. Mouser’s smile vanished into a thin line of barely contained sound.

“Stop this right now.” Ciel finally was awake enough to understand and plot a course. Mouser sighed. Well it had been funny enough. “That’s an order.”

Sebastian smiled, lowering his head in acknowledgement. So he simply explained the behaviour.

“Prince Soma said patients are things to fawn over completely and be nice to.” The demon composed a puzzled expression, smirking then, head tilted in doubt. As if saying that he was just taking advice that seemed sound but made no sense to him. “Does this not please you?”

“I don’t need your fawning. It’s disgusting.” The boyo said bluntly, looking angry. Mouser sighed, shaking her head, standing and stretching, going inside the closet to pick up the clothes for the nightly activities.

“Is that so. I am sorry then.” Sebastian said calmly, allowing the boyo to eat, walking around with Mouser, both preparing the trip. The thief left with the cart when it was time to dress. “By the way... at about four I received a phone call from Tanaka.” Sebastian informed while dealing with the waistcoat’s buttons of the properly tailored suit. Despite being tagged as a criminal they were still going to visit a Baron. Some decorum and showiness was in order. The Phantomhive name had to be impeccable. “It seems Lady Elizabeth is at the manor.”

“What!” Ciel shrieked, tensing. “Why didn’t you say it sooner?”

“I wanted the young master to eat his dinner with ease.” The boyo accepted that answer as Mouser came in, carrying the cloak and having the top hat placed on her own head, balancing it while twirling the cane, waiting. “And if you don’t chew right the nutrition level will go down...” Sebastian continued, straightening the jacket and holding it so the boyo’s arms could go into their sleeves.

“Don’t get carried away with the advice of that peaceful idiot combo.” Ciel grumbled.

“Said combo is out of the way for now if you’re quiet.” Mouser informed. “Agni is cooking something Soma requested and the prince is downstairs in the billiard room. Warmth and games.”
“It seems Lady Elizabeth has no intention of returning home before seeing the Young Master.” Sebastian picked up the conversation unhurriedly, taking the hat from Mouser, adjusting her hair before giving the item to the boyo. “So with her fast return in mind...”

“Jeez...” The boyo groaned making Mouser chuckle as the cape was placed around his shoulders and she tied the big bow. “You have researched Baron Kelvin’s house?”

“Yes, seeing there was plenty of time to do so. It’s a place about a day drive from London by coach or railway.”

“Boyo... there is something you should...” Mouser started softly.

Ciel was not going to listen. His attention was in the mission and focused on Sebastian to get the best result. Mouser sighed and glanced at the demon. Maybe nothing would come of it if they killed the bloke before he could prattle and tattle.

“If it’s you we’ll be able to get there in an hour right? If it’s an order...” Sebastian seemed calm. Mouser fidgeted. So it would be a test for her too, the thief though, putting on her gloves, cape and adjusting the little hat. “Let’s end this quickly and return to the main house.” Ciel ordered haughtily.

“Yes my lord.” Sebastian acquiesced, finally getting into his own overcoat, ready to depart.

Unfortunately Ciel’s status as the worse thief ever had not changed overnight. Soma came running as soon as the boyo’s shoes started to take him downstairs.

“Ciel you’re going out again?” The prince was standing his ground on the base of the staircase, trying to look angry and intimidating. It was clearly not within his nature to be either. Feeble effort at best. “If you don’t heal...” Soma began to scold

“I heard you nursed me while I was asleep.” Ciel said softly, taking a different approach.

“Yes... I” Soma was immediately disarmed by the sweetened tone.

“Thank you. I feel so much better. Thank you.” The boyo did the trick again, all sweetness, smiles and soft fluffiness. Like one of the bunnies he sold.

“Is that so.” Soma preened, easily distracted. “Thanks to me... after all when the nursing is good you really heal better...” the prince was happily rambling, not noticing as the boyo made a dash for the door.

“Yes. So the healthy me has to go. See you.” Ciel crossed the hall and slipped into the cold snowy early night. Slivers of sunset still stained the sky, deceitful. “All that smiling practise really came in handy...” The boyo said as the demon pair closed the door, leaving Soma shouting inside.

“You fooled me Ciel. I’ll remember this for when you come back!” Soma was shouting, irritated.

“This is the mansion?” The boyo asked as Sebastian placed him down, looking around with a critical eye.
“Yes.” Sebastian answered simply, turning. Mouser took a deep breath, stretching, uncomfortable. It had been a mad sprint and her legs felt quite boneless for the time being. The demon examined the female for a moment. “Were you able to keep up?”

“ Barely but I managed.” She admitted. While he was able to sprint non-stop she could only keep up through short burst of speed, covering as much ground as possible before stopping and wheezing for a couple of minutes. The demon gave her an amused look, approaching, placing her face between his hands, kissing her slowly and deeply, replenishing what the harsh effort had taken.

The boyo ignored them with a frown, as that sort of activity was in the grossing him out category, still examining the place, noticing the lack of light, guards and movement.

“How is it?” He finally asked. “Can you pick up any kind of trace?”

“Yes.” Sebastian said after a few moments staring at the stone, clean façade. “I am not sure if all of them are here but it seems everyone is alive.” Mouser did not look, still recovering. The trio walked towards the main door calmly, ready for the worst.

“Welcome.” The double door opened slowly, revealing a sombre looking Joker. He showed neither a flinch nor surprise. “We have been waiting Earl Phantomhive.” The circus leader bowed politely, stepping out of the way. Please come inside.” He said, clearly taking the role of the butler of the household, snapping his fingers to bring the lights to life, revealing a decor that mixed what was once a classy mansion and broken dolls and limbs. Pretty pieces, discarded...

“Enough with the dolls.” Mouser grumbled as the boyo looked around wide-eyed in shock. Sebastian’s reaction was a bit more contained but he looked less than pleased with the situation. “I am sick of dolls.” It did raise the question if that had anything to do with the disabled doll house. They were not fully assembled, dressed or animated so that chance seemed faint.

“This way.” Joker urged in a dead tone, very politely.

“What do you want to do?” Sebastian leaned down, assessing the boyo’s mood and intentions. “Kill him right away and rescue the children?” Mouser did the same quietly while they walked upstairs. “Kill him right away and rescue the children?” The demon suggested.

Mouser agreed. It was the simple, quick, clean and easy path to take.

“Wait.” The boyo said quietly and thoughtfully. “If this kids were still alive isn’t it better if we catch them red handed? Also if we don’t understand the situation or his goals completely we can’t report it to the Queen.”

“Understood.” Sebastian bowed gently, acquiescing.

“I believe you are over thinking.” Mouser whispered. “You should just dispatch him quickly and move on.”

“Well... they say don’t judge a book by its cover.” Joker interrupted the small exchange. “You’re a good example. That such a little body lives under the stage names of the Queen’s watchdog and Evil noblemen that’s some hardship Smile.” For a tricked man he was being extremely comprehensive. Which was a clear giveaway that he was not the one in control. And the one in control had what he was after right under his roof.

“My name is Earl Ciel Phantomhive. A servant shall not speak to me with such familiarity.” The boyo stated with all the arrogance he could place in his voice, giving back all the anger and frustration that had slowly been accumulated over the last few days of forced humility and face
aches due to the overexposure to smiles.

“Exactly.” Joker shrugged, reaching another door. “You are a noblemen after all.” The man sighed and slipped into the stiffer role again. “We have prepared dinner for you.” Joker announced as he opened the way to an ample dining room, richly decorated with a stage in front of the perfectly set and polished table. “This way please.” Joker followed through the formalities, pulling the chair for the boyo, crossing the room then, standing next to the opposite door. “He has arrived.”

“You came to see me.” A man was wheeled into the dining room by two pretty blonde children, their eyes empty and the gestures slow, dull and mechanic. Oddly enough even the dead-girl dolls had looked livelier even when lacking a soul. The soul she caught a glimpse of was deeply repulsive. In contrast the man, Baron Kelvin, even heavily bandaged was perky and lively, the one eye that was free of the fabric shining in glee. “Earl Phantomhive. Ah it’s like a dream. To have you so close to me. Though I feel so ashamed to meet you looking like this.” He was wheeled to his place. Joker showed nothing.

“So you are Baron Kelvin?” Ciel asked, just confirming.

“That’s right. But it makes me feel rather awkward to be all formal with you. For you we have prepared a feast.” A sudden invasion of children in servant’s uniforms, pulling and carrying the said feast entered the room. “The wine if from 1875.” The baron continued as Joker poured and served. The kids did their duties and disappeared. They were as well trained as any domestic staff Mouser had seen. But they were still sharing the same dulled eyes and souls of the others. The thief crinkled her nose in distaste. Too close. “It’s from the year I were born. I might sound as though I am showing off a little.”

“It doesn’t seem to contain poison.” Sebastian said after taking a cautious sip. He was standing silently behind the chair, to the left. Mouser was standing to the right hands caressing her knives under the cape, pulling just a bit feeling the metal against her skin, waiting.

“Humph.” The boyo acknowledged the statement, staring, his eye darkened. “I have no intention of touching food served by a rat so there is no need to taste for poison. Moreover...” He shifted slightly on his seat, examining the new wave of diminutive dull servants. “Those children... it looks like there are more victims than the police reports.”

“They could have been bred here for the servitude purpose.”

“How?”

“Keep whores pregnant and have a steady supply.” Mouser said, grimacing. That had been... of what was the name... Madam Taylor’s method. She specialized in selling kiddos... Not a brothel, just a market. So who was to say that Baron Kelvin didn’t produce his own particular preferred brand of servants?

“But their appearance...” The boyo continued, preferring not to delve too much into that particular side of the conversation. They were indeed unknown faces but the lack of report could indeed mean that they had never been known in the first place. A blank existence, created just to function.

“They are empty.” Mouser provided, her eyes still and deep red. Sebastian showed no emotion. The boyo was growing angrier and repulsed. “Can I kill him?” Mouser offered in a sweet whisper.

“That’s it... just merely having a meal...” The bandaged baron was rambling, delving into the food that had been placed in front of him, dutifully aided by the blonde pair. “Earl... Are you also bored?” He turned, playing the hospitable and conscious host, interrupting the flow of the
conversation on the other side of the table. “Joker.” Fat pulpy hands clapped forcefully, startlingly loud. “Prepare *that* for me.”

“But...” Joker seemed shocked and torn.

“Just do it.” The bubbly tone shifted easily to aggression and cruelty. He didn’t stop eating, enjoying himself and showing a pleasant look every time he glanced towards the boyo.

“Yes.” Joker whispered, resigned, pulling a few ropes, making bell sound throughout the house, walking towards the stage, picking up a cane from one of the servant-child in the way, clearing his throat discreetly as the curtain was pulled apart gracefully. “Welcome Earl Phantomhive. Tonight I will accompany you to a world of pleasure that will leave you dazzled.” There was a line of small bodies attired with circus clothing and pristine masks. Still. Empty. Broken. The baron was laughing and clapping in anticipation. The boyo just looked slightly confused for the moment as Joker masked himself in his circus persona. “First we have a tightrope walker with no lifeline or anything.” A little girl above the ground, tumbling down, crashing on the stage, her skull cracking, blood seeping through the fair hair, staining the boards. “This is the real deal.”

There was no mistaking the flinch that racked through Joker’s frame. Ciel gasped in shock. Sebastian frowned. It was not exactly puzzlement but there was a clear feel of disgust in his attitude. Mouser tilted her head, staring at the blood, blinking slowly, petting her daggers. The baron cheered gleefully. Joker seemed to be in pain, his voice cracking as something forced him to continue.

“Next is the wild animal tamer.” A little, scrawny kid. “A fierce lion.” A big grown and hungry beast with a scarred rump, riled to aggression, further egged on by the scent of the blood that was leaving a smear through the planks as two other properly dressed kids dragged the unfortunate rope walker away. It was no surprise when its first action was to attack and maul the unresponsive boy. “Then...” Joker’s expression was growing more pained and tighter. “Next is a knife thrower...” A boy and a girl strapped onto a decorative board. “The fate of the girl is...” The knife was thrown, straight for the head.

“Stop it Sebastian.” The boyo shouted suddenly, standing, almost demolishing the cutlery. The blade was stopped too near the mask, held by the demon who then stood, taking the piece of white lacquer away, picking up the images of the missing children, leafing through them thoughtfully in the shocked silence of the Baron and Joker.

“Ellery Nickson disappeared in the Cornwall area. There is no mistake.” Sebastian announced, reaching the papers he was looking for. “As you expected Young Master. Kidnapped children are put into a show without any training.” That was the early concept but a passable excuse for the first stage of the report. “I see. This is just another way to enjoy the circus.” Sebastian shrugged dismissively, watching what was happening on the other side of the stage. Mouser grinned and glanced at the Baron.

“Can I kill him?” She whispered again.

“Sorry... you don’t like this method.” The baron grew flustered, fidgeting and gesturing around. “Joker.” Kelvin shouted, angry once again. “Clean it up right away.”

“I shall put a stop to this.” Mouser smiled, perking up as the boyo’s voice grew dark and he stood, advancing. Sebastian watched, amused. Both the Young Master and his covenant were very keen on the notion of killing the man. “I have no desire to sit at a table with a beast that is more despicable than an animal.”
“What is wrong?” Baron Kelvin whimpered, confused.

“This is enough for a report to the Queen.” Ciel announced, gesturing at Sebastian while advancing. Mouser skipped along, a blade in hand, the gun in the other. “Vulgar. Ugly. Perverted. The lowest form of human. It is my duty as the Queen’s Watchdog to eliminate you.” The boyo shouted suddenly, pointing his own pistol at the offender who shrieked in fear, the situation not quite dawning on him yet.

“Earl?” Joker shouted in fear, advancing, the blade pulled out of the cane, pointing it at the boyo’s neck while Sebastian held a blade to the young man’s own neck and the boyo kept the pistol pressed against Baron Kelvin’s head. Mouser chuckled, out of the impasse, blade over Joker’s heart, gun to the baron’s chest. “Joker... stop the Earl from pointing that dangerous thing at me!” The baron was shrieking, shivering on the chair. The two blonde kids hadn’t reacted throughout the whole ordeal.

“But...” Joker whispered, tilting his head back, trying to keep from losing his balance and his life by default. Sebastian smiled, almost daring him to do something.

“You won’t listen to me?!” The baron forgot the moment of danger due to his anger at being disobeyed, looking at his tool until he folded, letting the blade go. Sebastian kept him still though the threat of a blade, watching quietly.

“Can I kill him?” Mouser whispered, returning her dagger to its place, pleading with Ciel, her eyes completely red, the pupils simple slits. Her insistence seemed off place but considering… everything...

“Where are the kidnapped children?”

“The house is big but even if he’s dead they’ll be easy to find. And we don’t have to hear him talk.” Mouser reasoned.

“Mouser...” Ciel said calmly.

“You can kill him.” She conceded although she was not happy about it, pouting. “If you just shoot the head now it will splatter and stain all your clothes. If you want it quick aim to where I am pointing. One shot to the heart and he’s silent. If you want to drag this on, although he will make a ruckus, aim for the stomach, down here. It will make it hurt so very much... but you will need more shots to make him die. Or you can ask me. I’ll kill him.” Mouser whispered conversationally, holstering her gun, making a go ahead gesture. And Sebastian noticed that, for a moment, the Earl of Phantomhive was actually considering that course of action.

“The children.” The boyo demanded again, pressing the gun harshly to the shivering man.

“What?” The fear was forgotten and suddenly he was exited and childish again, vibrating with glee. “You want to meet those children? They are in the basement. I can take you there right away. Besides there was something I wanted to show you in the basement.”

“He’s barking mad and you are following him into a basement.” Mouser mumbled along the way exchanging a glance with Sebastian. The demon smiled, nodding. Her eyes… She was blood hunting. It was not worrying. “I cannot see that ever ending well.”

“To walk beside you it’s a dream come true.” The baron was mumbling like a besotted maiden as the blondes pushed him along the way.

“Don’t waste your breath. Just lead me to where the children are quickly.” Ciel would have none of
“I’m sorry. But I’m glad. Since that day I have always regretted it. Why couldn’t I be at your side that day in that place?” He whined, high pitched and long suffering.

Mouser sighed. Well… they should have killed him before getting to that point.

“That day... my side? What are you talking about?”

“You’re exceedingly clever and he’s a pervert, boyo.” Mouser said, arching an eyebrow, head tilted meaningfully. Ciel flinched, glancing back.

“No matter how much I regretted it... time wouldn’t turn back.” The baron gave a key to one of the blondes, growing excited again. Sebastian seemed suddenly uncomfortable. Mouser shivered, feeling some sort of pull on the other side of those wooden doors. “But I realized... If I can’t turn back time maybe I should just do it again.” The doors were opened to some sort of arena, softly lit by candles, cages on the opposite side of the entrance. A seal Mouser recognized as Sebastian’s was carved onto the floor, flanked by candelabra and with an altar in the centre. Nobles playing demon baiting… “Look. It took me years to prepare it.” Ciel froze, his eye freezing, stopping, dulling, fear raking through him, even if only for that brief instant where reality fought with memories. “So let’s redo it Lord Phantomhive. Just like that day three years ago.” The Baron pleaded happily.

Mouser sighed, looking around, towards the children, the circle, the boyo, the demon and the enemies.

Letting people that had proven to be an antagonist live was always so troublesome…

“Now will you kill him?” Mouser asked sweetly. A demon’s whisper.

Ciel clenched his teeth angrily, his grip on the weapon tightening.
Chapter 30

The boyo was not acting. His anger had built to the point were it was tangible. But he just stood there, dipped in shadow, listening, watching as the fool ranted about his part on the past. Mouser was leaning against him, arms halfway around his shoulders, head tilted. Then she shrugged and walked towards the cages, crouching in front of the children, reaching inside, sharpened claws tilting a small face towards her very gently, looking into blank brown eyes.

“Even now I can’t forget what I felt back then… only I who gave up everything to meet you… could not go, fulfil my longing. I wondered why fate must constantly separate us.” Mouser looked up, letting go of the girl who like a rag doll fell limply down once again. Her steps were barely audible, the heels kept slightly off the marble floor. “After that day everyone was gone. All of them.” The thief snorted. Not all surely. That was a case that was bound to leave loose threads everywhere, to be picked. But judging by the boyo’s livid countenance he had no interest in touching that particular subject. “It was you, right Earl? You were the one that killed them all. I am so jealous. Such a beautiful end, dealt by one as cold as the moon himself. Please I beg of you… let me be part of it all.” Well… that made it easier. He wanted to die, they wanted to kill him… if only the boyo had done it sooner. The old man’s voice was grating and annoying, the edge of madness rasping like sandpaper. “Everything is the same as that day. Look I have prepared everything.” He made a wide gesture with fat arms, gesturing towards the circle, the space.

Mouser approached the altar slowly, still moving around aimlessly, staring down at the markings, crouching again, touching them. Warm… welcoming… familiar… summoning… It was not calling her but the need to answer would be there. Most likely because it was Sebastian’s mark.

“The room of the ceremony, the sacrificial lambs.” The baron was still announcing, growing even more excited. “And the last piece is you… I intended to invite…” The shot was sudden, accompanied by a growl of anger. Mouser looked up and smiled. Sebastian just glanced, interested. A close range, direct shot to the gut. The man did not react for a moment, too shocked by the action, the pain not registering yet.

“Father!” Joker shouted as Baron Kelvin fell from his wheelchair, breaking free from Sebastian by losing his skeletal hand, reaching inside the sleeve for a blade concealed within the prosthetic itself, going for the boyo. Mouser smirked and pulled the gun from her thigh holster, shooting, getting his leg, making him trip as Sebastian gripped his wrist, hacking his arm off quickly and cleanly, barely making an effort.

“Please do not disturb my master.” The demon butler said quietly. Mouser holstered her gun again and approached as they started to shout in pain. Or agony. Seemed stronger than the usual kind.

“It hurts… Earl it’s so painful!” The baron was groaning, the insides ravaged by the bullet making blood well to his mouth, spilling in pained gulps, almost choking him as he tried to supplicate. “Please… I beg… if you’re going to kill me do it just like you did everyone else that day. Please…” The man whimpered as the dragged himself over the floor, trying to reach the boyo, leaving a large stain along the way.

“Same as them?” The boyo growled, beyond anger, beyond reason, growing cold, kicking the bandaged head, doing what he had been too weak to do when the cult had taken him. Vengeance, retribution, changing the balance of power and all. “Kneel down like a worm and beg the demon to do it.” The boyo stated, gun still pointed towards the baron. His hand was no longer trembling with supressed feeling. Steady and cold. Sebastian was smirking, calculating. Mouser shrugged and waited. If it was like it had been Sebastian would be the one to claim the kill. It worked out.
“Please don’t kill him.” Joker called weakly, getting pass his own pain, trying to get closer. “Despite all he saved us. We were abandoned by our families and country. He saved us from fear and starvation.” Mouser sighed and glanced at him. Saving, was it? Saving did not mean doing anything in return except living on. “Many brothers and sisters are still at the workhouse.

“And have you seen them recently?” Mouser asked softly. A hostage did not need to actually be alive when there was no need or gain in returning it. The ones being pressured by its existence just needed to believe in such condition. Joker stopped for a moment, mouth agape. Then he shook his head and the tiny seed of concern, returning his focus to the pleas, to his belief.

“If he dies we can’t live on. And that’s why…”

“You kidnapped those children?” Ciel asked, interested only in the facts.

“Yes.” Joker answered, lowering his head, surrendering to the simple truth of the matter.

“You have obeyed this man and in order to survive you sacrificed others.” The boyo continued. Mouser relaxed a fraction and lit a cigarette, leaning against the half wall that surrounded the centre stage.

“Oh... yeah.” Joker nodded, eyes closed. “For kids like us England was a living hell. We didn’t have money to buy food or protect our friends. We had nothing. However Father saved us from that pile of rubbish. He gave us hands and legs that allowed us to protect what is most precious to us. That’s why we decided to live. Even though it meant another kind of hell. I knew from the start it was wrong…” The man was desperately trying to explain, appeal to some higher morals.

“You are not wrong.” Ciel cut him off.

Mouser blew the smoke slowly. He was wrong. When caught it was always wrong. That was the rule to get pity out of fools. The I am so very sorry mister, sob for effect, I am alone, I am hungry I want my mommy... It worked best for children up to twelve. Then forget the mommy and ask not to be hurt, flinch and cry for mercy. Add children and family to further the misery. And as soon as their guard is down either stab them where it hurts or just run for the first dark hole they can’t reach into. The choice was dependant on the situation.

“You fought to protect your world. Isn’t it good enough? After all justice in this wold is just a bunch of principles made by those in power to suit themselves. No one really thinks of others. You will lose everything if you can’t keep up. Only two kinds of people exist in this world. The ones who steal and the one who are stolen from.” Someone was spending entirely too much time with her... Mouser thought, smiling nonchalantly. It wasn’t the intention he was projecting, those were his own beliefs. It was the wording and shift in terms. “ So then... today I just stole your future. That is all.”

Joker started to laugh suddenly. Of course he would be within the act. The reasons might have been real but the way to beg for them was part of the act.

“Exactly.” He flopped onto his back, smirking- “However you will also have something important stolen from you this night.” Ciel tensed slightly. Sebastian frowned. The townhouse or the manor? “My fellow circus members are paying a visit to your manor tonight.” The demon relaxed slightly. Mouser pouted. If anything should happen she hoped her books and the multiple weapons would be fine. “Do you know why we’ve never been caught while stealing those children? It’s because every witness has been killed.” Well that was stating the obvious. Which made the thief think they were very bad at the kidnapping business but that was her idea. Quick and quiet was the way, something that would not be discovered till late morning at least. “We are professional who
eliminate anyone who crosses the path of our mission no matter who.” A carnival of killers. Quaint notion. And yet it made some sense that some skills could be used by the criminal class. “I wonder how many people will be killed while they search the manor for you Earl.”

“Killed is it?” The boyo said calmly, glancing towards Sebastian who was smirking, amused by the assumption that the Phantomhives were as normal as a city dwelling dandy.

“Even your servants won’t be spared.” Joker continued, completely believing in the skills of his fellow first tier members.

“My servants.” Ciel said, a slight thing that one could call a smirk twisting his lips. Sebastian chuckled a bit. Mouser walked closer to them, shortling, tossing the bunt down, stepping on it, creating a dark smudge on the blood stained floor.

“What’s so darn funny?” Joker demanded, caught off guard by the reaction. Others would be panicking and lamenting the fate of their precious house, the comfort of the servants...

“Just who do you think you are dealing with?” Ciel said, tapping his cane down on the floor harshly, punctuating the sentence, sealing the fate of the intruders. “They are Phantomhive servants. They are a private army me and Sebastian picked to protect the family secrets and pride.” Mouser smiled, placing on hand on her hip, tilting slightly so the cape opened, showing the holsters, pistols and daggers. Not one of them was without unusual skills. Some like Finny and Meyrin defied what was usually accepted as humanly possible.

The breakdown was rather simple.

The boyo while vulnerable had some skill with guns and foil, a pattern that was acceptable for the noble gentleman. He rarely felt the need to wield them against foes personally. The main threat was his twisted little brain. Sebastian was the powerhouse, the main attacker and bodyguard, capable of what could be seen as impossible, ready to compensate for any weaknesses on the others. Mouser was a Jack-of-All-Trades due to her upbringing. Bard was a strategist and a former soldier. He could fit any role needed at any given time both in offense and defence. Meyrin was long range, a sniper. Finny was another powerhouse but on the physical department only. And old Tanaka no one saw coming.

“A… private army…” Joker mumbled, dawning on him that maybe they hadn’t been given all the information needed to be successful in that particular venture.

“The Phantomhive household exists for the sole purpose of eradicating the Queen’s distress. If you step into that den you can never turn back into the light.” Ciel stated coldly, proudly, knowing his duty and not flinching from it.

“Those guys are pros… you can’t think they will so easily…” Joker said, disbelief and fear growing within.

“You are free to believe it or not.” Sebastian dismissed the words, playing with the dagger he had taken from the performance. “However don’t forget these are capable people picked by me.”

Joker broke.

“I wonder… what we should have done… like the nursery rhyme… we were… capable of playing only one song.” He began to babble, his voice growing weaker. The blood loss was starting to affect him, the colour of his skin already ashy. “But if we hadn’t been born in this country… our selves… our bodies… wouldn’t have been like this. Like this…” He broke further, weeping
“Don’t cry so shamefully. Crying won’t change a thing. The world is not kind to anyone.”

“Smile…”

“My name is Ciel Phantomhive and that alone.”

The boy stated as things quieted down to the wheezing of a man wracked by pain, struggling to stay alive and the weeping of a broken harlequin, a sound in the corridor creating the only true dissonance. Steps and wheels…

“Sorry to make you wait for the supplement…” The doors were opened by another set of child-serfs, the dark haired doctor wheeling into the room, followed by a pushed cage of more dead eyed children. Mouser twitched. Of course… it would be too much to ask if it was a different doctor… of course he would want to be close to his test subjects especially if they were being successful…

“You’re… Black, Silk and Smile… I see. What Joker said was true.” He stood, walking down the stairs with even steps, relaxed and unaware of the danger. “But even worse than cops that can’t be bought it was the Queen’s lapdog.”

“Doctor… your legs…” Joker whispered, surprised.

“My legs?” The doctor seemed a bit startled before chuckling easily, without a care. “Ah there is actually nothing wrong with me. Kids like you would get all jumpy if I just sat down.” Then he spotted the fallen patron. “Ah! Baron Kelvin… this is bad…” Panic actually crossed his features for a moment before growing into resigned look. “How awful. And I thought I had finally met a patron that understood my ideals.” He sighed, resigned, standing abandoning his patron to die due to the fact that there was simply nothing that could be done. Actually he could operate but Mouser didn’t think opening him up and digging around the flab for a bullet would do any good.

“Ideals?” Sebastian asked, doubtful.

“Yes. For a very long time I was searching for a perfect artificial limb and I wanted to continue its development. After all my research I was able to make the finest material possible. It was lighter and sturdier than wood and more beautiful than the mineral characteristics of ceramic.” The doctor smiled proudly. “I had made something that had never been done before. However gathering the materials was a difficult task.” The man stated, looking around.

“Son of a bloody flea bitten wanker…” Mouser whispered, getting the drift.

“Indeed your handmade artificial limbs had an enchanting feel to them. Like the Chinese made bone porcelain.” Sebastian had also reached a similar conclusion. If based on past experiences or simply on the latest rage imported from China that had to find its way to the Phantomhive porcelain drawers was anyone’s guess.

“Ah… Black you understand this beauty.” The doctor perked up but his expression soon gave way into a frown. “But I am sorry… could you not put it in the same league as bone made from mixed cow bones?” He considered that simple statement an insult to his work?

“That’s right… you said it was made from special materials.” Sebastian continued to prod.

“Yes. I can’t get them anywhere but here.” The doctor said, smiling, leaning against the cages.

“No… way…” The boyo whispered. Mouser grimaced, shrugging.
“This way we don’t have to put the effort into throwing them away anywhere.” That explained why the Undertaker and the whole underworld was out of the loop. It was effective. “Don’t you think this is the best way of recycling?” And he was proud of his resourceful solution.

“No… no way… what did you see us as…” Joker seemed as shocked and disgusted as the boyo, his gaze shifting between the man he had regarded as a saviour, the doctor who performed his will and his arm. Mouzer tilted her head. If the research had started before the kidnappings then the original members… had to come from the resources Kelvin already possessed. The emptied London workhouses and orphanages and adding to that the ones in the countryside.

“See… I only get rejected like that.” The doctor gestured, mentioning it with a sigh of annoyance. “As long as they don’t know the truth everyone is always praising me about how wonderful they are. But the Baron was different.” He stated, opening a cage, dragging a girl out. Proof of how far gone she was the lack of reaction. Ragdoll had more life and action than that little body, ravaged, dirty and bruised. Mouzer sneered, her fangs showing. Sebastian glanced at her, telling her to stay still. The thief scoffed, watching, focused on the doctor and stifling down the sudden urge to rend his throat open. “Searching for beauty was his highest motivation. He sponsored me with an abundance of materials and money. The best thinkable patron. Don’t you think it’s normal to search the best materials for the best product? As far as society’s idiots are concerned there’s no such thing as success without sacrifice.” He placed the girl on the altar. Sebastian was calm. Within a contract there was no chance of being called. Also no other demon would answer that particular call as it was being done without any other ritual elements and a pair of demonic entities were already present. Ciel was fidgeting, growing more and more agitated. He was starting to lose the perception of the real. He was seeing himself as the doctor raised the dagger. “A cow’s bones are fine but human’s aren’t? Who decided on that?”

The blade plunged into the girl’s chest, nary a peep leaving her closed mouth, the difference between life and death in her eyes and body close to unnoticeable. Blood splattered the dirty fabric, the blade, the altar, coming out in slow gushes as the heartbeat dimmed. The wet sound of flesh and steel was loud and clearly it dragged out what the boyo did not want to recall.

“Stop it! Stop it!” his shouts echoed around the room in a voice the children held in there no longer possessed. Mouzer reacted, hugging him from behind, grabbing his head as the memories and pain took over, leaving him with nothing but a blind panic, quickening, triggering another asthma attack, vomiting, eye wide, unknowing, seeing more than what was presently there. Mouzer flinched for a moment with an all too familiar memory of someone shivering in her arms while screaming in panic. He had no face either at the moment. Another one. One more. Absent minded she began to hum, closing her eyes as his voice broke and died into a hoarse whisper, tired of screaming.

“Young Master.” Sebastian voice was a familiar point an anchor. Mouzer’s eyes snapped open, looking for him as the demon grasped the boyo’s outstretched hand. “Is there something you are afraid of?” With an easy yank the demon pulled them both within his arms, trapping the boyo between their bodies. “You’re outside the cage now.” He said, tilting the boyo’s head up, making him look, see. “My lord.” The demon encouraged, coaxing gently, pulling the string that kept the eye patch in place, revealing the contract seal. “Come now… call my name.” Mouzer sighed, smiling, holding onto Ciel a little tighter as he struggled to get his voice out.

“Sebastian…” Ciel mumbled, grasping Sebastian’s coat, seeking some connection, some assurance that what the demon had said was indeed true, that he was no longer vulnerable. “Kill this guys.

Sebastian smirked and moved, leaving the boyo in Mouzer’s arms. She petted his head, still humming a soft sleepy tune, letting him hide his head in the folds of the cape, watching as Sebastian killed, ripping the doctors heart out as if it was an afterthought, the lifeless body falling.
down next to the altar and the girl that had served as nothing but an demonstration. The baron was wheezing his last. The demon crushed his head for good measure. Joker was already gone by the time he glanced at him.

“It’s done.” Sebastian stated, approaching the boyo, picking him up from Mouser. How far gone he was… proven by the fact that he did not even complain about the blood on the gloves. Mouser sighed, rubbing her arms under the fabric.

“Burn it.” The boyo growled, gripping the coat’s lapels, surprising the demon.

“Burn it? This place?” Sebastian hesitated. Mouser looked around. Hide it, destroy the proof, give them dignity in death because for most of them there was no living after that.

“Yes.” The boyo demanded, growing agitated again.

“However young master… if you recall the queen’s orders was not your mission to find the criminals and rescue the children? The criminals are now…” Sebastian tried to reason, knowing the boyo would fret about the duty to the Queen after the grip of memories and hate had passed.

“Shut up!” The boyo would have none of it. “Don’t leave anything. Everything here to ash. Did you forget your job? It’s an order!” He was shouting, gripping Sebastian’s head, shaking, making his intentions clear and with no way to circumvent. Mouser arched an eyebrow as Sebastian patted the boyo to calm him down, sighing in resignation, pulling the stained glove free, tossing it to the ground, approaching the candelabra.

He reached with the hand marked by the contract seal towards one of the small flames. It suddenly burned brighter, more fierce and different in colour and scent, engulfing the area.

“Yes my lord.” The demon said as the flames roared around them. Mouser flinched, surprised when one flame touched her skin. She felt it warm but it did not burn her. “Hellfire.” Sebastian elucidated as they walked out. “Burns stronger than any other flame. Within hours there will be nothing left.”

“As skills go is it common?” Mouser asked as some of the structure collapsed around them with loud crashes, crystal exploding and flickering about before turning into black ash.

Sebastian smirked.

“It is not.”

Mouser thought for a moment. So he was a either a very old or a very powerful demon. Most likely both.

“Black… Silk… Smile… what are you guys…” Freckles was staring in shock at the house that disappeared under a curtain of bright flames, completely engulfed, all three floors and at the pair that had walked out as if nothing was happening, Smile being carried by Black, looking out of it, passed out. “What happened? Brother is…”

“Dead.” Sebastian said bluntly. It was high time to end that case.

“What are you saying Black!” Freckles panicked, gripping the boyo’s jacket, shaking him, calling, tears starting to form. “Smile say something…”
“Don’t touch me so freely.” The boyo jolted up, slapping her hands away, angrily. The girls stepped back, not fully comprehending what was happening, looking at them.

“We were sent after you by the Queen’s orders to find the whereabouts of the missing children.” Sebastian took the role of explaining the situation. Mouser sighed and lit another cigarette. It was very clear where that situation would lead. A newcomer versus an old loyalty had no chance of being regarded as an ally.

“So you guys are really from the Yard? Freckles asked wearily.

“The Yard…” Mouser chuckled. “Ah girlie… if we were from the Yard it would be very noticeable. They can’t blend in to save their arses. That’s why when they try they end up deep in the Thames.” She blew the smoke away. “And you might have had a chance to make it out and move on seeing who your patron was.”

“You were there to capture us?” Freckles was bewildered, not finding sense in the situation.

“No. that is not right.” Sebastian smirked. “We are here to eradicate you.”

Whatever they had been told about their target suddenly clicked within her mind.

“The Queen’s Watchdog Phantomhive… no way Smile is… Phantomhive…”

The boyo straightened a bit, glaring.

“That’s right. I am Ciel Phantomhive. My duty is to clear away the Queen’s worries. That’s why I killed them. Kelvin. Joker. I killed them.”

Freckles fell to her knees, screaming, brought down by pain and memories. It soon shifted to tears and rage, reaching within her bag, pulling out a dagger.

“I won’t forgive you Smile!” She screamed, attacking revealing the burned portion of her face, focused only in the offensive. She wanted her revenge, to make sure she had done all to protect her own. Mouser sighed, turning her back, looking at the flames and the ribbons of cinematic records fluttering about, showing what had been done to one, to each, to all, from all views, all perspectives, justifications, fears and disbeliefs. It would have been her choice too. Let them be forgotten, let no one know what they had to endure because those around them had been both too weak to protect them and too twisted and settled to care. Rest in peace now.

“Sebastian.” Ciel whispered calmly but wearily.
Chapter 31

The train station was busy and loud with the sound of machinery and people. It was annoying. Mouser groaned softly, half hiding in her cape’s high neck, tilting her head down, into her palm. She smelled only ash and blood. No amount of sneezing and nose-blowing on the handkerchief was clearing that for the time being. Hellfire burned fast, burned all and apparently lodged the scents into her nose as if she had shoved a tissue soaked with something up the nostrils. That’s what had to be done when thieves slipped into the Under-London Labyrinths. But the choice of nose-stuffing was usually more pleasant. On the other hand she was not the only one looking slightly sickly.

The night had not been kind to either. The boyo was caught in memories and broken into fever dreams. Nightmares that left a whimpering shell of the usually grump. At least until morning. Then he was the usual bratty bossy boyo. Hers had been spent near the fireplace of the country inn, listening to the sobbing sounds, wondering and feeling pathetic for actually feeling.

It was just the nagging sensation of the myriad of what ifs piling on her head.

To change an outcome meant manipulating the boyo and while that could be done there was also the other side to twist.

Joker’s loyalty had clearly been guaranteed through gratitude and hope. Those virtues were shaped into coercion fairly easily but still had been the basis for his service. Both had been shattered through what had transpired in that basement. Taking children piled self-pity and loathing onto his head. They had seen that the circus or at least Beast shared said feelings. Finding out what the kidnapped had been used for was the final blow to shatter every belief.

So poaching the troupe would have involved digging deeper into their past and present, knowing where the failures and lies were located, severing each tie with brutal efficiency, pinning blame and fault on the benefactor until they were left without options. Their key had been the desire to protect their world. Offering proof of betrayal and a choice for the future would have worked. But their world and desires were gone with their lives. Oh well. Others carried on.

It would have needed a bit more time, thorough research. Maybe then the Phantomhive household would have gained a new set of highly skilled pieces for the boyo’s revenge game.

On the other hand maybe she was overthinking the events because she felt mirrored by the first tier members. In some points. Interestingly they hadn’t abandoned their peers behind and cared for more than their own and a few select skins. Running away and joining the circus was also something that had a very appealing mystique to the orphaned. Even though reality said that there was a high chance of ending somewhere worse.

“Mister…” A young voice snapped her out of her conjectures. A small country mouse carrying a basket full of oranges, bundled up in several layers of cloth. They looked slightly tattered but well taken care of. Most likely she was helping her family by selling produce. “Would you like an orange?” She showed the bright fruit, big eyes staring at them hopefully. “It’s only one penny…”

“Buy it.” The boyo said after a short pause, his expression tight and closed as he embarked. Mouser smiled softly. Maybe he was questioning his precipitation, the way he had been swayed by old terrors he usually buried.

“Thank you very much.” She had a bright smile on her face, skipping a bit as Sebastian gave her the coin. “May god’s blessing be with you in your journey.” She said sweetly, waving and
bouncing away.

The assigned place was easy to find. Sebastian closed the door after they were all inside, placing the small luggage on the overhead rail meant for such things as the boyo sat down.

“My apologies but because of our sudden departure the third class seats were booked out therefore we will be in first class also.” The demons continued with the formality and the dutiful words expected of a butler, taking the top hat from his bored looking master, placing it on its designed place before taking the seat opposite of the boyo, the orange placed between them. Mouser groaned and seeing the first class had privacy assured she fell back, using Sebastian’s leg as a pillow, eyes closed, adjusting to the smaller space, one leg draped over a bent knee. The demon smirked slightly before his attention shifted once more to the

“I don’t really care.” The young Master answered slowly, shrugging, looking outside as the train signalled his departure noisily.

“May I ask just one question?” Sebastian started after a while of silence and movement. He reached for the orange. Mouser made a slight sound sleepily reaching under the waistcoat, pulling out a pocket blade, opening it and handing it to the demon that started to peel the orange, slowly and skilfully, the rind curling in a slender white and orange ribbon.

“What?” the boyo asked, his interest low.

“Why go to the workhouse that they were brought up in?” Sebastian asked. Mouser made a slight sound of agreement. It would have made sense to go there as soon as they learned the identity of the man, gather ammunition as it would have been but now… any business with the workhouse could be easily dealt with paperwork. There was a soft silent hesitation that made the thief peek. His expression was slightly startled, shifting into a more business-like stance and voice.

“Well you can’t run a workhouse when the patron is gone. You need a new patron.” Mouser scoffed. The headmistress had eleven patronesses that were completely unaware of each other’s existences. How she managed that with social circles being as closed and gossipy as they were Mouser still had no clue. “Since Earl Barton is nearby he won’t refuse the donation. There is no harm in introducing myself.” Ciel shrugged and looked out of the window.

“Are you showing sympathy?” A simple question. No disapproval nor judgement. Just a smidge of curiosity.

“Cleaning up the mess is the Phantomhive’s job.” The boyo stated, punctuating each word, shrugging once more as if shifting under something. “There is no need to sacrifice the public over a selfish action of the underground.” In theory it seemed sound. But the public was the underground’s prey so in the end the notion was slightly impractical.

“Then why did you kill those children?” Sebastian reached the point.

“I’ve seen many children like that in the past.” Ciel stated. “When they became like that… there was no going back.” He added quietly, picking a segment of the orange.

“They would be happier in death?” Sebastian gave voice to the thought, amused, an eyebrow rising in a slightly derogatory way. “How arrogant.”

“It’s not exactly arrogance when you have the facts to back it up.” Mouser whispered, turning a bit, glancing at Ciel. That was what they knew. Our past was hell and our future is death. That was what they all knew. There were those who fell and those who survived, ran… always in fear… fear
was still present in both kinds of people. One succumbed and the other clawed until they died or got out. Simple.

“Do non-arrogant people exist?” Ciel asked with a small smirk.

“I have never met one.” Sebastian admitted with a chuckle.

“Weak humans, moreover children… how much strength do you think they would have needed to come back from a condition like that?” Mouser sighed and gripped Sebastian’s coat. Screams and pleas at night. Or a silence so empty it engulfed all. Always in fear. She chuckled softly. Fragments… “Back then I accidentally summoned a demon so I received the power to come back.” Mouser closed her eyes. Force from without. “However at Kelvin manor the only demons were you.” Ciel glanced at the pair. “And those demons are mine. I’m arrogant but… not so much that I’d irresponsibly save someone just to brag about it.”

Especially someone who would desire nothing more than to be left alone and forgotten. Mouser had glanced at their souls. She had seen the scenes of the cinematic records. Giving them back to their families and to life in the light would be no boon. The boyo knew exactly what took to come back. And how much easier it was to simply stay down. So in the end his arrogance came from the gift of death and disappearing. A belief in a mercy he denied himself for revenge.

“Exactly.” Sebastian finished the conversation with that simple word.

The trip took a few hours. The train stopped in the rural area, letting people down. From the stop Sebastian was immediately tasked with asking around for their destination. Knowing the boyo he immediately went after a farmer with a horse-pulled cart, talking for a few moments before signalling them closer, overhearing the last part of the conversation.

“Renbon Workhouse?” The older man was asking, confirming what he had heard. Sebastian nodded. The farmer sighed and nodded.

“Can you let him ride until we get there?” The butler asked, gesturing towards Ciel. The farmer looked at them oddly once again. Mouser just smiled and looked around. The country was very different and she could say the times she had been out there were few and apart. Especially the times that didn’t start with hunting a rat or ended with finding demon dogs. Actually as a city person she still felt uneasy with all the fresh air and open spaces. It was just very ingrained in her head that the shadow of a building was a good hiding spot.

“Since is on my way I don’t mind sir but what business do you have over there?” The man acquiesced companioningly as the boyo climbed onto the back of the cart.

“Just a few little things.” Sebastian didn’t go into detail but also made no gesture that could be considered suspicious. For all the farmer knew they were checking on one of the Young Master’s proprieties. Charity works were quite transmissible as noble endeavours went.

The man chatted happily during the way, fed by Sebastian in social way. A couple of children ran on the side of the road, playing and singing a nursery rhyme as they walked by and disappeared… actually the same one the circus obeyed to. Maybe it was a regional thing like “London Bridge” in, well, London. Or “Mary Mary Quite Contrary” near a graveyard.

“It should be over the hill.” The farmer announced, stopping the horse. It wasn’t that far from the train platform but there were no signs or marks to guide people to it. Maybe the baron did uphold
his part of the bargain and kept it hidden. Or it just had been forgotten. The path over the hill was poorly maintained and faded. There were almost no wheel marks or footprints.

Wind greeted the as soon as they reached the top. Wind and ruins. The workhouse had fallen into complete disrepair, only traces of what it had been left. Tatters of cloth here and there. Old toys. A shoe… Like the charities in London. Abandoned.

“In any case it seems baron Kelvin was lying.” Sebastian filled the wind stained silence after noticing the boyo’s confusion and shock. “Seeing the way this place has aged it had been unoccupied for a considerable amount of time.” He seemed to stop to consider something for a moment, approaching the fallen gate. “Judging by the way the doctor was talking the children from here were probably…”

“Some say you carry those you love with you. The literality here is a bit on the twisted side ain’t it?” Mouser said with a slight chuckle, spotting a bench overseeing the hills around them. All that winter wet green of the fields, the last traces of morning frost. She walked towards it, placing a hand over the wood, looking towards the horizon, sitting down, still looking away. Before the Baron had gone deranged that had been a good house. The wind felt good she though, closing her eyes. The walls had been solid with big windows to see the sun and the hills with no bars....

The gratitude had been genuine and because of a good thing.

“Young Master?” Sebastian’s voice called. The boyo had said nothing, standing immobile. There was something starting to come out of the boyo’s mouth. Something that suddenly burst into a loud, out of character, laugh. Mouser looked over her shoulder. Well… even Sebastian looked uncomfortable. It was something.

“There was nothing here!” Which would have been useful if they had had the patience and forethought to rescue the circus. “The thing they were protecting didn’t even exist.” Mouser snorted and looked ahead once again. Peaceful and beautiful. A place like that would have looked like heaven to any street urchin. “They didn’t know about this and they became so desperate… that they died.” He was still laughing, finding the whole situation completely senseless. “Their desperate hope was ridiculously crushed like a worm.” His voice started to grow quieter, closer to normal even though the chuckle was still inside it. “Superficial, cruel, revolting… isn’t it even more demonic than a demon?” Mouser smiled softly. Which might explain why he had been desperate enough to trust Sebastian to eliminate those who had harmed him instead of just letting go. “Right?” He glanced at a still bemused Sebastian. “And I’m the same, filled with the same ugly contents as they are.” He grasped his cape tightly, looking at his demonic butler, standing taller. “This is what a human is. I’m human being Sebastian.” He announced haughtily.

“One gone bonkers for the moment.” Mouser whispered to the wind. So who was she? Mouser guessed the answer was still pretty much the same. A whore-born thief, liar and murdered that had cheated humanity. So was she more or less than human?

“Yes, you are.” Sebastian nodded, smiling slightly noting the shift and solidification of something more, something else tempering his soul. “You’re different than a demon who are loathsome and possess complex evil intent.” The demon explained. His meaning was a little vague though.

“I am not sure if I should be insulted, flattered or say that I’ve been described like that for most of my thieving’ carrier.” Mouser whispered, standing, walking away from the rotted out shell of a once happy place. Sebastian smiled as the wind picked up, stealing the boyo’s hat ribbon, making it flutter out of reach. The boyo watched it go, following the black piece’s trajectory away and over the hills.
“Telling lies, desperately struggling, kicking other people down, stealing the stolen while repeating your reasons over and over.” Sebastian continued for Mouser as she approached. She shrugged. Her only reason was survival but as a basic one it covered a lot of those actions and looked less… well… not really sure of what it looked like. No one had ever asked why. “And even so they aim for the horizon over the hills. That’s why humans are interesting.”

More or less then. Mouser thought, embracing Sebastian as Ciel walked back towards them, ranting about the wind, ordering them back. Still take what you can. Forget the fear. She was happy. Greed was something so natural that could only be embraced.
Chapter 32

Charlotte beamed proudly as she looked out the window delicately decorated with frilly lacy curtains, appraising the sleepy and rather fancy square outside with the neat facades of the other buildings and their respectable tenants. The study and the house were decorated nicely and supplied with everything. She would bet a lot safely in the knowledge that they did not know who and what she had been and was. It was a proper and rich neighbourhood and she had made it out of the slums, out of the brothels that had tried to grab her and drag her down as soon as she left the orphanage.

Throughout the vulnerable years she had started to prepare her debut into the world, amassing money, secrets and favours, scouting for information and business venues backed up by Evee. The thief had helped out in her way, keeping unsavoury characters away, hiding the money in secrets spots, pointing out noteworthy or valuable targets, delivering warnings and blackmail notes or punishment when needed. In turn she had the support of Smiling Jack’s gang and the sympathy of some other underworld characters.

It was obvious that there was no way out of the underworld in itself, seeing they had been raised and moulded within its shadows, tainted beyond redemption in societies’ eyes, but creating a comfortable place within it was a good bet. She circled the desk and sat down, adjusting the skirts made of beautiful and rich fabric, smiling smugly as the governess knocked and announced her friend, bringing the tea as well in a well organized and elaborate tray.

A governess and being waited on hand and foot... it was so... oddly marvellous. And she depended on her own wits to gather the methods of payment instead of just the men. And she would make the opposite sex even more disposable until it was more a form of entertainment than something that was part of the “job”.

Evee walked in, a clear contrast with the new rich surroundings, slouching and smoking. She smirked slightly noticing how the woman scurried away quickly, both frightened and disgusted. Most didn’t even give her a second glance, especially when she looked like that ragamuffin boy who would steal you blind if you blinked. The thief made her way to one of the armchairs in front of the fireplace, things clinking faintly under the fabric, sinking into it with a sigh, groaning, arching and displacing a gun in her back.

“So Miss fancy... finally here?” She poked fun easily. The house and neighbourhood had been in every conversation of the last month or so. Charlotte had left the orphanage three months ago, as soon as she was sixteen, a legal adult. Evee had just been able to get away a couple of days before, now an adult too. A short, cross-and-age-dressing adult. And she had already been lost to the records. Charlotte had needed help from her new contacts to effectively sever ties. But what she wanted to become was not a profession for the weak. Free and safe. And that meant being powerful, resourceful and a resource.

“Not bad for my age right?” Charlotte teased back fluffing her hair.

“Sure.” Evee blew smoke gently, stretching. “What do you need?”

The demeanour grew serious immediately.

“Take down the headmistress.” Charlotte said coldly and with purpose.

“Really? Why? We are out.” Evee mentioned listlessly, as selfish as they all became. It was a
façade and a need. No one inside the orphanage resented the others for it.

“Apart from the revenue of the patronesses and the idea of protecting girls like us?” Evee arched an eyebrow. Usually there was no protection. They had the power to prevent nothing. What was left was clean up duty and picking up the pieces. The thought sometimes came to their minds but it was highly impractical and clashed with the survival instinct. “Revenge. Pure and simple.” Charlotte finished, picking up a letter opener.

“Revenge is a fool’s game.” Evee smothered the cigarette on the designated bowl and picked up a tea cup, crossing her legs easily with the boyish attire. She chuckled slightly as she sipped, eyes closed.

“We have been playing it for a while because we have never eliminated the source of the issue.” Charlotte pointed out. If revenge generated a cycle it was because it had tendrils to grab onto. No headmistress, no contacts with buyers. No buyers and there would be less busy Thursdays trying to find the taken ones and eliminate the offenders, free the broken and care for the stronger. They had to utterly destroy the other side to win that game.

“Then fools we are.” Evee shrugged and sipped again. “What do you have in mind?”

“Killing is easy.” Charlotte was never particularly bloodthirsty. But change came and made things easier if one just accepted the cruelty and selfishness in one’s nature. There was only so much one could endure before desiring to fight and destroy. “I want her to break.”

Evee smirked under her shaggy fringe. She waited in silence as Charlotte picked up her own tea cup, gliding gracefully like a highborn lady, taking her seat near the fireplace, opposite of Mouser, like they were simply having afternoon tea. It was puzzling to the thief why she kept to the forced profession, why did Charlotte chose to remain a harlot albeit a very well paid and increasingly exclusive one. But then again so did she remain in the comfortable niche she had found early on.

“Living in fear for a while. Get the money away from her. Make sure the girls can’t be traded for safety. Haunt every hour of her life. And then kill her.” Mouser made a quick surmise of her friend’s desires.

“That is the gist of it.” Charlotte nodded.

Mouser sighed and adjusted, the sleeves catching for a moment, showing three knives quickly strapped to it, naked blades against fabric for a speedy draw.

“We have to make sure the Queen’s watchdog does not notice. Or if he does we can claim it as a favour, make him an ally.” Phantomhive was a problem of aggressive elimination. The Trancy’s dealt with information. Hide from both and they would be good. And if found out make it look perfectly reasonable, innocent and advantageous for their lives. Or hope they had enough for bribery. “Play to win. No loose ends. No survivors. No way to deny our side of the story.”

“How do we start?” She knew but it was good to have all the words out. Especially when they could finally be spoken.

“By hunting. Find all files and people. When we have the information we can start.”

“So we’ll see each other in a month. Should be enough.”

“It should.” Evee smiled and stood, taking another cigarette, lighting it on the way out, waving easily before closing the door, ignoring the frazzled governess.
Throughout London there were twelve loyal and regular buyers spread throughout the city from outskirts to the centre. If one knew behind which façades to peek they were easy to find, like maggots under rot. Mouser started by the outskirts, in a way that each strike, as it came closer would bring a bit more panic into the woman’s mind.

One, two, three, four, five, six

Mouser pulled the reins of the pilfered horse, patting his flank as she dismounted clumsily, tying it to a nearby post and iron ring, looking around carefully. They hid in the dingy outskirts, amongst dirt, filth and fog, supplying a cheap brothel. They were lesser buyers, a meagre income. One or two girls at a time. Appearing only once in a while. The less noticeable of the group but the ones who dragged their purchases to one of the worse ends.

The thief sighed, pulling the weather-beaten floppy cap further down. Two men, no connection to the underworld despite running the brothel and buying from Mrs Packard. Two women willingly going along with the plot. Former whores, bitter and biting back the same pain they had suffered. Seven girls bought and imprisoned. Four to kill. The rest to be assessed and free if they could still make it.

Slowly she lit a cigarette and walked towards the brightly lit pit.

The method was repeated with the other brothel buyers quickly and easily. Those were the ones that needed a more straightforward approach, the cheap ones where no one of importance ever slept around and where nothing short of a gruesome slaughter would make the Yard come.

Massacre in Brothels read the headlines of the sensation press for the next month, gossiping and conjuring about conspiracies, mentioning the yard was finding connections to old scandals of orphanage charity gone wrong. Charlotte peeked over the edge of the paper towards the grey, rainy day outside. Seemed like the usual fodder for gossip but anyone that was involved in the goings of the destroyed place would notice and be concerned. Although no names were mentioned reading between the lines gave her one assurance. The Headmistress had been called already and the noose on her was tightening.

Seven, eight, nine, ten

Sometimes there was no need to kill. Just place the proof and make the Yard move. Four fell down by that method, victim of a complaint by a notorious young baron. Lord Randall made the arrests and the investigations, supplying the papers with pride and bragging, claiming a connection to the massacres and that at last they were ahead of the murderer.

Eleven and twelve

“Hello ducky.” A voice called from the corner, filled with fake cheer and an even faker lower
accent. But the lack of dropped vowels and the clear diction in those two words gave her away despite the slang. Mouser smirked as she approached. She was easy to find after all. But then again she hadn’t been forced to do any of that until a year ago. She had been a favourite then and yet she had always been… sorta spoiled sweet. Never looking down, always helping. That kind of thing got one killed, it did.

“Sweet pea if you can’t tell a bloke from a bint you might be in trouble.” The thief spoke up, stepping into the gas light, tossing her brown locks away from the eyes, showing herself. The woman in a garish dress that barely covered her shoulders and breasts jumped, wrapping the shawl closer to her skin. Then she gasped and sobbed, running to the thief, hugging her tightly. It was early night but she already smelled of sweat, booze and sex. Tears stained the cheap makeup. Bruises were showing, badly concealed by powder and rouge.

“Crows? Goodness… The headmistress said you were dead…”

Mouser shrugged.

“Death is very convenient when you wanna vanish. You do need some help to pull it off though.” Mouser tossed the but to the ground where it stayed, glowing faintly for a bit. “Charlotte and I have a proposal for you Sybil.”

“I can’t…”

“Return without money. We know.” Charlotte spoke up from the small carriage she had bought. It came to a halt, driven by the two beefy blokes that were her first and most loyal guards, Thomas and Edwin. No one had been idle in those years.

Sybil was young and pretty even under the floozy clothing and makeup. A classic Greek profile, clear cerulean eyes and a soft pale brown hair, just on the edges of being a dirty golden. Appearances mattered a great deal. She was the second daughter of country gentry, taken to London and the Orphanage after her father had killed himself over debts of honour and gambling. The relatives were too keen on getting their hands on the land that was linked to the title. Her brother had searched for her but then had been killed in a hunting accident, a transaction between the greedy ones and the criminal class.

So she had had a little value for Mrs Packard for a while. Then she had none. Now she had some again. Charlotte and Mouser had found the documents of who she was, the transactions made to make her disappear and created connections to families that were sure to erase even the stains created by forced prostitution. Some blackmailing was also involved. All that was needed was to shake the hornet’s nest known as the matrons of society, the old biddies that protected the moral code of the Victorian era.

“You will take her down?” Sybil asked, close to crying after the pair explained their plans and purpose.

“That is our plan.” Charlotte stated, giving her the cup and saucer.

“You have the perfect fit for the role. Sob story, lineage, connections and a good nature.” Mouser said from the semi open window, smoking again.

“If I become the headmistress as you say I can help them all, protect them from…” Sybil nodded, determined. “I will help. What do you need me to do?”
“We’ll make the contacts. Just make sure you’re where we can find you.”

Lady Helena Catherine Lovelace, Viscountess of Roth was a stern woman with a moral streak a mile wide. She was the kind that stopped her walks to give coins to the urchins that approached and punished those who dared to say anything against charity, goodwill and good deeds. She was by no means soft despite her kind heartedness. Military commanders had less steel on their spine. She was also aware that society and philanthropy for most people in her circles were nothing more than empty tools of prestige. But she believed in the Queen’s doctrine. What kind of country couldn’t take care of its future people? Not the one Victoria ruled.

So when a little urchin boy with big brown eyes sobbed near the hem of her skirt after fighting his way past her guards and servants, screaming for her, clearly knowing her virtue and reputation, telling of an atrocity so unspeakable inside the London’s brothels, as unsavoury as it was for a lady to know such things, connections to charities that she was sure friends of her backed, the Viscountess did not hesitate.

Mouser followed from the shadows as the now alerted Lady made arrangements, sending for the Yard and the Bow street runners. Soon enough the two high end brothels were discovered, nobles were shamed and the name of Mrs Packard was very close to being dislodged of its secrecy. She lit a cigarette slowly and smiled.

The first part was done. The main back dealings and supplies of money were cut. Next they had to arrange a meeting between Sybil and the Viscountess but that would be later on, when the headmistress was frazzled enough to drop all pretence of propriety and charm. Charlotte should have given Sybil’s information to a Runner by now and it would make the Viscountess determined to find the little noble girl in moral and mortal peril.

Next support to sever… the lovers. Two nobles, married to a pair of patronesses, a Crime Lord rival to Jack, a jeweller and a widower from country gentry that apparently she was scouting as a possible pliable husband to further increase her position in societies’ eyes. Which meant raking in more benefits and money.

Charlotte arranged for the blackmail of all. It was ridiculously easy how fast they backed away and paid up.

Mouser convinced Jack to move against the rival, wiping him and the gang out, gaining prestige, power and territory.

Planted rumours were quick to drive away the patronesses. No one wanted scandal on their names. Adding to that the facts of the multiple visits by Scotland Yard, the inquiries made by the Bow Street Runners and the issue was growing into unmanageable proportions. Charlotte was pleased with her machinations.
How was it all unravelling?

Years of affluence using those same methods and now, suddenly everything was going wrong.

The Yard was closing in, asking questions when the fools should have kept her name and the orphanage’s hidden.

The runners were coming too and asking the same and more.

Both knew things they could not possibly have known.

The patronesses had disappeared all of a sudden, driven away by the copper’s attention and some rumours floating about, rumours that were very true but that the outside world had no access to.

Her lovers sent no money, no gifts, no words, effectively abandoning her.

Lorraine Packard had lost money and credibility and felt irked and enraged by the situation.

Even some of the girls were vanishing, keeping her from finding new ways to make money out of them. And the ones that stayed were growing uncooperative, aggressive and unprofitable, unafraid of punishment and mouthing off like…no one. No one had ever been that vocal. The closest to rebellion had been Crows but that sadistic little murderous bitch was dead. Which was actually a pity. When she used her there was always profit. But having to have constant vigilance and fearing for her life while she slept were harsh downsides to using Evelyn Crows.

But back to the business at hand... beyond the financial, status and law issues there was a growing fear within the Headmistresses’ mind that something might be actively hunting for her and her paranoia was growing, fuelled by the string of coincidences and accidents.

“We should let her stew and sweat for a while.” Mouser suggested crushing her cigarette against the ashtray, opening a borrowed book, cooing at the romance, stretching her legs. Charlotte nodded organizing her information and schedules. Her endeavours were progressing nicely in all fronts. Soon enough it would be a good life.

“How long?” She inquired, opening the log book.

“Until things are critical and the house mostly empty.” Mouser checked the clock then snuggled deeper into the cosy couch with the book. Still a couple of hours to go before she had to go protect that shipment of illegal booze. “With her spending habits I’ll give it a month, month and a half.”

“Then we position Sybil.” Charlotte nodded and made a note. “She is already under the Viscountess protection. I arranged for her to be rescued by the hired runners. The sob story is working wonders. She will take over and the Viscountess will be her patroness.”

Overspending and trying to keep everything like it was when no support was given. It brought her down faster than they had anticipated. So Mouser and Charlotte made some arrangements and sped things along. Placing proof for the Runners who then informed the Viscountess who then
delegated to the Yard. In less than a week the Headmistress was captured and detained at her Majesty’s Pleasure.

Sybil replaced her and Mouser returned the girls she had kidnaped and kept safe. The orphanage was still a base of operations for the underworld but now worked under Charlotte’s orders. It was sort of a haven backed up by a Lady that nobody would dare to question.

Still jail time was not enough for their plot.

Mouser allowed Mrs Packard to do porridge for a while. For someone who had loved luxury it would be hell.

As bad as jail was a fugitive’s life would be worse. The thief created a situation where the headmistress was forced to run away from the rioting jail, chased down by the coppers. She had chosen not to involve Jack in the last part of the play. She had gone to Evans after stealthily placing two of his favourite whores in the same cell, giving up the information as a “token of goodwill from Jack”. So he staged the whole thing and Packard was dragged in the fuss.

Forgotten an unlinked Packard was left destitute on the street. Both girls made sure she didn’t die but was going to feel all the bite of London’s underbelly.
Chapter 33

The level of destruction was simply mind boggling. And it happened in a single night with a guest within the house that could denounce the weird people employed to the scariest creature in London, meaning Lady Elizabeth’s mother. Sebastian was understandably angry. But what was showing was a very reasonable and calm cold rage. And everyone was feeling the ambiance, even Finny. Tanaka was immune. Pluto was whimpering, all curled up under the trees, snout under tail. Mouser was simply there looking in awe at the amount of debris, blocking the icy sensation nipping her skin.

“I’m sure I must have told you many times before but…” Sebastian started very slowly as soon as his eyebrow stopped twitching and the frustration was under control. “You are to perform your duties quietly and discreetly as a shadow. That’s a servant’s task.” He paused for a moment, rather significantly, eyes narrowed as his sight went from the house to the shivering maid and gardener, the cook that looked disinterested, a very calm Tanaka and the dog that had managed to hide behind the hedges. “So.” The demon punctuated the word lazily, dragging it like a threat. “How many times to I have to spell quietly before you understand the meaning?” Very close to shouting but still very much under control. But the ominous crack under the tone made everyone jump.

“Soorryyy!!” The collective plea dragged a put upon sigh from the demon as he turned, gathering the supplies and starting the clean up as he distributed orders.

The boyo hadn’t seen it yet as they had arrived before dawn by carriage without stopping anywhere else, putting him to be in a guest room as soon as they saw the gigantic hole on the west wing. His reaction was not something they were particularly looking forward but he was a bit apathetic ever since they had walked out of the ruins of the workhouse. Exhaustion was a safe bet.

“In any case you three clean up the things that are scattered around.” The bag was dragged out of what remained of a service closet and started to get filled. He stopped for a moment as the servants scrambled to get charred mops and brooms and more burlap bags. There was long strand of bright red hair lying amongst the debris. Going by the sudden look of disgust it was a safe bet to assume it belonged to poppet. “I’ll do something about the repairs and Mouser will handle the general affairs.” Another pause as he picked a familiar looking yellow wool scarf. That reminded Mouser… she should contact poppet… “Tanaka will be fine with just the usual.” It was ruthlessly shoved into the sack with the rest of the trash. It was safe now to assume they had all been eliminated. Still the town contacts should be called. “Well everyone. The day will be full enough with just cleaning.” Sebastian continued his instructions, checking the clock. “Don’t worry about anything else and devote your time to the task at hand.”

“Sebastian!” Lizzy’s panicked shout echoed through the mansion before she actually reached the guest room where the boyo had just woken up and was completing the morning routine. “It’s dreadful… there is nothing there!” Mouser peeked after the blonde had stormed in, frowning. How on earth had she found out which room to go to in that enormous mansion?

“Lady Elizabeth.” Sebastian took it in stride, his voice coming from behind a decorated screen before peeking, showing a pleasant face. “Because of the servant’s clumsiness the young Master’s wardrobe room was also damaged. Right now we just have a few suits that we brought back from London.”
“Whaaa?” Lizzy was shocked into a moment of silence before pouting, looking saddened. “I wanted to dress up and go on a boat ride today…” She whispered softly. Mouser entered the room, closing the door that had been left ajar and wobbling.

“I’m deeply sorry…” Sebastian paused, glancing at Mouser while a small yawn came from the other side of the screen and Lizzy still looked sedated.

“The usual men arrived with the materials.” The thief announced softly. And by the amount of glee they had displayed while doing it they had been eagerly awaiting a call from the mansion. The boyo paid extremely well for good services.

“When the repairs are finished we can immediately…” Sebastian acknowledged the information and turned to Lizzy again, trying to keep the situation peaceful and mostly silent.

“Ah, that’s right!” The young girl perked up, clapping, interrupting Sebastian without a care. Most likely she wasn’t even listening, fixated on the idea of spending time with the boyo. “If there are none we can just make more.”

“Yes. That’s why after the repairs…” Sebastian tried to continue, diffuse that particular ticking bomb.

“There’s Easter coming…” Lizzy rushed and peeked behind the screen at the sleepy boyo that was finally fully dressed. “It’s really a good time… hey Ciel, let’s do it. Ciel?”

“Eh?” Blank. Completely blank and sleepy.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Huh…” Followed by an expression of nervousness.

“So will it be all right if I call the tailor today?” And a profound confusion. “So you weren’t listening to me after all.” Lizzy was growing aggravated.

“No… you see… that’s right how about I get a dress made for you too as a present?” followed by the most weaponized male peace offering of all times. Mouser chuckled. Gift giving was always a sure positive for some people.

“Really? I’m so happy… an Easter dress decorated with matching flowers would be great.” She clapped. Mouser chuckled behind her palm imagining Ciel in something flowery. Just too funny.

“I know, I know…” Ciel grumbled, glaring at her for a moment, knowing he was being made fun of.

Sebastian sighed with a sudden deep resignation that made the thief catch some sort of undercurrent. It was mostly an impression, not an outright statement of… something. But there was definitely something there. He turned to Mouser.

“Call the Tailor. The number should be in the address book.

“Aye, aye.” Mouser said, walking out of the room. Luckily the line and the phone hadn’t been damaged in the explosion. And such a novelty was always a fun thing to use.

Meyrin swept the floor slowly, trying to make sure she was catching every bit of dust and debris,
feeling they had escaped from something rather terrible by a very small margin of manoeuvre. She paused for a moment, adjusting the glasses, looking towards the door. Horses and wheels? Moments later the doorbell sounded. The maid approached, peeking outside. Where they waiting for guest with the manor in that state? A maid’s job was to face the Master, and by extent his guests, with a clean house. The place was nowhere near Sebastian’s standards and by default hers as a servant of the Phantomhive.

“Who is…” She called while opening the heavy door carefully, barely avoiding a squeak when she saw who stood outside, stylish and with a travel case in hand.

“Ça va?” The French rolled out of the woman perkily with a wink.

“Miss Nina!” Meyrin squeaked again, backing away from the door.

“The tailor that indicates the seasons. Nina Hopkins has arrived.” Nina announced gleefully before charging and catching the maid in a hug, pecking her cheek, unaware of the other woman’s squirming and shaking broom. “I missed you Meyrin!” Mouser stopped on the stairs, looking down with a slightly baffled expression as the woman, the tailor, groped Meyrin and slid a hand up her skirt. The thief shook her head. That might be the explanation for Sebastian’s grumpy mood after Lady Elizabeth’s plans for matching and new outfits. “Might my maid ensemble have come in handy this time? You have such nice materials to work with… I can make some nice highlights. Next time at my store…” The voice dropped to a clear purr that had nothing to do with clothing. Or it might. Lack of it most likely.

“Ah it’s Miss Nina.” Finny interrupted coming inside to carry the baskets of debris away, stopping and waving, excited by the visit and not seeming to care about what he had found. Or maybe he was just too innocent to understand.

“Hello!” Bard was far from innocent and he had gotten the picture.

“Meyrin I’d like you to escort me to where the Earl is.” Nina’s whole demeanour changed to a cold shoulder, outright ignoring the males in the room.

“Are you ignoring me?” which did not sit well with Bard.

Mouser chuckled silently.

“Your spare clothes are in the carriage.” The tailor said dismissively waving a gloved hand without letting go of Meyrin who still shuddered and squirmed, trying to get away with faint efforts.

“What’s with the difference in treatment?” So Bard wanted to be smothered and groped?

“Miss Hopkins.” Sebastian walked into the scene, easily carrying a beam without even crinkling his tailcoat. Standing on the opposite side of the stairs. Mouser straightened. The show was over. “I believe I have told you many times that merchants are to come in through the back door.” He instructed with all the backing of propriety, tradition and social views.

“So you’re come out Mr Stiff.” Nina Hopkins scoffed at all of that portrayal, finally letting Meyrin go. The maid gasped for air and hid behind her broom, returning to a furious sweeping to show she was much too busy, raising more dust than she collected. Sebastian frowned but there was no skirting what the tailor had come there to do.

“The Master is waiting. Evelyn.” Mouser jumped, startled. It was rare for him to address her by her actual name. But seeing the outsider in the room it was not a strange thing to do. Still it usually went by Miss Crows in such situations… Was he staking a damn claim on her? “Please escort Miss
Hopkins to the drawing room. I will join you shortly.”

The tailor’s attention focused immediately on Mouser, her eyes roaming. Mouser sighed. Deal with the lady-lover.

“This way please.” She called, separating from the rail.

After a short trek of criticism towards the clothes that she was wearing but some praise for the practical cut of the trousers they arrived at the designated room. Mouser pushed the door open, allowing the woman in.

“Nina!” Elizabeth stood immediately, happy and ready for the circus of clothing. Mouser sighed and groaned. She had heard that many times form Charlotte. And the last time had cost her some ribs. Grell had also made some similar sounds when the red fabric had made its appearance.

“Aren’t you good tempered today Lady Elizabeth.” Nina pecked the girl’s cheek affectionately, appraising her with a professional’s eye, adjusting a curl and a frill. “Lovely as always.” She praised after a few more second of fussing with the day’s ensemble.

“Thank you.” Lizzy chuckled, happy.

“The Earl is still a beautiful boy as always. It’s amazing…” The tailor turned to the boyo suddenly, her eyes bright and admiring.

“Ah…” Ciel mumbled slightly uncomfortable.

“Well then Miss Hopkins.” Sebastian arrived with the materials, placing them in the room and gesturing for Mouser to close the door. He opened the log they had made after Lizzy’s decision of all the lost outfits and what would be immediately needed. “Please tailor some suits for the Young Master today. We also need an outfit for him to wear on Easter and a matching dress for Lady Elizabeth.”

“A dress decorated with flowers that matches Ciel would be good.” Lizzy asked, excited.

There was a sudden smirk in the boyo’s face when he glanced at Mouser, cutting through the previous disinterest, that made the thief very uneasy for a moment.

“After that I also have an extra request.” He began, catching the women’s attention. “My secretary needs a second formal dress for both business and the theatre appearances.” Mouser face changed into a look of abject terror, flinching to run, stopping the kneejerk reaction in time, her hand clamping onto the doorknob. Lizzy clapped, approving the notion. Sebastian just uttered a sigh in his corner while piling fabrics. The tailor glanced at her, smiling. Smiling like when she saw Meyrin.

“Leave it to me.” Nina announced dramatically, unbuttoning her skirt, pulling the fabric away to reveal shorts, boots and garters. Sebastian was not amused by the theatrics. Lizzy was shocked. Mouser was still trying to stop herself from running and the boyo was smiling devilishly at the spooked thief. “I will tailor the best dress possible inspired by the very latest trends.”

“Nina! Showing your legs like that is very un-lady-like.” The young Lady was saying, blushing, covering her cheeks, trying to hide it.

“A lady.” Nina scoffed at the notion while parading the outfit through the room and placing every object she needed where she wanted it. “That kind of thinking is from the stone ages. These clothes were designed with emphasis on moving easily paying respect to the active woman Mrs Bloomer.
endorsed. Women who discard customs are much freer.” Especially in that country. There was a ridiculous amount of rules for the Victorian female. Mouser could agree with the tailor. But still she was not particularly keen on having to be measured and stuffed into frills… the window was open… who cared if that was a second floor… “It’s the same with clothes, Greek and Japanese style, clothes that are easy to move in and give a more relaxed silhouette. It will be all the rage from now on. Of course silhouette is important for man too. And for a beautiful fit measurements are essential. So Earl let’s start right away.” The measuring tape was pulled out of the bag and snapped open. “Are you listening?”

“Yes… I…” Ciel jumped and fidgeted before he stepped onto the bench, and the process started with Sebastian’s assistance and Lizzy’s suggestions peppering the scribbling and silences.

“Ah… I wonder if you’ll ever grow up.” Nina sighed as she was finishing. “You’re still so small… come to think of it you won’t wear my handmade evening dress again will you…” Evening dress? Mouser perked up and smirked. Material… “I regret I wasn’t’ there to see you in that dress… I heard rumours of twin tails…” So that was the source of some of the boyo’s discomfort about dressing up to infiltrate places?

“What are you talking about?” Lizzy asked, having only partially caught the words.

“Nothing! Go over there!” Ciel shouted hoarsely, beet red and fidgeting like an ornery horse before a bath. Sebastian was chuckling at the show. It was another hint of something but they still hadn’t given her the whole story.

“Oh my… this is tres bién Earl.” Nina walked away, jotting down all the numbers, appraising them, clicking her tongue. “Your sizes haven’t changed at all. More like your waist become even thinner.” She said in slightly chastising voice.

“The more I look the more splendid these proportions are.” The tailor was getting overly excited. “Boyish smooth legs. Delicate shoulders. A slim waist. I’ve got it! I’ve got it! I’ve got it! The spring of my imagination is overflowing!” There was a delighted mumble about tailcoats, flowers, ribbons, braided fabrics, tassels, silk, chiffon, organdie, velvet… “With this kind of tension is time to make patterns! Give pen and paper!” The mumble continued going for buttons, drapes, pleats, bishop sleeves, red, yellow and greens…

“Wait.” Sebastian interrupted the flow with a calm tone, a sharp contrast and enough to actually make the woman stop the ranting.” Wouldn’t red be a bit gaudy on the young Master?” Or was he just thinking about poppet? “I believe those colours don’t suit him. Small as he is those shades would make him look childish.” -Er. Mouser added stealthily.

“And what exactly is wrong with that? I have no interest in anything but girls and boys under fifteen.”

“I have no interest in what you do in your spare time.” Sebastian added with a hint of stiff disgust and frustration. “The young master is the head of the Phantomhive House. Rather than bowing to fashion trends you should consider tradition and grace. In any case I can’t agree with a red. Calmer colours would be more appropriate…”

“This is why I don’t like Mr Stiff.” Nina ranted, pointing the pencil. “Have you ever heard the saying you can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. I can’t stand to have to listen to
the whining of an amateur. Can you please waste someone else’s time until the fitting? Get out, out.” She shooed everyone away. Mouser was about to breathe a sigh of relief, almost out of the room, when she was grabbed by the bow tying the ends of the back lacing of her waistcoat. “Not you.”

“Oh well… it’s a little early but why don’t you have the afternoon tea.” Sebastian said when the door was slammed on the group’s face. Behind it Mouser whimpered.

“Ciel you look so cute.” Lizzy cooed as the boyo stood on the pedestal, wearing a newly tailored shirt, held together by pins, just giving a loose but accurate general idea.

“Is that so…” Ciel said disinterested, not even glancing at the mirror. Mouser was standing in a corner, shuddering, glancing frequently at the window. The sketch for her dress was done and she had been wrestled down and mercilessly groped for measurements. Nina said it would be ready before the Play. Mouser would have preferred to spend time with Grell and Charlotte ganging up on her to choose French underwear. She would have even gone as low as to tell poppet what Sebastian did to her in bed if it would have gotten her out of that.

“Yes. Specially the frills around your neck.” He looked like he was wearing a bib but fashion didn’t make that much sense anyhow. Lizzy was just focusing on the cutesy facet of his appearance. And as it happened it was not hard to make him look tinier and infant-like.

“Wrong! It’s wrong.” Nina shrieked and ripped the half made shirt away, baring the skinny torso to the bright but pale light of the winter noon much to the boyo’s shock. Mouser felt a bit avenged by his shocked expression and sudden stiffening of the spine. “I did not want such an ordinary silhouette!” The tailor was ranting as the boyo tried to hide the mark burned onto his flesh. But he was too obvious about it. Lizzy noticed the movement, her attention shifting from the tailor that was making a dramatic rant in the background.

“What is wrong Ciel?” She asked, sweetly and wide-eyed.

“Ah it’s nothing.” Ciel tried to make up an excuse quickly “I just got caught in one of the marking pins…” he tried to dismiss the event but it only made Lizzy look more worried.

“Pins? That is bad!” Noblemen, Mouser thought with a shrug. “If we don’t treat it…” Minor injury overreaction. The boyo miscalculated the care and love she devoted to him.

“Ah? There is no blood…” Ciel dismissed the moment as quickly as he could, faking a shiver. “So can you hand me my shirt?”

“Okay… to take care of her husband is a wife’s job you know.” Lizzy said smiling, picking up the shirt, opening it, stepping forward, completely ignoring the discomfort the boyo was displaying. “Well. Come here. Put in your arms.”

“Allow me.” Sebastian cut into the moment, picking up the shirt smoothly. “If I allowed you to act like a servant I’d get a severe scolding from the Marchioness.” He justified, finally prying the girl’s attention away from the boyo. She looked slightly confused for a moment before acquiescing, smiling lightly.

“That’s it!” Nina broke through her creative swamp and stepped forth, bringing out the measuring tape with a slightly manic glint in her eyes. “It would be better if you had a more sharp and tight silhouette. With that in mind Earl allow me to take some nude measurements.” A sharp snap of the
tape that made the boyo flinch, looking around, disoriented. “To bring out your silhouette I want full body measurements.”

“Wait!” Ciel shouted, hand still covering the mark on his back, looking around. Lizzy was confused. Mouser moved away from her spot and began to make her way through the piles of fabric and discarded paper to the girl. Maybe she could convince her of… something.

“Earl your hand is on the way.” Nina was complaining “I can’t take your chest measurements. Stick your arms out.”

“Wait!!” Ciel protested again when she gripped his wrist and moved his arm. Sebastian moved fast, placing his palm flat against the boyo’s back, covering the brand, creating an awkward moment silence. Mouser covered her face with one palm, groaning low, still moving.

“What?” the boyo squeaked in surprise.

“What indeed.” Nina echoed coolly, glancing under the thin arm at Sebastian. “What are you doing?”

“Well… actually… you see… I hurt my leg and it’s painful to stand without support.” Mouser burrowed her face further into her palm, shaking her head.

“Well it is interrupting the measurements.” The tailor said in a snippy tone, eyes narrowed. “If you want I can support you.” She offered, snapping the tape straight. Before diving in again. Creating a flowing tangle of poses and awkward movements. “It’s unnecessarily hard to measure like this.” She was complaining as Sebastian moved to the left and the boyo looked slightly silly in the middle.

“Indeed.” He agreed, too stunned to be thoroughly annoyed.

“Is that so?” Sebastian said pleasantly, manoeuvring the boyo. “Miss Hopkins put your hand through the gap between our bodies.” He suggested evenly.

“Good grief.” Mouser mouthed as the tangle grew weirder and weirder.

Lizzy seemed to share that opinion, staring wide-eyed and with one gloved hand covering her mouth.

“Lizzy! Even though you’re my fiancée having you stare at my naked body so much is well… embarrassing.” Ciel shouted suddenly, finally remembering something that would have gotten him out of that awkward situation a while ago.

“Sorry!!!” Lizzy jumped, startled, turning away, covering her eyes. Mouser patted her shoulder.

“It’s all right sweetie. He’s just very bashful.” She said kindly, smiling.

Lizzy was blushing a bit more strongly than before.

“Done.” Nina announced after a bit more shuffling about. Sebastian sighed, between relief and annoyance. “There. You can put your clothes on again.” The tailor dismissed the model easily, turning to the piles of papers and conferring the numbers.

“Thank you for your hard work.” Sebastian said formally, helping the boyo down who then plopped onto the bench, exhausted. Lizzy was still staring at the screen in front of her eyes, tense, as if fighting the urge to turn towards her fiancée. Mouser sighed, in relief. Sebastian should have
had enough time to get the manor in shape fit for show... “I’ll get your shirt immediately.” The
demon said, walking away, seemingly thinking everything was in order once again.

“CIEL!!” Prince Soma’s shout completely shattered the small moment of peace that had been
created after the measurement waltz, pushing the double doors of the drawing room wide open,
followed by a calmer Agni. Nina barely reacted. Lizzy started to turn. Ciel almost jumped out of
the bench and Sebastian froze for a split second, caught off guard and looking suddenly annoyed
and frustrated before leaping into action. “Why did you secretly return to the main house?!” there
was not even time to finish the rant as the fabric fluttered around the boyo and was pulled away,
revealing the Earl impeccably dressed while Sebastian folded the piece of heavy... curtain...
Mouser decided, pinpointing the source, wincing.

“If you stay undressed like this you will catch a cold Young Master.” Sebastian advised calmly,
stepping away.

“What in the… you’ve already changed?” Soma babbled a bit, confused, before regaining his pep,
facing a wide-eyed Lizzy who was admiring his clothes and form, seeing him as exotic and odd.
“Who is this girl?” The Prince asked, head tilted.

Agni was calmly closing the doors.

“Who are you?” Lizzy asked, curious as a little lamb.

“This is the 26th son of the Bengal Royal House...” Agni performed his usual duty in the
introductions.

“Where is Bengal?” The young lady asked. Mouser glanced at her. Nothing more adorable than
deliberate innocence. It was not exactly a fake but she was stretching her cuteness as far as it could
go. Most would limply call that the art of being a British rose.

“Don’t talk all at once!” Ciel shouted suddenly through the chatter. Nina was working, immune to
her surroundings. The boyo approached the prince and his servant. “This is my fiancée Elizabeth.”
He introduced her and her position easily.

“Nice to meet you.” Lizzy curtsied, smiling, winning over the prince.

“I’m Soma and if you’re Ciel’s fiancée that makes you my little sister.” Soma declared.

“Make her what!?” Ciel shouted, disliking the turn of events. Mouser chuckled feeling the easy
mood.

“I will most definitely let her eat my curry.” The Prince offered as if it was the highest honour he
could bestow.

“Listen when someone is speaking to you!” Ciel’s answer was prompt and huffy, regaining his
pride.

Lizzy just chuckled, watching the antics.

“Well. Let’s go to the dining hall immediately.” Soma proceeded to ignore the boyo, curry filling
his thoughts.

“The dining hall is damaged...” Ciel started as a host should.

“Please do not worry.” Sebastian interjected. “Dinner preparations have already been made.” At the
confused expression the boyo presented the demon answered with a formal bow and a smirk. “It cost an arm and a leg but it’s perfect as always.” He assured his master.

“He was bedridden?” Lizzy said suddenly as Soma talked about the last visit and why he had travelled to the manor. Sebastian stopped serving for a moment, focusing, deciding if he had to interfere or not. The pair was playing cards. Agni walked in pushing the serving cart.

“Yes.” Soma continued, gesturing with his free hand. “That’s why I thought I should give him something nutritious. So I came with curry.”

“Ciel why didn’t you tell me?” Lizzy whispered, looking saddened, worried. And he should clear those worries away or the household would be in risk of receiving an untimely visit from the marchioness.

“Lady Elizabeth.” The demon began, placing the tea cup next to the lady. “The Young Master was burdened with a very important job that didn’t allow time for a break” Surely her mother, having been part of the Phantomhives had told just enough of what she knew to the daughter that was betrothed to the House’s Head.

“Sebastian... no matter what I do Ciel won’t tell me anything.” She continued, loosing for a moment all the light sugary demeanour that was her trademark. “What should I do?”

“It’s a difficult question for me to answer as a butler however there is one thing.” Sebastian considered his answer and what advantages it could buy for the Young Master. Rest was in order. “It’s been a long time since I’ve seen the Young Master’s face this relaxed. It’s probably because he was able to spend a nice free day with everyone.”

“It would be nice if that were the case.” Lizzy answered after looking around and then focusing on the boy that had fallen defencelessly asleep in his armchair while the other occupants of the room chatted and played.

Mouser sighed, stretching in the small hackney she had taken to leave the Phantomhive estate. Tomorrow was a very important anniversary so she had chosen to return to London at midnight, meaning as soon as the day of started. It had been an uncomfortable day to say the least but funny. And the sketches she’d seen of the dress showed as something elegant, even if slightly frufru, that a female servant in charge of business would use when accompanying the boyo to the theatre as she would have to do next week as part of the charity event. It showed that the Young Master had style and was generous and all that social fakery and noise.

The thief grimaced.

“Hi. I am here, death.” A voice dragged the greeting.

Mouser opened one eye, smiling as she spotted Grell sitting before her. So she had missed Sebastian while taking care of the invading circus and was going to hound the thief as a way to the demon. Mouser didn’t mind. Actually... she was going to use Grell. The boy got back at her with a dress and a groping tailor. And she had to pay Sebastian her own taxing way.

“Evening poppet.” Mouser said, crossing her legs lazily. “I was going to invite you to an
anniversary today. Do you have some free time from Reaping?”
Chapter 34

The house had a different scent now, Mouser noticed as she dragged herself out of the bed and got dressed. It was the warm and peppery tang of all the stored spices and the remnant echoes of whatever Agni cooked. They had been so preoccupied with going to confront the Baron they hadn’t even noticed the change. There was something else underlying it too. The Town house was feeling cosier even now, despite her being the only inhabitant for the day and half of the next. She smirked and swiped some of the boyo’s fine tea from the pretty tins that had been left behind, brewing it, pouring it onto the ugly mug, opening the morning paper, humming under her breath. She had a few hours before meeting Grell at the Tea Parlour and then wait for Charlotte to join them...

One week away from the play and there was not an announcement anymore but a full blown article full of social nothings. It was just good business even though Hamlet was a boring choice for a bunch of orphanage kids. Still the cakes in the small after-play party would make bearing with it worth it for them. At least that’s how she remembered those events... Her dress’s secret pockets, the inner linings of the skirt and jacket, would be so full of cookies she walked out of the charity events wobbling and making slightly crunchy sounds. Mouser chuckled at the memory.

Maybe she should review the files about who would be attending and pinpoint who would be the perfect target to schmooze that night... the phone rang suddenly, dragging her attention away from the little blurb about another case of human spontaneous combustion. Carelessly she tossed the paper onto the counter and picked up the phone.

“Sebastian?” Mouser said, confused, leaning against the wall. She thought a bit about his words. “I could find some other company to perform. Every actor in this country has done Hamlet at least once… we could pass it as secondary branch and place a little note on the program...” She grew silent for a bit. “Why?” the thief rubbed her nose, sighing.

“No. I got it was an order. But that…” She pursed her lips. “Charity or not this is the nineteenth century. A move like that…” She rolled her eyes. Such a thing to say only highlighted how old he was. If she remembered anything about history it would be what... a medieval tradition proposed by the clergy to humble the noble-kind. That had to go on the new program to amend the cultural shock. “It’s a big gamble with the Phantomhive reputation though.”

She hissed.

“No, I will not be on stage. Yes, I am refusing.” The thief tskd, grimacing. “Punish me then.” Mouser sighed and calmed down. There was no need to bring her personal feelings about the stage to that particular conversation especially when she had a valid reason to use as a refusal shield. “There will still need to be a representative of the Phantomhives in the Family’s Theatre Booth or it will be seen as an insult, a disregard towards the pairs. If everyone else is in the play...” She chuckled softly. “So you do forget things... And I did not went through two hours of groping for nothing.” Mouser grew quiet as he explained the new plan. “I can still find some things that will be of help and change the program... prepare the stage as it’s unlikely the company’s original props and scenery will arrive any sooner than the actors themselves. Let me just jot that down... Undertaker and Lau? Anything else?” She felt a slight smirk play over her lips. Drama and theatre... well... that was just aligning so nicely. “I’ll see you soon then.” Mouser placed the phone piece down softly and sighed.

Send notes... where was the paper with the official...
The big house that stood amongst other smaller ones did not seem neither too rich nor too poor. It was in a comfortable niche, a place where both worlds connected, drawn closer by money. It was a rather abrupt change of place, going from the familiar tea parlour from her butler days with Madam Red, filled with mindless gossipy hens in pretty gowns. But as a Grim Reaper Grell was used to see all kinds of life. And chatting with the likeminded pair was no chore. Evee’s viciousness, Charlotte’s sense of style… and the possibility that Sebastian actually needed her for something, implied by Evee over tea…

Grell fidgeted, chuckling slightly. It was enough to make a woman positively giddy.

Charlotte’s comfortable carriage halted in front of said building, one of her men hopping down to open the doors and offer help to the ladies. Grell felt rather animated when the man did not flinch and actually treated her like one. Usually she chose to ignore the rude comments about her situation. But the pair made no issue of it. Still neither demoness nor human had told her what that visit was about. They just smiled and said anniversary, exchanging somewhat self-satisfied sadistic glances over the delicately decorated cups of tea.

All they said to her presence after Evee’s invitation was a “Glad you could make it.” They said it was nothing big, just a shared toast and drink amongst like-minded old friends.

Grell adjusted her glasses.

Both were exhibiting some odd signs looking at the place that seemed to have no remarkable characteristics. No ominous architecture or any hint that there was danger about. The Grim Reaper could even check her Death Note and see that no souls had been collected in that area in a long, long time. It just looked like a simple, clean and safe place. A plaque stood over the large doorway, announcing the building as Carrick’s Charity School for Young Girls. An orphanage-school thing.

Evee was nibbling slightly on her cigarette’s butt.

Charlotte was twisting a button in the cuffed wrist of her jacket.

“We should go in.” Evee said, checking a clock, sounding resigned.

“Indeed. Everyone should be waiting.” Charlotte answered, nodding.

A young woman opened the doors after a few brisk knocks. She smiled and ushered them in. Pretty as those old statues that were uncovered all the way in Greece. But still uninteresting. Grell considered. There seemed to be strength beneath the smile but none of the hard undercurrents that made women like Evee or Charlotte or Madam Red connect with Grell.

“Where are the girls Sybil?” Evee was saying as the woman guided them towards what seemed to be a dining hall.

Sounds of celebration were spilling from the closed doors.

The Anniversary, whatever it was, seemed to have attracted quite a few people to that spot.

“As we wanted some privacy I sent all of them to watch the circus. Older ones guarding the young ones and Klein watching over all of them.” The woman said as she opened the door. At least thirty other young women occupied the hall, talking and drinking. All of them were… Grell adjusted her glasses for a moment. They all had the feeling of survivors about them. Grell tskd. Maybe she
should have checked Evee’s records after all…

“The circus still in town?” Evee asked smirking slightly.

“Interesting thing Crows… Some of them disappeared.”

“Did they now?”

Their guide scoffed and whistled suddenly.

“Crows’ here!” Sybil shouted. “Come on.”

Evee chuckled as everyone turned to her, gathering around. A bottle of rum was given to the thief. She winked at Grell and hopped onto a table, clearing her throat.

“We have done this for the last three, almost four years now.” Mouser started. “While London was living in fear we had a moment of happiness. You all are familiar with what Charlotte and I did. To a greater or lesser extent.” Some laughed. Others nodded, more sombre. Charlotte poured some wine for herself and raised the glass, acknowledging the words. “We were not the ones to end it, sadly, although we made sure Lorraine Packard suffered a lot, or at least a little bit of what we felt, before it happened.” More chuckled, a shout about the bitch deserving it, some booing and choice words about the woman.

Packard? Grell thought, looking up, the name somehow making a connection.

Evee winked at her again, a fang showing slightly, her eyes shifting to a deep red. All could be shrugged off as effect of the light.

“So… we’re here to celebrate the death of Jack the Ripper’s skilfully chosen third victim.” Mouser sloshed the rum bottle, staring at it with a vague smile. “To her I say _thalla gu taigh na galla, sìursach._” The cheer echoed suddenly, almost deafening. “Go to hell and stay there Mrs Packard.” Evee said a bit more silently, sitting down on the table as her friend celebrated, smiling slowly, showing nothing but fangs.

“Evee…” Grell approached, smiling, flipping the flaming hair away, capturing Evee’s face, tilting it upwards. The thief’s smile did not fade either.

“What is it poppet?” She asked sweetly.

“You knew.” Grell accused smoothly, sitting down next to her, entirely too close, draping one arm over her shoulders. Mouser chuckled, freeing herself from her hands, and moving a bit, leaning against the Grim Reaper. This time the guns did not come out.

“Sebastian did tell me.” She admitted, crossing her legs, stretching. “I thought you would be pleased poppet.” Mouser tilted her head back, face to face with Grell, her warm breath fanning against the skin of the Grim Reaper’s neck. “This is a celebration of your actions.” The thief moved, looking around as she stood. “Enjoy it.”

“You’re leaving?” Grell asked, frowning for a slight moment.

“Sebastian gave me some chores.” Mouser shrugged, leaning to whisper against Grell’s ear, playing with a red strand of hair, tucking it away. “He can be such a demanding man.” The thief said slowly. “Speaking of which… Meet me at three o’clock this afternoon. You are definitely going to be needed at the manor. And who knows… maybe he’ll be grateful enough to finally give you that kiss.” Mouser leaned and placed her lips against Grell’s forehead in a soft peck. The she
flicked the nose hard enough for the glasses to tumble, walking away with a chuckle. Tease and trigger. Play and deceive.

“How did he get through your watch?” Mouser asked at the frightened thug that had been Packard’s ponce and had promptly both peed himself and threw up all over the place before regaining enough mind to call her and hope she gave him instructions. The body was mangled beyond recognition and painted red, darkening to a dull brown. The smell of death was everywhere in the squalid little room of a whore that was also a fugitive from the law. Lowest of the low and thanks to Charlotte there was not chance she could ever move away from that.

Mouser smiled slightly. Not her kind of work but everyone had their style. And that particular style seemed to be all the rage amongst prostitute killing now. Sloppy but deep and angry slashes to every area of the body followed by a cleanly and crisply cut removal of all the female organs.

The ponce was just babbling away, confused and scared. Mouser shrugged.

“Call the Yard and let them do the clean-up.” She said calmly. “Tell them you found her when you came to collect the night’s gains. And inform us of any conclusion the coppers come to.” The thief left. She was finally dead… Mouser could hardly wait to tell Charlotte and the others, the ones that still kept in touch.

“That was pretty much it.” Mouser stated as the record faded in the small space of the hackney, pressing her lips against the bleeding cut on her wrist, stemming the flow, giving a show of licking it. Grell leaned back, chuckling, smug and self-satisfied. Recalling the murder it seemed.

They would arrive in a matter of minutes.

Mouser had found out about the death of all the first tier after the invasion, confirming that not one was left. At least the ones that invaded the estate. Snake had not been mentioned at all. She had played the troubled card when Grell ranted about Sebastian’s encounter with Beast, voicing outrage on Grell’s behalf, building a bit more rapport with the Grim Reaper.

“Now about the play…” the thief continued as they walked upstairs. The lights were bright in the music room and voices came from within. No one seemed to be around, within the many corridors, so Sebastian was most likely working on them. Mouser guided Grell through the manor slowly.

“Say no more.” Grell stated, making a dramatic gesture. “I was born to be an actress.”

“Yes. I’d say so too.” Mouser said with a hint of barely perceptible sarcasm.

Behind the door Ciel was giving voice to an already dead Hamlet.

Grell started to bristle.

Sebastian did not sound amused either, even though his voice was muffled by the door.

The boyo was startled and restarted the monologue, sounding even less convincing, prompting Grell to slam the door open, tossing the teeny-tiny-baby-scissors of Death Scythes at the boyo’s feet.
“Obviously it’s not to be.” She stated, annoyed, dramatically, advancing, tossing the red hair over her shoulder. “What a terrible worn out performance!” The Grim Reaper scoffed, facing the room after a charged pause. “You should die without a moment’s delay and put the audience out of their misery, useless Hamlet.” Sebastian relaxed again as he assessed that there was no actual threat this time. Mouser walked in too, looking at the mismatched collection of people recruited for the play. That plan might backfire for the demon.

“Grell what are you doing here?” The boyo asked, his hand hanging limply with the play.

“I brought her.” Mouser said softly, checking the time as if the event was unimportant. Sebastian’s expression tightened. She smiled in response. “There were some doubts about the abilities of the current cast.” The thief said smoothly, straightening.

“Who…” Lizzy said, eyes narrowed, staring. “I have the feeling I’ve seen….” So she did retain some memories of the Dollhouse. The little statement did not seem to be dismissed by the boyo either.

“You lack heart.” Grell instructed, tapping her flat chest for emphasis, looking pitying and serious. “You need heart.” The Grim Reaper stated again, making a grand gesture before closing her gloved hands into a fist. “The silent cries of Hamlet’s soul are not being conveyed at all.” A slashing wide motion of the arm for further note. “They must reverberate with pain.” She stated, poking the boy repeatedly, taking a deep breath, stepping back. “Listen… It should be like this…” Grell coughed slightly in preparation, behaving as if there was a spotlight in her. “To be or not to be…” Dramatic and serious. “That is the question… No!” And then she derailed. “Something like this is no question at all.” The Grim Reaper sing-sang, dancing happily through the room.

“Not at all.” The group sans Ciel and Lau made the chorus.

Mouser smirked, catching Sebastian’s annoyed expression. It was going well.

“I have changed since encountering you…” Grell continued the tuneless song, grabbing the demon, clad in his tutor’s outfit, hand. Sebastian made an utterly disgusted expression, trying to step back, the small conductor baton ready for a whipping. “The really important thing is lo…”

“No.” The demon said dryly, shoving the wooden instrument up Grell’s nose, lifting the Grim Reaper a couple of feet into the air, grimacing, ignoring the shriek. “I will kill you without a second thought.”

“Love and death always walk side-by-side.” Grell commented, unfazed by the pain, giggling. “Take me higher Sebastian, Higher.”

Sebastian scoffed and pulled the baton out, wiping it on a piece of cloth, eyes narrowed behind the glasses.

“Still it might be worthwhile allowing such a shady character with such theatrical affectations to live a while longer.” He pondered, glancing at Mouser, trying to see through her plot.

“See?” Grell piped in immediately, sitting straight on the carpet she had fallen onto.

“In any case all of you lack tension.” Sebastian stated, looking around, levelling a glare at each person. “You need to show some determination.” The demons stopped for a moment, glaring harder at Soma and Agni. “As I said stop eating curry.”

“But it’s good.” Soma said simply, munching away without a care, as usual.
Between a dancing RanMao, Grell hugging his ankles, a boyo that looked huffy, Lizzy putting the Undertaker in pink accessories and a confused staff Sebastian seemed to be close to a rage point.

Mouser smiled and walked away.

“I look forward to your play.” She teased, closing the door, chuckling to herself as she walked down the hallway.

There were quite a few rules when it came to making appearances. Each event had its own set of specific steps and courtesies. It became especially true and evident when someone had to appear on behalf of their employer as reputation was everything. So Mouser had to be all formal and fancy to make said appearance and lacking help at the manor as everyone was busy at the Theatre already, she went to Charlotte with the boxes Nina had sent for her.

The dress was a three piece creation made from winter velvet, black in colour, with a light cyan blue silk ruffle around every edge and trim, something that was not in the original sketches as they had been at least three shades of blue. The skirt fell straight after hugging her hips, the ruffle hitting the lacing of her boots, the second piece was a long sleeved corseted top, buttoning up tightly from her midthighs to the bust, the off the shoulder neckline showing a lot of skin that Mouser felt was uncalled for. It had no lacing on the back, relying on expert tailoring and a hopeful lack of weight fluctuation of the wearer. All in all it could be called a mini over dress. The third part was a jacket, Basque cut, double breasted, with a more modest v neckline, sleeves tight till the elbows and then flaring out into long, exaggerated bell sleeves. All in all it highlighted the wide choker that carried the silver cameo with the Phantomhive coat of arms.

Needless to say Charlotte was happy. Especially when she started playing with her hair. It was longer than it had been in a long time and her friend decided to bring out the curlers again. The result was not the frightful mess of dangling rings that she had been subjected to last time but a smooth wavy tail to the side, touching her shoulder. It was half hidden by the porkpie hat, the narrow curled brim sporting a lace-rose trimmed, polka-dotted black sheer veil, a ribbon of the same material enhanced by a droopy bow on the right side going around the flat crown. It covered most of her face in a dramatic statement.

Then she had been sent away with the guarantee that she looked like a posh girl.

Mouser sighed staring at the fan that sat deceitfully dainty in her cyan gloved hands. It was the only weapon allowed that night even though there should be no trouble. Sebastian’s gift was a fan with a metal frame or several slats cast as long, delicate looking feathers, the circle made of black silk with a bright silvery edge.

The formal carriage of the Phantomhives stopped in front of the Theatre, the valet rushing to open the door.

Nobles were watching who came and how. People were already gossiping, speculating about the new program as it would have been impossible to keep the facts about the delayed company a secret. Ladies focused immediately in her outfit as she stepped down in a long time and her friend decided to bring out the curlers again. The result was not the frightful mess of dangling rings that she had been subjected to last time but a smooth wavy tail to the side, touching her shoulder. It was half hidden by the porkpie hat, the narrow curled brim sporting a lace-rose trimmed, polka-dotted black sheer veil, a ribbon of the same material enhanced by a droopy bow on the right side going around the flat crown. It covered most of her face in a dramatic statement.

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The formal carriage of the Phantomhives stopped in front of the Theatre, the valet rushing to open the door.
The charities had been ushered in first so the children would not impair the parade of the *haute monde*, the gossip and preening before the play. People visited each other’s boxes, focusing opera glasses on each other, comparing and competing. There was commotion from the ladies when the Viscount Druitt entered his own box, waving and showing off.

Mouser scoffed, opening the fan. Despite the wintry weather outside the theatre was rather balmy to allow the ladies to show off the cleavage the dresses sported. She checked the watch inside the sleeve of the jacket. It was about time to start. The lights dimmed, the voices quieted down and the curtain rose.

It was off to a broken start filled with bored children but the play in itself was staying true. Mouser yawned behind the fan as the scenes changed. And then it started to go as she expected. Grell blew it, Agni blew it, Finny as the narrator took it in stride, RanMao made it funny. The audience started to pay attention to what was happening. The boyo was surprisingly good in conveying the drama, leaving kiddos weepy and receptive to the theme. It also made Druitt weepy and annoyingly chatty.

With all the broken shortcuts the play was taking there was no intermission, the plot flowing easily into the duel where Sebastian’s natural presence scared the pint-sized audience. The nature of the play was suddenly shifted when a little one voiced out his opinion, breaking the damn that kept them quiet.

“Hamlet, don’t!”

“That old man’s sword is poisoned.” That one made her chortle behind the fan, only heightened by the momentary shift in Sebastian’s expression, seen through the opera glasses, seemingly insulted at the assumption.

“That’s right!”

“The match is a lie!”

“They want to kill you!”

“Don’t die Hamlet!”

The barrage of words and novelty totally threw the boyo off the script. So Sebastian toyed with it, making the play move forward once again, the sound of the children proving they were completely engrossed into the new plot.

Then Grell blew it. Again. With singing and a floating gondola.

Mouser chuckled. That was going to be hard to explain to the business associates but it was just so… worth it…

Apparently poppet had been slacking off because the scene was cut short by William T. Spears that cut the gondola’s support, making the other Grim Reaper take a rather spectacular tumble onto the stage, walking towards it nonchalantly while scolding poppet. Mouser used the opera glasses again. *Are those my bloomers?*

The thief shook her head, placing the seeing implements down, reclining on the armchair of the box, sighing as Soma ran into the stage, beginning the rather contrite wrap up. In the end the moral remained. Revenge was foolish and empty. But Hamlet survived, the kids were happy and the
actors took a bow. She sighed and stood as the lights came up to uproarious clapping. Now… to do the damage control.

“Well…” Mouser started, speaking to a crowd of ladies and reporters that had flocked to the box. “Seeing it was a play for children we felt Hamlet was a bit heavy despite being the only play offered by the troupe. So while preserving the morale of the play the Funtom Company tried to keep it light and of easy understanding for the young ones.” Lying was so easy. And they believed every word, leaving to spread the gossip.

The thief sighed. She had a few minutes before having to make some business and appearances… She stood slowly, adjusting the sleeves, looking out, towards the emptying seats. It had been a success despite the warped form. So money would be pouring easily and quickly into the boyo’s coffers.

“Miss.” A deep voice called formally, quietly, almost apathetically. Mouser hummed a voiceless greeting, turning slowly, hands inside her sleeves, the fan flat against the wrist of the opposing hand. Tall, dark, bespectacled and well groomed, the typical butler attire. Short black hair, golden eyes. Her lips twisted softly in distaste.

“You’re the spider’s butler.” Mouser stated softly. There was no recognition on his part but why would there be. She had seen him, he hadn’t seen her. Such were the workings of the underworld. Also he did not look… three years, convergence… the thief’s eyes narrowed behind the veil. Before she did not know what to look for and it had been partly a lucky guess that she had seen through Sebastian. This time, up close, it was clear at first glance. “Deamhan.”

Claude Faustus adjusted his glasses without any visible change.

As easily as she’d seen through it he should have seen through her.

“My Master looks forward to resume the family contracts between the Phantomhive and Trancy households.” He stated calmly and with a frosty politeness that was just placed on the unemotional.

“A letter would have been the mannerly thing to do Mr Faustus.” Mouser stated icily, smirking. “But I will pass the message to the Young Master.” He did not move. Mouser risked it, testing the waters. He seemed to be saying the boyo did not know who the Trancy’s were… If that was true the Phantomhives were crippled… or would have been if Sebastian was not within the household. “Still… the strings are yours.” The thief stated. Alois Trancy had no interest in the Underworld he inherited. Claude Faustus had managed such businesses although his actions were so minimal it bordered on the non-existent.

“You flatter me.” The demon said without any particular intonation.

“Hardly. I’d rather flatten you.” Mouser replied in a scornful way. His hand extended as if to grip her neck, not quite angry but close enough to resort to aggression. She moved, the fan opening, feathers razor sharp cutting easily through his glove and palm. It was a trifling wound. What mattered there was the intention. She motioned the fan as if she was just cooling herself as they stared at each other. The brief moment of loss of composure was gone from his eyes now. But he did not step back, still too close after the attempt. Mouser paid no mind to that playing with her fan.

“I’m sure I know what kind of females you usually deal with if such a petty threat gets you results. So I will warn you.” This time she was the one to step forth, into his space, sneering while looking up. “I will not kill you if you touch me.” She smiled, staring through the black veil. “I will castrate
you and feed you chunks of your on bleeding flesh.”

There was a charged, heavy pause while the theatre rustled behind them, voices, sounds and people moving about, unawares. Then he stepped back. Not intimidated but grudgingly admitting something.

“Your soul would have been a delight to feast in.” The demon butler of the Trancy stated, a sort of backhanded compliment.

“And if you tried I would make you choke on it.” Mouser answered without missing a beat, examining her fan and closing the steel structure with a snap, the feather-blades folding neatly over the black silk without a tear. “Now piss off. I’ll give him the bloody message.” The thief walked past him, into the corridor without fear or further acknowledgement. A not-human and another demon… hopefully the latter would be just a noble quarrel… in any case assassinating Alois Trancy might be a good move on their part.

Thalla gu taigh na galla, siùrsach – Scottish Gaelic. Quite literally: fuck off, whore.
“For today’s afternoon tea I have prepared Congresbury green tea with gooseberry jelly and elderflower syrup.” Sebastian’s voice interrupted the afternoon’s work as he rolled the tea cart into the study. The boyo groaned, tossing the papers down immediately. Mouser picked up the documents and migrated to the armchairs near the fire, tossing them down nonchalantly and picking up her book for a pause, stretching.

The play was another boost to the sales and the notoriety of the company. So far they were beating last year’s numbers according to the boyo.

If things remained steady the opening of the curry restaurant in March should curb the usual decline of toy sales that happened around spring.

Candy sales had its ups but were relatively steady throughout the year.

Then there were the plans for the hotel. But those were drafts mostly. The documents that proved the acquisition of the propriety, the notices of hired hands and the sketches that would guide the remodelling of the old Ludlow Castle, deep in Shropshire. Apparently there was a market for rural castle hotels when the nobles either wanted to spend some quiet time or hide out away from the estates until some scandal or another passed.

“Not really special is it?” The boyo complained after a few bites.

“Is it not to your liking?” Sebastian kept his voice neutral in that sentence. Mouser pinned the page and looked up with a slight frown. She was on the fence on the how deliberate had been the choice and the dislike on either side. They had been a bit tense lately. Although she supposed it was only natural seeing that the month marked the return to his life after the rather poignant December. One out of slavery, one into it. “Well then… after you finish it would be time for some work.” The demon extended a letter.

Mouser sighed. Either she had forgotten to check the mail or that had just arrived. Either was plausible. She lit a cigarette, leaning back against the plush fabric. So what did the Queen want the boyo to clean up next? The thief mused opening the book. Most likely the burning-bodies. The newspapers were getting increasingly loud about it and as January drew to its end there had been more and more fiery events on the streets. So far the news had reported fourteen dead women, starting in the ends of December as an isolated case…

“Human body combustion is it?” Sebastian commented as the boyo finished the letter and shared the main issue, a deeper frown in place. “Such cases… they are becoming too frequent in London. Has another victim appeared last night?”

“It has.” It had been in the morning paper too so Mouser was fairly sure Sebastian’s question was rhetorical. He usually read the articles while ironing the paper. “The Queen sends word. She grieves over the terror her subjects live in.” Still the frown had not eased.

“Is something the matter?” Sebastian prodded. The boyo picked up the letter and gave it to the butler, pointing out a specific passage. “To discover the perpetrator of such heinous crimes I urge for the joint effort of my Watchdog and Spider.” He stopped and thought for a moment before asking. “What is this about?”

“I don’t know. Or actually I should I say I don’t know about it. You referred to spiders before.”
The boyo asked, turning to Mouser, calm. Maybe it was something that he had been expecting.

“You… don’t. So it really was not a full deceit. Not spiders.” The thief crushed the cigarette slowly, adjusting in the chair. “The Spider.” She punctuated while lighting another smoke. “The Spider is the code name of the Trancy Household. They are nobles that work for the Queen in the shadows of the Underworld. While your family deals with menaces the Trancy household is the intelligence gatherer. Usually working in tandem with the Phantomhives. They point, you destroy.” She huffed, allowing smoke to float freely.

“I see.” The boyo nodded, slouching, tossing the letter onto the table, on top of the newspaper clipping about each case. “So the request is not unusual. Her Majesty probably feels I need some… supervision.”

Sebastian chuckled quietly, standing next to the chair once again, waiting for instructions. Mouser smirked.

“Let’s face it boyo. As fibs go you could have worked in a better one in that report.”

“Really.” Ciel snapped dryly. “Let’s see you do it.”

“Sure.” Mouser stood at the challenge and bowed low, as one should do before the Queen, deepening her voice in a playful mimicry of Ciel’s. “The mission Your Highness entrusted me was to retrieve the children. Unfortunately by the time I was able to track down the man responsible he and his accomplice doctor had already killed them and used their bodies for experiments so extensive that nothing was left of them to identify, much less bury. I regret such an outcome but from what was gathered within those halls before the fire was sparked by that demented doctor, no doubt trying to prevent any more findings from taking place, there was no chance to recover the children as they were killed only a few days after capture. Through such chemically fuelled flames the recovery of the few bodies that could have been returned to the grieving families was also impossible and I had to abandon the Manor before being burned myself.”

“Really? Such an extensive lie…” The boyo began, rubbing his nose.

“Would have prevented some doubts on the Queen’s part.” Sebastian acknowledged his covenant’s trickery as she stood and placed the cigarette back on her lips. “The Young Master deviated too much from the given order and did not offer a justification the Monarch was pleased with.”

“I do know that. But the consequences of my report remains to be seen.”

There was a pause between the three. Pluto was howling outside, hunting something. Or most likely playing with Finny and Soma who was refusing to leave to the town house, claiming Ciel was still convalescing and insisting in him sampling every curry loaded with special healing spices.

“There is something else…” Mouser decided to continue the issue at hand with the Spider, walking towards the table, sitting on it, dangling her legs. “Alois Trancy is the current head of the household but there were a lot of doubts and irregularities with his… title worthiness. Mostly because the last Spider was… what are the terms I’m looking for… a lecherous pervert that liked young boy flesh. He bought them from orphanages all over the country and if your predecessor knew I’m not sure why he didn’t discredit him in front of the Queen that claims children are the future.” Mouser closed her eyes for a moment, thinking, organizing what was known. “You see… the only child of the Trancy household was kidnapped as a baby and supposedly Alois returned a few weeks before the convenient demise of the old bloke. Three years ago along with a dark-clad butler. He is fourteen.” Sebastian and Ciel exchanged a glance. Mouser smiled. “Yes, you do see it.” She allowed more smoke free in a steady stream. “It was all very pretty for the public, a
miracle, then funeral and the teary goodbyes, the story, the facts… that is the tale that is accepted although it had its doubters, the main one being the late Trancy’s brother. But then most dismiss his belief as greed for the money and title.”

“You don’t believe either.” The boyo noted. Mouser nodded.

Sebastian opened the window a bit so the cold air could diffuse a bit of the smoke.

“I am in a trade of manipulation and lies. Oddly enough those are also the skills a noble develops as so called social polish. Then I was also in an environment where people were forced to use sex as a tool. And it works even better when the target is not used to have a… willing… recipient. At least in the case of the narcissistic. And everyone knew how Trancy was. Most likely this Alois Trancy is nothing more than a one of the boy-whores who gained enough favours and approval, one that was smart and broken enough to manipulate a pervert. Really… as supervision it’s likely the worst pairing I have ever seen.” She stretched. “As for the black butler… his name is Claude Faustus and he is a demon.”

“When did you meet him?” Sebastian spoke as they packed the basics needed for a trip to London. Mouser shrugged, sliding belts and guns into place, back turned to him, choosing from the assortment placed on the desk. She needed bullets for the Colts and Meyrin was running low on the rifle ammo. Bard also said that the bullet belts for the Gatling needed to be replaced. The one in the basement that had not been severely damaged by the explosion.

“Theatre.” The thief answered, ready to go, sighing, picking up the cape. “I had seen him before that but didn’t have the tools to realize more than the fact that something about him was off.”

“Why did you say nothing?” Sebastian finished the packing and turned to her, cupping her face between both nude palms, skin against skin. Mouser took a shaky breath, scrambled by the closeness. A few hours with no interruptions was what they needed… unfortunately there seemed to be no such thing in the foreseeable future and it was leaving both, as Mouser was noticing his own frustrations despite their rather polished deceptions and disguises, rather on edge. The kiss was sudden and hard, tongues twining until they were breathless. Just for a moment, for a claim, a reminder.

The fact that Faustus was a demon and she had stated that so carelessly was also making Sebastian feel rather annoyed. Although it was impossible to steal a covenant it was possible to take the female’s interest away from the male that had warped her. Even in Hell’s machinations, hierarchies and plots it was rare to find a female that severed the ties. It was true the pair, after the initial times of change, could, and most likely would, separate and not see each other for centuries. Killing females came with harsh penalties due to their rarity and the amount of work needed to create such a creature. It was purely practical. Abuse still happened but an artfully crafted Demoness was more than likely to brutally murder or otherwise eliminate anyone harming her. He could recognize protectiveness over Mouser but wasn’t exactly sure why it felt a little heavier that the pride of success and the connection of the covenant.

“I wanted to make sure.” Mouser admitted after a moment, her hands caressing his arms before walking out of them, opening the unmentionables drawer, taking away a pile of papers form under lacy bloomers and ribbon gathers. “Here.” She extended them to him, giving the demon time to leaf through the main pages. “This is what I dug up in addition to what I’ve told the boyo.”

“Thorough.” Sebastian admitted. So that was why she had been missing for hours at a time. That’s
why she asked how did he know when the manor was endangered and what kind of tricks could be used as defences. “Trancy’s manor…”

“Has a surplus of power and is still one of the easiest places I’ve broken into.” Mouser smirked. “It could be that he is that sloppy, uncaring or wanted some of these…” she fingered the pages lightly with glistening black nails. “to be found. Faustus expressed the wish to play with the Phantomhives.”

“You are unsure if it’s a Master’s order or his own interest.”

“You have spent quite some time nurturing the boyo’s soul. It could be starting to look like a delicacy from the outside.” Sebastian pondered her words. Yes. Yes it could. But it was awfully rude, against all kind of aesthetics to breach into another’s contract without even an introduction. Even so agreements could be made if the two parts were willing. “How do demons come from hell?”

“Some are called. Others linger about for decades. Some wander. It is mostly a matter of preference.” Sebastian picked up the suitcases, walking towards the hall. The carriage should be arriving. If things remained quiet they should be able to leave without alerting Prince Soma and Agni.

“Why are there more?” Mouser continued her inquires, having left the documents behind, hidden away once more. “One soul, one demon. Or can it be shared?”

“Contractually, no.” The demon answered, surprised by the similar flow of thought. “But some of us are just messy eaters that attract scavengers. Some throw scraps to lessers so they’ll become servants.” So what was Faustus desiring both from the soul, the minions with him and the demons standing on the other side, between him and a unique Young Master?

It was early morning when they set out to the crime scene, finding the Scotland yard moving around, trying to find some more clues. They did not look successful. Aberlain and a handful of coppers walked around the area where the wall was charred. Lord Randall was crouching in front of the smudge, staring at it intently.

“Seems like you’re having some difficulties Lord Randall.” The boyo stated to drag the man’s attention away from the crime.

“Phantomhive.” The distaste was still palpable and still the same.

“Why not allow me to investigate a bit of this case?” The boyo stated, waving the letter dismissively. Mouser sniffed the air. Despite the papers saying alcohol abuse there was no scent of it in the air. It was traces of something that was also burned, dry and metallic.

“There has been no progress so far.” The commissioner stated in a clipped tone, arms crossed.

“And is that different from the other cases?” The boyo inquired, looking around. Mouser pulled her glove free and touched the sooth in the walls. Result of a fire, not directly of a body. There were faint traces of cooked meat in the air still. But that could also be coming from the pie store a few blocks down. “I will have you show me the records.” The boyo demanded. Lord Randall always made him work for the information but he didn’t exactly mind. It was a game of power the Commissioner always lost.
“There is nothing left of them.” The tone grew even tighter. Mouser cleaned her fingers and snapped the glove back in place.

“Trancy?” The boyo asked, suspicion in his eye, adjusting the top hat.

“Another like you.” Randall sneered. “Out of the law, working in the dark.” The commissioner continued. “The Scotland yard has been unable to solve these cases with the interferences. There is no way you can.”

“We shall see. We’re going Sebastian…” The boyo began, turning, finding the demons swooning over a trio of kittens with their mother.

“Those round and innocent eyes that know no filth nor foulness. Those tails that lovingly swish as if belonging to nobility. Those paws with a soft shade of warm pink.” He gushed over the lovingly. Mouser chuckled as the boyo buried his face onto a palm.

“Inspector.” Aberlain returned, slightly out of breath, saluting. “Again there was no noticeable evidence left.”

“I deeply apologise Young Master. The kittens were just so cute I…” Sebastian snapped out of trance as that was something. If there were no records the guard’s memory was one of the tools they had left.

“Let’s go you cat obsessed moron.” The boyo groused, walking away.

“I think they were Tobias’ kittens.” Mouser mentioned as they walked towards the coach. “Damn that rake…”

“What do you plan on doing?” Sebastian focused his attention on the boyo now.

“If the yard can’t help us I suppose we have to go there.” The boyo was once again resigned.

The Undertaker’s laughter was as loud as ever, this time the task delegated to Sebastian. The boyo scowled at the door, waiting to be allowed in. Mouser played with her smoke, silently, reading, sitting on the same barrels that still stood outside, the wood slightly rotting in some spots. The Undertaker was laughing off the aftershocks of whatever Sebastian did, gesturing them close.

“Here.” The man stated, fishing within his jacket, taking out a small vial of glittering ash. “I’ll show you something great, keep the promise like I said.” He continued, reclining.

The boyo stared blankly at the vial.

“I said I wanted to look at the corpse of the incident.”

“Well, like I said…” The Undertaker answered, chuckling, tapping the glass. “This is it. This was all that was left at the crime scene.” He kept smiling waving as they left, taking the sparkly ashes. “Burning out at such high temperatures it’s obvious only ashes would remain.”

The funeral was not announced anywhere but it was not that hard to find the place and hour. It was cold but there was no snow in sight. Clouds were gathering, turning the day grey but the scent of
rain was still not close enough. It matched the dark clad people gathering around the coffin that was being lowered, empty but for a small lady’s shoe surrounded by pale flowers. They watched quietly, the boyo removing his top hat. It was clear the husband had tried to reach for the woman. His hands were stiff, heavily bandaged and smelled of charred flesh and ointments.

“Young Master.” Sebastian whispered softly when, as the ceremony was drawing to a close a pair of newcomers crossed the graveyard. A portly middle aged man properly dressed, a bowler hat on top of his head, hiding brown hair streaked with grey, carrying a package and a stocky, matronly, blonde woman both past her prime and clearly soured, the small eyes dull behind the veil, by life walking under a black parasol with fringe trims. They smelled of photograph chemicals.

“I am Turner from the photo study.” He announced in a quiet tone, making the small group part, the widower clearly recognizing him. Man and wife bowed respectfully after he removed the hat. “I am sorry to meet you in grief this time.” He stated, giving the hat to the wife who silently took it along with the fabric that covered the framed picture. She showed no emotion. “I have brought you the last photo of your wife.”

“She was that beautiful and yet...” The wife said, the voice soft. Mouser’s eyes narrowed for a moment. Resentment, anger, boiling regret and bitterness. It was hidden but the tone was recognizable for those who had been surrounded by similar tones. “We are sorry for your loss.” The hands of the husband were unable to hold onto the picture, the frame falling, the glass shattering. “She really was so beautiful” It was hard to see the small smile but it was there. As they said their goodbyes and walked away the sun broke through the clouds and the air shimmered with tell-tale signs. The unburned scent and the gleam in the ashes... the trio exchanged a knowing glance.

“Excuse me.” Sebastian returned in the evening, as the sun has just disappeared, leaving all in the dark. Mouser and the boyo were playing with guns over the desk. The demon frowned slightly, noticing oil, gunpowder and grease stains over the once sparkly top as well as her boots. Mouser was mumbling about how long it had been since the boyo had made any kind of maintenance, half lounging on the tilted chair as she worked. “The components found in the ashes and in the ones taken from those two or the photo studio completely match.” Mouser gave the Young Master one of the finished weapons, letting him place the bullets within. “Magnesium oxide. The flash from taking a photograph leaves behind traces of such magnesium in its wake.” Traces. What had been the ashes was too much for a simple picture. “I have also acquired the product information from Lau.” He took out a folded paper sheet. Mouser closed another pistol with a click, giving it to the boyo for loading. “A whole shipment of magnesium bought and delivered by a single studio.”

“A whole shipment is too much for simply taking pictures.” The boyo stated the obvious.

“Sometimes people buy in bulk because it gets cheaper but the chemical storing is hazardous.” Mouser loaded the gun herself, slipping it against her thigh, picking up another instrument and repeating the gestures. Muscle memory. She wasn’t even looking at her hands.

“Indeed.” Sebastian stated neutrally, moving a bit more in the written information. “Also the victims had too much in common. The women in this case had been recently married before having their picture taken at the...”

“Turner Photo Studio.” The boyo stood, stuffing the gun of his choice in the back pocket. “Let’s go. That couple knows the truth behind this case.”
“Understood.” Sebastian bowed, hand on chest. Mouser sighed, pulling her legs out of the balance act and finished putting her guns in place, following.

The carriage came to a stop before a fireball of a photography studio, the fat cow singing and hopping merrily along the cobblestones while sprinkling sparkly silver dust.

“It’s that woman!” the boyo shouted over the panicked voices in the night, the roar of the fire and the explosions she created as she ran along.

“Turner’s wife.” Sebastian completed, eyes narrowed, locked ahead.

“Happiness! Happiness!” the woman was chanting, carrying the camera, taking the occasional picture that exploded into crimson flames. Sebastian had to grab and throw the boyo out of the way. Mouser hopped up, perching on a window ledge, looking ahead. She adjusted her position and lit a cigarette on the flaring flames nearby.

“That camera is the instigator device!” The boyo shouted from the ground, moving, trying to see. It would be best if they could destroy the camera at once. But the woman was too far and Mouser was no long-range sniper. “Catch her Sebastian!”

“Yes, My Lord.”

The order was given and the demon ran down the street although not at his full speed, mindful of the explosions. There was just something not quite right with them. It broke the speed and time and was more than likely to make him lose even such a wide target. That proved true when she went into the inner labyrinths, the sideways and twisted alleys. But it was still easy to hear the merry song she was shouting into the night as she burned people to death. The tone suddenly changed when a flash of red came down.

“You…” Sebastian said acidly, defending from a new death scythe with the Trinidad or knife, fork and spoon.

“It’s time for Death!” Poppet announced happily on the impasse reached.

“So you’re the one pulling the strings behind the scenes?” Sebastian asked slowly. Mouser doubted it. Fire wasn’t exactly poppet’s style despite its red colouring. And judging by the Death Scythe that was made for chopping, tearing and slashing there was no way she would be that indirect.

“I’ve only drawn a pretty red line between Sebby and myself.” Grell announce happily, obliviously allowing Sebastian to dodge, one long leg slamming down on poppet’s head. Mouser winced. Well… he had been itching to hit the Grim Reaper for a while now it seemed. “Ouch! So horrible!” Grell complained, hands on the bruised crown. “Why the rough treatment?” She complained while the boyo emerged into the alley, finally catching up, panting hard. Maybe making him run was not such a great idea… Mouser glanced at him slightly worried. Asthma and all.

“The first to strike was you.” Sebastian stated dismissively, adjusting the tail coat. Another scream and explosion came from an indistinct position, most likely ahead, nearing the main streets again.

“I was only trying to hack the tension.” Grell complained, still protecting the bruised head. “I was even chasing that pig and yet you…”
“Come now, Poppet, stiff upper lip.” Mouser patted the Grim Reaper’s back softly, picking up the Death Scythe, admiring it. “I see you got your toy back.” Grell smiled and went over to her to gush about the sharpness and the vibrations and whatnot.

“Why is he here?” The boyo wheezed out, grimacing.

“You’ve come here for the souls of the victims have you not?” Sebastian asked calmly, slightly relieved that it was not a full stalking action.

“But now that I’ve met you here work is over.” Grell flirted, coming closer, batting eyelashes. “From here on the two of us shall have an adventure.” Poppet tried to hug Sebastian who dodged each attempt with a grim expression.

“Oh my.” Mouser chuckled. Another explosion echoed. She blew a bit of the smoke out, turning to the boyo. “We should leave. I’ll go catch the sow.”

“We have no time to lose with this guy. Let’s go.” Ciel said, still annoyed, starting to run ahead for once.

“Understood.” Sebastian followed soon, ignoring Grell who, seeing him gone, gave chase almost immediately.

Mouser shrugged and followed a bit more slowly.

There might be some worth in exploiting Grell seeing they were after the same target. She just had to wait for the moment when the Grim Reaper was thoroughly trampled and needing a girly talk.

It happened a bit sooner and more literally than Mouser had been anticipating as Grell cut Sebastian’s path, standing amongst the flames, arms opened.

“If you want to embrace me Sebastian you’ll have to pass through these fla…” She stated dramatically.

“Excuse me.” Sebastian said in a no-nonsense tone, walking over the Grim Reaper. Mouser walked out of the alleyway as Grell recovered enough to sit up, calling.

“OH Wait! Sebby!” Poppet whined, reaching for the dark figure that disappeared ahead.

“Poppet we talked about being overbearing with affection.” Mouser approaching, her heels quiet in the fire-lit street, crouching before Grell who huffed. “He prefers the cat approach.”

“Eveeeeeeee!” Poppet broke down in dramatic dry sobs, hugging the thief tightly.

“There, there.” Mouser groaned out, patting the red-clad back, glancing around, discreetly spitting out the dead cigarette. “Poppet…” She whispered gently, her voice soothing and sweet. “Who are you hunting?”

“Huh?” Grell stopped the drama for a moment, opening the hug enough to let Mouser gulp air.

“I see no records leaving the souls around me and while I must admit I don’t always see it casually…” Mouser stated, leaning a bit back to look her in the green-and-gold eyes.

“Ah… that is…” Grell stopped the overly dramatic sobbing for now and smirked, adjusting the glasses gleefully.

“Something that could help Sebastian?” Mouser continued, playing with the red hair, fussing over
“Aw you let her get away?” Grell stated when they finally caught up with the demon. Sebastian made a slightly upset expression, glancing at the pair. Mouser smiled and tilted her head. The demon answered with a soft smile of his own, understanding.

“Grell…” He called, the voice losing the utter contempt from a while back. “How about we work together?” Sebastian asked, turning on just a bit of the charm. Mouser smirked. So he was just doing it very reluctantly.

“I am a hunter that chases your love.” Grell failed to notice or outright ignored such issue, drawing close and flirting again. “That is my most important work.” The Grim Reaper opened the ledger. “Soooo… Margaret Turner, five minutes after midnight, after indiscriminate mass murder she commits suicide by self-burning. According to my Death Note that is the soul I shall collect tonight.” Poppet finished, leaning against Sebastian.

“And the victims?” The demon asked, looking back at the dying fire of one of the charred, ashy remains.

Mouser sniffed the air. Where had the boyo gone to?

“Their souls were burned into hers.” Grell said, making both demons pay closer attention to the fires. Such thing meant the killing method was not as scientific as it looked.

The out of place explosion without a fire following it drew their attention towards the Big Ben, crossing a flood of panicked people barely contained by the Scotland Yard.

“Young Master.” Sebastian said, pinpointing the boyo backing away while the smoke cleared, high up in the Big Ben’s with the bells. Silver flakes flickered in the air, inert.

“That Pig… when did she get up there.” Grell pointed out, looking up too.

“I think the boyo just insulted the cow.” Mouser squinted, commenting on the action. “And the cow had a weapon. And a bullet could theoretically ignite…” She allowed the words to die, gesturing softly.

“Well now…” Sebastian shrugged, adjusting his gloves calmly. “If I don’t hurry it will be bad. That woman dies in five minutes, killing herself.” He repeated.

“Wait… what do you think you’re doing?” Grell approached.

“The Young Master has ordered me to capture her.” Sebastian elucidated.

“But there is no time left you know…” The Grim Reaper shrugged, dismissively.

“Where would we be if I as a servant of the Phantomhive couldn’t do this much.” Sebastian stated with the usual mischief underlying that statement.

“The woman is obsessed with happiness and being showered with attention by passionate and
handsome men. If you paid attention to the ranting while she wobbled down the street.” Mouser mentioned thoughtfully. “You two could put on a show. I’m sorry poppet but…”

“Well then… shall we go?”

“What?” both Mouser and Grell asked, confuse by a sudden sharp look.

Grell was flaming enough to be fire-proof. How about that… Mouser thought, gripping Sebastian as he ran up the building with ease, carrying her so there would be no delays, using Grell as a shield as Poppet ascended using the Death Scythe. Poppet reached the top with flare, dragging the pig-cow’s attention with a succession of explosions and photographs to which Grell gladly posed.

The thief felt Sebastian’s grip shift suddenly and before she could react she was tossed towards Grell, letting out a girlish shriek of surprise, caught bridal style and used as a prop in the photographic session of fire and rage, the Grim Reaper turning on the extreme allure of whatever shreds of manliness remained within while shielding her from blasts even while acting passionate.

“Ripe and utterly sweet…” Grell said, glancing at the outraged woman quickly while tilting Mouser backwards, noticing that Sebastian was in position.

“Makes you want to bite.” The demon answered lecherously, the woman turning in rage and confusion.

Mouser made a little sound of complete confusion, big brown eyes wide, not quite getting how she got into that situation. So Grell really was a good actress her mind supplied about all the lovey-dovey photos that had been taken.

“Didn’t I tell you to burn!” She shouted trying to use the camera. Sebastian moved fast, kicking it out of her hands, making the heavy bum hit the stone floor. “Impossible…” The woman whimpered, eyes wide. “What on earth are you people?”

“I am just one hell of a butler.” Sebastian answered, closing in on the prey.

“Death God, Hunter of Love!” Grell announced.

“Please do not say that while holding me.” Mouser piped in, still in bridal carry, pressing a gun against Grell’s chest, looking annoyed. It was entirely too much touching. “Also put me down.”

“Tell me everything you know.” The boyo recovered from his own shocked, wide eyed response to the setting, approaching, gun in hand.

“You may as well kill me.” The woman announced. That penchant for the melodrama everybody seemed to be displaying that day was growing tiresome. “That person told me that if I do this beautiful men would fall in love with me.” She said it with absolute conviction.

“That person…” Sebastian noticed, trying to make the answer come out.

“The man with the golden eyes… he…” The woman started when a sudden fire enveloped her. Grell gasped, letting Mouser go. The thief ran to the edge of the clock tower, looking at the buildings nearby. The scent was different, not the one used to burn the others but had a shade that she knew. There was something out there.
"This is impossible. This woman’s soul is burning out too…” Grell was mumbling, shocked.

“It’s a burning love! Happiness!” She screamed while edging towards the barrels of magnesium.

“That was not magnesium.” Mouser called out to Sebastian, hopping down, choosing to go before the problem occurred. Also if she was fast maybe...

“Wait you have not told…” the boyo demanded, advancing, grabbed by Sebastian, dragged out of the tower before the explosion echoed, a small fire, a lot of smoke.

“You’ve got to be joking right?” Grell came down after a moment, leafing through the Death Note frantically. “How could a soul due to collect burn out? It’s simply impossible… it must be written here somewhere…” Then poppet stopped, sighing, closing the ledger, staring at the rescued camera. “Well I’ll have to report to Will so… Evee dear take a picture of us.” Mouser chuckled and did so, noticing a sighing Sebastian and a smiling Grell in the sight, returning the camera after it was done to an exited Grell that left as quickly as she had arrived. “Next time I want more pictures! Bye, bye now.”

Sebastian waited for a moment before concluding the business at hand.

“Young Master. You have ordered me to capture the woman but…” He showed a glove full of sparkly ashes. That soon drifted away in the wind.

“Entirely turned to dust.” The boyo said quietly. “A berserk woman crazed by her greed. That is the only explanation we can give to Her Majesty.”

“Wanting to be loved. For that sole obstinate reason people can go even this far.” Sebastian said, thoughtfully. Mouser shrugged. It was a basic need, whatever the name it went by, that was easily exploitable. She glanced at Sebastian and sighed. Very easily used and it often did not come with any advantage. Sometimes though… the thief smiled.

“How meaningless… for something called love that has no significance or form…” The boyo was saying, applying his cynicism. Well he could try that one on a stranger.

Mouser cleared her throat theatrically, embracing the boyo without him fussing, slipping his hair away from his ear while tying the eye patch.

“Llliiiiiiiizzzzyyyyy…” She purred for him. The boyo stiffened, a small embarrassed blush appearing over his features, pretty much a disclaimer to the status of his theoretical love-belief. Sebastian hid a smirk on his gloved hand. “In any case the supervision cheated by creating the case in the first place.” The thief stated, growing serious. The last one had been hellfire, burning high enough to erase the soul. There had also been a small plume of the same in each attack, which meant in each case.

“Golden eyes.” Sebastian answered, catching her meaning.

“Rare enough that I’ve only seen a pair in all my life.” Mouser nodded, adjusting her cape, rubbing the arms, feeling the cold nip of the winter night.

“Mouser.” The boyo called sharply.

“Aye?” She answered automatically.
“What else do you know of the Trancy household?”

Mouser smiled.

“The Itsy Bitsy Spider crawled up the water spout. /Down came the rain, and washed the spider out.” She sing-sang, in a surprisingly clear voice, looking at the dark sky touched by the red of the fires the explosion of magnesium had sparked.
“So… how long are you guys planning to stay here?” Ciel groused at the breakfast table while the tea was being served. A dark, black Ceylon tea scented the room as it was poured into the delicate china and placed in front of the boyo and guests. Mouser looked out the window at the wintry landscape, seeing Finny weed and Pluto chase the few birds that did not seek warmer climates without success. Both her and Sebastian had increased a bit the security and attention around the manor. Nothing else had happened after delivering the report about the crazed woman and the human combustion. All they knew for now was that a spider was weaving it web somewhere hidden.

“What’s up with that?” Soma complained, gripping his cup with a pout, fussing. “Even though I went through the trouble of staying here to spend the winter holidays with you.” The prince announced proudly, as if his magnanimousness knew no bounds.

“Don’t just invent holidays.” The boyo complained, opening the newspaper with a snap, scanning the first pages with a critical look, trying to pinpoint any detail or piece of gossip that could spell trouble. Diamonds, South Africa and murder was what the news boasted that day. It didn’t seem all that important but the papers liked to make a big deal out of everything especially if involved riches and blood.

“Especially since I’m going to beat you at chess today,” Soma continued, undeterred, trying the challenge as a way to rile the boyo up. The dare that would have not gone unnoticed by any other thirteen year old was ignored without acknowledgement.

“You said that yesterday and only played one game with me.” Soma protested, standing up. Agni caught and righted the chair before it slammed on the carpet, smiling indulgently as the prince pouted and waved his arms about.

“Why don’t you polish your skills by solving some chess problems while I’m working?” Ciel conceded, losing the argument to win a bit more of wiggling room. “You have too few countermoves.”

“Damn!” Soma looked thoughtful for an instant before regaining the energy that was so unique to him. “I will remember this! Agni! Come on. We’re doing some intensive training.”

“Sorry but I have work today.” The boyo stated, looking grim and sure, still trying to evade any attempt Soma made towards enjoyment or fun. Sebastian pulled the chair, ready to do the escort duty. Mouser picked up the ledger and paperwork.

“You said that yesterday and only played one game with me.” Soma protested, standing up. Agni caught and righted the chair before it slammed on the carpet, smiling indulgently as the prince pouted and waved his arms about.

“Well,” Mouser scoffed, flipping the pages of the black ledger. “you were lucky they didn’t notice that you were gone when we went to London last week.”

“Perhaps a quick reminder about his job at the town house could speed things along Young Master.” Sebastian suggested, walking along, diverging from then in one of the corridors, headed for the morning duties.
Commotion in the kitchen. Mouser looked up suddenly, standing, ignoring the boyo’s questioning look, opening the window, hopping down, crouching on the icy cold ground, barely accusing the impact, heading towards the back entrance.

The door was slashed to pieces.

The kitchen was a battleground but the fight was over, the thin rapier of one of the white-clad man piercing a pastry, kept away from Bard’s head by Sebastian and the treat-tray. Mouser sighed and relaxed, recognizing the uniform, having heard rumours about the Terrible Trio, walking into the mess, pulling the kitchen ledger from the bullet-riddled shelf, starting the damage shopping list.

“It’s a custard choux cream made with eggs from our own Phantomhive territory’s poultry.” Sebastian was telling the white-haired man with the sword and the trigger happy look who hopped back and straightened, staring at the golden pastry oozing a richly yellow cream down the silvery blade, while Bard helped a glassless Meyrin up.

Bruise ointment.

If one could judge by the pained look the maid made.

“Please take a bite.”

“So-so I guess.” The man said, closing his eyes. Mouser sighed, the tip of her boot touching the remnants of Meyrin’s two standard guns. New pair of pistols. She jotted down, placing the list on the table, pulling out the guns that stayed on the small of her back, handing them to Meyrin who nodded, still looking at the intruders with suspicion. “Kinda like the lowest passing mark.” Despite the dismissive words he munched the whole pastry. Potatoes littered the ground, some peeled, some not and some with bullets in them. Was that going into the damage ledger or onto the supply list now?

“Hey! Sebastian! Who are these guys?” Bard approached, asking surreptitiously.

“Your glasses.” The second man returned Meyrin’s glasses to her politely and formally. They were not cracked or broken.

Dishes, pots, pans and bowls… cooking crockery… three whole shelves of shards…

Mouser sighed, looking dismayed, and scribbled it down.

Again…

“Do you have something else?” The white haired man-child was saying while depleting the treat-tray. Sebastian just glanced at him sideways and then at Bard who waited explanations.

“These two are…” he started calmly.

Repair the walls, pry out bullets…

“Oh, yes… we haven’t met you before.” The man said, sheathing the rapier, standing taller and straightening his tailcoat.” My name is Charles Grey.”

“My name is Charles Phipps.” The other introduced himself, looking composed and serious.

“We’re codenamed Double Charles.” Grey continued merrily, smiling boyishly. Mouser’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. White hair. Silver eyes. It was not the not-human but it was close enough
in the hair detail to be annoying. “We are her Majesty’s private secretarial officers and butlers. Nice to meet you.” He pulled out a letter with the official seal from his coat, holding it up for all to see. “And today we are the messengers delivering this letter to the Earl.”

Two kitchen knives, broken handles and nicked blades.

“Charming.” Mouser piped in, slamming the ledger shut and placing it down. “So why this sudden loss of trust in the postal services?” It was slightly satisfactory to see the unease, as small as it was crossing the guests’ frames. Sebastian smiled slightly. “I trust this meeting of the staff was enlightening but to contact the Earl you really should send a note to either the butler or me no matter how short notice the visit is. Now then. Follow me. The Earl will join you in the parlour momentarily.”

“So in accordance with the Queen’s request we would like you to host a banquet and entertain a guest who is coming from a visit to England in two weeks’ time.” Charles Phips was explaining while Sebastian served the tea. Mouser took notes, standing behind the boyo who placed the letter down after a brisk reading, staring back at the Queen’s secretary/butlers.

“Why me?” The boyo asked, focused. “I don’t think a guest would be at ease if he’s being entertained by someone like me who has no acquaintance to him whatsoever.” It was a valid point but he had a title and dual reputation. And few knew the dark side of his title so when it was announced that the Earl or Phantomhive was throwing a soiree… invitation hunt would start as soon as it was out. He did tend to forget that side of nobility.

“The person we’d like you to entertain is a German personage who also happens to be a distant relative of the Queen.” Phips continued, undeterred, clearly more serious and focused than his pair. “It is to be a sneak visit to England. He is interested in the self-proclaimed factory of the world that is England’s industry and popular literature… he also wishes to mingle with persons of profound scholarship.” Mouser tapped with her pen onto the paper surface. She could ask Charlotte who were the fashionables that would be convenient to invite besides the industrial lords. “The Funtom Company you manage is one of England’s businesses that is boasted all around the world.” That answered part of the request. “With connections like yours you should be able to call forth some guests that will please our visitor.” That was a challenge however, almost a dare.

“Even so is it alright that the Queen would let me entertain him?” The boyo questioned further, doubtful.

“Do you think it’s alright to say that?” Grey piped in cheerfully, his eyes containing a glint of mischief and mockery. “The Queen’s been having some doubts about the Earl since the report on the “incident” the other day.” He sipped his tea. Sebastian frowned slightly, examining the guest and the boyo. Mouser smirked and lowered her head, focusing on the writing. “Don’t you think there is a chance to restore your image with this mission? Then again… this is just a request for the noble Earl and not the watchdog.” He continued chirpily, stretching for a moment, smiling.

“Noblesse oblige.” Phips continued, still rigid and serious. “We would like you to think of it as an obligation as one of the ones that have it all.”

“I understand.” There was no choice wither way. “I’ll take it.” The boyo acquiesced, nodding slowly, leaning back against the couch, looking thoughtful.

“By the way I’m the overseeing officer. It’s all right if I am allowed to participate as well?” Grey
said smiling, pointing to himself.

Mouser frowned, looking up, towards Sebastian. He was doing the same. Good. So it wasn’t only she that was feeling off.

“Of course.” The boyo said flatly.

“We just confirmed the safety of the mansion.” Grey continued, gesturing around, not really focusing on anything.

“The manor’s security is flawless.” Ciel said a bit snappily but with a contained tone.

All that interest in security… Mouser closed the pen, eyes narrowed.

There was something not connecting in that conversation… A demand and a threat more than a request.

“It does seem you don’t need any more guards.” Grey gestured, nicking another pastry, munching away.

“It can’t be helped that our risk factor will increase due to the invited people.” The boyo stated, his eye sharp and darkened. The mood was souring fast and it seemed Mouser and Sebastian were not the only ones noticing the trap.

“It’s settled. We’ll be taking our leave. You don’t need to see us out.” Phips stood, bowed as politeness indicated and started to leave.

“I look forward to seeing you in two weeks.” Grey said out loud, waving.

Stiff silence followed as they left. The boyo stood and approached the window, staring the disappearing white-clad forms. He groaned without turning.

“Sebastian. Mouser.” He called. Both demons looked up, reacting to the tense tone. “Start the preparations. And after that contact Lau and the Undertaker.”
Chapter 37

The plan needed to orient and enact the party was composed of a long list of supplies and tasks to be accomplished in a rather tight amount of time. The kitchen inventory had to be checked and rechecked, the deliveries done in time, the produce and ingredients had to pass a thorough examination and have a certain degree of quality and the storing space cleared, cleaned and rearranged to fit all. It was just slightly different from the usual. Some special ingredients, larger quantities. Some bought and others requested from the surrounding fields. And some spices delivered from the townhouse to where the Indian duo had been successful booted out to once more.

Neglecting a duty was not the way of a great man the boyo said…

The invitations were the first piece that needed to be completed and forwarded and as there were some social aspects involved Mouser decided to consult an expert and then discuss the list of possible candidates with the boyo and Sebastian. As it happened fitting the requirements there were a lot of dandies, dilettantes, fashionables and Druitt. The last one would not be invited. Not even if her life depended on it. Well… maybe then but still Mouser felt that they would have to be very, very, very, Very, Very, VERY desperate for such an event to occur. And to aggravate the supervision of the last odd job and because nothing was mentioned of it on the letter the Trancy household was not invited. It was a fancy form of low blow. Also it kept the trap open. If they wanted to continue the threats all they had to do was contact.

Charlotte had suggested, right on top of the list, Grimsby Keane and Irene Diaz as the cultural representation of England, giving their widespread fame and ability to sell out performances. Also Keane was known for his fashionable ways and modern views on theatre. And a pretty woman at a party, especially an opera singer, was always the right touch of slightly scandalous that every soirée needed. There was a third suggestion, made by Sebastian, more of a request to track him down and send an invitation. And seeing the man’s social position he would have no reason to decline. A writer. Apparently the boyo still kept the 1887 Magazine the story had been first published in along with last summer’s first book edition. Although it was not her first choice of reading entertainment Mouser had found herself immersed in the tale. It was an intricate and interesting piece of murder and mystery. The way the young man was talked about and presented himself also helped with the gathering’s notion of the blooming society that was England. The other guests, apart from the imposed pair by the Monarch, were handpicked carefully according to the assignment demands and objectives referenced in the letter. If one read carefully between the lines. Businessmen and investors to impress the German man with the Industrial side of Great Britain.

After that was done they just had to wait for the confirmations. And do a bit of investigation on each of the guests. One could never be too careful.

But who would miss the chance?

From food, storage, and guests the list went on and on about the little things needed to clean, decorate and make the household worthy of the guest’s eyes. It was a simple matter of extending the usual routine to the guestrooms and an increase in the laundry loads. And using Finny for lifting beds, rugs and any piece of furniture out of the way. Sebastian finessed the last details on any of the cleaning endeavours.

Pluto would be shooed away soon enough, relegated to the edges of the estate with strict patrolling
orders. The pooch had developed a taste for those and Mouser suspected he had been munching away the occasional intruders with glee. The main house had suffered no direct attack in a while now. It could be argued how effective the dog was seeing it hadn’t been of any use when the circus had attacked but, according to Finny, they had been hiding the pooch from Lady Elizabeth.

Mouser checked the chore list for the day and sighed, standing, stretching, organizing the latest paperwork to deliver downstairs. There was nothing for her to do at the moment because it was impossible to actually accomplish anything before the last deliveries were made. The household would be calm and just doing the usual routine for the next two days. Then it would be back to the preparation whirlwind.

They had the confirmations.

The menu was planned, the wines chosen and the rooms prepared and chosen both where guests were allowed and where they would be strictly forbidden.

According to the clock and schedule Sebastian should be in the butler room, balancing the household ledgers and creating a separate one for the party. The thief left the study making little noise, walking down the bright hallways. Well… as bright as they were going to get judging by the stormy looks of the outside world.

“Sebastian?” The knock was swift and short, rather unnecessary, the answer small and sharp, the door opening into a neat room occupied only by the demon sitting behind a desk, scribbling and counting. He barely looked up, determined to get as much work out of the way as possible. She slinked in, closing the door, locking it impishly, before walking towards the desk, placing the volumes she carried down.

“Place these on the shelves.” Sebastian asked, pushing a couple of black bound books with dates inscribed on the spines. Mouser picked them up, turning her back on him, looking for their appropriate place.

“Everything seems to be in order and moving along smoothly. For once.” Mouser mentioned, hopping to slide the first volume into place. Fast-paced scribbling was occurring behind her, stopping suddenly, changing to the sound of pages being flipped, almost too quickly for any reading to be occurring.

“Yes. Soon enough all that will be needed is a swift education of the other servants on how to behave towards the guests.” Sebastian stated, placing the new documents down. It was as if all evidence of his presence had vanished. Well all but his actual presence, a constant pressure in the edges of her senses.

“I used to like it when nobles threw parties.” Mouser placed another book onto its place, one black tipped fingers sliding down the spine, accompanied by a wistful smile. “Perfect time to infiltrate and rob them in-between the hustle and bustle of the preparation and event. Just dress as a maid or page boy and you are overlooked.” Another book was slid into its gap. “Or you can make as much noise as you want upstairs and no one will check.” Actually servants were instructed to notice who was making the noise and report but to otherwise allow such occurrences to unfold.

“Then some defences need to be enhanced, just in case.” Sebastian said, the chair hissing against floor and carpet.
“The reports have arrived. Lau was quite thorough. In any case if either of you feel there is a need to consult further with the Undertaker I have cleared a day.” Mouser stopped with a sigh when his hands slid over her waist as the last of the ledgers was placed onto the shelf, the demon leaning against her, nipping her neck before his lips brushed a warm path to her ear, deft fingers undoing the buttons of her waistcoat, slipping it down, allowing it to fall to the floor and crumple, gloveless hands slipping under the shirt, beneath the undershirt, dragging it free from the pants, pulling her back against him, tasting the tang of tobacco, lemongrass and sugarcane. She reached up, digging her fingers through his hair, pulling the head down until the angle was just right.

A kiss stained by hunger, the edges sharp by a fraying control and pressing need, the sinuous movements behind her makings his hands move sneakily on the skin just above, just beneath the edges of the trousers. Mouser allowed a small whimper to escape as she strained to not let go of the kiss, tiptoeing.

“I locked the door.” She murmured softly when his hands snaked around her waist, lifting her without effort, carrying her towards the desk, placing the thief on the smooth top, making quick work of the shirt’s buttons. The thief smiled, hiding a shiver of cold beneath the heath of his touch, the feverish desire that grew so easily. She beckoned him closer in acceptance, starting to return the favour, shoving his coat and waistcoat away before focusing on the buttons of the impeccably pressed dress shirt, following the revealed flesh with her lips, downwards, parting the fabric as she moved along, her fingers slipping further down, to the fabric’s edge, returning the teasing torture that had made her belly flutter and senses flare.

Deftly the thief hopped down the desk and reversed their positions, sinking further down his torso, oven the tight stomach, nipping his hipbone as her nails played with the trousers’ button and edge, playfully threatening to just tear it away. Sebastian grimaced, keeping control, focusing not only on the pleasure his little demoness could bring but also on not outright destroying the desk he was balanced against and not breaking her explorations by dragging her upwards and resuming the kiss, tearing away the remainder articles of cloth that stood in his way.

Mouser popped the first button open, pulling the trouser slightly down, ready to move on to the newly revealed area when one of the bells chimed. Both groaned and looked up, towards the neatly labelled board.

Kitchen.

The thief sank to her knees, sitting down, bringing her forehead in a frustrated nudge against Sebastian’s leg.

The demon hissed and pulled her upright once more, once again against the desk, relishing on the surprised squeak she produced before falling backwards over the paperwork, arching by instinct, seeking him as he pulled her trousers out of the way, tangling them in the boots, the long and tortuous caress that followed having her in a purring fit, blushing, also trying to abstain from leaving claw marks on the wooden surface.

“Not now.” Sebastian growled. Mouser mustered enough wit to chuckle and answer.

“Are you not being neglectful of you butler duties?” Sebastian’s hand sneaked under her bloomers, ripping them away from her flesh, leaving gathers, stockings and belt untouched. She looked suddenly down, eyes widened. Sebastian smirked, nibbling a path from the neck that strained to keep eye contact to the stomach that twitched in answer, along with a blissful moan as his hand found her core, already searing hot and moist.

“I will consider this a success on your abilities as a corruptor.” He whispered against her skin.
before ignoring the new chiming from the kitchen, claiming what he had been desiring.

Surprisingly nothing but their clothes had been knocked around. Mouser fidgeted for a bit, having forgotten the feeling and rules of how one wore pants without underwear, smoking quietly, mind kept in a nice haze, sitting on the chair, breathing hard in the aftermath. Sebastian was giving a show of putting his clothes back on as straight as they had been before. She was not going to make an effort of it until the thief reached their room. Hence the bundle of fabric at her feet and the current state of semi-nakedness. If one could consider undershirt and pants nude.

The demon approached, caressing her hair that had only had become slightly skewed amongst the activities, picking up something from one of the drawers.

“I have a request.” He started in a much more composed tone. The fingers that were sneaking around her shoulders and neck were not though. It had been a nice interlude but he was still not fully… well… Mouser smiled. He gave her a small box wrapped in brown paper. “For the duration of the party I will need you to wear this at all times under the clothes.” Mouser nodded, standing.

“I’ll go see what caught fire this time. After, you know.” She stated, still smiling despite the grave undertone he had given the request, as the demon straightened the reports she had delivered, the attention back on the upcoming social gathering. The mention of the torn and crumpled clothes dragged a smirk out of him though.
Chapter 38

“The rain came.” Finny said out loud, stopping his last minute chores, as the rain pelted the windows, harder and faster than it had been in the last few days. Mouser looked up from the paperwork, snuffing a butt out into the ashtray, eyes narrowing for a moment. That could pose some issues with the party plans. Tanaka echoed the feeling.

“Isn’t it ‘cause the young master is doing something unusual?” Bard piped in with a chuckle, stirring the soup slowly. Mouser snorted, blowing smoke harshly, closing the book and standing. If that was the reason for the rain soon enough frogs would be accompanying the water.

“Bard! That’s rude.” Meyrin scolded, carrying the plates, piling them onto the tables with the items that needed to be taken to the rooms that would host the party.

“The party won’t be cancelled because of the rain.” Sebastian came down, announcing how things were developing. “Don’t idle.” He instructed, looking around, seemingly satisfied with the progress. There was a flurry of activity, everyone doing what they had been ordered to do, returning to the kitchen for the final briefing. “It’ll be time to meet the guests soon.” Sebastian restarted the conversation, clapping his hands, looking around, checking if anything was missing to be taken up. “When you’re called into the dining hall come out in order according to your position try not to mix things up. Please wait in the entrance hall first. Understood?”

“Ho!” Tanaka said, the exclamation short and to the point. The old man would stand at the entrance, allowing passage and announcing the guests by profession, name and importance.

“Yeah, yeah.” Bard acquiesced grumpily. He would take the food to the rooms as it was needed or requested.

“Yes.” Meyrin shouted, stiffening in attention. She would walk around with trays, food and drink.

“Yes, yes!” Finny stated happily. Poor boy had to be the one to walk in the rain with umbrellas to defend the guest. Also take the carriages that would stay to the stables and tend to the horses.

“Aye, aye.” Mouser whispered with a sigh. She would help Sebastian and Meyrin with serving the guests and had to support the boyo when business matters arose.

The guests were starting their mingling and talking in the entrance hall, waiting for the host and others of the same ilk. The murmur of voices was loud enough to reach the upper corridors. Mouser looked down, sitting on the staircase railing, observing and waiting, unseen, not bothering with deciphering their words. Greedy souls, weak souls, sweet souls, twisted souls, petty souls… missing souls. Her eyes narrowed. Mouser adjusted her position slightly. Not all guests were there.

“Your eyes.” Sebastian chastised gently, standing next to her, adjusting the silver comb that kept her chignon in place, looking down as well afterwards with a critical glance, his hands on the rail, enfolding her. Mouser snorted and broke her questing, willing her eyes back to brown and sweet.

“Are we ready to start?” The thief asked perkily, turning her back onto the new people, looking up at Sebastian’s face. The butler nodded slowly.
“The Young Master is just finishing the last minute details and will be here shortly.” He stated, both looking down at the unassuming wordsmith being mercilessly teased by Lau. Mouser smiled softly, slipping down, standing and taking a deep breath. It was going to be a long night. Thankfully sleep was just an appreciated commodity nowadays and someone had made sure she was too full of energy to be slothful.

“Why don’t you leave your teasing of the guests at that?” A voice cut through the Chinese man’s words making Arthur look up, eyes widening in surprise as he saw a small kid, barely a teenager flanked by a pair of dark clad figures, shattering his imaginings of a stormy and intimidating figure.

“A child?” he babbled, stumbling on the words, still shocked.

“Yes. That tiny little child is Earl Phantomhive.” The Chinese said merrily without a hint of repentance.

“Little was unnecessary!” The young Earl shouted, aggravated. There was an amused glance exchanged between the pair at his back before they watched the room once more. Arthur shivered. There was something predatory about those two, something that went suddenly away and made him feel a bit silly for thinking such things.

“See? He’s angry.” The Chinese chuckled as the Earl snorted, turning on the staircase, examining the guests that started to notice his presence, drawing himself taller and clearing his voice, speaking clearly, with strength, enunciation and the education good money and title always carried.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation today. I am the head of the Phantomhive household, Ciel Phantomhive. After the dinner party starts I’ll once again call upon each of you in order to exchange greetings.” There was a small warm smile directed towards the group. It was well received with murmurs of polite thanks. “This includes both my regular business partners and the ones I’m meeting for the first time.” He made a slight pause as he walked down the last steps, looking around, seemingly making a head count. “But it seems we are missing one honoured guest. He is not here yet?”

“With this foul weather his arrival may have been delayed.” The male, clearly the butler spoke, bowing slightly, advising in a low tone, enough to be heard but not loud or overpowering.

“Well…” The Earl considered the course of action for a moment, staring at the storm. “We cannot just keep everyone waiting in the hall like this.”

“A young Master.” The maid that had been tending to their needs and carrying bags with a young strong boy returned, a bit flustered. The old man that greeted them at the door was opening them once more. “The guests are arriving.” She announced after a short polite bow.

A pair was entering the manor now. A portly, serious looking man and a young white haired smiling gentleman.

“Pleased to meet you” the older one stated stiffly, walking towards the Earl, extending his hand in a greeting. “I’m Georg Von Siemens. I am grateful for your invitation.” He paused for a moment as the handshake concluded, looking around, assessing the crowd. “I am deeply sorry to have delayed you.”

“Not at all.” Ciel Phantomhive smiled slightly, nodding in understanding. “You came from afar. We’ll exchange pleasantries after the party has started. This way please.” He gestured and walked
towards one of the great wooden doors. The dark clad female glanced after him, waiting for a moment, and gave the butler a sheet of paper, accompanying the young lord. Arthur stared a bit. Miss Diaz was finely dressed in a gown that was befitting of her status as an opera singer and social butterfly, a bit showy, a bit revealing and enticing. The Chinese girl was showing her legs fully, shamelessly. The maid’s ankles were in display along with a good bit of leg but that could be overlooked because of the profession that demanded swiftness of movement. That one had everything covered but the traditional male attire only highlighted the fact that she had a nicely curved derriere under the bouncing bow of the back lacing of the waistcoat.

“Well then.” The butler cleared his voice, turning to the guests, glancing at the paper on his hand. “I will call the names. Please proceed to the dining room in that order.” He requested simply, starting the social gathering rituals.

Flattery and empty conversation. Old businesses, old acquaintances, fears and rivals. Lau was working the room with both the aura of the gang leader and opium dealer Mouser had known for years and the in-the-clouds persona he showed to the world. More often than not they mixed and matched so it was hard to tell where the act was. The business rival, Mr Phelps proved once more his nervous nature by shivering like a leaf. RanMao used her charm onto the sober German much to the man’s distress. The opera singer dazzled everyone with a smile and a bow. And the poor author in the end was simply ignored by the crowd and took refuge on the chairs placed around the room.

Mouser sighed and watched. Meyrin was carrying glasses with surprising deftness, Sebastian was doing the same. And she was holding onto the notepad and a growing list of requests and business meeting dates and all the little social things the boyo was deflecting and dodging.

Excluded Arthur watched the push and pull of the situation.

“Would you like a glass?” The butler walked by him, presenting the tray with a vague smile.

“Thanks…” The wordsmith accepted, dejected, looking up, suddenly startled. Wow… what beauty and ambience he has. He could appear in a book by Oscar Wilde… I see… when you become high class your servants also become high class. Really… Arthur sighed. Why am I here again… I want to go home…

“How it all right if I sit next to you?” Someone asked.

“Of course…” Arthur said softly, still dismayed, jumping up startled when he noticed who asked. “Earl!” The young boy sat down, smiling slightly. By his side the black clad woman leaned discreetly against the wall, working on the ledgers that she carried. Her smile was not as faint or as seemingly benign as her counterpart’s and held a mocking shade. Mischief.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” The Earl asked, seemingly amused by his startled embarrassment and lack of knowledge about what should be done with his arms and feet. “Please sit down Mr Wordsmith.”

“I’m really not at a level where I can be called wordsmith yet.” Arthur said, sighing, sitting down. “Please call me Arthur.”

“I want to call you this, so isn’t it all right?” the Earl replied, smiling. “Do you dislike it Mr Wordsmith?” he pressed, leaving no room to wiggle out. Arthur sighed, shaking his head.
“No… umm…” The writer hesitated a moment in the comfortable silence. The young woman had put the notebook away, pressed against her chest, leaning to hear something the Earl was telling her, consulting the notes and sighing, adding to them. “It may be rude to ask but why did you invite me?”

“Because I have read your work.” Ciel Phantomhive admitted without embarrassment or pause, frowning when he saw the look of utter shock on the man’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“So… it was even read by people of your status…” Arthur babbled.

“It has nothing to do with social status.”

“It is an enjoyable piece of writing.” The woman spoke up, her voice low. Arthur looked at her. She smiled, a different expression that she had been wearing so far, tilting her head. “The Young Master still keeps the Christmas publication. You should be quite flattered. He does not praise easily or undeservedly.”

Arthur blushed a bit, shaking his head.

“Besides my business partners are often normal people. Commoners as they say.” The Earl continued, waving his disregard for status like a banner. “The main character of your work is very charming and witty. A new kind of character that hasn’t been seen before.” He returned to the published work easily, waiting for the creator’s opinion.

“Really?” Arthur blushed further, surprised. Then he sighed and reclined a bit on the chair, looking wistful. “But it seems it was not very popular. I have no intention of writing him again.”

The room was broken into groups now. The drunks, the ones that hunted food at the buffet, the death glarer’s and the ones that held conversations. Mouser took note of each with slight unease. She could sympathize with the Wordsmith discomfort. Everyone had a secondary motive to be there except, perhaps, the poor man that was being targeted by the boyo’s attention. Money was the most obvious one. Sebastian seemed to be taking note of the glares as well and possible motives for them.

“You’d think that the people of such an advanced country would acknowledge freshness of writing.” The boyo was saying, critically.

“On the contrary, it was just a pretentious bit of writing done outside of my own speciality.” The wordsmith was still trying to deflect the praise. Most likely ever since he had been published others had been poking at his work with those same words. “I’m swept aside by specialists in the field of writing, saying that my content is too light or that the way I use their tools is wrong.” There it was. The public was merciless and would turn as soon as there was a juicy piece of gossip to justify it. Authors had been ruined by badly written pieces of criticism simply because it had originated from someone with title and wealth.

“It’s fine if they’re the ones saying it.” The boyo pointed out. “Your target audience was the common people, right? So long as the people enjoy it it’s fine.” And that showed that he had not invested that much time looking into the literary world. Mouser snorted silently and took note of the missing number of booze bottles.

“I really wanted to write a historical novel but I’ve been turned down by countless companies saying that it wouldn’t sell.” Arthur had finally been coaxed into talking about his work, adjusting himself on the seat, turning towards the boyo, gesturing in explanation.
“Isn’t it better to make those kinds of things after you’ve become famous?” The boyo asked, considering. “Since increasing your status means having money, reputation and contacts. If you’ve got the authority you’re praised into the high heavens even though the writing might be rubbish... which is often the case…”

“Right! Exactly!” The conversation was interrupted by the heartfelt exclamation of the theatre producer. Mouser winced, the loudness of his voice slightly unexpected in that corner of the dinner party. He also had the scent of the beginning of getting well and good rat arsed. “I really can’t stand for it! Even in our line of work the stubborn old causing problems have taken over.” Theatre… well… he had several points there but that had a fishing hook coating. “I really can’t allow it. Even an amateur can read a script out loud. Don’t you think so?”

“Certainly.” Ciel squeaked out, as startled as she and the Wordsmith had been. “The backgrounds and outfits used in your stage have been really exquisitely made.” He salvaged the moment, using the last play he had seen or just quoting the critics. Mouser was unsure.

“Naturally someone like you who is leading the edge of fashion understands the difference.” Keane continued, gesturing with the flute. “The work on the charity play was new and refreshing and it was praised not because it was the Earl’s doing but because it had impact and was thought out.” Mouser pressed her lips together and looked up. The boyo was fidgeting. “I’d love to have an understanding with the Earl someday. How about it?” He threw an arm around Ciel, smiling. “Patronage…”

“Well… tomorrow we could talk… Evelyn?” The boyo called, evading. The director’s attention was drawn to her as the thief started to jot down an appointment and for a moment he blanched. “Excuse me Miss…” He started, picking up Mouser’s face suddenly between his palms, examining it. “Uncanny… I must ask… Is your name Crows?”

Mouser stepped back coldly, sighing, then returning to her default smirk. “Well… yes. Evelyn Crown, Mr Keane.” She curtsied with the introduction. “I believe all that surprise is because of Sophie Crows portrait, correct?”

“Yes, yes…” Keane started, recovered, his enthusiasm mounting.

“I told you to please stop it!” Miss Diaz scream cut through the room harshly, breaking the happy drunk mood that seemed to have been adopted by half of the guests. She was backing away from the German, gripping the lacy fabric of the dress’s décolletage. The man was clearly drunk, already having lost all the solemnity and showing the altered state in the rumpled state of his clothing “To have you all over me with your disgusting hands…” She was complaining, clearly distressed, backing away. Mouser turned slightly, glancing around the room. Nobody looked like they were going to get in the way of the scene. From what was known about society most parties were attended in hopes there would be a scene to gossip about. “I can’t take it anymore!”

“Whaa?” The man slurred as Mr Phelps squeaked close to a panic. “It’s your fault for wearing those clothes.” Mouser’s eyes narrowed slightly, moving a bit. “You really want to be touched. Don’t pretend you’re sweet and innocent now.” The boyo stood and began to walk, glancing at the thief that was twitching in annoyance. She scoffed, lowering her head slightly, understanding.

“Insolent jerk!” Irene shrieked, raising dainty lady hand and delivering the ultimate girly defence in the form of an open handed slap. It had much more impact than it would have had otherwise because the burly man was heavily sloshed. “Have some shame!” So he fell down still gripping the beer cup and the woman chastised him.
“Why you… like I’ll let you talk to me like that!” the man wobbled to his feet, his arm drawn back, throwing the remnants of the beer towards the opera singer, suddenly, and to everyone’s shock, intercepted by the small frame of the young lord. There were gasps, there were little sounds of disapproval. Arthur noticed the little chuckle the Phantomhive secretary allowed out while almost everyone else was watching, growing silent in shock as the Earl shook his head slightly, getting rid of some of the moisture clinging to his hair, one hard-looking eye opened not quite in anger but rather strict.

“This is a dining hall.” He scolded the adults without a flinch as Miss Crows walked out of the dining hall, leisurely. “In any case that will be enough from both of you.” He tapped his cane, making sure his point was properly conveyed.

Keane on the other hand was too incensed to leave it at the warning.

“You old pervert!” the director shouted, crossing the room, grabbing the nearest thing, a bottle. “Don’t touch my woman so easily!” He threw the heavy object, enraged. A quick black shadow moved before the bottle made contact, gripping it, hopping onto a ladder. The butler… Arthur watched wide eyed. The secretary walked back into the room, carrying a plump towel, arching an eyebrow as the butler displayed finesse and skill, pouring wine into the pyramid of cups in a delicate waterfall, straightening with a theatrical flourish, making sure all attentions were on him as he presented the composition.

“It’s a fantastic wine from the village of Purcari, in South-eastern Moldova.” He showed the bottle, stepping down, placing it onto the table. “Ladies and Gentlemen please enjoy.” He said, bowing smoothly, the incident thoroughly forgotten as the guests rushed towards the new attraction.

“Um… than…” Irene was trying to say as butler and master walked towards the secretary who extended the towel without comment.

“Are you all right young master?” The butler was confirming, patting the young man dry.

“Yes.” The Earl dismissed the event, scoffing, making sure the party was still occurring without any other issues.

“You should change your clothes as well. It’s not very befitting of an Earl to smell like a cheap tavern.” The secretary said, picking up the ledger again. The earl shook his head.

“So when a solemn man gets some alcohol into him that’s what he becomes? From the looks of it he’s a repeat offender.” The young man started to speak once more, this time in French. Arthur frowned, impressed. Miss Crows grimaced, looking away with a clear grumble, legs drawing a bit tightly together.

“Even so showing how little self-constraint one has… I wonder if he’s just an immense fool or whether he knows no shame at all.” The butler answered promptly. Finishing the straightening of the dishevelled clothes.

“Seems like the incurable type that would make a doctor hopeless.” The young Earl joked with a straight face. Arthur couldn’t help but to chuckle. The earl smiled, making a smooth shushing motion. Both the butler and the secretary glanced at each other, seemingly amused.

The party flowed smoothly after that incident until about eleven.
“Oh… has master Siemens fallen asleep already?” The Earl interrupted his conversation about the merits of the new kind of literature Arthur had produced glancing at the man that had fallen into a drunken stupor gripping a poor distressed Meyrin. RanMao didn’t seem to mind but she was always hard to read. Ciel stood up and sighed, clearing his voice. “Sebastian. Take his Lordship to his room.” He turned his attentions to the guests, smiling courteously. “I will retire also. I’m very sorry but for a child such as myself it’s bed time already.”

“You really do resemble her.” Irene was saying. Mouser sighed with a nod. She had been dragged by singer and producer along to the billiard room and attended to the people there with her, mostly by pouring drinks and chatting with the lone woman seated on the armchair, serving as a sort of chaperone.

“So I have been told.” The thief admitted. “Personally I would have no idea.”

“There was a lot of talk about her and rumours.” Yes. The lightskirt. And a bastard child to boot. And not surviving.

Mouser felt like she could not bear her ill will.

After all for an opera singer to carry out the pregnancy and, as much she had looked, never asking anything from the sire’s family was odd. Most of the pregnancies amongst mistresses were baby-traps. Extortion.

All in all, with the documents, proof and rumours, it had seemed like her mother was going to keep and raise the child. Also there was the very well documented scene at the opera house where Sophie told Mouser’s sire to take a long walk out a short pier, breaking the liaison when her belly was barely showing. Telling him she needed no money and no man. Witnesses said he had offered an outrageous amount of money for her to… take care of the issue. But whatever her plans death had cancelled it all. Hate or love the dead was a waste of time and mind.

“But her singing was beautiful. Do you sing Miss Crows?”

“No. I do believe the so praised voice my mother possessed was not in the blood.” It had been though. She could sing. Never had reason to do it freely but she had been able to. And she had started to smoke to see if she could destroy every hint of it. Having nearly been taken to another kind of slavery in the opera house by the one-time lover of the headmistress was more than enough.

She had considered it.

It was on the same level of the perhaps that led orphanage kids to run off with the circus.

Then she asked Jack’s opinion.

Mouser served a bit more tea to the opera singer, leaning when passing the saucer. The woman stared at her chest for a moment. Mouser followed her glance and chuckled, picking up the silver chain and the white gold ring shaped like a feather curling around one’s finger, slipping it back into the shirt. The actress said nothing of it, sipping the Ceylon blend tea.

Faced with the situation of that company the young thief had decided she was better off in the orphanage buying her peace with murder and trinkets. If a man was in charge a man was the problem. So she arranged for a permanent separation of said lover. He did say he was fond of
“Miss Crows…” the woman started meekly, dragging Mouser’s attention away from the little spark of memory.

“Yes?” the thief asked politely, regaining her helpful look.

Irene was watching the game forlornly as the men moved around the table and analysed the cue and balls.

“I regret that I wasn’t able to apologise to his lordship or thank the butler…”

“If you are unable to do so tomorrow I would be happy to pass on your sentiments.” Mouser answered formally before frowning as shouts echoed through the corridors, making everyone in the room look spooked and agree to check. She glanced at the clock before going along.

“What’s with all this racket?” Grey asked, heading the group that came from the billiard room, crossing paths with ones that had been drinking, finding Sebastian and Meyrin in the corridor, standing in front of Siemen’s door, the maid looking spooked and worried and Sebastian sighing, resigned, giving her a pitcher of water.

“Let’s break the door.” The butler said carefully. He seemed to feel that something beyond it was suspicious. He kicked the door open easily, cracking the latch lock, revealing the interior of the room, lit only by the flickering flames of the fireplace. The portly man was on the armchair, blood staining his shirt.

Meyrin shrieked, shocked. Keane, looking stunned, embraced Irene who looked about ready to pass out. Lau and RanMao were calm as ever. Grey had a detached expression, the first serious one he cracked from the moment Mouser had seen him.

“Mr Phelps!” Mr Woodley shouted when the young man was the one to faint. Shouts started to echo.

“Excuse me!” Arthur gasped, crossing the room in easy, wide steps, being the only doctor. “He’s dead!” he stated after checking the vitals.

Sebastian looked thoughtful. Mouser snorted and stared at the corpse. Troublesome.
Chapter 39

Thief rules said:

When finding a corpse on the job you get the hell away from the area.

When making a corpse on the job either use it or dispose of it.

Phantomhive rules on the other hand were rather strict about killing inside the house. Especially after the last bout of slaughter had ended up with an exploded kitchen and holes in most of the roof.

New rule said: no dead people inside the house are allowed.

If they do slip in drag them outside and dispose of said intruder.

And that lord Siemens was in clear violation of that protocol.

Moreover… there were too many people that had witnessed the big lump of dead meat in the room to just quietly make it go away.

Mouser patted her pocket, not finding her lighter or cigarettes, forbidden by the “rules” of a certain overly socially-conscious demon, considering asking one form Bard when he burst into the room, accompanied by Finny, reacting as shocked and surprised as everyone else. Minus Sebastian maybe.

Tanaka peeked and walked away. The master of the house had to be disturbed now.

“What was that scream we just… whoa!” Bard finally managed to say, tsking in annoyance as he noticed what was happening. It was the usual reaction for those that were already jaded.

“Is that person dead?” Finny asked, spooked, worried.

“I’m afraid so.” Arthur answered grimly, still trying to see amongst the play of light and shadow. Mouser snorted. The room felt stuffy, reeking of fire, ash and… old stale blood. “Most likely the blood loss from the chest wound was fatal. I can’t be certain because it’s dark.” The eye doctor turned wordsmith continued, standing, stepping back.

“Hey… isn’t it kinda hot in this room?” Bard muttered in an aside to Sebastian.

“Yes it is. I heated the room beforehand but…” The butler nodded, noticing it as well.

“Maybe he was cold.” Bard dismissed the thought, chewing on the cigarette thoughtfully, worrying.

Mouser stared at the white cylinder for a moment and fidgeted.

“What’s all this racket?” a new, sleepy voice cut in as the Earl entered the victim’s room, still rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, followed by Tanaka who held a three branches candelabrum, casting a small light to make the corridor clear.

“Young Master?” Sebastian acknowledged his presence with a bit of wariness in his voice.

“Lord Siemens…” The boyo said, staring. Then his eye narrowed and he glanced at Sebastian, confirming what was already known. Mouser sighed. It indeed seemed trouble had started sooner
than scheduled.

“A… anyway…” Keane stuttered nervously, still holding onto Irene. “We shouldn’t move anything until the yard arrives…” Well… at least he was trying to be practical and law abiding instead of shivery, panicky, frowny and grumpy. How sweet.

Mouser shook her head slowly. Bard spoke up.

“No. It’d be better if we move the body now.” The soldier turned cook appraised the field quickly, grimly. “I can’t say it any nicer than this…” The cook continued when everyone looked at him with puzzled expressions. “Meat rots faster than you might think. Even if we snuff out the fire now, time will be up before you know it if he stays next to the heart.”

“Rot… you say…” The actress muttered, shocked, paling in disgust, looking ready to faint. Or throw up. Either or.

“Irene…” And her lover was right there to keep her straight. And risking his fancy garb while at it. Nothing braver than that for a dandy.

“It’s like he says.” The doctor in the room, the poor wordsmith caught in the middle of the world he barely understood said, standing with a sigh. “I also think it’s best if we lay him in a cool, dark place until an expert can take a look at him.”

“Well then.” Sebastian stepped onto his role easily. “Let’s move him into the cellar until the Yard comes. Finny. Bring a stretcher.” The young man ran out of the room, quickly. “Evelyn go call them.” Mouser nodded and left too, walking down the corridors quietly.

“The phone is dead.” The thief announced as the occupants of the quiet, corpse-free room turned towards her when she made her presence known. Most expressions were of terror and worry.

“In any case the Yard wouldn’t be showing in a long while.” Lau said. Looking outside, at the dark stormy night beyond the glass panes. RanMao stared too, an unemotional counterpart to Lau’s constant smile. “Seeing there is quite the storm.” The Chinese said matter-of-factly, having been quite silent and removed from the action for a while.

“So you mean we can’t leave either? Mr Woolsey shouted, close to panicking.

“It’s fine.” Lau waved it off, unconcerned. “Everyone was meant to stay overnight anyway.” He continued as if murder was nothing. It was nothing for some of them but still that group was composed of mostly naïve innocents.

“Like one can call this fine. I’m not staying in a place where a murder took place!” Woolsey shouted, the anger starting to override his concern.

“Indeed we are surely on the shores of a deserted island.” Lau said philosophically. Mouser snorted, looking around lazily. “It also means there is a good chance the killer is still within the mansion.” There were several in that room but that might not be the one he was referencing. The storm was also adding drama to his expressions and movements.

“Now that you mention it…” Earl Grey started slowly, the expression still fixed onto that serious working frown that looked like it belonged to the other half of the Double Charles. “If you think about it logically wouldn’t the killer be one of us then?”
The expressions ranged from anger, to shock, to utter bafflement and a lot of boredom in one side, mainly composed of Mouser, Sebastian and RanMao. The girls were used to being killers, both accused of and actually doing it and the demon was focusing on the case, still sneaking glances at the fireplace and armchair. Another that seemed unusually focused was Miss Diaz, recovered from her lady-like vapours.

“What?"

“Why us? Is that a joke?”

“That’s right?!”

“Well… First of all we only just met each other…”

The voices mixed in justifications and outrage.

“Miss Diaz?” Sebastian asked, noticing the woman’s focus.

“When we first arrived the door was locked. Correct?” She asked, adjusting her voluminous skirts for a moment, looking around, making sure she had everyone’s attention. The opera singer turned her attention towards Meyrin. The maid fidgeted a bit but then thought about it, nodding.

“Now that you mention it… yes, it was.” She admitted, glancing at the now open door, the latch broken.

“So wouldn’t I be more likely that someone broke in through the window, locked the door to give himself time to escape as he went back out the window again?” the woman said, still unwilling to thin anyone in her presence could kill. It was just so uncivilized.

Mouse smirked and scoffed. Window. Rain, slick walls… not a good choice. Also the latch was not one of the easiest to break. Not on the balcony and not perched on a narrow ledge. And certainly not when the fingers grew cold and the instruments wet. It made one clumsy.

“But if he came through the window in this rain wouldn’t there be footprints?” Earl Grey pointed out, pointing out the pristine condition of the flooring and carpet. “Not to mention this is a second floor. And the windows were locked. Still are.” He made a show, pulling the knobs, making the structure clack to prove his point.

“So… someone locked it from the hallway and escaped that way…” Keane came out to support his lady.

“That is unlikely.” And Sebastian dashed their hopes easily. “The keys of this mansion all go with the original ward locks from when the mansion was first built. They are complex pieces so it’s unlikely one other than a skilled craftsman could make an imitation.” That was flaunting wealth, title and taste. “Furthermore the keys have all been locked away in a safe.” And cautious nature. “The only copy of the key that opens the safe is in the possession of the butler, me, therefore the keys stored there can’t be taken.” And that was a challenge.

And it took about twenty minutes with a masterwork set of lock-picks, thieves’ tools, to convince those stupidly stubborn and complex locks to open up. Sebastian had her going around the house and test each of them. It got easier and easier as she worked each door but even in the end the quickest opening was in fifteen minutes. Way too much for any job.

Wrestling down the butler was also very daunting.
“Also, in order for it to be locked simply from the inside, other than the ward lock.” Sebastian continued, placing the key back into the inner pocket of his jacket. “There is a latch attached to the door. In a situation where the key cannot be taken out of the safe there is the possibility of locking the room only from the inside.”

And then kick down the door like one was in the wild west of America.

“In other words this is a locked room murder.” Lau stated, centre stage, before the stormy scene that graced the window.

“Preposterous! We are not in a novel…” Mr Woolsey said, still torn between anger and fear.

“Indeed.” The boyo finally intervened, cutting through the growing agitation of the group. Mouser sighed. Now if he could say nothing pacifying the escalation of aggression. “If anyone published this kind of crude locked room drama they’d sure get complaints.” Well... there went the hope of not increasing the problems in the manor. “Wouldn’t you agree Mr Wordsmith?” He dragged poor Arthur into the conversation.

“That’s right…” The writer was startled, then he started to think about his research most likely. His eyes narrowed in thought. “Surely if you used those…” He mumbled.

“What’s that?” Lau asked.

“A needle and a thread.” Mouser scoffed when the boyo said it very seriously.

Sure.

Use the most contrived method, why not? The thief glanced at the door while the boyo explained the technique she had taught him when asked about breaking ins. Personally for a latch nothing simpler than a thin flat blade or a spatula. A stiletto or letter opener could also do in pinch. Even a stiff piece of paper could work. Just slip it into the crack, move it up and open it is.

“In mystery novels it’s the oldest trick in the book, not to mention plain and boring.” Ciel continued, knowing that everyone was listening. “However the criminal isn’t looking to write a novel. It’s more like he is trying to create a smoke screen.”

“That sure explains the locked room murder but…”Lau began in his usual lazy tone.

“It also means anyone could be the killer.” Arthur completed, completely dismayed.

“It wasn’t us! Definitely it was someone else!”

“It wasn’t me either! Amongst us aren’t you the most suspicious one? You had a fight with the Lord…” “Don’t make false accusations old man! Like I would kill someone over that…”

The pleading and defected started once again, the fight between the theatrical duo and the diamond merchant.

“Now, now you two… let’s calm down and hear everyone’s alibi, shall we?” Lau was acting like the pacifier. It was just such an odd place for the Chinese to be... “Lord Siemens was killed after he had retired to his room. Actually to be precise it was between the time his Lord rang the servant’s bell and the time the butler and maid arrived. If you have an alibi to cover that time you’re safe.”

“Me and Irene were in the billiard room.” Keane spoke for Irene despite her faint whisper of accordance. For a Victorian lady faced with that situation she was taking it all remarkably well.
“I was in there too.” Earl Grey

“So were me and Mr Phelps.” Arthur said, crouching by the unconscious young man.

“I was caring for that room.” Mouser said after them, crossing her arms and abandoning the stiff pose for a moment, curving forward. “Everyone was there from the moment Lord Siemens went to bed until we heard the disturbance. No one left.”

“What were you guys doing?” The boyo asked, focusing on the next group.

“We were drinking in the lounge with Mr Woolsey.” Lau said. “Right RanMao?” The small girl nodded silently.

“Right.” Woolsey took the opportunity immediately, greedy for a way to keep himself out of suspicion. “We were together the entire time before the commotion started. We ran out of wine and had the butler fetch us some more. Right?”

“Correct.” Sebastian answered to the inquiry with precision. “I brought it about 12:10.”

“Us servants were all cleaning up together…” Meyrin spoke for the rest of the manor’s staff, hands raised and trembling.

“First and foremost none of us knew which room Siemens was staying in.” Keane started again, dissecting the events like any good director would do with a play. “To find him in such a large mansion would take some time.”

“Which means that…” Grey said in a low tone, everyone turning to the only one that had not stated what he had been doing yet.

“Excuse me for asking Earl but what were you doing at the time.” Lau continued on his role as the neutral entity.

The boyo barely reacted despite being the centre of attention. A sigh of frustration was all he allowed out before speaking. Sebastian still wasn’t saying a thing. Tanaka was silent as well. The trio was having a moment of worry behind the noble’s backs. Mouser glanced outside waiting for the frogs.

“Certainly I’m the only one who hasn’t got an alibi but I don’t have any reason to kill the Lord…” the boyo started only to be interrupted by a puckish Laud that decided to sow the seeds of discord.

“Well, you wouldn’t say there was no reason at all now, would you? Most of the reasons to kill someone are inconceivable to other people. It doesn’t matter how time a genius scientist studies it. The psychology of a person is something that cannot be comprehended by other people. Besides your company has a branch in Germany, doesn’t it. There could have been something outside the book that could interest a German banker like him.” He poked at the facts playfully, creating reasons that to some would look good enough to kill for. Woolsey expression certainly seemed a bit tighter.

“Are you suggesting that my company is in some kind of horrible debt?” The boyo scoffed in dismissal. “Preposterous.”

“Quite.” Mouser said, shaking her head. “The books are quite in order and not even an inexperienced Lordling could make all the Phantomhive enterprises disappear. It’s an intricate and sturdy machine.” The thief put on airs of professional aggravation. Questioning the business was questioning her as a secretary after all. No one wanted that blemish in their recommendation letters.
“It’s not an unrealistic story.” Lau said with a small whining pout. “No matter how big a company is there are times when all of it can vanish overnight.”

“Incompetence of one does not affect the whole when something is well constructed.” Mouser said snappishly.

“Wait! I don’t get all that complicated stuff but the Young Master would never…” Finny finally had enough to step forward and shout.

“Finn.” The boyo called. “Enough.”

The gardener looked down dourly. Mouser pressed her lips together and straightened again.

“I’d like some insurance.” Grey chose to interfere again.

“Insurance?” Miss Irene said shakily.

“That we’ll get out of here alive.” Grey stated darkly.

Mouser’s eyes narrowed.

“What… do you mean by that?” The singer stammered, frightened.

“Well… the mansion is currently under the control of a killer.” The Queen’s butler-secretary stated. “And we can’t get out with this rain. What if we’re all “gagged” before the storm settles?”

“Let’s confine him.” Lau suggested suddenly, merrily.

“Confinement?” Bard said suddenly, outraged.

“Confine the Young Master?” Meyrin stammered, shocked.

“But he’s scary…” Lau whined, making an innocent face.

Mouser grumbled, rolling her eyes.

“If that makes you feel better go ahead.” The boyo dismissed the fears with a shrug and a put-upon sigh, snuggling deeply into his housecoat. Not even the warm room was enough to completely compensate the thing nightshirt and fluffy coat. It was winter after all.

“If we’re going to confine him it can’t be in his own room.” Grey spoke again. “Noble’s rooms generally have some kind of secret escape route built in. My place has them too.”

“Well then… we’ll have to keep an eye on him while attending to his…” Sebastian started, clearly annoyed by the new layer of work that was being added by the murder and all the suspicion. Mouser frowned and started counting all the ways the things were changing and ways to adapt...

“That won’t do.” Grey cut in. “Seeing as you might help the Earl escape.” He walked around the room staring at each one of the guests. “So in other words it would be best if one of the guests would stay with him and keep watch.”

“No! I will not leave Irene alone!” Keane stated, dragging Irene into his arms again. Frankly the whole overprotective bit was getting annoying.

“I… I just can’t.” Woolsey said without any further notes.
“I don’t want to either. Scary…” Lau also refused but with a fake shiver and cheery disposition.

“I don’t want to either but someone has to.” Grey bemoaned.

One could see the inner workings of the wordsmith’s mind as he quickly reasoned with himself, arriving to the simple and plain conclusion. The boyo could not have killed Siemens because, without an alibi as he was, he had been the one to supply clues

“It’s up to you Mr Wordsmith.” Lau said cheerily using the distraction of the young man to pin the watch duty on him. “Please watch him carefully so he doesn’t escape.”

“That’s right. I have something that might do in my carriage.” Grey returned to his cheery demeanour, turning to Finny and issuing and order. “Would you get it for me?”

“It looks like this is where we split up.” The boyo stated, arms folded. “Sebastian escort everyone to their rooms.”

It was an awkward situation of a big bed and chain. Arthur was less than thrilled as he half heard the butler report while preparing the young Earl for sleep. He mentioned the guests were in their rooms, except the severely nervous Mr Phelps who refused to be placed next to a dead man’s room and was reassigned to the Lord’s bedchambers.

“It should be cold tonight.” The Earl said, sitting down, the bed dipping and waving under his slight weight, the authority in his young voice undiminished. “Don’t let the coke in the rooms go out. Even though I won’t be around, be sure to give our guests perfect service. Inform Evelyn that she should organize the appointments and cards we were given this night and prepare the contacts.”

“Yes, My lord.” The chain clicked closed and the butler stood, holding the candelabrum and the housecoat. “Well then. Please excuse me.” He blew out the candles, exiting the room without much sound, the door clicking closed smoothly the only hint that he had left, along with a hushed conversation in the corridor that soon vanished.
Chapter 40

“Mr Wordsmith…” The young Earls’ voice and a series of sharp shakes made Arthur wake up rather abruptly, sitting down, looking around, finding the young man looking at him with a worried frown, moving back as he noticed he was awake. “Something is wrong.” The Earl said, glancing at the ticking clock in the dark grey room. “Even though is quite past the time that Sebastian was supposed to come wake me up he still hasn’t come.” He hesitated as if something was in his mind. “Evelyn usually takes on some duties when he is unable…but she hadn’t appeared either…”

“What… did he…” The rush of suppositions from last night came back. Had the butler truly killed Lord Siemens and ran away with… he had thought the maid, in a convoluted plot that was guaranteed to sell well amongst the thrill seeking ladies… but it could have been the secretary if what the earl said about she being the one who came when the butler did not… if both were missing…

A knock on the door followed by the elder servant interrupted his thoughts.

“Please excuse me.” He said in a calm contained voice, stepping into the room. “I’m sorry to be this late…”

“Tanaka…” The earl said, hopping off the bed, the chain rattling behind him as his expression grew a bit more concerned. “Where is Sebastian?” he finally asked the question.

“What the hell happened?!” Grimsby Keane was growling, staring.

“How horrible…” Irene whispered with one hand placed over her mouth, shuddering.

“How did it end up like this?” Woolsey was looking panic stricken.

Lau and RanMao made a pair of curiosity and indifference.

Earl Grey was staring sternly.

“What do we tell the Young Master…” Meyrin babbled, weeping like a fountain, accompanied by Finny who blubbered even more inelegantly. Bard was staring stoically, the bite on his cigarette but a single sign of distress.

The annoying voices and crying were echoing in the room, Mouser thought, crossing her legs, leaning further back into the armchair, checking the black planner, looking up sharply when the boyo stopped in the gaping entrance of the room, staring wide-eyed, everyone’s attention shifting to him.

“Young… Master…” She whispered slowly, surprised.

They should not have called him until the schedule was satisfactorily rearranged…

“Sebastian…” The boyo whispered, staring at the fallen body of his butler, frozen in death in a puddle of red.

Arthur froze behind the Earl, staring into the room, taking in the macabre scene. The horrified
guests lingering near the door, away from death, the servants crying, the Earl walking into the scene and the corpse of the butler fallen between the hearth and the armchair where Miss Crows was seated, as if no man had died on it last night and tendrils of the butler’s blood were not reaching her toecaps.

“Young Master you shouldn’t go closer!” The maid shouted, grabbing the young man who struggled, suddenly angered, broken out of the stupefied gaze that had lingered over him a moment ago.

“Let go!” he shouted, the voice cracking slightly.

Miss Crows snapped the ledger closed and placed one elbow on the armrest, leaning against it.

“You can’t Young Master!” The gardener asked next, trying to stop the flaying arms.

“Stand back!” The Earl ordered, breaking free, slapping the hands that tried to be reassuring and calming away. “Don’t order your Master around.” He almost snarled, advancing once again.

“Young Master…” The gardener whimpered, crying once more when he turned and caught another glimpse of the dead man. The maid’s lips trembled but she was able to stifle her tears a bit better that time.

“Sebastian…” The Earl called slowly, stepping onto the blood soaked carpet, staring down quietly. “Stop fooling around.” He continued quietly, disbelieving. Crows tilted her head, the movement short and abrupt, like a broken doll her fingers curled slightly, in twitchy reflex. Arthur did a sudden double take. Her hair was down, falling around her shoulders, maybe a bit lower. It gave her an eerie Ophelia-like look. The slight smile was still present in the shadow play of the day’s grey light. “Sleeping on the floor doesn’t look that comfortable to me. Exactly how long are you planning to sleep?”

“Young Master…” Bard whispered slowly, worried.

“Didn’t you hear me Sebastian?” The Earl kicked the body, glaring. “I said get up.” His voice was slightly raised now, hardening. “Why… you…” the young man reached for the weapon that was piercing the butlers chest, puling it out with a new gush of red, tossing it away before growling, gripping the jacket’s lapels, shaking the butler in a rage. “That’s an order.” He said, his strength barely enough to shake the dead weight. “Sebastian wake up this instant.” The Earl called authoritatively, teeth clenching when the order went unanswered. “That’s an order.” He shouted, attempting to shake the man once more.

“Earl…” Arthur whispered, pained, not daring to approach.

“Didn’t you hear my order?” The young man shouted, slapping the still form. “Who said you could just die?” The shouts continued, along with the hitting, the guests growing more uncomfortable with each hint of control loss. “I won’t allow this!” the Earl said, leaning heavily in his perceived authority. There was a small rustle, ignored by the shocked onlookers of the drama scene. “Open your…” the ear shouted, hand raised for another blow.

Miss Crows stopped it, grabbing his wrist nonchalantly with a bloody hand, looking icy and disapproving, her expression almost hidden by the loose hair. In the dim light of the stormy day it was suddenly clear that both her hands and her cheeks were stained dark red. The cook stepped back. He seemed to have been ready to stop the show as well.

“He’s dead.” The secretary said, waiting until the young man’s hands went limp, letting go then.
“Leave it.” She said as the boy looked at her with one wide eye, starting to look lost and frightened. Miss Crows let go but didn’t step back, looking on.

“You’re kidding right?” Ciel whispered, realization dawning, turning back to see the dead butler. “Are you dead…” The tone, the lost quality of it made Meyrin and Finny burst into tears. Tanaka lowered his head, respectfully saddened. “Sebastian…” He whispered, leaning, almost hugging Sebastian. “You’re my butler… you were supposed to be by my side until the end…” He quieted down after those words.

“If we leave him here he’ll rot.” Gray interjected suddenly. Bard looked startled. “It would be better if we moved him fast.” He continued. It was the same that had been done with Siemens.

“Yes…” Bard agreed, despite the pain of losing another comrade, as he said it.

“Young Master…” Meyrin said, trying to pull him off the butler again.

“No! Let go!” The Earl shouted, struggling, proving once again that he was truly young. “Don’t you dare leave me behind!” He shouted, glaring again at the corpse, getting free for long enough, reaching for the silver pin on Sebastian’s lapel, ripping it away. “It’s an order! An order…”

“The dead are not very likely to answer.” Miss Crows interjected, indifferent, looking down, at the blood under her boot.

“You’re his wife!” The Young Earl’s anger turned against the unsympathetic secretary.

There was a sudden hush in the room at that. She glanced at the Earl, tilting her head thoughtfully.

“Do my tears have any magical proprieties?” Evelyn asked slowly, her tone clipped and sharp.

“What?” The Earl whispered, staring at her.

“Does a tear bring back the dead?” The woman rephrased her question none too gently.

“No…” The young man said ruefully, his shoulders shaking, keeping his pride and restraint.

“Then there is no use in crying. He is dead. He is nothing.” Mrs Michaelis sat back down and crossed her legs, opening the ledger once more, going over the entries. Irene covered her mouth, horrified, gripping Keane closely.

Arthur shook his head. If she was truly that unfeeling there would have been no blood tainting her hands and cheeks. And the wet spots covered by the black colour of the trousers on her knees. Not in that pattern. It looked like there had indeed been no tears but she hadn’t been unable to keep her hands away from her husband or dry eyes.

“Mmm…” The Chinese hummed quietly, thoughtful. “It would be impossible for the confined Earl to commit the murder right… things just got interesting.” The Chinese man’s smile was unsettling, his open eyes not as kindly as his whole demeanour showed. Arthur was certain he was the only one seeing those behaviour shifts.

“What the hell is it with this mansion to have two murders in one night?” Keane shouted, badly frightened.

“Moreover with that…” Irene whispered, staring at the bloodied poker tossed on the carpet.

“He was stabbed with the poker all right.” Bard said, covering half his face with the palm of his
hand, staring.

“How brutal…” Someone whispered.

“Seems quite practical as improvised weapons go.” Mrs Michaelis piped calmly, flipping the pages and making annotations.

It was as if her husband’s body was not right at her feet.

Unless she was the killer…

Arthur sighed, returning to his examination.

“There are also traces of being hit in the head.” The eye doctor stated, turning the butler’s head around a bit, finding blood tangled in the black hair. “He must have been hit from behind while collecting the ashes.” The writer in him speculated, glancing at the dying ember in the fireplace. There were still a few, glowing red beneath the choking ash.

“You’re saying that wasn’t enough to kill him.” Bard applied his military knowledge there, keeping himself together. “So they gave him the final blow by stabbing him in the chest?” Still that part was making no sense to him.

“Either that or they just continued attacking without checking if he was dead…” Earl Gray spoke next. “Two hits would be most likely to kill than just one.” He stopped talking, staring for a long while. “Strange… even though he didn’t die from the blow to the back his head why did the killer go out of the way to stab him in the front?” The man considered, dragging a shocked expression from the other guests. Mrs Michaelis frowned, still leaning against her hand, propped by the elbow. Her legs crossed and uncrossed slowly, the booted foot bobbing for a couple of moments.

“Certainly it makes sense to attack from the same angle a second time.” Bard acquiesced.

“Perhaps… there were multiple culprits.” Arthur suggested nervously. The shock and defensive reactions were to be expected. So he explained himself further. “For example someone came out from the front to catch his attention and the accomplice struck from behind. Then the one in front struck the final blow.”

“Or he could have just turned around.” Mrs Michaelis said acridly with a scoff, not changing her position. Tanaka had placed a coat over the Young Master’s shoulders. “Even in pain and disoriented the first instinct is, always, to check.” In any case the wounds were not saying that she could have done it. For one she was too short to hit the butler on the head in that angle, standing or kneeling. She could have stabbed him but somehow… it was hard to picture that…

“Well… no matter how it happened it is certain the killer didn’t show any mercy or hesitation.” Lau spoke up, eager to stir something up. “To have killed that butler the killer must be extremely…”

“Stop it already!” Finny snapped away from his crying and sadness, gripping the young Earl, trying to cover his ears. The Earl was startled but didn’t react all that much. “Why are you having this conversation in front of the Young Master? Please think of his feelings. And…” He glanced at the armchair’s occupant, his eyes filling with tears again. “Mouser may look like she doesn’t care but…”

“Finny.” Mrs Michaelis said, standing slowly, her voice dragging just a bit. The young man froze, hugging the Earl. The maid looked disoriented, settling for a bow and an apology. Whatever he saw the gardener stopped, lowering his head, resuming his crying.
“Mouser? Arthur thought. Maybe a nickname within the staff... but why a rat-killing cat?”

“Well... Certainly.” Earl Gray conceded. “Instead of standing around the corpse like this why don’t we temporarily move this thing to the basement?” He suggested cheerily, brushing aside the matter. “We can discuss who did it later with some food.”

“Isn’t that just a little too easy going?” Woolsey babbled, following the Queen’s envoy.

“Indeed. There is no point in being hasty.” Lau agreed easily, walking out with Ran Mao.

“It’s decided then.” Gray said, stopping on the demolished doorway, looking back inside. “So you guys are in charge of cleaning that up. Oh. And the preparations for breakfast also.” He ordered with a grim look of contempt. “I’m going to the dining hall. I’m starving.” The mood shifted again as he stretched.

“Of course. The schedule has been rearranged to fit the current state of affairs.” Mrs Michaelis said with a sweet smile that made Arthur rethink the impossibility of her being a killer. Maybe she had not killed her husband but there was no doubt in him that she would not have minded eliminating Earl Gray.

“We’re going too.” Keane announced. Irene hesitated as she was dragged out of the room, staring at the secretary. Seemed like she had something more to say to the widowed woman.

“It’s as they say.” The Earl spoke up again as all the guest but Arthur had left the room. “Move Sebastian to the basement. I’m sorry for losing my calm.” It was not an apology. Just an admission.

“But…” Finny babbled, hurt.

“Young Master...” Meyrin whispered, heartbroken.

“Tanaka.” Ciel Phantomhive called out, once again in control.

“Yes.” The servant complied to the call.

“Sebastian is dead. From today on you’re my butler. I entrust you with the management of the mansion and supervision of the servants. This pin will also be returned to you.” The Earl stated formally.

“The pin of the Head Butler. How nostalgic.” The old man said while accepting as she was obliged. “Should you really be hiring an old man like me?” he questioned with the familiarity only allowed of servants that had been through a lot with their masters.

“It’s just until I’ve found a replacement.” The Earl dismissed the worry and glanced back. “Evelyn.” She nodded. “Make the preparations for interviews as soon as this ends.”

“Certainly.” Tanaka bowed quickly, assenting to his orders.

“Yes, My Lord.” Evelyn stated, eyes narrowed, a small grin breaking through the formality when the boyo flinched.

“I’ll hold on firmly onto this.” Tanaka continued, placing the pin on the fabric, turning to the servants afterwards and clapping to garner their attention. “Well then. First we’ll prepare the Master’s bath. Meyrin the hot water, if you will. You two, please carry the hot water to the bathing chambers after moving Sebastian. Hurry now.”
“Yes.” The group said in one voice, hastening to prepare.

“Evelyn…” Tanaka turned to the young woman who had opened her ledger.

“As I said, the schedule has been rearranged. There were some instructions left in the kitchen for the eventuality of Sebastian being too busy with the attending of the guests during the breakfast time and the rest should be managed after that is sorted out.” She paused, consulting the entries. “We have a one hour gap at most for discussing such things and prepare for what should be done next.”

“Very well. Let’s go Young Master. You’ll catch a cold standing here like this. Let’s give you a change of clothes.” Then his tone shifted to something more tutor-like. “The head of the Phantomhive household should not be shaken by something as trivial as the death of a servant. I never once saw the Master lose his composure due to such trifles.”

“You’re strict as ever, old man.” Tanaka smiled at the Master’s words.

“Although I should compliment you, Mrs Michaelis.” He nodded towards the secretary. “Proper posture despite the state of your hair.” The old man praised and chastised at the same time, despite deeming the unruly hair a minor mishap in her countenance.

“My hair?” Evelyn whispered as if not understanding. “Oh.” She noticed, grimacing. “It seems my comb fell…”

“Mr Wordsmith.” Arthur jumped when the old man knelt, placing the house slippers in front of him. He had been watching the body being picked up with a growing sense of unease. There was a silver, engraved comb, visible now that it was gone, half in the blood, half in the unstained carpet. “I’m truly sorry. For something like this to happen…”

“No… it’s… rather than myself please stay with him.” The young man asked, glancing at the silent and solemn young Earl. “Please stay by the Earl’s side.” He requested, worried.

“I deeply appreciate your concern. Well then… Let’s go Young Master. We shouldn’t keep the guests waiting.” The elder servant, now the new butler stated, guiding the young man away.

The young Earl walked out with dry empty, steeled eyes.

Evelyn Michaelis picked up her comb, staring at the mirror, wiping the blood away, pulling her hair back, pinning it, rubbing her cheeks, scratching the blood out and making a tear disappear from her reflex, the hand lingering for a moment against the ribbon around her neck, tucking in a ring that peeked amidst the white and black, turning away from the reflecting surface, dry-eyed and walking away in a sedated pace.
Chapter 41

The breakfast table was being set in grim silence, everybody in the same room, having found and carried out the instructions left behind, with the supplies arranged in kitchen, meticulously organized by a dead man. It had spared a lot of plotting and rearranging supplies and preparations. It was a silent affair punctuated by the storm outside and the small sounds of porcelain and silver, fist being set on the good linens and the rustle of the guests walking in and settling into their places. No one seemed to be with that much of an appetite after all except for Gray, staring at each other, at their plates, sneaking peeks every time they heard something move.

“He really saved us by preparing this properly.” The Earl said calmly as the last plate was placed and all the servants stepped back, occupying the predestined waiting positions.

“This smells so good.” Gray stated chirpily, grabbing knife and fork, after placing the linen napkin protecting his white uniform. “I’m really hungry since I didn’t eat this morning.” He complained with a big smile, digging in with gusto.

Arthur cringed a bit, looking around, towards those that were and belonged to the Phantomhives.

The young Earl was looking distant but calmed, moving his fork and knife with sharp and perfectly executed gestures, eating little.

The old man, now the butler, stood nearby with a pitcher of water, ready to serve, the figure of efficiency and stoic resolve, surprisingly deft and spry for the age his face showed.

The maid waited near the side table that held the second plate, also looking quieted and calm, hiding sorrow behind the glasses whose reflects kept others out and away.

The cook was also nearby, chewing on his cigarette. The hard look in his eyes was that of a veteran. He had not wept either. It was someone who was accustomed to loss.

The gardener was still not completely dry-eyed, standing near the fireplace that kept the room warm.

Mrs Michaelis stood on the other side of the Earl, ledger in hand, unmoving. If not for the sharp wickedness present in those dark eyes, that showed itself when few were looking, one could believe her widowed state was as irrelevant as her words before had tried to make it.

Grieving under the polished façade, every single one.

“What’s wrong Irene? You didn’t even touch your food…” Keane noticed after a while of silence and cutlery.

“I’m sorry. I’m not very hungry.” The opera singer whispered, placing the napkin against her mouth, looking distressed.

Gray looked the way of that small exchange of words, finished with his plate, the attention sharp on other ways to get more food.

“Since there is some left is it all right if I take it?” He asked, playing with the fork, twirling it between his fingers.

“Yes…” Irene answered, slightly startled, picking up her plate as an offering. “Feel free.”
“No.” Gray shook his hand, dismissing the gesture, pointing towards the empty chair next to her. “I didn’t mean yours. The one next to you.” He pointed out.

“What? Oh my… indeed there is one too many.” Irene noticed. It was something glaringly obvious now that it had been pointed out. “Perhaps the chef got the numbers wrong.” She said in lieu of an explanation. Seeing that everyone was frazzled it would not be a strange occurrence.

“The one who prepared this meal was Sebastian.” The Earl spoke up, coldly. “He wouldn’t mix up the numbers.” The young man continued, still placing absolute faith on his former butler. Mrs Michaelis was staring at the empty seat with narrowed eyes. The maid was counting, moving her lips quietly and touching her fingertips as she did so and the cook was checking the table of the next course. In each instance there was always an extra plate.

“Then whose is that?” Lau asked.

“We’re all…” Woolsey began with a small chuckle.

“Mr Phelps seems to be missing Young Master.” The secretary spoke up in a dry tone.

“Ahh… since he’s always so inconspicuous I didn’t notice.” Mr Woolsey was the one to laughingly point that out, shaking away whatever unease he could be feeling, making conversation, trying to break the rain-filled silence. “Now that you mention it I haven’t seen him all morning… looks like he overslept a bit too much.”

Arthur was not convinced and all the troubles they had been experiencing…

“Excuse me.” He stood up, serious, worried, his grim tone catching everyone’s attention. “We should take a look in the Earl’s bedroom.” He asked. The Earl looked grim too, standing as well. Around the table there was a new hush of worry.

“I’ll take you there.” The Earl said.

“Mr Phelps! Mr Phelps… if you are in there please answer…” There was no sound inside the room as ten people gathered in front of it, the writer knocking on the door, trying it, edging on the desperation. “It’s locked… Earl… where is the key?” Arthur asked, turning to the group.

“I don’t know.” The Earl said, thoughtful. “Evelyn?”

“Sebastian is… was the one who always carried the key to your room.” Mrs Michaelis answered promptly, barely missing a beat after she was called. “And for safety reasons he was not exactly forthcoming with information about where he usually hid it.” Evelyn paused for a moment, as if reviewing possible places, possible mishaps. “Seeing he is…” She hesitated a bit, pressing her lips together. A small hiss came out of her lips as she looked at the Earl. “Do you wish me to…”

“Please get back Young Master. I will…” the gardener stepped forth, readying to ram the wooden structure. But before he could do anything a blade swished past them in a flash of white.

Earl Gray slashed the door down, standing amidst the debris with a plate in one hand, the slim sword in another and the fork tucked away in his mouth.

“We need to be quick seeing that there is still desert.” He stated, justifying the destruction.
“Great. Another one.” Mrs Michaelis deadpanned, glancing at the door, helping the Earl, who was claiming to be choking in the protective embrace, and the gardener up.

Arthur straightened, having also taken cover when the Queen’s butler had taken aggressive action against the doorway.

Lau was clapping gleefully.

Shrugging that aside Arthur crossed the front room, aiming for the bedroom door.

“Mr Phelps…” He shouted as he barged in, only to stop and look down at the new dead body on the carpet.

“And another.” The secretary added in the same deadpan, sighing as people walked into the bedroom and stared at the new corpse in fear, dread and worry.

“Rigor Mortis is already setting in.” Grimly Arthur knelt and performed the exam. “So he’s been dead for a while.”

“Are we having some kind of nightmare…” Keane asked slowly, once again supporting Irene.

“He doesn’t have any kind of external wounds like the other two though… no.” Arthur moved Phelps head slightly, finding a pair of dark lesions. “There is a wound. Two punctures on his neck… like he was stabbed with something.” He stopped, standing up with a deep sigh. “It might be from a needle or needle-like object to inject the poison.”

“Needle…” The Earl whispered, his thoughts interrupted suddenly by Lau and RanMao rummaging through his closet.

“Wo… the Earl sure lives in a nice room.” The Chinese was saying, having opened drawers and closets in the adjacent room, going through them as RanMao tried on hats.

“Don’t just search person’s rooms as you please!” Predictably he got angry.

“You held on to the clothes I gave you… did you wear them?”

“Listen when people are talking!” Ciel shouted into the closet, irked. Mouser peeked and found the Chinese handling dresses and female accessories. She snorted, glancing down at the boyo who fumed and walked away into the serious matters.

“It also resembles a bite mark…” Arthur was saying, thinking of reasons for such a wound pattern.

“A bite mark on the neck… its sounds just like Carmilla.” Irene whispered, frightened.

“By Carmilla you mean Le Fanu’s “The Vampire Carmilla?” The earl inquired, forgetting what was happening inside the closet for a moment, frowning.

“Yes…” The opera singer perked up and then looked at the Earl in an odd way. “Do you know it?”

Mrs Michaelis coughed, looking away with a guilty half-smile. The Earl looked vaguely uncomfortable. It was rather obvious to whom the gothic horror novel belonged to. And it was not exactly appropriate…

“You’re saying this guy was killed by a vampire?” Woolsey cut in harshly. “Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t say that kind of unscientific thing in the XIX century.”
“Unscientific.” The boyo whispered to himself, glancing at Mouser who was staring at the vents thoughtfully. “I guess you could say that.”

“2:38.” Arthur whispered suddenly, crouching behind the bedside table, having noticed that the sheets and covers were fallen on that side along with the things that had been placed on the top of the furniture piece, all knocked down onto the carpeted floor, most of them broken.

“That’s the clock I keep at my bedside…” The Earl stated, noticing the action, approaching.

“I guess it probably fell down when he was writhing in pain… it’s broken.” Arthur answered, giving him his thoughts.

“So in other words Mr Phelps died at 2:38.” Ciel concluded, looking around, gesturing for Finny and Bard to take care of the body. It was growing into annoying routine that. A routine that conflicted with the household rules.

“Rather than discussing these things while standing why don’t we sort the situation sitting down? With some tea as well.” Lau suggested, emulating the last solution for problem solving methods.

“Indeed.” It was not much of a choice, host and courtesy wise. “Tanaka please escort everyone to the drawing room.” The Earl ordered, walking ahead as if no care burdened his shoulders, followed by Mrs Michaelis who leaned and whispered something inaudible as the old new butler answered to the order with the only words he had at his disposition for such an event.

“Certainly.”

The discussion around the coffee-table was centred on the deaths and their timeline. Gray was finally open for talking after devouring most of the sweet supplies. And he was the one talking, summarizing the events with a seemingly disinterested veneer.

First Siemen’s death and the only suspect being the Earl.

Then he moved onto Sebastian’s death, lacking the time and any mention of possible culprits.

Then he moved on to Phelps and the clue provided by the broken clock.

The fact of Sebastian’s missing time of death and placement on that line of thought was immediately noticed and pointed out by the Wordsmith, correcting Gray who looked surprised but acquiesced quickly, even if he looked grumpy, sulking as he leaned back on the armchair, when Arthur noted that for the two other murders he and the Earl had a very solid, chain-like alibi.

It was Lau that made a pivotal question.

“Who was the last to see Mr Butler?”

Arthur conjectured that might have been him and the Earl. Finny spoke up, saying that Sebastian had come to the servant’s quarters at 2:50. He had left instructions about food, cleaning and an owl with the maid. Arthur glanced at Mrs Michaelis, thinking.

“An owl?” The Earl asked. The cook nodded, arms crossed.

“As opposed to pigeons they can fly through a storm. It’s just like him to think of everything.” The last line was mournful whisper.
What was in the letter?” Gray asked the maid.

“I didn’t see it.” Meyrin answered.

It would have been rude to.

“He might have sent the letter to the authorities.” Arthur suggested. It was what the preparation of an owl implied. A ready means of communication with the outside for any kind of isolating situation.

“Seeing the telephone is down I would guess so.” The Earl said with a nod, agreeing.

Earl Gray looked grim for a moment.

Silence and rain were all the sound that existed as they mulled the facts over,

“You didn’t see him?” Arthur asked carefully, looking towards the last of the servants. The three men shared a room. The maid had her own quarters that would have been shared with others if there were any. At first he would have though Evelyn was with her. But seeing her marital status it was safe to assume she slept with her husband. The secretary shook her head slowly.

“It’s not uncommon for him to come to bed very late and get up quite early. Before Finny found him… his… I just thought I had been asleep when he returned and left.” She answered despite hesitating in some of the terms.

Arthur nodded, sighing, taking out his notebook, scribbling down.

“However if Sebastian was the last killed the story becomes a lot more complex.” Arthur noted with a tired sigh.

The issue of the key.

It would seem Sebastian was the killer.

But then he was also dead.

So what was what?

“So… maybe the butler joined up with someone and together they committed the murders but then, afterwards they quarrelled over the rewards the job would bring and finally he was silenced.” Lau suggested after another charged pause.

“It’s not unthinkable.” The Earl admitted the possibility, clasping his hands as he leaned back on his chair. The butler’s widow said nothing in his defence either. “In that case… the probability of the killer being someone who would benefit from their deaths seems high.” He pointed out calmly, looking around.

“So I would seem. Money makes the world go round.” Lau stated grandly.

“Evelyn.” Ciel called.

The secretary sighed, half bored and half annoyed and elucidated.

“Mr Phelps was the heir to the Blue Star Line, a major company in the marine transportation business.” Mrs Michaelis started. “He was regarded as weak willed by most of the others in similar businesses but had enough skill to be entrusted with the foreign trade branch. Recently he even
made possible for the company to expand their business to the Asian region.”

“This would mean that Lau was his business rival.” The Earl pointed out, making everyone stare at the Chinese that showed surprised for an instant before smiling calmly and sipping his tea.

“Well… I guess that would be true.” He admitted shamelessly. RanMao was simple leaning against the man, still and emotionless.

“Furthermore you walk around carrying a needle in those dragging sleeves of yours do you not?” The Earl continued, inverting last night’s situation. There was a small amused expression in the secretary’s eyes for the barest moment before she faded out again.

“What?” Woolsey shouted, shocked. Keane stared and Irene was resorting to the usual shocked mouth covering ladies employed in startling situations.

“Yes. I am carrying one.” Lau admitted, pulling the long, thin piece of metal out of the sleeve’s fabric. “It’s used in oriental medicine though.”

“You… You killed Mr Phelps!” Woolsey shouted, standing.

“Oh my… aren’t you being a bit too rash about this?” Lau chuckled, looking up calmly, placing the cup down and hiding the needle once more in the wide sleeves.

“You bastard… you just searched the Earl’s room!” Keane reacted too, standing, wide-eyed. “You could have been destroying the evidence!”

“How could you make a locked room murder from that far-off walk-in-closet?” Lau reasoned. “There is no door going outside and even though we are Chinese it’s not like we can just pass through the ventilation shafts or something.” He chuckled at that patting RanMao’s head. “And I have an alibi to the hour of Mr Siemen’s death.” Then the Chinese chuckled, glancing at the Earl. “But awww… the Ear is such a bully. You don’t need to take revenge on me now?”

Both the Earl and Arthur looked at the man with a disbelieving, judging expression. The secretary chuckled slightly behind her hand.

“Do I really need to hear that from the one who suggested my confinement?” The young man said in annoyance. Then he shrugged, sipping his own tea. “In any case there is no one who could have killed all three even if they teamed up with Sebastian. I was just teasing you.”

“That’s true.” Arthur admitted calmly, sighing, knowing the complexity of the situation at hand.

“What are you talking about…” Irene began in a frightened tone.

“If we put it in a chart…” The Wordsmith started scribbling on his notebook with broad, quick strokes. “It would look like this.” It was a grid that clearly showed that there was no way that one single person could have done it on their own even if they had teamed up with Sebastian. And Arthur said exactly that, creating a sudden shock and panic in most of the guests.

“If it’s impossible to do alone then the people who came as a pair are the criminals!” Woolsey shouted, inciting the rage of the Theatre director.

“Are you kidding me?” Keane stood up, shouting as well. “On top of being trapped here I’m being treated as a criminal?”

“Grimsby! Calm down!” Irene joined the screaming match, trying to hold back the man.
“Yes, please calm down.” Arthur butted into the conversation, worrying about the brewing violence. “Also I am not saying it all comes down to two people it’s not as simple as that…”

“Simple or not I don’t care.” Woolsey had reached his breaking point. “I’ve had enough. Like I’d stay in this place anyway!” he stood up sharply and started to pace, going for the door.

“Where are you going?” The Earl called calmly. “Under these circumstances I’d like you to refrain from acting on your own.” The statement had the quality of an advice. Woolsey took it as a threat.

“Are you saying that to me? You’re the one that’s…” he turned around, the expression of a broken, terrified person covering his features.

“I’m what?” Ciel Phantomhive asked, very calmly, almost bored with the display.

“I… I know! It was really you who planned this all along, wasn’t it!” Woolsey started the accusations, blabbering.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say but please calm down.” The Earl supplied politely, a faint smile coming to his features. Behind him the secretary smirked.

“You wanted to finish us off from the beginning and gathered us here to do so, right?” Woolsey’s voice was growing higher in pitch, in fright. “You… the Queen’s Dog.” There was a slight, subtle hardening in the Earl’s countenance. Mrs Michaelis grin grew a bit sharper. “I’m going home!” Woolsey stated, using the couch as a shield. “Like I’d let myself be killed!”

“Wait! Please! It’s impossible in this storm!” Arthur stood up suddenly, trying to stop the man from doing something foolish. “You should stay here to avoid suspicion as…”

“I don’t take orders from a mere doctor!” The man shouted, attacking Arthur, the slap sending him to the ground, hitting the coffee table in the way with a dull thud and a grunt.

“The one telling you to sit down is me.” The Earl intervened with a harsher tone. “So sit down already.”

“D… Don’t order me around!” Woolsey tried to attack the young Earl, much to everyone’s shock, stopped by the old man who took him down in two simple moves, twisting his arm and placing one knee over the fallen man’s spine.

“Please excuse me Mr Woolsey.” Tanaka said politely. “If someone means harm to the Young Master in this mansion, no matter who they are, these servants will show them no mercy.” Arthur looked around. Mrs Michaelis stood behind the Earl’s chair, the closest one, casually. The half-opened left sleeve showed a hint of a blade’s handle. She glanced at him, grinning as she closed the buttons. Tanaka had just proved himself to be a specialist in hand-to-hand combat. Arthur hadn’t even seen him move. The other three waited in the edges of the room, appraising the situation all serious and ready, not looking anywhere near harmless any longer. “Please understand.”

Lau and Gray looked impressed. Irene and Keane were shocked.

“What the hell is this place… damnit…” Woolsey was grumbling in pain.

“What… what was that right now?” Arthur mumbled, mostly to himself, picking up his pencil and notebook with limp hands.

“If I’m not mistaken that is Bartitsu…” Lau said, answering to the author’s confused stare.
“Bartitsu can you please tell me more about it?” The Wordsmith asked, exited, seeing a new thing that he could use or investigate.

“Tanaka.” The Earl called, sipping his tea. “You can leave it at that.” The old man stood up, letting go of the businessman, standing and stepping back. “Mr Woolsey. You will obey your orders, correct?” Woolsey looked none too keen on obeying. But he had no choice. “Well then. Currently the only one who couldn’t have been the criminal is Mr Wordsmith.” Ciel stated. The secretary approached Arthur and extended him a soaked handkerchief for his bruised cheek. “I think it would be safest and fairest to put him in charge of deciding our actions from now on.”

“Me?” Arthur whispered, pressing the linen and lace rain-soaked cloth to his face, his surprise clear.

“Yes. I don’t really want a criminal prowling around my manor.” The Earl stated with a shrug.

“Well… I feel the same but…” Arthur mumbled, embarrassed.

“Yes. Us too…” Keane answered for him and Irene.

“Then it’s decided.” The Earl placed his tea cup on the coffee table, leaning back into the armchair. “There is plenty of time until the storm dies down anyway. Let’s thoroughly corner the criminal. Right Mr Wordsmith?” Behind him Evelyn grinned wider, head slightly lowered, her eyes sharpening, gaining a mischievous focus, suddenly, a small glint of red tainting the brown colour, the black-stained nails moving lightly over the Earl’s chair. Mouser suddenly made sense as the Earl smiled like an innocent child… no. Arthur noticed that too. There was something else inside the smile, a chilling, imp-like nature in the expression and statement of the Young Master of the Household.
Chapter 42

There was another bout of conversation and mild interrogatories after the Earl’s statement in which some of the details were thrown into relief.

It all was boiling down to the key at that moment.

In the end whoever had the key, either given by the butler if he was the killer, taken from its hiding place if he was not, or taken from his body to throw away the investigators, was the most likely to be the killer.

So the plan was to verify if it was, or not, currently with Sebastian.

Arthur closed his notebook and placed it on the table, looking around.

“Also, from now on I’d like us to move as a group.” He suggested as the talk about the occurrences died down and it was time to implement plans and measures. “Since it would be difficult to ask a woman to accompany us to the corpse storage I’d ask of Miss Irene to stay here with Mr Grimsby… Mrs Michaelis…”

“I’ll go too.” She stated. Arthur hesitated, staring at her. “Also I have a request. Never refer to me as married or by my husband’s name.” more puzzlement followed. She smiled slightly. And explained that the only ones, beside the pair wearing the rings, who knew about her marriage were the Young Master, who had given authorization for such a thing to occur, and the Father who had married them. And for the Young Master’s sake it was easier to appear unattached to anyone else in the eyes of society.

Arthur cleared his throat in the silence that followed.

“Also I’d like Mr Woolsey to stay too.” The Wordsmith continued, his voice thin and wary. Woolsey just grunted without any way out of obeying.

“I’d like you to allow me and RanMao to enjoy some tea over here.” Lau asked, completely comfortable in the couch, sipping the tea again.

“Since I have nothing to do here I’ll tag along too.” Gray asked, standing, adjusting his uniform.

“Excuse me Earl but would you mind guiding us through the manor?” The Wordsmith asked.

The Earl of Phantomhive placed the tea cup down, nodding.

“Not at all. The servants are more familiar with the bottom floor though, so let them guide us instead.” He glanced at the cook and gardener.

“Yes, Young Master.” Finny was the one who answered.

“Tanaka and Meyrin stay behind and take care of the guests.” The Lord of the household ordered, standing too.

“Certainly.” Tanaka answered with a bow.
“This place has the kind of atmosphere where one might expect a ghost to pop up at any moment, doesn’t it?” Arthur said, his voice echoing on the curling stairway that led to the wine basement, amazed at the architecture that did indeed seem to lend itself as a scenery for those gothic novels where ghosts and evil figures lurked about.

“Will you cut that out! There is no way there are ghosts here.” Gray snapped suddenly, shivering, latching onto the Young Earl’s arm, eyes dodging nervously around. It was dark ahead and dark behind them as the lantern the cook carried swayed and bobbed, sending slithering light everywhere that did not quite dispel all the shadows.

There was a small feminine, if raspy, chuckle coming from Miss Crows as she glanced behind, smirking. Gray jumped noticeably. Arthur felt a bit of a shiver running down his spine as he struggled to readjust again the way to address that woman.

“It would not be inconceivable that there are some otherworldly apparitions Earl Gray.” Her voice was echoing somewhat in the deep halls. “The Phantomhive history is a long one and many of their line have perished within these walls. Then there was the dramatic incident from four years now. And now three more souls have departed within the manor… who knows how many more have breathed their last sighs here.” She lowered her voice softly and looked ahead once more. “How many lingered behind in waiting, watching the living, resentful of the very thing they no longer have, desiring to reach with gossamer spectral hands to pluck the warmth out of their bodies…”

Gray was growing visibly spooked as she toyed with the ghosts.

“I only believe in things that I can cut with my sword.” He said in a very tight voice, still clamping onto the Young Earl’s arm. Miss Crows chuckled again, growing silent.

“So can you please walk on your own?” The Earl grumbled, looking annoyed.

“I thought you might be scared.” Gray justified, still fidgeting. “I was being kind…” he complained as they reached the basement door, the small group stopping.

“We’re here.” Bard announced quietly, opening the door. The wine cellar was dimly lit and three corpses rested under white sheets. Finny shivered suddenly, hesitating in the entrance as everybody stared, ready to do what had been done. Bard sighed. “Put these gloves on when you touch the corpses.” He advised, taking out a few sets of the cooking gloves, giving them to whomever wanted.

“You’re well prepared…” Arthur praised grimly. Evelyn had pulled the sheet away, staring at her husband’s face, her expression shifting a bit, head tilting left. “Well… please excuse me.” Arthur asked softly, gripping the sheet too, frowning when he looked down. “He’s wet?” The secretary nodded, pulling the sheet completely off, folding it quickly, stepping back.

“Looks like a leak in the roof caused it.” Bard stated, looking up, towards the stone and brick arches.

“Poor Sebastian…” Finny whispered, twisting his hands nervously. “Please move him.” The young man pleaded, near to tears once more.

“We should.” Arthur said in a tired, resigned voice. “If he’s wet his body will decay faster as well…” the doctor stated what would be obvious as the Ciel and Earl Gray snapped on the gloves. Evelyn didn’t bother, just standing there, holding the sheet, staring at the scene.

“Decay…” Finny babbled suddenly, whimpering, stepping back, shocked.
“We’ll need to investigate him but since he’s still suffering from Rigor Mortis it’ll be hard to take his clothes off.” Arthur stated after a quick appraisal of the body, sighing in a bit of frustration.

“I would suggest cutting them away.” Evelyn said calmly, her voice still chillingly eerie in the gothic ambience of the basement. Actually Earl Gray jumped again when she spoke up. “In any event…” She took a deep breath, slowly. “there is a trick I can teach you.” She stepped forth,

“Stop it!” Finny shouted, the reverberating echo snapping and bouncing on the walls and kegs. “Don’t treat Sebastian like a mere object…” Arthur was taken aback by the sudden outburst. “Sebastian is very dear to us…”

“Finny. If you’re going to have this pointless conversation leave.” The Earl stated, cutting through the rant, picking up the butler’s watch and chain. Finny stopped, trembling, closing his mouth. “It’s a nuisance. You can move him later. First let’s search for the key.”

“It isn’t attached to his Albert.” Arthur said as they started their work.

Mouser sighed and stared for a bit. It was not that different from patting down victims for goods to nick. Bard placed one hand on the gardener’s shoulder before joining in to help, to make the whole thing go faster, for the sake of someone he regarded as another lost comrade. The thief sighed.

“Go outside.” She told Finny gently, tilting his downcast head so he looked at her. With the heels their heights were about even. His eyes were growing watery again as he stared at her. “I’ll call you when it’s done. Just remember why we are doing this.”

“To catch the killer?” Finny answered in a very thin voice, still lacking the conviction to believe in that.

It was too raw and too recent.

Mouser nodded, smiling for him as he retreated.

“He doesn’t have it around his neck…” Gray said. Finny stopped a bit, looking back. Mouser gave him a stern look, willing him out then glancing back. Gray was holding a thin silver chain that held the matching ring. No key so far but they had managed to remove jacket, waistcoat and tie.

“Can I have that back?” Miss Crows asked suddenly, standing behind Gray, extending her hand. The Queen’s envoy hesitated for a moment before dropping the circumference in her hand, chain and all. She stepped back, letting them continue their work, freeing her own ring from behind its hiding place, inside the shirt, under the bow, slipping both into her fingers, hers where it should be, his on her thumb so it wouldn’t fall.

“It’s not here…” Ciel spoke up after all was done, standing as Bard and Arthur replaced the clothes.

“Could it be in your bedroom?” Arthur asked as Evelyn gave him the sheet back, nodding, after calling Finny to help with the moving.

“This is our room.” Evelyn said, opening the door, showing a simple space with little details to it, walking in, waiting for everyone else to gather. It showed signs of use and living.

“It’s pretty spacious.” Arthur said out loud, looking around calmly. Evelyn nodded wordlessly and
went for the nightstand, picking up a metal box and a lighter, taking out a cigarette, lighting it nonchalantly, the action explaining the slight tang of tobacco that lingered in the air.

“It’s because he’s a senior servant.” Bard explained the household mechanics although he could not resist pointing out that the butler was always one of the highest standing servants. “Though we’re actually senior servants too…” He glanced at a nervous Finny while Evelyn sat on the bed, smoking, shaking ash to a small clay bowl. The rings gleamed slightly as she lit one of the gas lamps. “This is our first time here…” Bard noted too for the benefit of the guests and the Young Master that was not supposed to know the going-ons that made the household work.

“I’ve only been here twice since I gave him the room.” The Young Earl admitted too, marking himself as rather dry of information. “Can you think of a place where he would have hid it?” He turned to the other person who inhabited the room. The secretary nodded but before she spoke Earl Gray interrupted.

“In any case let’s search in the place where one might keep the valuables.”

Evelyn scoffed and gestured with her free hand.

“There are some rather traditional hiding spots in every room. Under the bed, desk, fireplace and drawers.” She quieted down as everyone searched, smoking serenely.

The men went around the room, peeking at every spot that could possibly contain a key. Her eyes narrowed suddenly in annoyance as Gray searched once more the bottom drawer. The secretary tskd and stood from the desk-chair she had migrated to as Finny powerlifted the bed and walked towards the Queen’s servant.

Her heel made contact with the wood suddenly, slamming the drawer closed, barely giving Gray time to remove his hands. He jumped back, glaring. Evelyn smiled sweetly.

“You have rummaged through my unmentionables three times already.” Arthur looked up, blushing suddenly, having forgotten to account for the fact that that was a couple’s room. Her things would be mixed with his and… “Either you find something or remove your hands from my garter belts.” She blew smoke and stepped back. “I am unsure if the floor has any loose boards but when I walk over them none sounds hollow.” She emphasised the point with a staccato rap of the high heels.

The Earl sighed and stared at the last place they needed to search. The closet. As he opened it a dozen or so of cats sprung from within, mewing happily, purring and looking for the nearest play partner. The Earl was shocked, Arthur was surprised. Gray was just blinking.

“Wah! These kitties are so cute…” the gardener was immediately taken in by the creature’s charm and picked one up, petting it. The Earl panicked and flattened himself against the closet, sniffling suddenly.

“That bastard… he hid them from me…” He shouted, eyes widening as the small furry creatures approached, mewling, trying to play. “Don’t let any of these set foot out of this room!” he ordered, trying to inch his way away from the balls of fuzz.

“Young Master?” Finny called, approaching, confused for a second.

“Don’t come near me! My allergies are…” And so Ciel Phantomhive stared to sneeze hard.

“However he really doesn’t seem to have that much personal belongings.” Gray stated as the secretary, gardener and cook gathered the kittens and placed them on the bed. “Wouldn’t it have
been nicer to have at least something from your original home?"

“Not all people like to recall their past… Sir.” Evelyn spoke up, petting one of the kittens gently before turning away. “And sometimes all you have of that past is simply lost.”

“Where did he come from?” Earl Gray asked abruptly.

“Who knows.” Bard answered with a shrug. “None of us do. We don’t even know what he does in his days off. The only thing we know is that he is ridiculously good at his job.”

“Perhaps the young master knows something.” Finny said, glancing that way.

“I don’t know anything either.” Ciel answered, sniffling, trying to contain more sneezes. “Where he came from, what master he served before, what he has done in the past… I have never had any interest in it.” He admitted, shrugging. “It was fine by me. Back then anyone was fine. As long as they were devoted to me and granted my wishes.” He added quietly.

“Back then?” Gray whispered. Then he glanced at the wife.

“I could say he came from hell but… would you believe me?” She said snuffing out the cigarette. Arthur shook his head, taking the words for their poetic intentions. They sounded like her teasing whispers about ghosts. A past that was best left forgotten… There were thousands of dark stories that survived and moved forward, away from whatever ill events had befallen them. So perhaps Sebastian had been one of them. As a wife, showcasing or not the man’s name, she was rather obligated to keep the husband’s secrets.

“If we can’t find it after all this… it’s probably not here.” The Wordsmith said out loud, adjusting his sleeves.

“Then why don’t we check everyone’s luggage?” Gray suggested suddenly.

“Naturally don’t you think they will refuse that?” Arthur stammered nervously.

“I have more authority than the Yard so if they don’t want to show me it will be ok for me to force them.” The Queen’s representative stated merrily as they returned to the tea parlour.

The request was met with acceptance and the assurance Miss Irene Diaz and RanMao’s belongings would be searched by the females of the household. But it was a fruitless pursuit. The key was not hidden within the guest’s possessions. So they regrouped once more in the parlour and tried to work out another way things could have happened, see another plan.

“Even with all of this it could be hidden somewhere else.” The Earl completed, looking around as everyone reclaimed their seats. The teapot and empty plates had been placed on the tea cart and were ready to leave the room. Everyone had been eagerly awaiting the conclusions that had been reached.

“That or he could have thrown it out the window.” Lau stated in a sedated, thoughtful drawl. “Since it’s so small if it was carried or buried in the storm we aren’t going to find it.”

It seemed to be the end of the key clue pursuit.

“Excuse me… I’m going to search outside!” Finny stepped forward suddenly, shivering slightly, a
bit timid to be almost shouting that to the guests but looking determined nonetheless.

“I’m going too.” Meyrin hesitated a bit but agreed to the sentiment, stepping forward too.

Evelyn sighed and looked around. No one seemed that surprised by statement and sentiment it carried. Bard was hesitating, his hand dipping into his apron’s pocket.

“Certainly finding it would give us some clue towards the killer but you don’t have to go out of your…” the Earl started, conciliatory.

“I… I want to solve this case!” The gardener shouted, his hands fisting, tears welling up again. “Because I’m dumb I can’t find the killer by thinking it over like the Young Master. But I may be able to find the key. If the key can lead to finding the killer…” he pressed his lips together, storming out of the room, the maid following closely.

“Guys…” The cook called out, looking baffled. “I’m sorry! I’ll go after them.” He stated, leaving too, silence welling up after they abandoned the room and their steps faded into the distance.

“Do you wish me to go too?” Evelyn asked softly.

“Make sure they don’t hurt themselves.” The Earl requested.

“Aye, aye.” Arthur heard her whisper as she exchanged a quick look with Tanaka, closing the doors behind her.

Their voices were clear, even muffled beneath the heavy rain. Mouser stopped on the doorway, staring at the grey vastness of the storm, seeing their shapes amidst the curtain of fast falling water. She stepped out under the black rose-and-thorn parasol as she heard them talk about Sebastian with love, reverence and gratitude, broken down by the futility of the self-appointed task. Bard was less than inclined to coddle them as tears started to flow once more. Still he was not without kind words.

“Listen up you two. Listen.” Bard shouted when the tears almost drowned his voice, approaching the pair, crouching so they were level. “I’m the same as you. Without that and the Young Master I wouldn’t have any of these things either.” He stopped to make his point as clear as possible “We shouldn’t be overdoing it here. What’s our job? To protect this house. To protect the Young Master, right?” Their past, what Sebastian had done for all of them. Selfishness for one could look like kindness to another. That was why it was done and why it worked. Mouser twirled her parasol slowly. “That’s why we there’s only one thing we should be doing right now...”

“Protect the scrawny boyo.” Mouser said, approaching, cutting most of the rain that fell on them. “Come on. Let’s get out of this weather.”

The servant’s common room was a small square chamber with a fireplace and cluttered by three old plush sofas that had been rejected by the main house but were still good enough for use, as was the carpet stained by wine and scorched by coals, as were the tables scuffed and chipped. It had not been intended as a recreation area for the staff but it was what it had become. The trio was sitting in front of the fire, wearing dry uniforms and towelling their hairs. There was a pot of spice tea and some cups already waiting on the coffee table. Mouser was reclined against one of the sofa’s back,
sipping from her cup, the boots drying near the fire, wiggling her stocking covered toes from time to time.

“This is not exactly protecting the Young Master.” Bard tossed the comment towards Mouser, pulling the towel down, lighting a cigarette in the merry flames. She smiled into her tea cup as Meyrin passed a comb through the tangled and moist hair, glasses on one of the side tables.

“We cannot appear in front of the guest looking like drowned rats either. Tanaka is with the boyo so… just take your time to be prepared for whatever may come next.” She leaned back and peeked outside through the narrow window, fiddling with the cup.

“Mouser… are you…” Finny started softly, trying, peeking from under the towel.

“Don’t.” the thief sipped the tea as the question was unasked and unanswered, her tone dropping to a chilling growl, staring into the tea.

“You loved him.” The maid stated softly, sadly.

Mouser looked like she had just been whipped, a fast, pained glance before hiding it away.

“That is a very… hard word.” Mouser said placing the cup down, adjusting her position on the couch, uncomfortable. She looked at the rings on her left hand. “I don’t know. Enough to give in, I guess.”

“Everyone.” Tanaka walked into the room calmly, startling the group after the heavy silence. “I am glad to see you are all right.” He stated with a kindly smile after looking around at the state of things. “Miss Crows can you return to care for the young master?”

“Of course.” Mouser answered with a sigh, placing her feet on the carpet, going for the dry and warm boots, lacing them up quickly, leaving.

“It seems we have a bit of a problem… if the rest of you could follow me to the kitchen…” it was the last she heard of the old man, new butler as she walked down the corridors.

The room was silent, the guest gloomy and the tea was growing cold. The boyo had stood up and walked towards the window, staring at the dark day that was slowly dragging to an end. No one was saying much and there was not much that they could actually do seeing it was best for them to move in groups. At least the ones that were not expendable any longer, that is.

And of course there was a new nervous energy now that Lau had hinted to the possibility of a nefarious outside agent, a culprit that was hidden amongst them but not one of them. Personally Mouser believed that was partly impossible due to some simple facts about the currently employed staff. On the other hand the house was awfully big and she was usually the uninvited guest in such affairs. The thief knew just how easy it was to slip within a big manor and stay there, hidden, knowing routines and paths, knowing what and how to do what one had come to do.

Lau had also a flair for the theatrics, making everyone on edge with the woven words of secrecy and mysterious possibilities, things that hinted at an easy explanation. 

*If he’s lying in wait for a chance to attack, aiming for our lives… he might not be that far off anymore.* Actually Mouser felt a slight urge to shout boo at that moment but that might have seen a bit childish on her part. The sudden fright effect, making the entire room jump, nearing a heart
failure was the sudden slam of the door, followed by the servants barging in.

“Young Master! We caught someone suspicious.”
Chapter 43

The man inside the ropes was tall, with a distinct, acutely distinct and carved face and brownish-red eyes. His black hair was still neatly slicked back despite the fact that all of his body and clothing were dripping wet. Despite the aforementioned state said clothes still retained an air that told the people huddled in the tea parlour that they would have been neat and crisp otherwise. All in all, the Marchioness would have approved of the figure’s cut. But his appearance and the circumstances made it all quite suspect.

“He was real? Where on earth was he hiding?” Gray was the first to recover from the shock and speak up.

“So you mean... this is the killer?” Woolsey was quick to grasp at the concept, shouting, still barely reining in his panic. Evelyn smiled slightly and shook her head. The Earl seemed a bit bewildered but nothing more.

“To think the unknown guest would show up so soon...” Lau sated calmly, standing, approaching. “Even I am surprised. So who are you?” he asked in a carefree manner, patting the man’s shoulder who looked less than impressed.

“This again?!” The Earl almost shouted, bristling. Evelyn chuckled lightly, covering her lips softly.

“My name?” The man asked carefully, as if assuring himself that he had heard the question correctly.

“It’s been a while, Jeremy.” The Earl finally spoke up, greeting the new arrival calmly.

“Earl is this Old guy a friend of yours?” Lau asked, the droopy sleeves waving as he gestured.

“Old guy?” The man rumbled in distaste, eyes narrowing. Evelyn snickered. Arthur glanced at her. She seemed at ease, as if she knew the man.

“Yes. This man is Pastor Jeremy Rathbone.” The Earl introduced the man calmly after a moment of composing himself. “He is a popular advisor to the local church and somewhat of a famous person. And I believe... Evelyn?”

“Why, of course.” The secretary answered quietly, with a nod. “He is... was a friend of Sebastian and the one who married us.” There was a slight blush on her cheeks as she glanced away. “Special Permit and circumstances...”

“Please call me Jeremy.” The man spoke to the group with a smile, despite being bound.

“A Pastor?” Arthur mumbled, staring.

“Like I would trust a suspicious looking guy like that!” Woolsey flew into a new rage created from nervousness, standing, pointing fingers and raising his voice to a shrill shriek. “The only one who could have committed the murders is an outsider without an alibi.” The man’s voice cracked as he stood behind the No matter how you look at it... it has to be this man!

“Actually your reasoning is utter nonsense Mister Woolsey.” Jeremy answered with a faint mocking smile.

“How did you know my name?!” Woolsey admitted, flinching and stepping back, arm raised as if
to protect himself.

“Looking at you is rather obvious.” Jeremy stated, approaching suddenly, surveying him once more with a critical eye before starting to enumerate the various clues the man’s figure provided. “The only place where you would be able to mine such a large diamond is South Africa. Furthermore the only way you would be able to create such a round brilliant cut diamond is with the latest polishing machinery recently developed by the Woolsey Company. I’ve also heard that the jeweller Daniel Anderson has been holding sale talks with women, saying it’s a rare item that hasn’t really appeared in the market yet. If you consider that one of the people invited to the Earl’s evening party is wearing such rare rings it is most likely the director of the Woolsey Company... in other words you, Sir.” There was a small pause in which everyone seemed too dazed to speak. “Am I wrong?” Jeremy prompted with a slight head tilt.

“More importantly... how in the world... no.” Arthur spoke up after clearing his throat, centring and focusing. “Why and since when have you been here?”

“Nothing but questions.” Jeremy shook his head with a put-upon sigh. “Would you mind opening my bag?” he turned slightly speaking at Bard who narrowed his eyes but complied, revealing a white owl inside the leather structure, eyes closed and still.

“It’s Sebastian’s owl.” Meyrin recognized it, covering her mouth, looking wary. “Is it dead?” She whispered in a tiny voice.

“No, but since it resisted I had to put it to sleep for a while with some medicine.” Jeremy stated with nonchalance, shrugging. “It will wake up soon.”

“Just because it resisted a bit? How cruel!” Finny spoke up.

“Please look at the letter at its claw.” Jeremy asked. The earl stepped forth and took the piece of paper away, opening it and staring with a frown.

“Young Master... what did Sebastian say?” Meyrin asked, hands on her mouth, wanting to know what she had sent into the world.

“It seems he anticipated he would be killed ad sent a letter to Jeremy.” The Earl answered in a tight, grim voice. Evelyn pressed her lips together, a slight huffed sound coming out. Irene took it for grief. Arthur glanced to see mischief in the eyes of a face that tried to look saddened.

“But you can’t prove he is not the killer from a piece of paper.” Keane was the one to protest that time, still mulling over Lau’s words. “If he came from the outside he could just as well have committed the murder last night.”

“Actually I have a simple solution to your lack of evidence in my coat pocket.” Jeremy admitted looking down, towards said pocket. Finny approached and picked up whatever was in there, holding up a piece of paper, staring at it.

“A ticket is it... for a play.” He said tentatively.

“What’s the date?” Ciel asked, quick and to the point.

“Yesterday. It’s from the evening show... February 12th.” Finny spoke up, eyes narrowing as he read slowly. “The place and program are... the... L...a... the lady of the lake at the Lyceum Theatre.”

Jeremy smiled slightly, nodding once.
“The Lady of the Lake is indeed playing there at the moment...” Irene said softly. Keane quieted down, sitting next to her once again.

“Indeed I went to the Lyceum in London, last night. The play ended at 10 pm.” Jeremy supplied. “Even if I took a hansom cab and threw the driver a sovereign it would still take two hours to get here. Furthermore in this rain the road would become muddy and it would take at least twice as long.”

“The river along the road would flood.” Bard said. That was one of the reason why they could not leave, adding to the downpour. “There is no way you’d get over the bridge in a horse drawn carriage.”

“Of course there are countless ways of getting here. Walking, swimming.” Jeremy shrugged, glancing around with a small chuckle. “Though I would not recommend those for normal human beings. There are always many ways to get a result. As many as the stars. But there is always one truth.”

“In other words... you could not be involved in last night’s events because you were in London. Am I right?” Arthur said calmly, serious and definitively.

“As expected of a master novelist. Thank you for speeding up this conversation.” Answering to the sudden confused look in the man’s face Jeremy chuckled and continued. He used the same method he used in the appraisal of Mr Woolsey. “You can find a lot about people’s jobs and the like from examining their looks and habits. First of all you have a large callus on your right middle finger. It’s different from people who paint or draw. Hence... next is the blue stain on your sleeves. This happens when you wash things with ink on them. Furthermore... you wrote several pieces of material in your cuff so you won’t forget them. Only a novelist would do something like that.”

“Amazing. He’s like my teacher, Professor Bell. He also liked people watching.”

Jeremy chuckled, looking slightly flattered.

“Well, now your doubts should have lifted would you mind getting this rope off of me?” He continued, glancing around at the tense faces. “The air around this manor is heavy with the smell of a crime that will rid me of my boredom.”

It took sometime to explain the events afterward but Arthur was going to be thorough. Jeremy seemed to demand it, despite still being soaking wet and no doubt cold. He took a place in the opposite armchair of the Earl, fingertips touching carefully, legs crossed.

“That’s all that happened from the time of the first murder to the murder of the butler who called you here.” Arthur stated, sighing, placing the pages where he had been taking notes down, for all to see again.

“I see. That’s very interesting.” Jeremy pondered. “Could I see the bodies? They will eloquently tell me nothing but the truth.” He asked.

“Well then... let’s go to the basement wine cellar together.” Arthur stood, inviting him along.

“Stop.” Jeremy raised on hand, calmly. “I would like you to move each of the bodies to a separate room.” It was an odd request and Arthur just had to ask why. “The scent might be a clue to the crime. If we put the bodies together their scents will interfere with each other. Also the cellar has a
strong wine scent.” He shook his head grimly. “On that note can you lend me three rooms Earl?”

“That would be fine.” The Earl answered, turning to the servants. Bard, Finny and Meyrin straightened and awaited orders. “You guys. Divide the bodies in three rooms.

“Earl, will you allow me to change my clothes in the meantime?” Jeremy finally requested the obvious comfort he had been lacking.

“Sure.” The Earl nodded, slouching back into his armchair, thinking. “The clothes of my predecessor might be too small. I’ll lend you the clothes of the dead butler. Evelyn.” He called. The secretary rolled her eyes for a moment before smirking, nodding.

“Of course. This way please.” She turned to the new arrival, walking toward the doorway, waiting. Arthur heard the chuckle as the door closed after Jeremy joined her. “Old man.”
It didn’t take that long until the Pastor returned although the Earl seemed to be holding his opinions even as his guests asked about the new arrival. They returned quietly and Jeremy settled into one of the chairs, asking once more to clear some details. The secretary waited near the doorway, glancing at Tanaka nodding for a moment as if assuring him everything was normal outside of the room where the guest had secluded themselves. Arthur was happy to provide said information until the other servants walked in, announcing that the bodies had been moved and placed where he had requested.

“Well then…” Jeremy stood up, clapping sternly. “I would like you to show me the bodies in the order that they were killed.” He requested calmly.

“We’ll start with Lord Siemens, then.” Arthur provided. The Earl was standing as well, ready to move.

“I’ll come along too.” Earl Gray piped it, standing with one hand in the air.

Bard and Evelyn were exchanging the information needed, in a hushed tone while the cook was glaring at the newcomer’s back. The secretary smiled and shook her head, patting his shoulder, waiting for a few more seconds, seeing if anyone else was going to volunteer to come along.

“Come this way please.” She called, opening the door and moving ahead, guiding them toward the staircases.

“The bodies have been placed in this hallway.” She pointed out, stopping and waiting for all to join her. Doors lined the parallel walls, all equal and equilibrated. “The three rooms on this side, by your request.”

“That saves some trouble.” Jeremy stated, nodding, reaching for the doorknob.

“Quite.” Evelyn snapped dryly, waiting for everybody to enter the room.

“How do you know?” Gray asked, looking again at the body. He was acting unconcerned, not caring about what was going one. One could wonder what did he actually want from that little excursion.

“I knew as soon as I saw this.” The Pastor answered, showing the scratched and dented back of the pocket watch. “This is an expensive item but the area around the winding key hole is full of scratches. You’d only do this if you were either a very crude person or drunk.”

“Of course the reek of a stale winery that comes out of his fat carcase has nothing to do with that
“Indeed the strong scent of alcohol is proof that he was gulping down strong liquor up until the moment of his death.” Pastor Jeremy agreed with a small chuckle, as if saying that the clock and its damages were not needed as proof of the vice.

“I have a list.” Evelyn said calmly, shaking her head, showing the small black ledger that seemed to be an omnipresent item in her hands. “The rum was gone.” She grumbled, tapping her heel as Jeremy returned his attention to the prone former German.

“Hm…” He rumbled thoughtfully, eyes narrowing, leaning a bit closer, sniffing with that Cleopatra nose of his.

“What is wrong?” Ciel Phantomhive spoke up, eye narrowing.

“There is also a faint smell of the sea.” Jeremy stated after a couple of another short sniffs.


“That is correct.” Jeremy nodded, “Doctor.” Arthur almost jumped with the sharp call. “Do you happen to carry a handkerchief?”

“Ah? Yes, of course.” He patted his jacket quickly, fumbling. “Here.” He gave it to the Pastor who used it on the corpse’s mouth, much to the younger man’s shock, sniffing at the resulting stains on the white cloth.

“Thank you very much.” He stated, folding the piece of fabric pristinely, before giving it back to a severely disgusted Arthur. Evelyn chuckled lightly, shaking her head. “Well then. Mr Phelps was next, correct?” Jeremy asked as the group moved slowly to the other room. The secretary was the one that lingered behind to re-cover the body with its plain white sheet.

“He was the only one killed by different means than the others.” Arthur was saying when she entered the second room. The examination was well under way. “I thought, due to the wounds on his neck that the cause was injected poison.” Jeremy turned the corpse’s head lightly, nodding along the explanation, focused. “At the time of the murder the only exits and entrances were locked, making it the perfect locked room situation.”

“I see.” The Pastor stated softly, letting go.

“I still have complaints about the door.” Evelyn mentioned glancing sideways at Earl Gray.

“Can you show me the room where he died?” Jeremy asked, standing, clapping his hands as if to get rid of dust.

“Of course…” Evelyn said with a little nod, gesturing the group outside.

“Mr Jeremy is sharp-eyed so if we show him the room he might see things we missed.” Arthur was saying as they made their way up and to the other side of the house. Gray stopped suddenly in the middle of yet another flight of stairs.
“That old guy is not following us, you know…” he mentioned, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

But soon they started to hear the voices and steps.

“Most of the passages are disused. A good deal of them are sealed.” Evelyn was saying as they made their way up the stairs. “But yes it would be like a small labyrinth within the walls. The keys are very small, easy to conceal and carry. There are no maps of those paths except those the servant’s memory possess… Tanaka would be the one to talk to about the servant corridors…”

“So there is no way the passages could have been used.” Jeremy’s voice came next, pondering.

“Very unlikely. Signs of use would be glaringly obvious.” They came into view. The Pastor was patting down his face with a handkerchief. He looked up and smiled slightly, chuckling.

“I’m coming, I’m coming. So sorry for being late. I was ascertaining the state of the so called secret passages…”

“Let us get this over with.” Gray complained, moving up once again, grumbling. “This is why old guys are…”

“Moreover… aren’t you carrying a handkerchief there?” Arthur complained, still annoyed over the treatment of his own piece of tissue.

There were several moments of silence as Jeremy walked around, calmly and pausing at each point of interest, examining the room with lenses and a critical eye. He finally stopped and returned to the centre of the room, facing his audience.

“Hmm… it seems there are several killers in this crime.” He stated, serious and solemn.

“So there were multiple killers after all.” The Earl said, slowly, shaking his head.

“In this household I count at least eight known ones.” Evelyn whispered, rolling her eyes, turning away, walking towards the slashed doorway.

“IT will be simple to catch Georg’s killer but it will be rather troublesome to catch Phelps killer.” Jeremy stated, thinking his findings over. “In order to avoid further victims it’ll be better if we catch this criminal soon.” He nodded as if approving his own words, looking outside, frowning. “No human will be able to get out in this storm anyway.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur asked suddenly.

“In order to catch Phelps killer there are two requirements.” Jeremy elucidated. “One is for night to fall.” The Pastor touched one finger, bending it gently. “The second is your cooperation Earl.” He continued, turning towards the household master.

“My cooperation?” The Earl asked suddenly confused.

“Yes. I’ll tell you everything once night has fallen.” Jeremy evaded the answer. There was a momentary pause interrupted by Gray’s eagerness to finish the examination.

“Well… next up is the butler. Let’s go back.”
“I believe you told me the butler was stabbed to death after being hit.” Jeremy stated as they walked into the third and final guest room, approaching the covered corpse. “Well then excuse me…” He stated, approaching and crouching, reaching for the fabric of the sheet. The Earl moved a bit, looking suddenly faint and wobbly, gripping the wordsmith’s sleeve as if about to swoon.

“Earl…” Solicitous as he was the man was immediately there to steady the young Earl. “What is wrong are you feeling all right?” Earl Gray looked away from the corpse examination.

“I’m sorry. Seeing Sebastian’s corpse so many times… is just too much for me.” The Earl said in a thin, strained voice. Evelyn scoffed and approached.

“Why don’t you take a break outside?” Arthur helped him to get steady.

“Thank you Mr Wordsmith.” The Earl answered in a thin voice.

“Weren’t you fine when you stripped the butler’s corpse a while ago?” Earl Gray stated.

“Young Master… are you sure this is not simply a lapse into that cold because you have been avoiding your medicine?” She leaned down a bit, berating him. Arthur looked surprised for a moment as the young man looked up, his eye wide and innocently bright. She tskd and glance at Gray. “You don’t seem to believe in a grief threshold in any event.”

“I see.” There was a fluttering sound as Jeremy placed the sheet down once again standing, interrupting the side scene. “It seems the butler’s death was quite straightforward.” He stated.

“You’re done already?” Gray asked, dismayed.

“Yes. I’ve seen enough.”

“It’s almost diner time. I’m hungry.” What’s on the menu today?”

“Who knows?” The Earl deadpanned. “Shall I ask the servants?”

“It’s fine. I’ll be looking forward to it. I’m heading back.” Gray sighed and changed subject, walking away.

“Well why don’t we head back too?” Arthur suggested.

“I have preparations to look over for tonight so please go ahead.” Jeremy said as the group broke apart.

Earl Gray waited until the corridor was cleared, peeking, hurrying then, going for the last door. He felt something was wrong and he just had to check… in his haste he collided with something that gave a startled gasp as she fell and looked up with those unsettlingly big brown eyes, blinking in bewildered surprise.

He grunted in annoyance, sidestepping the secretary, slamming the door open and ripping the sheet away to see the corpse of the butler, eyes narrowing, standing there for a moment, torn between surprise and relief, the fact that his fears seemed unfounded and the annoyance of being proven wrong.
Mouser smirked behind him, standing up, barely a rustle accompanying the movement, a taint of red in her eyes, leaving with deliberately quickened steps, as if frightened, hiding on the side corridor, masking her presence with the usual tricks, waiting for him to leave.

Mouser stopped by the kitchen on her way to the room to get a new smoke, watching the lecture and activity. She shook her head. It was very familiar to the usual pattern and she was not entirely sure why none of the players were not noticing it. Maybe because it was both a routine and a pressing need to have something for dinner. In any event she made the detour.

“Pastor… you’re being very solicitous, helpful and obvious.” The thief spoke up calmly and quietly, faking praise. Jeremy looked over his shoulder, having already tied an apron around his waist and made a beeline for the knife stands. “Tone it down.” She whispered, plucking a cigarette from Bard’s pocket as he walked by, carrying the needed pots and pans, nicking it without him noticing, lighting the cylinder on a nearby burner.

“Truly?” Jeremy chuckled as the servants moved along his instructions, acknowledging her opinion. Mouser smirked and shook her head, blowing smoke nonchalantly. “In any event… if we don’t hurry nigh will be upon us along with all the creatures it allows to infest the world.”

“Blatantly.” She muttered, walking out, trailing silvery smoke.

The small smile of pride after dinner proved to be a success was not helping but most people tended not to notice other’s mannerisms if they had no reason to be watching. And Earl Gray was the kind that had no reason to be watching if food was in his line of sight. But soon, courtesy of Lau, the business shifted once again to the matter at hand and the killer in the house.

“Well then… now that we are all full why don’t you finally let us on the truth of these incidents?” the Chinese stated, folding his napkin, dropping it on the table, looking at each of the guest’s faces. That made Gray look a bit more focused, suspiciously glancing at the Pastor. Evelyn glanced at him, shifting a bit. Arthur shivered. Her fingers had curled inwards slightly, touching the sleeve’s cuff. And knowing what was within…

“Let us not be hasty now.” Jeremy stated pleasantly, finishing his own meal and placing the silverware down. “There are still some things I want to prepare before that. Will you lend me your assistance Earl?” He asked once again, looking at the Young Earl’s chair.

“Yes.” Ciel Phantomhive acquiesced. “What should I do?”

“Well then… Earl…” Jeremy made a slight pause. “Take off your clothes.” He asked, the request starting the young man into a shout.
Chapter 45

Of course when everything was tense the chapter one would end up in was either the one that would make you want to laugh or in the middle of hot and heavy action. It was the latter case. Somehow Mouser believed that laughing in a situation such as that might be a bit too much for the frazzled nerves of the people that jumped every time the page’s paper hissed as she turned them. And for all they knew she could be reading a manual on how to catch criminals… the thief smirked, the cigarette wobbling a bit on her lips, and flipped another page as the character was flipped arse over tits. Not bloody likely… what was essential was keeping a straight face.

Slowly she closed the book, placing it down, next to her, as self-assured steps walked down the hallway and Tanaka opened, still leisurely reclined against the widow seat. The guests were tensely looking at the doorway. The trio had improvised weapons in hand as to not unduly spook said guests. Lau was sitting on the opposite position of Mouser, in the window, glancing at the thinning rain outside. The boyo was bundled into one of Sebastian’s outer-coats, sitting on the bed, on the entre of the present people.

“Excuse me.” Tanaka knocked and entered, bowing quickly and efficiently. “We were successful in capturing the killer.” He announced. A sigh of relief echoed throughout the room. Mouser puffed a bit of smoke into a ring, changing her position slightly as the old man entered the room completely, not deeming necessary to close the door. “I told them that the Young Master and the rest were hiding in master Woolsey’s so I expect them to arrive soon.”

It was indeed soon. Arthur and Gray walked in first, the eyes of the Queen’s butler looking grim and dull. Mouser smirked, letting out another small huff of silver, one eyebrow arching. That look of unhappy frustration was getting funnier by the minute.

“We brought the killer along.” Earl Gray announced when Jeremy walked in, carrying a writhing tangled thing between his hands. As expected Irene had a shriek to say.

“*This* is the killer?” Bard grated out, staring at the writhing ribbon of a fanged creature.

“A snake?” the boyo almost whispered his eye wide.

“It’s hard to believe but it really came to get the young lady wearing the Earl’s clothes.” Arthur admitted. RanMao nodded, bored. The buttons of the formal jacket looked like they were about to pop.

“To compensate for their lack of sight snakes have extremely developed sense of earing and smell. That is why they are able to locate their prey in the dark through sound and smell.” Jeremy explained, still handling the venomous creature. “In other words… the snake was most likely trained by being fed right after being exposed to the Earl’s scent. If one uses a snake it doesn’t matter if one has a key or an alibi.” And then the scholar explanations continued. Mouser blew more smoke and cracked open her book once more, tuning out. “This is a black mamba. They inhabit South Africa” note the oh so convenient location. “and possess a strong neurotoxin. The victim will inevitably die within one hour of being bitten. Finally it possesses special characteristics such as the world’s fastest movement and excellence in climbing trees. It’s the perfect snake to use for murder.” Africa’s deadliest snake. Still convenient. “But a snake is still a snake. It didn’t know whether the person it bit was the Earl or not.”

Bollocks to that. Mouser flipped the page with a snort.
“I see… for the criminal it was an unfortunate development that the Earl was sleeping elsewhere.” Arthur had pulled out his notebook and was scribbling furiously once more as well as reviewing what he had penned down before. If a trained African snake was the criminal… how and who.

“And the one who slept in my bed was Patrick Phelps.” The boyo said, nodding, following the event’s logic.

“I figured it might appear again when it got hungry so we stood guard and it appeared, as expected. We were lucky that this young lady could wear the Earl’s clothes and take his place.” Jeremy stated, nodding as RanMao fidgeted within the fabric, complaining about its tightness. “The snake’s abilities were also the reason why we did not use Evelyn. Her scent is too mixed with tobacco to be overpowered by the Earl’s.” Mouser made a little ring of smoke, chuckling. “In an emergency situation the Earl would not be able to avoid the attack.” And that was why they did not use the boyo as the usual bait. Also it would have looked bad to the normal people if a child was used…

“And if he died we would be in trouble.” Lau stated, laughing slightly. “Right RanMao?”

“Glad you’re safe.” RanMao whispered in a very small voice, embracing the boyo who immediately started to hiss and struggle.

“At least put something on!” he shouted, squirming.

“Oh my, he escaped.” Lau stated suddenly when the boyo managed to get away, coughing and trying to regain his dignity.

“Too bad.” RanMao stated, huffy.

Mouser smirked and moved on with the story, marking the page.

“In any case… I was made to wear the butler’s coat to hide my body odour?” The boyo asked.

“Isn’t it great how it hid your entire body?” Jeremy said with a wide smile.

“You really don’t know when to stop talking do you?” The boyo stated grimly, threatening. It wasn’t very effective.

“Do you want me to add to it?” Mouser asked, placing the book down, standing, snuffing out the cigarette discreetly, leaning. The boyo groaned, hissing again.

“However it’s illegal to transport poisonous snakes on trading ships.” Arthur was saying, keeping a wary eye on the snake. “I used to be a doctor on a boat that sailed the African sea course as a part time job, the luggage was checked quite strictly.”

“Which means it was smuggled.” Lau said after a thoughtful pause, RanMao once more draped around him. “Bribing a privately managed freight ship is probably the easiest way.” One.

“Indeed… although you would need close connections with African business.” Two.

“If you’re talking Africa imported products would be gold or dia…” three. Dawning of the realization for Arthur as he was completing the sentence, all eyes turning to Woolsey.

“N… no! It wasn’t me! Trading its Kunlun’s thing!” Of course he would try to shift the blame towards the foreigner.
“Aww… we don’t do business with African companies.” Lau stated in a very demure voice, looking actually disappointed by that.

“Well it really is a bit much to be deciding the killer based on a snake from Africa alone.” Gray reasoned calmly.

“That’s right. How about when Siemens was killed? I have an alibi!” Woolsey tried to grab at the tiny lifeline he had just been offered.

“That alibi might not be worth much at all.” Jeremy stated, having placed the snake safely locked inside of an empty suitcase, crossing his arms, watching the commotion.

“What?” The accused stated, startled.

“What do you mean?” Keane asked, confused.

“What if the corpse the butler and others found was not a corpse.” The Pastor suggested, creating doubt and dissent.

“What?” Arthur whispered and then shook his head, thinking back. “But he didn’t have a pulse and the blood on his chest…” He reasoned, eyes narrowed, expression distressed.

“Did you thoroughly inspect the wound?” Jeremy asked softly, pushing just a bit.

“That… it was quite dark so wasn’t able…” Arthur admitted with a sigh.

“Does everyone know about the potion Juliet drank in *Romeo and Juliet*?” Jeremy seemingly changed the subject, looking around.

“You mean to go into a state of apparent death but come back to life?” It was no surprise when the actress was the one to speak up.

“You mean?” Arthur picked up on the meaning and heading of such a conversation.

“That’s right. It actually exists. A poison that induces such a state.”

“What?” Woolsey shouted suddenly, not really helping his position.

“There is a substance called tetrodotoxin that was recently discovered and is being studied.” Jeremy stated, calmly and sure of himself. “It seems that if you refine it in a certain way you will be able to achieve a state of apparent death much like Juliet’s”

“Tetrodotoxin is the poison puffer fish and certain octopuses carry isn’t it?”

“As expected you have the latest information doctor.” Mouser snorted. *Expected.* “When I investigated Lord Siemen’s body I noticed a faint scent of the sea. Perhaps that was the scent of a poison made from puffer fish. I just have one question here. Why would the scent of a poison come from someone who was allegedly stabbed?”

“It was set up?” the boyo stated grimly. The fidget Earl Gray betrayed was small but was there, along with a tightness in his eyes.

“Indeed.” Jeremy stated gleefully. “He himself drank the poison and stained his shirt, pretending to be dead. Then it wouldn’t matter what room he was put in. He probably figured that people without specific medical knowledge wouldn’t examine the wound closely, hence it would work as temporary deception at least.”
“I should have looked more closely…” Arthur whispered, grimly.

“But when I checked the body he had certainly been stabbed to death.” Jeremy turned the game again.

“So what was meant to be a fake turned out to be a real murder?” Lau asked, his hands resting inside the sleeves.

“If we look at the situation like that the killer might have wanted to lure the Earl into a trap.” Arthur deduced warily. “It’s impossible to know whether Lord Siemens was an accomplice though.” Pausing for a moment, thinking back on the party made Arthur sigh, his worry and suspicion becoming more pronounced. “He seemed out of bounds once he had some alcohol in him. The killer might have invited him to “give everyone good scare” or something.”

“But the Lord and myself had never met before.” The boyo noted, playing innocent to the hilt. “There was no reason for him to lure me into a trap.” Hence he voiced the other option. “We can just look at him as someone being used and silenced by being killed.”

“How sad.” Arthur nodded, seeing that it was the only explanation that made sense in that context.

“There would have been plenty of chances to talk to him during the party.” Jeremy elaborated. Being present during the event or not did not matter. Everyone knew how such things played out.

“If so anyone could have egged him on! I don’t have any kind of alibi!” Woolsey shouted, panicking over the new lack of security his situation offered.

“We could inquire as to what everyone talked about with Lord Siemens during the party but…” Jeremy started but smirked as he noticed the uncomfortable shifts around the room. “Let’s not. Humans are lying creatures.” He admitted pragmatically.

“That’s right. In fact you could be lying as well.” Gray stated suddenly, scoffing. “If he drank the poison where did the bottle go?”

“That’s easy. He got rid of it in a place no one could examine. In the fire for example.” The boyo supplied.

Mouser smirked and glanced at the window. It was clearing out… soon enough the phone would be back up and they had to wrap that little drama up before anyone else came nosing around. Say Lord Randall.

“That’s right. There was a ridiculous amount of wood in the fire back then.” Bard spoke up.

“We wouldn’t find it there definitely. And if it was collected after the afterglow died…” Arthur opened his notes once more, finding the other little pieces.

“However that wasn’t possible. Because of Sebastian.” Ciel said, still grim, still serious.

“That’s right. Before he could destroy the evidence, the butler had already come to collect the ashes.” Arthur answered promptly, finding yet another piece of the puzzle.

“That’s nonsense!” the target of the accusation whimpered, stepping back.

“If he had found proof of a set up his precious alibi would go up in smoke. He acted quickly and immediately killed Sebastian.” Mouser picked up the tread, making sure her voice was kept low, making everyone turn and make an effort to listen. “Next he recovered the evidence and returned to
his room.” She smirked slowly.

“Then the one who has it is the killer! I don’t have any such thing! You searched us right?” Woolsey declared, growing frantic.

“That’s right. Outside the hearth.” The earl answered, smirking too. “Isn’t it the perfect hiding place? It’s not like we would come to search the room again. If you recovered and destroyed it after we were done searching it’d be perfect.”

“That’s a false accusation.” The man shrieked. “There’s nothing like that…”

“Then show us.” Grimsby was sufficiently prickled to move towards the fire, to fulfil the requirements needed for the crime to be solved. “Let’s see if it’s there or not!” he picked up the shovel and started poking about the dying fire, pulling out ash and something shimmering. “Glass shards?”

“But it’s not like we can tell what it was like?” Arthur said slowly as Jeremy approaching, ignoring the ash in the air, crouching and picking up the pieces.

“It’ll be fine if we pick up and put it back together.” The pastor declared nonchalantly, staring his work.

“That’s impossible. It’s been reduced to bits.” Arthur whispered, in awe.

“Nonsense, it’s like a puzzle without a picture.” The Pastor scoffed, working, holding the complete puzzle in hand, appraising it for a moment. “Hmm… it’s done.” He declared after a few dead seconds. “Looks like an ampule of medicine.”

“To find this here means…” Arthur, well, virtually everyone stared at the now cornered man.

“You’re the killer after all! You murderer!” Theatrically said by Keane.

“I have no idea what this is!” Woolsey shouted, panicking. In any case a denial only made one look guiltier. The trick was to either admit it outrageously or say nothing and run like hellhounds were on their heels.

“To want to trap a child… why on earth would you do that?” Arthur whispered, befuddled.

“Diamonds.” The boyo spoke up. At the confused looks tossed around he turned his head a little. “Evelyn.” She looked down with an unamused frown.

“There was a top secret plan with the major company in diamond industry, Rose and Funton. Together they virtually possess the world’s leading technology. A cooperation in that effect was being negotiated. It would impact greatly in the jewellery industry. But a couple of weeks ago the president, Mr Rose, was murdered and the plan was put on hold. However if the plan was put into motion again the Woolsey company, that boasts about having the latest technology, would certainly have its reputation damaged. Not to mention loosing clients, support and contracts. Social reputation would be destroyed and in no time so would be the actual business.”

“That’s why you thought you’d kill me right?” Ciel spoke up after the reasons were placed on the table. “That was a careless thought anyway.”

“I didn’t do it!” Woolsey shouted, his face distorted by fear. “Please believe me! I’m being set up by the Queen’s…” Again with that… this time he was stopped by a blade pressed against his throat by an angry looking Gray. It was amazing how abruptly he shut up, eyes wide, darting along the
length of the metal.

“Shut up.” He demanded, the hunting game over. “I don’t need your explanations. I’ll listen to your stories in jail.”

“I didn’t do it!” The man tried again, close to weeping.
Mouser smirked nodded at the boyo, leaving for an instant.

“If you don’t want to be killed I suggest you be quiet. I’m really in a bad mood right now.” Gray answered.

“Earl Gray.” The boyo called as she handed him the chains, sagging a bit under the weight but managing to keep it hidden. “I have quite the fitting item is here. How about we use it?”

Gray was not amused and remained so while he proceeded to chain the man.

“Let’s leave the rest to the police.” Arthur suggested.
Mouser nodded, glancing at the windows. Almost clear, almost dawn.

“As soon as the phone starts working again I’ll call the Yard.” She assured out loud, mostly for the guest’s benefit.

“We solved the case with this.” The boyo stated with a nod, sighing.

“I’m so relieved…” Irene whispered, being embraced by Keane.

“Come to think of it what was that dark red liquid?” Finny blurted out suddenly.

“Finny there is no need for that anymore!” Meyrin panicked.

_Liquid?_ Mouser frowned, turning around when Jeremy chuckled.

“Ah… that’s right. I haven’t discussed that yet.” He admitted.

“Dark red liquid?” The boyo asked, glancing at the Pastor.

“The maid seemed to have found a dark red liquid in Ms Irene’s room. She was wondering if the always young and beautiful looking Ms Irene was a vampire.” Jeremy explained. Mouser sized up the woman for a moment. Vampires?

“Are you questioning Irene?” Keane’s protective streak made another appearance.

“Grimsby please…” Irene said evenly.

“I daresay the contents of the bottle were this, right?” Jeremy held leaf, showing it to the people present, the tilt of it making the object particularly visible to Finny.

“Ah! That’s a red perilla.” The young man identified it immediately.

“The red perilla has an anti-aging effect.” Jeremy said after putting it away.

“That’s right.” Irene whispered, blushing slightly.

“The extract is taken from the boiled down leaves is the origin of your beauty, is it not?” The Pastor continued, dispelling the misunderstood.
“I’m sorry.” Irene chuckled, holding Keane’s arm. “I never thought it’d turn into something like this. I take it because I want to remain young with him forever.” And the director blushed slightly, smiling, happy.

“It can also restore fatigue. I tried to make some.” The Pastor showed a different bottle filled with a dark red liquid. “On that notion… why don’t we celebrate the solving of this crime by toasting with some of this?” he picked up the cups and started pouring.

“Well if Mr Wordsmith would like to make the toast…” The boyo asked as Meyrin apologised to the actress.

“Me?” Arthur asked, surprised.

“Because of your indispensable help today.” The Young Earl clarified as the cups were offered.

“Well then… to celebrate the solving of the crime… cheers.” Arthur said, half bashful, half proud.

Mouser chuckled and left the room.

The Yard arrived a few hours later, as the sun advanced in the sky. Everything looked shiny and sparkly after the heavy rain. There was once more a black clad duo flanking the Earl, watching as a disgruntled Gray guided the murderer into the jail-coach and the guest’s carriages were wheeled around the manor to take the people to their homes along with another coach for the Wordsmith.

Arthur looked back. Miss Crows was smiling, turning back into the house, following the Earl. A knock on the coach’s window, snapping him away from his thoughts.

“Mr Jeremy?” Arthur whispered, smiling, answering to the man’s own seemingly eternal grin.

“What a gloomy face even though we solved the case.” The man said, observing him for a moment, waiting.

“No, it’s not like that.” Arthur managed to clear his throat and answer. “You helped us tremendously Mr Jeremy. Thank you very much.”

“I should be thanking you.” Jeremy answered, chuckling. “We probably won’t meet again but all the best.” He extended his hand, changing the tone and language suddenly, speaking French. “Mr Wordsmith… thank you for taking care of the young master.” The carriage took off, taking a bewildered man away, looking back with dawning shock and wide eyes.
Mouser checked the clock when the sound of hooves and wheels returned and the Wordsmith, looking pale and out of breath stormed through the hallway. Well that was quick… she returned the watch to its place, playing with the diamond rings she had filched from Woolsey as he was taken. Surely he would not miss some of the pretty stones. The boyo stopped and leaned against the railing, glancing at the doorway, at the new arrival. Mouser sat next to him, waiting, leaning slightly forward. Jeremy stopped on the staircase, glancing back, smirking softly.

“Why so flustered? Did you forget something?” He asked, not breaking away from character.

“I came back to confirm the truth.” The young man panted, looking determined, eyes narrowing. “Pastor Jeremy… no. Butler Sebastian.”

Jeremy lost his smile. Mouser clapped, chuckling. Then the man snickered.

“Excellent.” He reached for the fake face, pulling it off in a soft mass of flesh coloured features. The Earl scoffed, leaning further back. “Seems like we underrated you a bit.” Sebastian appraised. “Or it would be more likely to say we have rudely underestimated you Mr Wordsmith.”

“Also you were being rather obvious in your mannerisms.” Mouser added, playing with the rings, new and old.

“You were forewarned.” Sebastian turned slightly, approaching his wife, tidying one of the fashionably loose strands. She shrugged. “No one else seemed to notice.”

“No one else sleeps with you.” Arthur fidgeted and blushed. “Besides they were a bit too… hurt to notice that you were bossing them around in the exact same tone.” Her fingers had sneaked down to her pant legs, patting the fabric, looking for something. “Probably though it was a trick of grief.”

“I… I can’t believe…” That dragged their attention back. “How could something so unreal be happening…”

“Oh? Didn’t you come back because you were certain of this?” Sebastian asked, looking carefully doubtful. “If you had just gone back you would have returned to your peaceful reality.” It was Mouser’s time to scoff, looking away with a vague smirk. “So why did you come back then? Trembling, even.”

“Because if my uncomfortable feeling wasn’t simply an uncomfortable feeling…” Arthur started, trying to take control of his trembling self. “I’d have to go after the Yard’s carriage immediately.”

The boyo laughed suddenly.

“Your sense of justice is so strong Mr Wordsmith. You did mention in your works that you liked the knights of the Middle Ages.” The smile turned dark and mocking. “Didn’t you realize that if you knew the truth you wouldn’t be able to return home?” Arthur shivered and took a step back. Mouser glanced at both of them with a patronizing smirk, returning to a playful bobbing of her boots. “I’m just joking.” The Earl followed the lack of response from both servants to carry out the previous threat with a mild snigger and wave of his hand. “It is as you guessed. Woolsey wasn’t the criminal. In this crime at least.” Arthur couldn’t contain a look of utter shock. The boyo shrugged and started to climb the stairs once more. “However he deserves to be in that carriage.”

“What do you mean?” Arthur whispered in a slightly broken voice.
“Let’s not stand and talk. We might as well have some elevenses prepared.” The boyo continued and returned to his previous default. “Sebastian.”

“Understood.” Sebastian bowed and turned away from the Earl, towards the guest. “Mouser will take you to the greenhouse.” Arthur hesitated as Mouser leaped down the rail, straightening her clothes. “You wish to know the truth, don’t you?” The butler prodded, chuckling. “Don’t be scared. We won’t eat you.”

Mouser reached the foot of the stairs.

“This way.” She said, moving along.

Green, lush and warm. Plants, metal, stone and glass carefully and artistically arranged around, creation a small fey-like forest surrounding a marble circle where the cast iron table and chairs were placed, covered in delicate fabric and ready to receive the pair that would be attending the elevenses. Arthur looked around, in awe was Mouser guided him towards the centre of the greenhouse. The boyo came next, talking a seat with a heavy sigh. Sebastian arrived next pushing a tea cart, placing and preparing the needed porcelain items.

“Today I prepared you Fortnum and Masons Darjeeling Second Flush.” He placed the filled cups down without a sound. “For snacks I have petit fours.” Sebastian continued, placing the silver platter down.

Arthur gulped, staring at the delicately prepared spread in front him. Mouser was standing behind the Earl, watching. Said Earl reached for the tea cup, smirking.

“We haven’t poisoned it so please help yourself.” He took a small sip of the tea, giving it his approval. “So...” He asked, reclining against the iron high back of the chair. “How did you know he was alive, Mr Wordsmith?”

Sebastian finished the serving and placed himself on the opposite side of Mouser, behind the Earl, to the left.

“Actually it was not as if I had some sort of conviction that he was still alive.” Arthur admitted after a moment, still staring at the food placed in front of him. He took a deep breath to steady himself before continuing. “It was more like... I kept having this vague sense of discomfort. I’m not sure how to say this but he was just...” He glanced at Sebastian and then away. “Too perfect.”

Mouser chuckled to the side. Sebastian looked simply thoughtful. The Earl’s expression didn’t shift. “Even though I had this uncomfortable feeling about the Butler Sebastian and the Pastor Jeremy there wasn’t a single flaw in either of them to be suspicious of. They were too perfect. So perfect it was strange indeed.”

“It seems your assessment was indeed correct.” Sebastian conceded to Mouser, nodding. She just shrugged.

“Perhaps he was just looking rather closely.” The thief pointed out. “And you were toying with him.”

“And by this you are trying to say...” He turned towards the Wordsmith who gulped in a fearful reflex before picking up the thought thread again.

“That there was no way you could have prepared everything so perfectly before dying... well...
being murdered. The food, the owl, even your words… to me they were too perfect.” He fidgeted in place. “That wasn’t just a foreboding. The pastor Jeremy that appeared afterwards was suspicious no matter how you looked at it but his alibi was perfect. So perfect that there was no reason to doubt it. And then his words at our parting… the moment I realized the true nature of my discomfort and realized that ‘the possibility of something unreal’ that would overthrow all our reasoning.”

“Something unreal, you say?” The boyo asked, placing the cup down. Sebastian frowned, waiting.

“The possibility that the butler Sebastian had not died.” Arthur blurted out, hands busy with the towel, scrunching it. “When I thought of that I could not contain myself.”

“To think you’d come to believe this after just those words…” Sebastian shook his head. “You’re all that one would expect of someone who has earned the Young Master’s praise.” He prodded.

“Stop saying such unnecessary things.” The boyo huffed, glaring.

They kept the game for just a moment before Sebastian returned to the questions.

“And? What part of me made you think so?” It was an inquiry with the objective of improving future performances. The issue of perfection was a touchy point. Possibly he had never considered that being too perfect could also be as much as an issue as being incompetent.

“At the time of Lord Siemen’s death…” Arthur started with the first strange thing. Personally Mouzer would have picked as first the somersaulting and bottle-grabbing at the party. “At that time you weren’t doing anything. Just observing our movements. We’re talking about the person who acted with such swiftness during the disturbances at the party.” So he chalked that one as simple efficiency. Well, then… “When I think about it now I can’t help to think that there was a reason for it.” Mouzer shook her head slightly, making a small amused sound, leaning against the chair. “Then when the Earl was suspected you didn’t utter a single word in his defence.” Sebastian smiled faintly, lowering his head in a half nod. “For a butler to not protect his master… it’s a little strange. But the suspicion would be lifted as soon as the next murder occurred.”

“Of course I realized this.” He admitted without a pause.

“However that was not the reason I did not protect the Young Master.” Sebastian pointed out with a slight hand wave.

“You probably thought it served me right.” The boyo stated, sipping his tea, glaring.

“Not at all.” The accusation was answered with a smile and dubious sincerity. It might be an issue with the phrasing. “I was just taken aback at how, while you predicted something like that would be set up, you gave in to sleep and I was left to take care of the mess.”

“Wait… by predicting you mean…” Arthur caught on that, his eyes widening. Mouzer smirked, as she watched the boyo and Sebastian exchange glares vs smile again. The question broke the match.

“We knew beforehand that there was a person mixed up in the dinner party that wanted to torment the Young Master.” Sebastian elucidated, pouring more tea for the Earl.

“So you mean… you predicted this incident would occur?” The shock didn’t seem to have worn out yet.
“Indeed.”

Sebastian chuckled, amused.

“We also predicted Master Siemens would be made a sacrifice for it and I would be killed.” Sebastian admitted easily.

Arthur was dumbstruck, staring back and forth, trying to make sense of the new shift of events.

“We prepared accordingly.” Mouser supplied. “There were also alternatives in case I was made target or they decided to go directly after the Young Master.”

“Why you two…” Arthur whispered. No. Stupid question. He was the butler, she was the secretary… they were important pieces in the workings of the household and the company, hard to replace under any circumstance. And the fact that a predecessor had been murdered while doing their job would make others wary of taking the position.

“We can start with the matters that involved Master Siemens’ death.” Sebastian said thoughtfully. “I heard the glass shatter within the locked room, before the scream that alerted the others. But there was nothing broken to be seen after I forced the door open. I didn’t smell blood…” The butler continued, thinking back.

“You didn’t?” Mouser interrupted with a small frown. “But the stain on his chest was blood. Old, stale, rotting blood.” She pointed out, making a grimace.

“Maybe I overlooked the scent because it wasn’t human.” Sebastian admitted after a thoughtful pause.

“And there was the smoke and alcohol he was drenched in.” Mouser answered right back, clicking her tongue.

“It was inconsequential.” Sebastian concluded the exchange. “In any case the scent of the poison was quite clear. And whatever bottle it had been contained in would surely be…”

“Wait a minute.” Arthur just had to speak up. “Why didn’t you say so immediately? If you had said so, surely it would have been settled without the Earl being suspected!”

“The Young Master seemed to be observing the situation so I did the same.” Sebastian supplied quietly.

“There was nothing to be gained by speaking up at that moment.” Mouser said, shrugging.

“A murder under those circumstances…” The boyo picked up the conversation, picking up one of the petit fours. “The first though I had was that it must have been a set-up.”

“It wasn’t unexpected in the least knowing what we knew.” The secretary piped in chuckling.

“Aside from being alive or dead, I did guess Siemens had taken the poison himself.” The boyo continued. “After that it’s as the butler says.” A slight smirk appeared on his face as he leaned forward, interlocking fingers. “I thought we wouldn’t be too late to catch the criminal’s tail.”

“You would be if he wasn’t utter rubbish.” Mouser said with disdain. “Too focused on the petty scheme to be effective in the getaway.”

“I see…” Arthur’s fingers were drumming on the table top. “That’s why you made him refill the
coal. I... caught on that.” He admitted when Sebastian’s glance sharpened for a few seconds. “There was no need to collect ashes in an empty room. Even so he was killed in that empty room while collecting ashes.”

“Indeed the Young Master’s order true meaning was ‘inspect the hearth closely’.” Sebastian the chuckled and glanced down. “Though you are such a cruel master, giving the order knowing I would be killed if I inspected the hearth.” Mouser chuckled bitterly.

“Lau’s very right when he says the boyo’s a bully.” She whispered leaning down on the chair’s back, levelling with the Earl. “The games we play…”

“I never thought it would go as we expected for so long.” Ciel said after a moment of absently sipping tea.

“As you expected?” Arthur babbled, the confusion crawling into his head steadily.

“Yes.” Sebastian stated with a nod. “That night I was killed. This wasn’t a scenario decided by fate or god. But it was one decided by my master, with timing decided by my master. I was killed by the criminal as decided by my master. I was killed that night by the one that had come to torment the Young Master.” He paused the string of affirmations. “I was murdered by the Queen’s butler, Earl Charles Gray.”

“The bratty annoying glutton.” Mouser supplied.

Mouser watched as the blood flowed from the multiples wounds that had been allowed to land. She watched as Sebastian fell to the floor and bleed all over the carpet. She watched as the shards were tossed out and the Queen’s envoy walked out of the room, grumbling about having to find Siemens. She walked out of her hiding space and gripped the handle of the poker, pulling it out.

Sebastian grumbled as he sat up, dishevelled and blood-stained... his own blood. It was not a good sight. She didn’t like it. Mouser placed the poker down to wait.

“To make successive attacks to a vital point in an instant...” The demon appraised his state, knowing he could not allow the healing to truly take place yet. “As expected from the Queen’s butler.” He stood up slowly, doing what could be done for his outfit.

“Can we return the favour?” The thief asked, glancing at the storm outside. Sebastian smiled a bit before leaving, continuing with his tasks.

“I followed Earl Gray to the wine cellar where we had places Master Siemens where he had just woken up. And was truly killed by the Queen’s butler.” Sebastian continued with the explanation of the events.

“So you’re saying you knew who the criminal was?” Arthur was shocked. “And then just... threw your life away? All because it was your Master’s order?” He did not understand that kind of unflinching obedience.

“Indeed.” Sebastian stated, lowering his head in a solemn nod. “I don’t tell lies.” He chuckled discreetly. “In any case the ruthless way the Young Master exploits people... and I mean butlers...
deserves a royal warrant.”

“What do you mean by that?” The boyo said with a slight annoyed glare.

“He means you are a meanie.” Mouser explained with a childish clapping of her hands. “Also I think it was kind of a compliment on your ability to be somewhat of a…”

Sebastian interrupted whatever teasing she was going to go into and moved on with the tale.

“After that I made the preparations for three days’ worth of food, I gave instructions for the next day to the gardener and chef. For when the worst came to the worst I gave the owl I had captured in the forest the day before to the maid. And I wrote a report regarding the hearth inspection to the Young Master. Then I returned to my work as the Young Master had asked.”

The poker went through his chest. Mouser watched as new blood stained his clothes, as Sebastian allowed his body to slump down. The angle was not exactly right and from the front instead of behind… He could have asked her to do it. In the bad mood she was in… She watched as he made himself look like a corpse. It actually made her feel a sympathy pang. Maybe not.

“Sebastian…” There was no answer but he was listening. “I don’t like seeing you like this.”

“Weep for me then.” He asked after a chuckle, barely shifting.

Mouser sniggered.

“I’ll put on my sad face.” She conceded.

“I was found by Finny, as it was planned. I just meant for it to be a small revenge but Earl Gray’s puzzled expression… It certainly made me laugh.” He mentioned the shift of the pokers’ position as a simple joke, shrugging. “The young Master put on quite the realistic show. Even though I wouldn’t have though he would hit me with his ring hand though. Furthermore with me in a position where I couldn’t move… his cunning was admirable. And Mouser is such a cold woman, using the Young Master to punish me.”

“I did stop him. After I felt the scolding was enough.” Mouser grumbled. She paused and sighed. “I was…”

“Upset?” Sebastian supplied teasingly, turning towards her.

“Annoyed.” Mouser answered, scoffing. Sebastian smiled at her answer, cupping her face for a moment. Mouser looked a bit taken aback and shook her head, blushing and pouting. “Moving along…” She prodded.

Sebastian continued.

“As a corpse I was able to obtain an alibi and freedom. It was a step forward in being able to freely accomplish my job. However… when you asked to see the bodies… Emergencies are a part of the Butler job… and as I returned… there was a voice and a call… a litter of kittens… could that be the call of light in the darkness?” That explained the cats in the closet. “I’m joking though. I relied
upon Mouser to stall and disguise any issue that might arise from the side of the living. And so I
managed to avoid the worst crisis of all my years as a butler by just a hair’s breadth and some
spooky words.” Mouser chuckled. “However it was the first time in my long life that I had to show
humans such a humiliating appearance.” The demon scoffed, showing his annoyance and fangs for
a split second. “After that I recovered the shards of the ampule that Earl Gray had tossed in the
garden. I threw those shards in Woolsey’s room and completed the Young Master’s order. Then I
camouflaged myself and returned, carrying the ticket and the owl as my alibies, as Pastor Jeremy.”

“I supplied the makeup, the wardrobe and we had several general plots set, depending on what the
Young Master would name him.” Mouser supplied. It had been quite the hassle to steal from at
least six theatres about town but what needed to be done had to be done. So it was done. In one
day. Half a day actually. While they did whatever they had to do in town. “Quite a nice choice, the
Pastor thing, actually, even if I wasn’t quite expecting the dramatic entrance…”

“I quite agree. It has a certain irony one could very well appreciate.”

“And it played nicely with the widow-married thing.”

The boyo scoffed, looking pointedly away as the pair was having that conversation.

“So the ticket was fake?” Arthur asked, befuddled.

“No. It’s the real thing. I actually went to London to buy it. During a break in the dinner party I
slipped out and bought it. I couldn’t see the performance for more than two minutes though.”
Sebastian answered ruefully.

“That’s impossible!”

“If you have any doubts then, please, when you return to London let the stub be inspected at the
ticket booth. I also have a receipt.”

“So everything, including the owl was just a part of his own plan to make Jeremy look
convincing.” Ciel concluded.

“What was written on that letter?” Arthur whispered.

“Ah yes… about that letter…” The boyo frowned. Sebastian snickered again. “It was just him
trying to be funny.”

“It was just some brain training for the Young Master since your studies were on hold during the
incident.”

“And you have to admit it boyo… your fibs need work and your timing can sometimes be dreadful.
Agility.”

“From there my double role…” Sebastian veered towards the business at hand once more.

“Wait…but I investigated your corpse with Jeremy.”

“That’s… not exactly true. If you recall we separated the corpses… so while I was changing, I also
changed roles. And again after all was set. I simply made sure I was one step ahead of everyone.
The only obstacle was Earl Gray. First we investigated Master Siemens. Then Mr Phelps. And as
you walked out I changed Mr Phelps’ body place. Mouser was there to help and concocted the
conversation about the servant’s passages, linking with the locked room mysteries so my delay
wouldn’t look too suspect.”
“About the passages… where… where was the key then? And… Wait… You’re saying the body was Phelps’?”

Mouser showed her left hand where the wedding rings were.

“Are you familiar with ring keys?” She asked softly.

“You had the key?” Arthur said surprised. She had lied the whole time?

“I had half of the key to where the key is. Which is somewhere in the house.” Mouser explained. “Sebastian had the other half and the knowledge of where he put it. Then I had both of them but that line of investigation was abandoned.”

“We had the rings made as a precaution, to keep the Young Master safe.” Sebastian said with a nod. “And yes. It was Mr Phelps body. Thanks to the Young Master’s bad acting, Mr Wordsmith personality and Mouser’s natural inclinations towards misdirection I was able to get by. Lying and deceiving, buying me time.” He smiled for her. Mouser rolled her eyes and glanced away. “You know the rest. I supported the Young Master as Pastor Jeremy. Master Woolsey was arrested. And the Young Master got away unscathed without a conviction.”

“I don’t get it… after hearing your story… the incident… no, everything. I can’t make head or tails of it anymore. Because I mean… if that story was real… then everything that happened was Queen Victoria’s butler, Earl Gray’s doing. To commit the murders he had the stage prepared by Earl Phantomhive and then even tried to make him out to be the killer. Even so the Earl and his servants, specifically his butler and secretary, made preparations to clear every suspicion surrounding themselves.” You could just hear his world shattering. “An even though they knew the killer was Earl Gray they made the innocent Mr Woolsey into the culprit.” Mouser scoffed at that. “It’s not that the incident is difficult… the situation is just unusual…”

“That might be. But there is nothing to be done about that. Because everything was her Majesty’s wish.” Ciel Phantomhive admitted.

“What?”

“The guest from Germany, Master Siemens. His bank made a large investment into the development of domestic ships. It wouldn’t be exaggerating if we were to say he was a key figure in Germany’s heavy industry development. Right now England’s position is being threatened by America and Germany. Her Majesty planed for Siemens’ to be crushed and the growth of Germany’s military power to be obstructed.”

“That would happen just by killing him?” Arthur whispered, surprised.

“Of course Siemens was no more than a regular banker.” The Earl admitted. “The power of that influence is perhaps somewhat like the flapping of a butterfly’s wings. However that will one day turn into a great storm. It’s called the ‘Butterfly Effect’ theory. Her Majesty Queen Victoria built up the great British Empire that she reigns over in just fifty years. Maybe she can somehow see which butterflies are able to change the world with the flapping of their wings.”

Blind trust and obedience.

“But why did Earl Gray wanted to pin the blame on you?” Arthur asked, having processed what had come before.

“I am ashamed to admit that a little prank of mine got found out.” Ciel said after a moment of silence.
“Because you lack agility.” Mouser said, earning a glare. She barely looked affected.

“I expected some kind of punishment if it were discovered.” The Earl said maturely.

“Like supervision. But we know what happened there.” Mouser broke that statement too.

“To think that she’d try to pin a murder on me… Her majesty sure has a sense of humour.”

“I’m pretty sure she just wanted to see you squirm and sweat for a bit you naughty little child.”

Sebastian chuckled slightly as the exchange, still standing primly next to the Earl.

“However I have always been good at playing games.” It was just a hint of bragging. “I used Woolsey, who I summoned here to be the escape goat, as a pawn.”

“Why the innocent…” Arthur babbled, worried.

“Innocence? Ridiculous. Diamond trading is a cutthroat business.” Mouser said, showing off the new rings. “And the things he dabbled in the dark… he was an amateur though.”

“Didn’t I tell you? Mr Woolsey deserved to be in that carriage.” The boyo repeated with a smile. “Up front he runs a diamond polishing business. However his true face is that of a weapon’s dealer who sells illegal weapons that he got in the diamond conflict areas.”

“They were nice weapons…” Mouser whispered wistfully.

“Furthermore there was the incident two weeks ago where the president of the Rose Company, the company that mines the diamonds, was murdered.” Sebastian mentioned, showing the newspaper clipping.

“We did use that as motive but not explained the full why.” Mouser stated, nodding.

“Through my own routes I was able to confirm that Woolsey was the criminal.” The Earl stated, hands intertwined, smirking. “For people of the underground society to use their power to endanger people of the normal society is a grave violation of the rules.”

“When outside the given jurisdiction and assigned businesses that is.” Mouser completed. “After all normal society provides clientele and targets.”

“Since I was going to get rid of him anyway, he was the perfect person to use as an escape goat.” The Earl continued.

“It would clear the Queen’s worries and make sure the Young Master was kept out of harm.” Sebastian stated, confirming the position. “It’s two birds with one stone.”

“What Mr Woolsey said that time…” Arthur recalled, shocked by the flurry of revelations and changes. “Just who exactly are you?”

“Tracking down people who break the commandments of the British underground society and dealing with them. The Queen’s Watchdog.”

“Chihuahua.” Mouser corrected him with a chuckle. He glared again at the teasing that was breaking his solemn moments. “They are mean.” Mouser pouted and faked repentance.

“What happened was no more than a little game where the Queen reconfirmed whether I had the talent or not.” Ciel continued after getting a small genuine smile hidden.
“No… no way… moreover if all you told me so far is true then that butler…” And now he was starting to grasp the many impossibilities in the story. Mouser sighed and arched, feeling Sebastian letting go of some of the binds and disguises. The reaction was similar within her, claws sharpening, eyes reddening and fangs becoming a bit more prominent.

“‘There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.’ Wasn’t it Mr Wordsmith? It has been in front of you all along.”

“Indeed.” Sebastian whispered suddenly in a darker voice, leaning over the Wordsmith’s shoulder. “The truth that I am not human.” Arthur shrieked and feel from his chair. Mouser shook her head, picking up the tea cup that had been tipped too, the Darjeeling staining the cloth. She sat down on the empty chair and poured some tea for herself. “‘Now that I do know I shall do my best to forget it’ right, Mr Wordsmith?” Sebastian continued, approaching the human, his shadow shifting and shimmering into interesting shapes. Mouser started to add sugar to the warm liquid. Arthur was terrified with the shifting darkness. Then he tried to run, the escape cut out by the appearance of the demon in the moment he blinked and looked back, slamming against his black clad form, falling to the ground. “One wonders what would happen were you to reveal this matter.” Sebastian purred. The thief smiled slightly, shivering, leaning back on the chair, tilting it, ankles on the table. “I am sure you understand, correct?” he said, gripping the man’s neck lightly. Arthur shivered and shouted, running again

“I’ll never say! I’ll never say it! Please…”

“Those words… I’ll make sure you will never, ever forget them. We’re always watching…” Sebastian said, the shadow shifting, engulfing him, changing. Feathers and darkness flowed before the Wordsmith passed out. He returned to the usual form after a moment, carrying the unconscious man to the carriage that awaited and back to his normal life.

“Baoiseachd…” Mouser stated, sipping the heavily sweetened tea. “Bloody hell-stamped randy bloke…” she whispered, playing with the cup, slipping the free hand through loose strands ruefully.

“What?” The boyo asked with a bored glance.

“Just thinking… I’ve been warped.” Mouser showed her fangs in a wide Cheshire cat grin, her pupils contracting into a narrow slit for a second.

“Why did you have to reveal that form to him?” Ciel asked as Sebastian returned.

“He is a writer. If he goes through an eccentric experience he will absolutely want to write about it. Writers are that kind of creature. Young Master, you liked his novel, didn’t you? You read the magazine many times and didn’t throw it away. Weren’t you disappointed there was no continuation?”

Mouser smirked and sipped her tea again.

“It was adequate to pass the time.” The boyo was not going to admit anything.

“His next work will be something to look forward to…” Sebastian said, calmly. “Well… now that Mr Wordsmith has left also I will start the preparations for lunch…”

“You are dead.” Mouser reminded him. Even though the servants had been given leave as they
sorted out the loose ends it was best if Sebastian stayed a bit out of sight until some sort of miraculous return could be arranged.

“Wait. I assume you didn’t mentioned it on purpose so I didn’t say anything. But you haven’t explained yet Mr Phelps murder yet.”

“Ah. That is right.” Sebastian admitted, leaning, placing one hand on Mouser’s legs, folding them away from the table, not bothering to say anything against the shoes on the cloth. “Actually there was another uninvited guest.”

“What did you say?” Ciel shouted, shocked.
The locked box under the table looked like something out of an illegal warehouse. Sturdy wooden box, chains and padlocks. It would be hard to unlock without the proper key and noisy as all heck to open even if just a smidge. Obviously unauthorized openers would take too much time and make enough noise to summon the guards so all effort would be for naught. Usually to lift those you plotted and then took the whole box and shipment to open the only in your own burrow at leisure.

The hissing and muffled shuffling inside was growing a bit more frantic, agitated. No doubt some light had streamed through the box’s cracks, disturbing the occupants. Mouser placed the cup down and stood, straightening her waistcoat, getting out of the bulky thing’s way.

“Since it was a bit sudden I had him taken to this luxury suite.” Sebastian explained, answering Ciel’s shocked stare at the new turn of events, placing the box in a place of prominence, waiting for further instructions. The boyo recovered quickly.

“The killer is in here?” he asked, more confirming than anything else, buying time to look completely calm.

“Indeed.” Sebastian gave the simple and neutral answer.

“Show me what’s inside.” The boyo demanded.

“Are you sure about that?” Sebastian asked, thoughtfully, standing upright. Mouser arched one eyebrow, taking the boyo’s former seat, observing. He was either getting ready to scold or something in there was going to prompt an ‘I told you so’.

“Don’t act so high and mighty. Open it up.” The boyo ordered. Apparently he was still not grasping the subtle signs that he was about to be setup as Sebastian started to undo the chains methodically.

“Well then…” He whispered while working.

Two snakes sprang out of the barely opened box, aiming for the boyo’s eyes, promptly caught by Sebastian. Mouser pretended she had not just jumped a bit on the chair and loosened her grip on the dagger’s, going for a cigarette instead, humming as she lit it. She hated when things jumped out of places they should not. Her first instinct was to shoot and she had no accessible guns on her presently. Except for the derringers in the vest, waist and ankles but sitting down they rather hard to access and the teeny-tiny bullet even at that short distance would already be too weak.

“What?!?” The boyo babbled a bit, having stepped back, close to a jump but not quite there, losing balance and landing ungracefully on his rump.

Sebastian stepped back, holding the squirming belts-to-be, keeping them from getting away, smirking ruefully. Mouser stood and peeked inside the box, sighing and staring to pull the man out, slightly surprised.

“They seem to be extremely resentful towards the Young Master, you see. That is why I asked if you were sure.” Sebastian chastised gently while helping the boyo up, straightening his clothes as well before letting him turn. Mouser twitched as the snakes hissed near her ankles but didn’t move from fear of the man she had placed down after a bit of a struggle with the box and binds.

“You’re… Snake?” Ciel whispered, caught by surprise.
“Master Phelps’s true murderer.” Sebastian introduced him formally as if that was his title and he was just another of the guests entering the household. “The uninvited guest really did exist.” It had to, seeing they had only planned for two murders. Three at most but not the one that had died in the wrong room. “As Mr Phelps died I followed the retreating snake and found him in here.” He explained.

The greenhouse was warm and away from the rain. Perfect for hiding. Mouser had seen a lot of them in the parties. They also seemed to be places sought by the young and old alike for secrets and affairs during said parties. It was rather odd to know that the places were rarely locked when they offered such potential for illicit activities of several kinds.

“Why is he here?” the boyo asked as Sebastian pulled the gag.

Snake took a big gulp of air, his snakes growing more agitated.

“The day after Black and Smile snuck into Joker and everyone’s tent they all disappeared.” He shouted, letting his anger show, struggling against the bonds. Mouser found the edge of the rope and twisted, pulling it slightly, getting the knot tangled enough so he couldn’t do any escapist acts. “It’s definitely your fault! Says Wilde.” His voice dropped a bit as he relayed what the snake near his left ear was hissing. “That’s why I followed Smile’s scent… says Oscar.” He tilted his head right, eyes narrowed, glaring at Ciel. “To a house in the town… two strange men where there. I asked about Black and Smile… and Silk had to be with them too.” His eyes jumped to the owner of the names he called. “I could smell her. Says Oscar.” Snake fidgeted for a moment, showing his fangs as he told his story, barely holding back what he was feeling. Fear, confusion, rage. “They told us to come and helped… Keats said to find a place to hide at night.” Another snake hissed and nodded.

“He must have entered when the dog had orders to let the guests pass.” Mouser speculated, shrugging as both Sebastian and Ciel developed a very silently stunned expression, turning away to hide the understandably angry expression the boyo donned and try to work out some sort of plan.

“What are they doing, escorting an assassin to me…” he gritted through clenched teeth.

“Not even we could have predicted this…” Sebastian said, containing his aggravation.

Mouser chuckled as Snake looked both angry and puzzled, returning to glaring daggers when the boyo turned to him, clearing his throat solemnly.

“I see… so… you mentioned that their disappearance was our fault?” he asked, all mature politeness.

“That’s right! After you showed up they started acting weird!” Snake’s voice grew a bit thinner, sadder, his head lowering, thinking back. “I got that Joker was hiding something from me… however despite my appearance those guys called me their friend… their family.” Mouser sighed. Another chance to change the outcome. If the past actions proved true it would be ignored as well. There were tears in his eyes as he struggled harder, shouting. “You took that from me!” Snake said, aggressive. “I definitely won’t forgive you, says Wilde.”

The boyo stood silent for a moment, his eye growing dark and distant. Both Mouser and Sebastian waited for the execution order. If he had not lied to spare Doll, Snake was…

“The circus group you were in kidnapped children one by one in the places you visited on tour.” Ciel stated calmly, surprising everyone else. Sebastian and Mouser loosened their grip on their respective weapons, exchanging a puzzled glance. “We became your companions in order to find
evidence of this.”

“They were kidnapers?” Mouser arched one eyebrow. There was an exploitable crack there. Easier to work with than the rest of the circus. His loyalty was also to the ones that had rescued him but having noticed previously their secrecy… “That’s a lie!” His worry and disbelief was showing. “Don’t talk rubbish, says Oscar.” He shouted on behalf of his snake.

“Rubbish?” Ciel asked calmly. “That might be.” He admitted very softly. “Because my real identity was discovered before I had a chance to gather evidence… they made their whereabouts unknown after that.” He concluded his newly concocted partial lie. “In that sense I may have taken your peace. However I wanted to save the children that were suffering because of them.” Cue a very doubtful shared glance with arched eyebrows behind his back. Still… Proof of betrayal and choice of a future. “Of course I want to save you too.”

The boyo waited for the surprise to appear on Snake’s face before freeing him, prompting a shocked scream. A gesture of kindness, a show of compassion, an act of trust. Good tricks.

“What’s this?! Says Wilde.” Snake and his snake shouted, confused.

“Young Master?” Sebastian inquired, unsure about the boyo stepping closer to an aggressive young man surrounded by poisonous snakes. The boyo made a gesture, telling him to stay back for the moment.

“Snake… Come to my mansion.” Ciel offered, extending one hand calmly.

“What… what are you saying? Says Keats.” Snake scooted back, confused, spooked

“You heard me right. I said I want to save you.” The boyo stated again, approaching. Snake looked doubtful. “We are looking for Joker and the others right now to clear the incidents.” He pressed the lie to make it sound more truthful, more appealing, more hopeful.” So don’t you think that staying here would be the fastest way to see them again?” The boyo added softly with that newly trained smile of his. It had proved to be a good investment. “I know they are not bad people from living in the circus. They are kind and cheerful to anyone and everyone. That’s why they should atone for their crimes. I’d like them to achieve true happiness. All of them including you.” Playing and plucking heartstrings, showing that he was willing to do for him what the circus had also done.

“Including me…” Snake whispered, falling into the trap, taking the boyo’s hand to stand up.

“If you stick to a lie it will eventually become the truth.” Ciel was saying as they left the greenhouse, having instructed Snake to remain in there for the time being until he could be properly introduced to the other inhabitants of the manor. “Then I just need you to hold your tongues and everything will go well.”

“Indeed.” Sebastian said neutrally.

“I must say that was a rather nice improvement and a surprising improvisation.” Mouser stated, stretching.

The boyo fumed quietly for a moment, then returned to other business.

“Moreover what are you planning on telling the servants?” he asked Sebastian who looked thoughtful for a moment.
The funeral was mainly silent event punctuated by the sobbing of most of its participants as they walked out of the church towards the burial place. It was boring behind the veil of the porkpie hat Mouser was wearing with the usual uniform and cape, keeping her face hidden.

“Ciel! Sebastian is a liar…” Lizzy shouted, sobbing behind a veil, unusually dressed in black, hugging the boyo tightly, much to his surprise. “He’s so cruel, promising he would never leave Ciel’s by himself…”

Soma broke down as well latching onto Ciel.

“Don’t cry Ciel! We’ll be with you forever!” He sobbed in promise.

“For ever and ever.” Lizzy completed as the rest of the group turned on the faucets.

Mouser stared at the gravestone. All that was a bit of a waste in her opinion for more than the obvious reason. Why so much work for a corpse?

“For you to care about me so much… makes me happy.” Ciel said, fulfilling his part, showing the planned smile with just a hint of actual feeling in it. “Well… let’s go back to the mansion.”

The whole group started to leave slowly. Mouser sighed behind the veil, glancing at the Undertaker who giggled quietly behind the grey stone, letting go of the solemnity he had worn during the ceremony. Finny stopped, looking back even before a tiny metallic sound started to ring out,

“The bell on his grave is ringing.” He said, making everyone stop and look back. “Even though there is no wind…” the young gardener continued, confused.

“Oh my… should you really be standing around like that?” The undertaker giggled looking at them under the droopy bangs. “If the bell rings… It means he is still alive.”

Dig him up! It was like a battle call, Mouser though, amused as they picked up shovels and started to attack the dirt like it was offensive until the coffin was open and Sebastian sat up, looking a bit relieved, gloved hand threading through his hair.

“I finally got out of there…” He started to go through the script when his eyes widened suddenly. “everyone…” Sebastian began before being forcibly tackled back into the coffin by three servants and a Lizzy. Mouser winced when she heard the coffin creak under the impact, the sobbing and blubbering growing stronger again.

“You bastard… I thought I had lost another comrade…” Bard finally broke down and tears started to flow.

“Mister Sebastian I am so glad!” Finny shouted in a congested voice.

Meyrin wept beyond words.

Soma blew his nose with a small smile, relieved.

Tanaka smiled benignly, nodding.

“Everyone please calm down.” Sebastian was urging, not relishing being used as a tissue.
Mouser lifted her veil, pinning it on the brim of the hat with a silver-and-jet jewel, letting it drape with its bow.

“I’m glad we put him in a safety coffin.” The Undertaker said with a chuckle, covering his mouth with one of the wide sleeves.

“I’ll say.” The boyo replied with a very bald face.

“It’s a miracle! God I am so grateful!” Agni was shouting to the heavens, hands together in prayer.

“Come back again.” The Undertaker said, waving them away, disappearing.

“I’m glad they were fooled due to shock.” Sebastian was saying, finally standing upright, giving a bare, hand waving explanation as to why he was alive. It went unnoticed under the happiness of seeing him so it was a bit unnecessary.

“Hurry up and wipe that off…” The boyo offered a tissue as the crying had left a bit of… remnants all over the butler. “Though I’d rather they were not that careless.” Tanaka approached, calmly, taking the pin away from his own lapel, placing it on Sebastian, interrupting his cleaning up. Mouser stepped a bit away. There was no way she was going to touch him before any kind of bathing took place. Blood she could deal. Snot and tears were… not ideal.

“Sebastian. I’ll return this to you.” The old man said, stepping back. “This is proof of being the Earl Phantomhive’s butler. The crest is on the place it should be now.” He smiled again. “The Phantomhive butler is not allowed to breathe his last breath before his master.” Tanaka walked away, shepherding the rest of the crowd away.

“Which means Sebastian from now on you’re my butler again.” The boyo stated, adjusting his top hat.

“As if he had stopped.” Mouser chuckled, shaking her head.

“Yes My Lord.” Sebastian smirked slightly after the slight surprise had passed, bowing and dropping to one knee. “I am devotedly in your service until the day that lie becomes truth.” There was a scoff shared between both. Mouser smirked and nodded slightly. “Furthermore I’d like to rectify one thing you said Lady Elizabeth.”

Sebastian spoke up again as he was aiding Elizabeth in the short climb into the carriage’s luxurious interior.

“What I said?” She asked, confused, tilting her head, blonde curls bouncing, the eyes still slightly red from the previous weeping.

“I do not tell lies.” Sebastian stated smoothly, winking, pressing his index finger against his lips.
Sebastian used the fact that both his clothes and hair were already tainted to retrieve the dog as soon as they arrived, after delivering Lady Elizabeth to her own estate. Everyone had their orders, issued by Tanaka before leaving and they were reasonable enough. No interference needed on his part.

The creature was filthy and wet, patrolling the edges of the Phantomhive land, slobbering and barking in an incomprehensible happiness to see him. Remnants of some unlucky or simply stupid poachers and threats were abandoned, half chewed, half eaten. They were of no interest to him.

The demon dragged him back by the thick and deeply worrying collar with nary a word, his mood clear enough to make the creature whimper and drag his paws on the muddy ground. It didn’t serve much purpose. It would be Finny’s duty to make him slightly less appalling. As impossible a task as that was.

He returned to his shared room after dealing with the dirt and tears, adjusting the tie as the day was not over and he was once more back to the butler duties. Mouser was lounging on the bed, reading with all the rescued kittens curled around and over her, one of them purring as his ears were scratched absently. She didn’t look up, flipping the page and adjusting her position, creating a small wave of mews as the little things accustomed to the shift. As much as it pained him he had been ordered to get rid of them.

It was a vague enough order the demon though, sitting on the bed and reaching for one of the small graceful creatures, petting it to his content.

“Anything to report?” Sebastian asked as he was giving attention to the small turtle-pattern kitten.

The book was closed with an audible snap. Her mood was still aggravated it seemed. Mouser placed it down and approached, her arms going around his shoulders, fingers entwining in his hair, caressing the scalp slowly. Looking for the no longer existent wound?

“Woolsey is dead.” She whispered against his ear, nails scoring the skin slightly. “The Yard hackney that came was a fake, as expected, driven by the Queen’s trio. I followed last night as you were being prepared for burial. It seems the requirements were met. We should no longer worry about retributions in regards of that particular incident.”

“Mouser…” Sebastian dragged her name slowly. Uneasiness did no favours so it would be best if he pried it out of her already. The thief’s arms went around his chest, and she pressed herself fully against him, chuckling, one teasing hand sneaking under the collar of the shirt for the briefest moment, nicking the skin with a sharpened nail, making blood bloom and stain the white fabric.

There was a flare in his response, a pull of darkness that dragged pride. Like a dragon with its hoard in those stories, never letting go of a single trinket, destroying whole villages, lands, kingdoms for the slight of one single being… It was a delightful sentiment and he was satisfied to see it went both ways strongly. The unease was gone now as the thief moved against him, allowing some of the kittens closer. As she had said it was just an acute dislike of his death-like state.

“About Woolsey’s weapon caches…” Mouser whispered softly, greedily, dragging a chuckle out of
“And that will be all concerning your duties for today.” Sebastian finished the morning routine, passing out the written schedules. As the party had disclosed the staff seemed to work better if instruction were left on paper. It was a system he felt was needed. “However there is one last thing you need to know.” He placed the remaining notes down and waited till the group’s attention was on him. Pluto whimpered, peeking through the open door, in dog form, his fur whitish once more, red eyes blinking quickly. The others gathered in front of Sebastian. Mouser sipped her tea slowly, flipping the report’s page, frowning slightly, picking up the pen, marking another of those small spooked notes about the hotel project. She clicked her tongue, putting it aside. There was another social obligation to attend much sooner. “There will be an increase in servants in the manor.” Sebastian announced, creating a group of shocked gasps to come out of the group.

“What?” Surprise coloured the expression.

“Please enter.” Sebastian called, the door opening slightly, allowing a mess of colourful ribbons to slither in.

Mouser sipped her tea, closing the ledger and piling the papers on it.

“Snakes!” Bard screamed, running in a sudden panic, hiding behind Finny who looked around with wide eyes but a wide smile. Meyrin picked up her skirts with a shriek, hopping up and down.

“Please calm down.” Sebastian said with a tired sigh, glancing at the half-opened doorway. “They won’t bite you unless he orders them to.”

“He?” Bard stuttered, spinning Finny in whatever direction a snake seemed too close.

Snake was peeking, wearing a suit uniform, Oscar draped around his neck, looking painfully shy. Mouser made a small sound as Sebastian approached, pulling him into the kitchen, slapping his back. The poor man almost jumped out of his skin.

“Straighten up. Introduce yourself loud and clear.” The butler had gone into a strict tutor mode. Pluto whimpered and hid his snout.

“I’m Snake.” He said, voice cracking as he tried to use it in the demanded way, shivering. “Nice to meet you. Says Oscar.”

“So it’s Oscar?” Finny asked, immediately warming up to the newcomer.

“No. This one is Snake and I am Oscar. Says Oscar.” Snake repeated what Oscar was hissing. Then he gulped, looking down shyly before starting to point and speak. “That one is Emily, next to her his Brönte and over there is Wordsworth, then on the side…” Meyrin was just confused now. Finny was already starting to make friends as was Tanaka. Bard seemed to be the one that was panicking and hopping every time one of the snakes glanced at him.

“Yes, yes. We’ll talk about those ‘servants’ at another time.” Sebastian cut through the presentations with a sharp clap, looking around and sighing. It was getting dark and dinner should be started soon. “Anyway. He’ll be a footman in this household from now on. Please work together.”

Snake looked around nervously. Mouser sighed and approached as the kitchen was once again
prepped for the day end routine, picking up one of the apples that waited on the bowl. Bard was
dragging ingredients out, Meyrin was taking out plates and cleaning them. Finny was scratching
Pluto’s head, urging him to go play and patrol. Sebastian had left the room, most likely to report to
the boyo.

“Here.” She offered. “Don’t be too afraid and if you need something come to me.”

“Silk…” Mouser smiled as he took the apple, this time a bit more trusting, drawing a bit closer,
nervously. He was adorable. Oscar’s head tilted towards her too. It was good to see she had not
wasted her time when being kindly in the circus. “What should I do?” Snake whispered while
looking around, at all the activities.

“Whatever you are asked.” She smiled. “It’s rather easy to adapt actually. Here.” She grasped his
free hand and walked with him halfway through the kitchen. “Start by peeling the potatoes.” Snake
nodded, sitting down on a bench, picking up a knife and starting the process. Mouser returned to
her seat, ignoring one of the snakes that was hugging her ankle and another that had slithered up
the table, curling near her tea.

The dam was ready and the associates had sent the invitations and the date of the grand
inauguration party. And the fiancée had been invited. It was enough for one to cackle.

“Sebastian…” Bard whispered in an aside as Sebastian was prepping the fish for the pie next to
him, barely receiving interest from the demon. The soup was bubbling in the pot. Snake was being
admired by the staff for being at least proficient at the given tasks, mainly cutting and cleaning
vegetables. Mouser was staring blackly at sheets full of numbers, hissing at them under her breath.
“Are you for real in hiring a shady guy like this?”

“No matter who he is the young master has made his decision. I will simply obey.” Sebastian
stated, placing another fish on the cutting board. “Also… couldn’t I say the same thing about you?”
He glanced at the cook with a slightly amused glint in his eye, looking around briefly to drive his
point home. “I don’t care who he is.” The demon continued evenly, gutting the fish with precise
movements. “However if he bares his teeth at our master then…” the head of the thing was hacked
off in a simple definite motion.

“How is he?” The boyo asked by the time the after dinner tea was served, hiding behind the
newspaper of the days that had been missed due to the Queen’s demands, updating on the news.
Once more he was hoping something was proving to be a hassle for Sebastian.

“It will take some time to train him. At least he’s a fast learner.” Sebastian said as he cleared the
table, lightly.

“Apparently I lost my status as only housebroken servant.” Mouser said, entering, stopping, framed
by the door. The boyo just glanced at her, frowning before returning to his teasing.

“You are quite good at making people learn, aren’t you?” He stated smugly, almost joking. Mouser
tilted her head, arching an eyebrow. He was setting himself up for a tumble… did the boyo forget
he had also been a target of Sebastian’s teaching?

“Indeed. Well that was what I was going to say but…” Sebastian’s slight smile should have been
the first clue but... pride and all that. “When I see the young master dance it appears that my teaching skills only go so far.” Ciel huffed and placed the tea cup down with a dry clink.

Mouser smirked.

“In any case Young Master…” Ciel looked up, frowning. Formality…

“CIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII” Lizzy burst from the open doorway, aiming for his neck in a crushing hug, wearing a simple peach travel dress and her hair spilling in ringlets under a clever little chapeau.

Mouser smirked.

“Your fiancée arrived.”
Chapter 49

The inauguration had not been prepared by the Phantomhive despite the company being a major player in that venture. It was a simple matter of goodwill, status and social posturing. But whoever’s hare-brained mind had sprouted an outside inauguration with tents and buffet had not considered the usual English weather and the fact that ladies would get their overwrought winter dresses with muddy edges. They didn’t seem to mind that much at the moment because it was a moment of mingling and exhibition. It was a party for nobles so they had to endure the conditions so they could be seen and show off their value. So there were bows, music, fine tableware, silverware, cristalware, spirits, champagne… one could name whatever they wanted it would be there in a fancy form.

Mouser looked up, frowning, touching the brim of the pillow-box hat matched with the usual uniform, sniffing the air. Fresh and cold countrysode, at least five hours away from the manor, seven-to-eight from London.

The weather seemed clear enough, considering the downpour mere days before, and the river just a bit away was full, treacherous, despite the confines, the small wooden piers and the decorated flat bottomed boats tied to it, bobbing slightly, innocently, waiting for the long lazy tour after the formal business, picnic and entertainment.

It was a way to deliver on that small promise to Lady Elizabeth. Dress up and go on a boat ride. While still doing something he considered useful like being used as a figurehead in the project, reaping the benefits it offered with minimal effort and a trifling monetary investment.

So there he was standing on the stone section of the dam, facing the crowd, seeing just a mass of colourful opportunists whispering about and sizing him up like a lamb to the slaughter. Admiration, speculation, pure curiosity… They were being sized right back so… Mouser shrugged slightly, standing one step behind the boyo, flanking him with Sebastian solemnly, the present pair showing power and money and the other five servants sans Pluto serving to add to the style and statement, hands folded over the notebook, pressing it against the fabric of the cape as the speech started. Then there was also Elizabeth and all the predators disguised as respectable wives filing their fashionably manicured nails, waiting for a chance to poach the young rich Earl.

“This place has been haunted by the overflowing waters for a long time now.” Ciel said in the careful tone used for the public, showing little more than what was required, putting to good use the little nuggets of training in faking pleasant demeanour he had been developing. “Thanks to everyone’s help we were able once more to establish another water gate within the Phantomhive lands.” By both asking him to invest and bribing him under the table. It was good business in the way it was arranged. “Just like the generations before me worked in these flood control ventures I will do the best I can as well.” And it garnered good will from the ones that lived within the land and had any interest in its products.

As soon as the speech was done the crowd broke into groups doing what they preferred. Some went to speak with the boyo, complimenting him directly, asking for some details, others, the investors, patting him on the back and looking grateful for the opportunity to be allied to such a name and company. Of course others just gathered to gossip. It was rather predictable.

“The Earl’s speech was magnificent.” An older man was telling his two companions, a man and a woman, the three of them wearing nicely cut clothes that spoke of money despite the more “rustic” twist to them.
“But on the company side he is buying out one competitor after another.” The man with a bowtie and a flat hat said, sipping his drink. “A real problem.” He stated with a grim face before leaning towards their female companion, conspiringly. “In fact…” He whispered secretively what he believed he knew. The woman chuckled and nodded, gesturing with her fan.

“That much?” It was a whisper of awe and greed. But then society demanded something else. Wealth could be flaunted in things. Mentioning their actual monetary value was… “That is so vulgar.” She added with a little tang of depreciation in her tone.

“He is young and getting carried away.” The man continued, condescending. “I hope nothing bad happens to him.” He dropped his voice to a hushed whisper. Mouser perked a bit, looking over her shoulder, focusing a bit more on that conversation. Squelching the events in the manor had been easy. But Siemens and Phelps were still dead and she had made sure to adjust the news, focusing on Woolsey’s greed. And outright lie to make a story that would be all the talk and then vanish in less than a week. But one had to be careful when town tongues wagged. Mouser touched the boyo’s back softly, making him notice the exchange too.

“I wonder who would be looking forward to that.” The woman said lightly.

“That’s what I would like to know as well.” The boyo cut into the conversation, making the group startle, turn to him and then regain the casual demeanour. He smiled politely, slipping on the mask, sizing them. “If possible, couldn’t you teach some things to this young, inexperienced boy?” He asked, playing up his age.

“There’s nothing we could teach you.” The woman answered, playing with her fan, pleasantly.

“Yes, indeed.” The older man, the one who had started the conversation laughed, nodding.

“Putting that aside…” The other man seemed to sense an opportunity. “Earl I heard stories of a good investment…” Mouser smirked. In which more likely he would benefit greatly.

“Excuse us but my master has another appointment.” Sebastian was the one to break the conversation with minimum hassle to the boyo. Ciel nodded, smiling a bit, looking rueful, turning away. Mouser lingered for a moment.

“If you’re interested in getting that information to the Earl please contact me and will make sure it is seen.” Mouser did her job with a slight nod and followed.

“What uninteresting people.” The boyo was complained as they walked away.

“They still could be used.” Mouser said with a little shrug as they weaved through the crowd.

“You believe they have anything to offer to the young master?” Sebastian asked conversationally.

“No. I believe they have money waiting to be stolen.” The thief answered.

“You want for nothing.” The demon noted appraisingly.

“I still like taking.” Mouser answered with a smile. He nodded lightly with a little touch of pride, stopping abruptly when she did the same, both glancing at the boyo and stepping slightly back second before Lizzy began her excited call.

“Ciel!” Lizzy tackled him in a spinning hug, giggling before shoving the recent edition of the *Girl’s Own Paper* on his face, hopping in place with excitement. “Take a look!” she urged, not realizing how close the paper was to the struggling boyo’s face.
“Lizzy I can’t read it like this!” he finally protested, pushing the paper away, stepping back, panting slightly, stifling a glare.

“It’s a deer.” Lizzy announced, pointing at a black-and-white picture and an article with a whimsical title.

“A deer?” the boyo repeated, confused.

“They say a very rare phantom deer lives on hills nearby.” Lizzy answered, clapping her hands lightly, looking bright and excited.

“Very rare?” the boyo whispered, puzzled, eye blanking in a complete haze of confusion.

Mouser frowned. Where was his head going?

“A white deer that brings happiness.” The young lady continued, elated at the idea. Mouser snipped the magazine and started to read the article. She rolled her eyes and flipped the page. Girly magazine, vapid stories, no substance. Frankly even a Penny Dreadful would be more enlightening and certainly more entertaining. But those were the kind of things that they thought were good for the little pure minds of their daughters. Frankly not helpful.

“I never heard of it.” The boyo said, shaking his head.

There was a new haberdasher in town… Mouser flipped the page, muttering at the announcement.

“It’s an old legend.” Sebastian cut in, informative as ever. Mouser scoffed, peeking over the pages for a moment and turned the page to an article about fur stoles. “The white deer was considered a good omen and to work better than any medicine. It seems it brings fortune to those who see it.” About right and as unhelpful as the story in paper.

“Exactly.” Lizzy perked up and smiled at the butler, giving a giggling praise. “As expected of you Sebastian!”

“Thank you very much.” Sebastian took it in stride as usual, bowing slightly.

“That’s just a fairy tale.” Ciel dismissed the story easily. Well no wonder why after reading that piece of overwrought fantasy drivel. Not that she was anyone to judge seeing where her book choices often took her fancy. Mouser folded the magazine and sighed.

“No. It’s true.” Lizzy insisted, pouting slightly, her voice childishly high pitched, cracking slightly. “There are quite a few witnesses after all.” Then she smiled, green eyes glittering in happy expectations. “Ciel let’s search for it.” She asked eagerly.

“I refuse. I am very busy.” Ciel said very grimly, dour as ever, stopping the sour tirade when confronted by a big pair of watery eyes and trembling lips. He flinched. Mouser smirked. Sebastian’s expression showed some amusement before Lizzy burst into loud tears and childish high pitched whine.

“You’re so mean…” she howled girlishly.

Mouser chuckled. She was only half feeling it. The girly routine and the weaponized tears… and it would work just because the boyo did care. As much as he didn’t want to both show it or feel it. But that was a public place and the usual routine triggered speculation from the nobles around. The tiff would make it into the betting books.
“Making his fiancée cry…” A man whispered with a half, benign chuckle.

“They may be engaged but it is still just playing house.” Another one said to his companion. It happened often seeing the marriages were arranged.

“Maybe my niece still has a chance…” A woman whispered with greedy speculation. That too. Throwing the girls fresh out of the finishing school to the eligible and rich bachelors…

“Sebastian…” Ciel said, sighing, resigned. He would be berated by Aunt Frances too if he did not fulfil certain obligations… and he had promised despite the deer being new to the situation… “Arrange a boat.”

“Understood.” Sebastian said, bowing quickly and moving away towards the piers. Mouser chuckled and waited, chaperoning as Ciel placed a more pleasant smile and changed demeanour.

“Lady Elizabeth.” He asked politely, extending one hand, bowing. “I’d like to go down the river for the gate inspection. Will you accompany me?” He invited, making sure it was heard. “I have heard a white phantom deer lives nearby. Did you know that?”

Lizzy perked up immediately, taking his head.

“Yes, of course. I will accompany you with pleasure.” She answered to the faked satisfaction of the people around.

“What about the plans for your immediate return?” Sebastian asked as he was helping the Young Master change his clothes to something more suitable for the boat ride. Meyrin had been taken by Lady Elizabeth and Mouser was with Snake, talking to him softly, keeping him under the shadow of her parasol. The new servant clung to her shyly, peeking around. He had mostly gone unnoticed, just acknowledged as part of the household, staying in the shadow of the trees. Bard and Finny were loading the supply boat and Tanaka was talking to the other guests, as he should.

“Change of mind.” Ciel stated simply, staring ahead at the water as the bowtie was finalized. Sebastian stood, listening. “This is my duty after all. The supervision of the river. This boring public relation and show. Making my fiancée happy. These obligations are brought along with being a Phantomhive.” He paused for a bit, considering. Mouser patted Snake’s arm, walking with him towards the river, the parasol tilted just so. No whisper of strangeness reached him yet as everyone seemed to be too preoccupied in seeing how would the little bump in the Phantomhive’s marriage market status develop. “And also I would have a bad conscience if I left it like this.”

“I shall go check the boat.” Sebastian said neutrally. Having a set fiancée was sure to be less problematic than being open game, true. But the open terrain, the changing weather and the presence of multiple people who were all too willing to stab another in the back made his job a bit of a hassle.

“Hey. Sebastian.” Bard called as he loaded the rest of the supplies, looking around as polite clapping accompanied the Earl and his fiancée as they made their way towards the boat, pausing to exchange pleasantries. Mouser gave Sebastian a bundle of paper, allowing him to confirm what had been done. Snake still clung to her, looking over her shoulder shyly, almost jumping at every unexpected sound and movement. “What’s with this? This is not some kind of show.” The cook
continued, a bit disdainful.

“Yes. Our young master is just being a bit picky.” Sebastian stated with a sigh, put upon, flipping the pages, looking over them occasionally to check if the referred item was packed. “There are a lot of enemies in high society.

“Enemies?” Bard’s eyes narrowed, the tension and attention doubling.

“You don’t say…” Meyrin whispered, looking under her lenses, moving them a bit, scanning the crowd.

Finny looked innocently around, wide eyes full of worry.

“This should come as no surprise to you after what happened in the manor.” Mouser said calmly, looking up again. Clouds were rolling in but there seemed to be no immediate downpour danger. Snake looked shyly away, fidgeting. Mouser chuckled and touched his arm. “Easy. It does not concern us directly.”

“There are a lot of individuals who want them to cancel their engagement.” Sebastian explained calmly, just stating an obvious fact.

“Cancel?!” A fact that shocked the trio greatly, making them huddle around Sebastian, looking for confirmation and advice. Sebastian looked up from his work with a sigh, eyes narrowing slightly, recognizing some of the signs that there was some zany plan brewing.

“Everyone.” The demon began very calmly. “I’ll ask you to stop thinking about these matters and behave yourselves.” He asked in a low voice. There was an implicit threat there but it seemed to be ignored altogether. Even as they lined up and saluted formally, acquiescing to the request.

“Silk? Why are they…” Snake asked carefully as the boyo arrived and made a show of entering the boat and helping Lizzy into it. Offering hands, all smiles and whatnot.

“Lady Elizabeth is a sweet girl with a tendency to go overboard in her desire to make the boyo happy.” Mouser and Snake were required to be on the boat with the pair of nobles as Sebastian was not enough in society’s eyes to be a chaperone. She guided him under the shade of fabric and lace. “That makes her quite liked by the trio there.” As they shared said tendency from time to time. “And the boyo also has a tender spot for the young lady. Plus it’s convenient so I doubt a cancelation will happen. In any event all we have to do is sit and be attentive.”

“A cancelation is out of the question! It must be the Young Master and Lady Elizabeth!” Meyrin was saying as the servants huddled into a circle, Tanaka approaching calmly to enter the second boat.

“We have to help him.” Finny piped in, eagerly.

“We will take care of it. We know what our job is.” Bard stated, organizing the troops.

The hours spent on the boat, searching were of broken peace due to the frantic efforts of the trio to make what Lady Elizabeth wanted come true. From swans to bunnies to horses the only thing they got right was the colour. The boyo showed annoyance, Lady Elizabeth was amused and Sebastian seemed to be holding back a sudden need to whack them with the oar. They were a bit more subdued after the first blunders.
“What’s going on over there?” the boyo muttered in annoyance at the commotion on the other side of the river. Mouser looked up from the book she was reading out loud. Snake peeked a bit, noticing the slight pause in her rhythm, holding the parasol over the thief, listening to the words of the Cat and Mouse in Partnership.

The thief shrugged. They had stopped for lunch and as the other nobles did the same it was no longer considered such an intimate setting as just staying in the boat seeing that everyone was watching and peeking at what the others’ servants had packed or were cooking on the fly.

“I had thought we could find Mr deer before lunch…” Lizzy complained with a sigh, her voice reaching the slightly hidden place where the servants and second barge waited, as they sat down on the blue carpet, both ignoring the preparations Sebastian was making. It was normal. Servants only were seen when they announced the job as done after all.

“The best food is always the freshest.” Bard was saying as he made a smack fire to warm up whatever they had brought. “Catch, prepare, eat. Prepared pies are no food.” He stated, with enthusiasm.

“Do you think the pigeons I caught will be useful?” Meyrin asked while eating a sandwich, hopeful.

“Of course. If you cook them with this the lady will be impressed.” Bard continued, picking up a flamethrower Mouser was sure was not in the list of things packed.

“...’All-gone’ was already on the poor mouse's lips; scarcely had she spoken it before the cat sprang on her, seized her, and swallowed her down. Verily, that is the way of the world.’” Mouser finished the tale with a chuckle and adjusted on her seat, taking the parasol back, ready to interfere.

“Snake…” the little advice for him to go eat died on her lips when she noticed Sebastian approaching with a grim expression. So that talk was not about something else. It was immediate and a problem right about…

Sebastian proceeded to whack the trio in the heads. Twice for good measure in Bard’s case while keeping a pleasant smile on his face. The trio watched with very tight expression as he started to cook with what was available.

“Seriously.” Sebastian scolded in-between fast and precise movements as he made the preparations. “How many times do I have to say this until you understand?” The butler continued as the worked, grumbling. “Haven’t I told you several times to behave?!?” He finished, presenting a perfectly balanced dish, glaring before leaving.

“We still weren’t able to find it. How boring.” Lizzy complained after a few more hour of boating. The sky was turning greyish. The antics had died down and the other nobles were still following to watch how the scenes unfolded. But the young lady remained undeterred.

“Do you want to go home?” Ciel asked, politely before lying down on the plush seat as Lizzy moved from one end of the boat to the other, peeking through the opera glasses.

“No. I’m not done yet.” She repeated the answer, frowning.
“Is that right…” the boyo answered slowly.

“What’s wrong?” Lizzy asked, looking at him, her expression growing a bit darker, concerned and the steeling itself at his indifferent answer, looking ahead once again, still scanning the horizon for the deer.

The downpour came suddenly, making everyone disperse, back into their carriages and hurrying towards the nearest inns. Even the fact that the Earl and his fiancée continued their search could not beat their sense of self-preservation and need to keep the clothes pristine. All the gossip was not worth getting messy. The agitation in the water and the fat droplets that fell had forced them to pull the boats to the margin and tie them down, the undaunted lady continuing on foot with a wide, determined stride that befitted a soldier. Her low heeled boots made it easy to move even if the skirt was a bit too poufy.

Mouser and Sebastian walked behind the Earl, who was trying hard to keep up, under her parasol, held by the taller demon. Snake had been left behind with the others, tending to the boats.

“Lizzy…” Ciel called, giving a little start and finally racing to catch up, shrugging the rain, gripping the girl by her arm. “I said wait.” He repeated, turning her around, a bit of worry showing on his face. A noble was usually very attached to her clothes and creature comforts. Why were they getting wet to see a simple deer.

“I saw something in the forest earlier…” Lizzy replied, seemingly unbothered by the slightly rough handling. Mouser frowned. Completely different from the weepy girl that had blackmailed the boyo into looking for the deer in the first place. Was it just determination or something deeper? In any case she was overdoing it again.

“The deer are hiding in this rain.” The boyo said, trying to move things along and get himself out of the rainy weather. “Let’s go home.” He said.

“No. I am going to find the white deer.” Lizzy said stubbornly, shaking her head.

“Don’t say nonsense.” The boyo said, keeping his voice calm, the expression softening just a bit. “We can find it whenever we want.” He continued, lighting a little spark of hope in the girl. “We just need to give a bounty for it.” Then he blundered. Mouser tsk, picking up the parasol from Sebastian, holding it by the ornate handle.

“Ciel…” Lizzy whispered with watery eyes before slapping his hands away. “You idiot!” She shouted, turning away. “It’s meaningless that way…” She whispered before running back towards the boats. “You don’t understand my feelings at all…” She continued before vanishing in the rain and curve of the path that ran along the river.

Mouser closed the parasol with a snap, slamming it down on the boyo’s head with an aggravated but blank expression. Said boyo placed his hands on the crown of the hit area, groaning as the thief opened the parasol again, with short and quick movements, and resumed using it for rain protection for her and the demon, glancing at him with a very pointed look.

“What was that for?!?” Ciel shouted in annoyance.

“I believe Mouser is agreeing with Lady Elizabeth’s assessment of your current state of intelligence.” Sebastian surmised, hiding a slight smile. And the Young Master was lucky that was just a regular parasol and not the new one that had been ordered for… other purposes.
“Ah… he made her angry.” The familiar voice of the Chinese man reached the trio as he approached, RanMao clinging to his arm. “Are things settled now?

“Lau?” The boyo had not noticed him and his betting booth, apparently. Lau smiled blissfully and nodded before focusing on Sebastian for a moment.

“How odd… say didn’t you die recently?” Sebastian merely chuckled at the question. In any event Lau had more important things to talk about. “I took the bet that you would find it so I’d like not to be disappointed.” He informed the boyo. Mouser frowned. There was betting on the other side of the river? She pouted.

“Your state of affairs doesn’t concern me.” The boyo dismissed the claim, looking around, seeing if his girl was returning.

“Your state of affairs doesn’t concern me.” The boyo dismissed the claim, looking around, seeing if his girl was returning.

“To please a lady is a gentleman’s duty, isn’t it?” Lau teased the different culture blissfully, smiling. “It’s really troublesome being an English Nobleman, right RanMao?” RanMao just nodded a bit in answer.

“It’s only natural.” The boyo puffed up, placing his pride in display again. “I didn’t give it much thought to begin with. This is my duty.”

Lau shrugged.

“Now that I’m done with collecting money it’s time for us to go.” He said, starting to turn away. His carriage should be nearby then. The boyo should really get away from the rain too. A little cough reminded him of that too as he turned to them.

“Let’s get Lizzy back and return….” Ciel started to order when Finny came running, shouting, calling for help.

Foolish little girl. Mouser thought under her parasol as they arrived, analysing the situation. The river was enraged and swirling in some points, press hard on the old floodgates. The boat was tied and bouncing on the currents with Lizzy barely holding onto it but still trying to untie it, get to the other side because she swore she had seen it. All because she wanted the boyo to be happy. Made one want to slam the parasol on both their heads. And the gates were about to break. They were scheduled for renovation but the recent rains seemed to be more than they could take.

“Sebastian…” The boyo whispered softly. “This is an order. Stop the flood.” Mouser huffed, snapped the parasol shut and prepared to strike again, her wrist caught by Sebastian before she could lower the blow. She glanced at his expression, gauging. Then snorted derivisively, freeing herself and taking refuge once again under the black lace. If he didn’t want to inform the boys about the stupidity of vague orders that was none of her business.

“Are you fine with Lady Elizabeth’s condition?” Sebastian asked calmly, looking around with a calculated look, thinking of what needed to be done to fulfil the requests.

“Don’t make me say an order twice.” The boyo said, seemingly getting ready to go get the girl himself, taking of the jacket, staring at the bouncing boat with determination. “I will protect Elizabeth. This is my duty.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian acquiesced, moving away to fulfil the request with a hint of a smirk.
A lie that was true and yet not completely so. Those were the ones more likely to deceive oneself. The boyo barely waited to get into the water, holding onto the line, inching with its help to reach the boat. Wind, rain and freezing river were sure to be a bad combination for his health.

But the simple fact that he was doing it himself instead of bossing any of the servants present did mean something.

Ciel showed little swimming skill but who was she to judge that part of anyone’s skill set. When the surge of water suddenly came, resulting from whatever Sebastian was doing to accomplish the given order, all she did was to hop out of the way to the tree tops, watching under the parasol as the others scattered, looking for high ground as the boyo struggled. Sebastian waited for the time to interfere.

In the end things had been saved, dried, regained and found. The white deer of legend was revealed under the water, etched into a hill and the Lady admitted she was once again overdoing for the sake of the boyo she loved. The damage would be easy to explain and pin on some enemy or another. Actually it could help with the buying of a rival company if the right strings were pulled. The geoglyph itself could get some good will and publicity from the several societies of archaeology and traditions.

Mouser sighed as she entered the carriage after Elizabeth had changed clothes, tasked with taking her home. The young girl’s mood dropped immediately from the cheery disposition to a little sadness as the coach gained some distance from the boyo.

“It’s benefiting no one to be like that.” Mouser pointed out suddenly. Lizzy jumped, staring at the thief, her green eyes focused. “I may be overstepping my boundaries but it needs to be said.”

“It was my decision. For Ciel…” Lizzy whispered. “Evelyn… what did you notice?”

Mouser smiled.

“Do you want to trade secrets?” The thief asked, catching the glimpse of interest in the girl’s eyes.
The amount of fearful letters about ghostly activity had been increasingly steadily as the castle renovation proceeded. Mouser and the boyo had been dismissing it as superstition and workers looking to increase their pay. Superstition was often used for such purposes and Ludlow Castle was so steeped into the country she doubted there was even a brothel nearby. That would be fixed as soon as more… loaded… characters started going to the quaint little hotel the boyo was plotting. And now they were actually sending a note saying they would no longer work and wished to dismiss the current contract.

“Good grief. What a good-for-nothing.” The boyo resumed his complaints as the carriage trudged through the countryside at a steady pace, assaulted by a light drizzle. “Abandoning his work because of a fear of ghosts?” He scoffed looking out, towards the grey landscape. “As is something like that was actually…” There he paused his ranting, glancing at the pair sitting in front of him talking quietly, a book opened between them. It seemed Sebastian was teaching, wearing the glasses that usually marked the transition from butler to tutor. Mouser didn’t look that pleased with whatever was being said despite sneaking glances at Sebastian’s face from time to time and smirking slightly, a bit of fangs showing over her lower lip.

“Is something the matter?” Sebastian acknowledged the pause with that deceivingly ever-so-helpful face.

“Nothing at all.” The boyo stated slowly and crisply. Mouser closed the book, snatched away and sat on it surreptitiously. “Let us finish this quickly and head home.”

“As you wish.” Sebastian bowed a bit and then turned to return to the lesson. He paused, glancing at Mouser with a stern frown for a moment. She pressed her lips together and looked up, batting eyelashes very innocently. The demon shook his head, smirking benignly, and removed the glasses, signalling the end of tutoring.

Ciel stared. It could not possibly be that easy to dissuade him. It just could not…

The castle was in-between ruin and construction site when they arrived to its premises. At least on the outside. True to their fears the workers were all but gone. What was truly interesting was that the interior was dry, comfortable and furnished, as if inhabited. And yet all of it gave an eerie fake feeling, as if everything was somehow barely there. But when the thief touched one of the wooden surfaces of a table it was solid. And cold. Colder than it should be even for something standing still in a huge stone castle with open doors in the end of February.

“I believe I have seen this painting before.” The boyo stopped before an old paining of two young boys in old frilly clothes. “Could it be a replica…” he pondered when the door slammed closed suddenly and without any influence from them, a path showing itself through candlelight, guiding them through the decorated corridors.

“You there.” A voice rose when they reached a room that looked like an olden-days audience chamber. “Who gave you permission to enter?”

“Sebastian do you have any idea why is a traveling entertainer in here?” The boyo asked in annoyance as a shadow became more solid, showing a young boy-man with blonde hair, blue eyes
and old-fashioned clothes.

“How rude.” He scoffed haughtily, preening. “I am Edward V, the King of England.” The young man announced solemnly, with all the conviction he possessed.

“What’s going on in here?” the boyo mumbled in annoyance, seeing that it had not been some flight of fancy from the workers.

Sebastian cleared his throat and interfered.

“It would seem the painting is genuine.” He offered calmly, placing the apparition, the furniture and the circumstances. “Rumour had it that 400 years ago Edward V, who was soon to receive the crown, and his younger brother, Richard, were confined in the Tower of London where they were eventually assassinated by their own relatives who sought the throne.” Rather typical. “The brothers spent their childhood in this castle. It is possible that they have returned home as mere spirits.”

“Are they full souls… as in edible?” Mouser whispered to the side, head tilted as examined what had just appeared out of thin air, her eyes then drifting to the second shadow peeking from the corner.

“Not exactly.” Sebastian continued, that part a bit more hushed down, solely to further her education. “Some souls, especially when their owner feels their demise was unjust, try to fight even as a Grim Reaper collects them. Sometimes fragments of the cinematic record shred and are able to get away, crystalizing into a shadow of a soul.”

“So where is it?” Mouser pursued the line, curious.

“Collected but unable to move on. If I recall Grim Reaper terms the judgment is incomplete.” Sebastian finished as the boyo sighed, making a decision.

“Even though it was just for a few months the fact is he was still a king.” And the Phantomhive’s duty was to serve the crown so the boyo was slightly stuck on that front. “We have no choice.”

“Understood.” Sebastian acquiesced even without knowing the plan. He also had no choice in that.

“What are you talking about?” The ghost asked, suspicious of the whisper.

So the show started with Sebastian stepping forth to announce the new arrival.

“My Master, the Earl Ciel Phantomhive, is at your service Your Majesty.”

The boyo took his hat down and approached, bowing respectfully for the required protocol time before standing and stating his business.

“Please excuse my improper behaviour. I was not expecting or aware of Your Majesty’s presence.” He stated simply and politely. Most social blunders could be recovered in that way. That did not mean the offended party would not hold onto a grudge.

“Very well. I forgive you.” The former king said magnanimously, examining the new arrivals. “It’s rare for me to receive a guest.” He pondered.

“Even though Your Majesty calls me a guest… this castle is propriety of my company.” The boyo stated, making it known, just a bit of bragging to the other boy that looked just a bit older.
“So you will be the new administrator I presume?” The ghost-king said, either misunderstanding on purpose or not understanding at all. Either way it took just that little suggestion of lesser position to make the boyo’s back go stiff.

“No you majesty.” He controlled it well, smiling pleasantly. “Let me make this clear. I wish for Your Majesty to vacate this castle.”

That made the ghost lift his haughty nose and adopt a similarly derisive tone.

“Are you trying to tell a king and his brother who lived in this castle for 400 years to leave?” He asked, half-menacing, trying to sound grander.

“Needless to say you will be compensated.” As a true businessman the boyo smoothed the insult. “It is my intention to comply absolutely with Your Majesty’s will. Let us discuss a way of reaching an agreement satisfactory to both sides.” And what exactly could you give a ghost? Mouser pondered, still focusing on that small shadow that was looking at them. Now it had adopted the form of a young boy carrying a skull, wearing a rather garish orange-and yellow outfit.

“Oh… it seems my brother Richard has taken a liking to that servant.” Edward the V stated, glancing at the corner where the younger brother was peeking.

“This is my butler, Sebastian Michaelis.” Ciel introduced him. “And this is my secretary, Evelyn Crows.” Mouser bowed too, mimicking Sebastian, keeping an eye on the ghost’s reactions. There was innocence but also forethought, stemming from boredom.

“Every day must be fun if you have a butler.” The youngest one whispered shyly, talking to the skull. “Don’t you think so?” He was still telling that to the skull but the brother reacted as if the words had been directed to him.

“Indeed. And given he seems a rather extraordinary butler, this will undoubtedly become rather interesting.” Mouser’s eyes narrowed.

“He can notice that?” She asked as jackets were removed and the little lords started to haggle.

“Quite.” Sebastian said, folding his own jacket and waiting.

A game of chess. The usual boring thing the boyo seemed to love. As usual he had taken the black side of the board, waiting for the king’s first move as the blond ghost was setting the wager into words.

“If I win this butler will be mine.” No reaction from Sebastian. “Should you win you may do whatever you desire with the castle.”

“Do not regret it.” The boyo replied with a cocky smile.

“Let us play fairly.” The king stated haughtily, picking up the first piece. “It would be no fun otherwise.”

“He’s gonna fiddle.” Mouser stated quietly glancing at Sebastian, who gave her a small nod of agreement, quickly losing interest in the boring game. Too bad all that beautiful silver around her was as ghostly as the hosts. It would have fetched a fair price.
“I feel the same way.” The boyo answered, launching his own pieces into battle.

Time passed as they moved the carved pieces of black and white.

“I will keep my promise.” The boyo said as he took down another piece.

“Of course you will.” Edward said, the knight in his hand changing suddenly to a queen he used to attack, toppling the black king. “Oh. This is checkmate.” He pointed out a bit too smugly as the boyo stared in shock both at the loss and the method used to achieve it.

“Your Majesty!” He gasped in outrage. “Did you lie when you spoke of playing fairly?” the accusation triggered a state of rage in the ghost, making his body gain a dark glow.

“What did you just say?” He spaced the words in a clam rage before spitting out in disgust. “I never tell lies. I detest lies.” He picked the white queen, making it change once and again. “This is my chess piece. I am just using my individual abilities to the best effect. I am not cheating.” Loosely speaking he was not, Mouser considered. In actuality he was. But she would not be the one to point that out.

“If Your Majesty would allow me to speak.” Sebastian requested, diffusing the tension.

“You have my permission, Butler.” Edward granted, leaning back on his chair, calming.

“It looks as though my master is forgetting his very own credo.” Sebastian elucidated, making the boyo frown in doubt and shock. “My master firmly believes that anyone who fails to utilize all the pieces in his hand to their full potential because he abides to superficial rules is a fool.” That calmed the ghost and made the boyo fidget.

“Then there is no problem.” The ghost king stood and cleared his voice. “Now then, Richard.” The little brother hopped down his seat and walked towards Sebastian’s side, gripping his tailcoat’s sleeve.

“This is an order. You are to serve those two wholeheartedly until they are completely satisfied.” The boyo delegated and admitted defeat after a heavy sigh.

“Are you sure?” Sebastian asked, making sure the order was correct. The vague issue once more.

“It cannot be helped. I lost.” The boyo dragged the words out bitterly.

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian completed the locking of the new course of action as the king approached, appraising him.

“Good. Then it’s settled. This butler will probably not die from some minor mishap. It seems he will be able to work for me forever.”

“I will give my best.” Sebastian stated politely, unfazed.

“Phantomhive I lack diversion. Visit me as a guest.” The king demanded.

“It would be an honour.” Was the only answer a person of the boyo’s status could give such request.

“As you are your now the first thing to do is have you take off this unrefined crow-like tail coat.” Edward was saying as two ghosts and a demon left the room that grew dark as if on cue.

Mouser hummed as she lit a cigarette, occupying the chair the ghost king had left abandoned.
“Turnabouts are rather jarring ain’t they?”

“Will you stay with me?” The boyo asked calmly, gaging where her loyalties were set. Mouser was first and foremost Sebastian’s by virtue of their covenant. But she also was his by the connections of the demon contract and the fact that he had indeed hired her and paid salary.

“Are you paying?”

“Yes.” The boyo sighed, gritting his teeth.

“There you have it then.” The thief said with a mischievous smile.

All the main areas were cosy, restored and filled with furniture and decoration. On the other hand the servant’s quarters and anyplace where a young noble should not have gone was in disarray, abandoned and ruined as it befit an abandoned castle. It did make a very clear point about the inhabitant’s former lives and current lack of worldly needs. Despite that there was at least one that needed to eat in there and he had been invited for dinner. Hence the lovely smell coming from the half-ruin of a kitchen.

Sebastian was cooking and... Mouser stopped in the doorway, staring. The old-time clothes were still black and the waistcoat trimmed with white lace was a deep burgundy. What had caught her eye was the ponytail. A long black tail of that sleek deep black hair, that reached the middle of his back tied with a black bow. He stopped on his way to the table, carrying a tray.

“Is there something you need?”

“I believe I forgot…” Mouser whispered stopping herself from picturing anything else involving that bow and free hair.

“Is that a fact?” Sebastian smirked smugly, returning to his task. “Dinner will be served soon.”

The whole trip was being a disaster. Ciel pondered as he sat on the bed of the guest room, deciding whether it would be a good time to further the investigation focusing preferentially on making them leave.

Dinner had been fruitless and frustrating. Ignored and chastised by his lost butler, and an extortion campaign lead by Mouser to whom he owed now almost the sextuple of the usual pay as she added both doubles and extra fees to any request he made that did not fit into her job description. He liked to use that opportunistic characteristic when negotiation with the companies he bought. They usually were more than willing to sell to him, a sudden benefactor and saviour, by the time she was done. To see that trait applied to him, which wasn’t as often as one might think, despite their gambling streaks was annoying and jarring.

He stood and began to dress, groaning as he found the same difficulties he had found when trying to don his clothes at the circus, finishing by throwing a robe over the crumpled pieces that covered him. The socks were rolling themselves down his legs as he shoved his feet onto the shoes, staring at the lacing with a frown. A sudden flash of a grinning Mouser demanding another extra added to her pay for tying the shoes broke his first idea, making him tackle the task with grim determination.
“Really, you should at least be able to tie your own shoelaces.” Sebastian said suddenly, taking
over the task with his usual nonchalance, making quick work of it.

“Sebastian? What of the princes?” He inquired sharply, glancing around and then settling for a
glare. “Surely you have not come all the way here with the sole purpose of laughing at me?”

“Though your face, indescribably baffled by a single thin string, was surely a sight to behold…”
Sebastian started glibly.

“Be quiet.” Ciel groaned behind gritted teeth.

“I came because I was ordered to take good care of our guests.” Sebastian said smoothly. “Well
then. Good night.” He left, not bothering to hide an amused smirk.

“Can I help you?” Sebastian startled the boyo suddenly as he was examining the bookcase. Mouser
smiled slightly when he jumped not having noticed that both were occupying the library when the
ghost-boy had passed by. The thief leaned against the armchair, crossing her legs as Sebastian
stood and approached the boyo.

“What do you want?” he asked sourly. “Sebastian?” the question hung in the air as the demon
showed a key, unveiling the secret lock behind a fake book’s spine.

“Is something the matter, dear guest?” He asked smoothly, mocking. “You do not wish to proceed
inside?”

“I don’t recall giving an order. Why are you acting of your own free will.” He had enough of that
with the wild female. Mouser waved as he glance at her, wiggling black nails. “I am the one to
make decisions until…”

“It’s part of the service.” Sebastian said, taking on a proud, solemn visage. “The key to satisfying a
guest during his stay is to foresee his wishes and act accordingly at all time. It is only natural for a
butler of His Royal Highness, the King of England to be able to do this much.” He was rubbing the
fact that the boyo had lost and the superior status of the new employer. Well done that.

“I will kill you.” The boyo growled, glaring.

“Awwww… so cute.” Mouser stood, approaching, ruffling his hair. He endured that with a glare.

“Well then. Do you wish me to unlock the door?”

“Open it.” He demanded.

“As you wish.”

“This is…” The boyo whispered thoughtfully as they walked down a darkened corridor filled with
old bones, the trapped scent of old rot and dust hanging heavy in the air.

“It seems to be a charnel house.” Sebastian hypothesised, as they moved further into the stone
halls.
“Please be careful.” Edward’s voice rose, along with light in the corridors when the boyo accidentally stepped and snapped an old bone. “It has been a long time since a human has set foot in these passages.”

“This room…” The boyo asked carefully. The king nodded.

“It was originally an underground prison. Criminal denied burial by the church were thrown here and forgotten. Not even their souls were allowed to leave.” Small plumes of what seemed to be crushed and jumbled cinematic records floated about, near the bones to whom they belonged.

“Buffet?” Mouser whispered, bumping Sebastian’s hip playfully.

“Oh, only if one is desperately hungry. Old forgotten souls are not the most appetizing thing. Think old mouldy bread.” Sebastian explained, smiling.

Mouser made an exaggerated disgusted face, playful.

“I remember. Horrid.”

“At some point I decided to create a memorial.” The king turned to a chess board made of marble with a neat set of skulls placed on their squares. “Please allow me to introduce my family… reunited as a bone parade and placed where they would belong in a chess match.” He did the presentations methodically.

“A knight is missing.” The boyo pointed out, noticing the flaw, thinking if it could be exploited.

“The place is meant for Richard.” The king answered, looking at the empty square with a frown.

“Are you not able to find him?” Ciel prodded further.

“No. That is not it.” The king shook his head and then sighed. “The skull is here. It was sent here from the Tower of London 200 years ago. However Richard will not part with it.” So that was the skull he was toting around and being all protective of. “I just want to free my brother, let him go to the throne of god where there is no suffering nor pain.”

How nice. Mouser scoffed.

“You mean heaven.” The boyo said with a little twang of thoughtfulness.

Sebastian just smirked a bit.

“Yes. My wish will be fulfilled if this memorial is perfected.” The ghost-boy-king stated, full of conviction.

“Proof?” Mouser said, a bit more doubtful about such statement.

“In other words you will be appeased if you acquire the skull. You wish to have it in your possession no matter the cost.” Both demons smirked a bit at that statement. The boyo was manipulating and gaining the upper hand again.

“Yes. In that case surely…” The king nodded, faltering.

“Sebastian. This is an order. Reclaim that skull.” The boyo ordered clearly. At least this time it was fairly clean cut.

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian acknowledged the request as usual, bowing deeply
“And move the chessboard to the hall.” He added as the demon left.

“As you wish.” The answer was simple, curt and on the go. It would be done.

“Tea and crumpets to go with that?” Mouser asked sweetly.


“Bringing tea is on the agreement.” Mouser said with a chuckle.

“What are you doing?” The ghost asked, confused as the boyo gestured for him to follow, returning to the well decorated main hall.

“Fulfilling your wish using the most expedient method.” The Earl of Phantomhive stated in a seemingly non-threatening way.

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“Please stop! Let me down Sebastian!” the young prince-ghost was screaming, squirming against the demon who did not give a flying fig about it.

“I beg your pardon lord Richard.” He said the words without an ounce of feeling, stopping in front of the spectators. A bored earl, a shocked king and a reading thief.

“What a shame. Here I was hoping to see a fight between a demon and a ghost.” The boyo said, leaning on the armchair, legs crossed under the robe. Only the rumpled socks peeking under it denounced the state of his clothes below. “How boring.”

“Could you not be a bit gentler?” the ghost protested, torn between the task and his brother’s wellbeing.

“I really find it incomprehensible that you left such an issue of such degree unattended for 200 years.” Ciel stated, unsympathetically as Sebastian took the skull away from the young struggling thing.

“But I never intended to make my brother cry.”

“What is more important? A few tears or eternity in heaven?” Mouser asked, getting merrily into the game.

“See? We secured the item you desired.” The boyo pointed out.

“No give it back! Brother will be…” the little boy was struggling, trying to get the skull back.

“Let Richard go. This is my order as a king.” The ghost shouted, enraged, attacking, trying to strike with the round-tipped cane. Sebastian merely dodged, smirking.

“Oh, I beg your pardon.” He repeated softly, staring at the fallen ghost who tried to get itself up. “Nonetheless your majesty is a somewhat impotent king.”

“Stop it.” He gritted out, turning to the boyo who was receiving the skull, walking towards the chessboard. “I said stop it Phantomhive.”

“It was your wish to acquire it no matter the cost. If you go back on that you will be no better than the liars you detest.” The boyo pointed out, closing the trap. Either way the ghost would leave.
“Sebastian. Obey my order. You belong to me.” The king was growing desperate, turning to the butler won in a chess game. Sebastian chuckled at the futility of trying to order him around without a contract seal. Even then…

“Regrettably I am bound by my contract to the Earl of Phantomhive.” He informed coldly, making the struggling youth stop suddenly with the shock. “The service I provided to you both was but a part of my work. I was just faithfully abiding by the orders of my rightful master.” And using the chance to make him see how bad he was at being without proper help.

“So even you betrayed me.” The ghost whispered, whatever had happened in his life taking more of his mind than needed.

“I was never on your side to begin with.” Sebastian shrugged, staring at the boyo. “The contract is in place. I belong to my master.”

“Well it looks like I will play the part of chief mourner when it comes to see you both to heaven.” Said boyo cut through the moment and approached the board with the skull.

“I have a feeling it will not work.” Mouser said, observing, book closed on her lap.

“Who asked you?” The boyo answered, stopping and examining the empty square.

“I am perfectly free to express my opinion though I don’t have a parasol with me presently.”

The little boy grew a bit more frantic. It seemed he agreed with the thief for some reason. As the skull as solemnly placed nothing happened. Mouser giggled. The boys looked around in confusion. Sebastian placed the small ghost down.

“Why is nothing happening?” Edward whispered as the moment dragged on and nothing changed.

“Lord Richard did not want you to find that the skull was someone else’s. Correct?” Sebastian supplied. It was too big to be a child’s in the first place.

“Yes. Because brother would be sad.” Richard approached his brother, hugging him sadly. “I am sorry I lied.”

“You lied to me?” Edwards whispered in shock.

“The truth is our bodies were lost.” The little boy said, his voice low and very saddened.

“That can’t be.”

“You forgot. Our bones are long gone… since that day.”

The pause was longer and charged.

“You are right… I remember…” Edward admitted suddenly. As memories flowed his body started to fade, to sparkle and diminish. “Even though I detest lies I have been lying to myself…” another admission as both he and the little brother seemed to be freed from whatever had crystalized their memories and kept that part of them on the world.

“The fragments are leaving to join the cinematic records for judging.” Sebastian instructed. Mouser looked at the scene. “A soul leaves when nothing holds it back.”

“Thank you Phantomhive.” Edward said, turning towards the boyo.
“I did not do much.” The Earl said what he should to the king, nodding and then gesturing towards the surroundings who were acquiring their dilapidated state once more. “Do not worry about the castle. I intend to leave it as it is.”

“I am relieved to hear that.”

“Goodbye Sebastian.” The little ghost ran towards the demon, hugging him.

“Have a safe journey.” Sebastian observed the normal protocol as both figures and furniture disappeared into nothingness.

Morning came with a little memorial for the gone ghosts.

“Now then. The nuisance is finally gone. Proceed with the renovation and be sure to advance as fast as you can to make up for these delays.” The boyo ordered the workers as he left. You liar. A small laughter echoed through the old stones as the boyo turned his back on the soon-to-be hotel.

(There is the game but as I have no access to it and it officially happened between chapters 13 and 14 of the manga and would be Ciel’s first contact with ghosts… It didn’t happen here. yadayada this is my explanation to boooos. Moving on. I have an angel to maul.)
“This morning you are scheduled to have a dancing lesson with Mrs Bright.” Mouser began to read the day’s obligations as soon as the boyo sat down behind the desk that was overflowing with paperwork. “And this afternoon you have an appointment with Lord Winsler who runs a trading business.” She smirked, pushing man’s file towards him so he could study what he would be dealing with. “He’s trying to move and fill the gaps left by Phelps and Woolsey’s deaths. You created a rather great opportunity for these gold-diggers.”

“Are you paying attention Young Master?” Sebastian interrupted as he noticed the boyo had made a sour face after the mention of the first appointment, taking the tea cart to its spot, near the support table, preparing the strong Tan Yang black tea that was one of the favourites for working time.

“Didn’t I tell you I have had enough of dancing?” He hid behind the papers in a surly, petulant way. “It does not suit me.” He completed the sentiment.

“You are too modest.” Sebastian took the opportunity, placing the cup in the small free room available. “Your steps, young master, have the ability to satisfy spectator’s hearts.” He flattered in a roundabout way meaning it was no compliment at all. And the boyo did know what that kind of thing mean and for one had no illusions about his actual abilities.

“By letting them have a hearty laugh?” he groused morosely, placing the papers down. “Is that what you mean?” his one-eyed glare was now focused solely on Sebastian who chuckled and looked sincere.

“No, no. Of course not.” The demon said with his back turned, leaving with the cart.

Mouser chuckled.

“In any event it seems you have another request.” She stated, giving the boyo the Queen’s letter.

“A cult?” He asked to the air after reading the words. “Yet another encounter with the occult…” Ciel complained.

A cult near Preston holed up in some abandoned convent that seemed to worship something called Doomsday Book and preached purification of all. Judgement for the people and Country. The Queen was concerned that they might be planning some sort of revolution or coup-d’état. But the letter was very light on any actual information beyond the rumour and the fact that the people from the industrialized city avoided the place in fear.

Scouting. The little amount of information available in the letter this time made it a need before even considering abandoning the manor. Which was unusual for the Queen’s missives. Either she was still testing the boyo or was trying to reinforce the contacts with the Trancy Household. Not bloody likely.

“Cult?” Charlotte said with disdain, placing her gold-and-green porcelain cup down, leaning back
on the armchair, thinking over those bits and facts. “In the industrialized Preston?”

“So we were told.” Mouser answered with a nod, staring at her tea. The flavours seemed so mute nowadays… but the scents made up for that fading. “If you could have one of your contacts gather a bit more information before I get there it would be of great help.” She placed the cup down as well and picked up a lacquered box, lowering it onto the round table and opened it. “I was told by an authority that these will be all the rage as soon as the Season starts.” Mouser showed a set of bejewelled hair pins in the shape of single flowers, colourful bundles of petals and leaves or single-hued arrangements of similarly shaped blossoms.

“Of course.” Charlotte chuckled and picked up one of the pins, playing with it. Droplets of sapphire chained by gold rings sparkled with the movement. The bribery was unnecessary. But both pretended a gift was such a trick. It simply felt easier, less heavy. “I’ll arrange for information, a steady supplier and a place to stay while in town. And I urge you to be careful. Those people tend to be…”

“Insane.” Mouser completed. “I know. In any case I just have to investigate and then relay the information so the boyo can decide the course of action.”

“They will all die most likely. Especially if that conspiracy to overthrow Queen Victoria reveals itself as a true story.” Charlotte said placing the pin down, next to the others. “Have a safe journey Evee.”

The contact was known as Dodger.

Preston was the territory Charlotte had given him to work his information skills, all within the agreements of the underworld. And he strived to keep the Lady satisfied. After all she was generous to those loyal and useful. To those who betrayed there was no mercy. Only swift retribution.

Dodger was a man almost reaching his forties, the grey hair a proof of a hard life in the world. He wore the warm but worn clothes of an industrial worker and blended into the similar crowd quite easily.

Mouser pulled her floppy old cap down as she approached, hands stuffed into the pockets of the jacket. Street clothing once more seemed like the easy way to go, to move about without sending any warning signs towards the prey. She had noticed a few people in some sort of religious attire walking around, buying from the market or preaching on the streets. They were met with suspicion and generally avoided.

“How ‘bout I buy you a pint mista Dodger?” Mouser called as the man that matched the description walked by her, grabbing his arm swiftly, stopping him amongst the crowd.

“If yer buying youngster.” The man answered with a nod.

Dodger had some interesting finds. The information was completed as he spoke of the old monastery, catholic place that had been burnt during the Reformation and was now the place where the people of the cult lived and worshiped whatever it was they called Doomsday Book. It was heavily guarded but the people at the gate were always willing to allow newcomers in.
So as long as they made no fuss and in the end didn’t leave… entering and infiltration should be easy then.

“There’s something else also youngster.” Dodger continued to divulge his findings as he poured another pint down his old throat. The dingy bar was dark and stuffy. But the noise and ambience were perfect for the trade. Mouser played with her small glass of rum, calling for another shot as the silence stretched and yet another pair of men entered, walking by, going towards their seats to drink to the end of another work day. “The Lady put a bounty for information of the head of two white haired blokes with purple eyes. The woman called Angela and a man without a given name.” Mouser’s eyes narrowed. “They were seen here as part of those people. I have informed the Lady but this is all I could get.”

“It’s perfect Mista Dodger. Here.” She plopped some coins down on the table. “Have a hearty celebration for me.”

All in all she should have suspected it when the letter mentioned “purification”. Mouser though, leaving the bar, plopping the cap over her jagged ponytail. She would approach the monastery and check the defences. After that it would be time to call in the rest of the hunting party.

A field of white flowers, the first fragile yet resilient blooms of the spring that approached, turned blood red by the sunset. Mouser sighed, stopping on the roadside, spotting something unusual and something that added to the fact that there was definitely not the run-of-the-mill-lunatic-cult going on. She hopped down the road and approached, hands in pockets, the cigarette wobbling between her lips, chuckling when her sudden supposition was confirmed.

“Is this really the place to be resting poppet?” Mouser called the red-clad Grim Reaper that was not breathing but was also clearly asleep, crouching near the head. Grell popped one eye open and smirked.

“I am waiting for my prince’s kiss.” The Grim Reaper said, creating a pout.

“He’s currently unavailable.” Mouser stated, poking her forehead playfully.

“That’s so mean of you.” Grell pouted as she sat, letting go of the flowers.

“Not really my fault.” Mouser sniggered, picking the cigarette, huffing a small cloud in the midst of the sound. “Can I assume you’re here for a reason?”

Grell stood and adjusted her attire, looking towards the monastery, frowning slightly.

“Will ordered me here on an investigation.” The Grim Reaper then shrugged as Mouser stood, crossing her arms, peeking under the shadow of her cap. “But I found nothing and I got hungry and tired and decided to take a nap.”

“In a field of white flowers? Poppet you know that doesn’t suit you.” The thief joked and then started walking away, towards Preston. “Come along. I’m staying in an inn nearby and I believe that we might just help each other.”

“So, you see some cinematic records have been stolen.” Grell elaborated her investigation details
over tea and a meal. Mouser frowned slightly, thinking for a moment. The room was small and a
crossed by several air currents. The cold was compensated by a small metal-and-stone fireplace.
The table and benches wobbled under any weight placed on them. It was finally dark outside.

“What could steal them from Grim Reapers?” The thief pondered, lighting another cigarette,
pondering.

“Not even surprised they can be stolen Evee?” Grell asked with a chuckle.

“Everything can be stolen.” Mouser reasoned, sighing a cloud, staring at it for a moment.

“The Grim Reaper library is very well guarded even though we sometimes have to allow «special
cases». ” The Grim Reaper explained a bit more about the location. It didn’t really matter how
secure they were said to be if the fact was that they were no longer there.

“The Records are what is used to judge souls, correct?” Mouser probed, piecing together what she
knew.

“Well, yes. But humans can only see them when they are dying.” Grell waved the knowledge
away, sipping tea from the nondescript cup.

“Judgement…” The demoness mused. “I can say that they sound a lot like the thing the people in
that monastery down the road worship. Something they call Doomsday Book.” Grell’s eyes
sharpened with interest. Mouser smirked for a moment, noticing a secured ally, nibbling her lower
lip as she remembered something else. “I have a question… what do angels do?”

“They.” Grell muttered with distaste. “Annoyances. They should take the souls according to the
judgement the Grim Reapers recorded and deliver them to their place. That’s their job. But they
can be meddling, changing the cinematic records of living people to manipulate the memories and
make them follow their designs, claiming it to be God’s goal. And fallen ones are the worse…
Tainted records cannot be judged.” Which would interfere with the Grim Reaper’s work as much
as eating the soul. “Luckily most of them don’t care about the living.”

“How can you catch an angel in hiding?” Mouser continued softly, pouring more tea, killing the
cigarette in the ashtray.

“Evee… you should not look for angels.” Grell lost her smile for a moment. “Unlike Grim Reapers
they will kill you even if you’re still a new-born.”

“That should be fairly obvious.” The thief nodded, sighing. “But I’m afraid one of those
annoynances has already flagged the Phantomhive household as a whole…” It was the only
explanation for the not-human and the instant hatred and aggression she had felt during the
confrontation…

Grell looked slightly worried. What would an angel be doing on earth? As meddling as they could
be they were also haughty, believing only in heaven and its purity.

“If angels shepherd the judged souls, meaning they have to be allowed in the Grim Reaper Library
under certain circumstances… wouldn’t one be the perfect fit for your thief?” Mouser asked after a
moment of silence, breaking Grell’s focus.

“They have access to the records but it’s very restricted…” The Grim Reaper began.

Mouser smirked.
“A thief would not care.” It seems it was time to call Sebastian.
Chapter 52

“You may enter.” The monk-like cultist that stood guard at the gates of the old, burned-down and badly rebuilt monetary smiled kindly, bowing his head at the four newcomers that had asked permission to join the ranks. “May your soul be purified.” He finished as some sort of goodbye as they entered and the gate was closed.

“Isn’t an infiltration supposed to be difficult?” the boyo grumbled as they walked down the half-dirt-half-cobbled path. Mouser sniggered, adjusting her cap, making the shadow cover her eyes and half her face. Inside the guards were gone, lax in their duties. But that meant very little.

“Not always.” She pointed out, hands inside the pockets, playing with the small handle of a derringer. “Sometimes it’s the easiest part of the job.” A small group carrying produce stopped and greeted them with bright smiles and a bow, moving on then in a smooth, peaceful rhythm.

“Impeccable smiles, all of them, aren’t they…” Ciel stated, eye narrowed.

“Rather instructive for you, Young Master.” Sebastian took the chance to poke fun at the lack of social varnish the boyo showed, carefully keeping both Mouser and the boyo between him and Grell. One never knew if a blow or a hug would be coming from the red way.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” As expected the Earl of Phantomhive prickled.

“I’ve seen him plaster a few nice ones lately thanks to Joker.” Mouser ruffled his hair with a chuckle.

“These are fake smiles.” The boyo pointed out, trying to steer the conversation.

“Not fake per se boyo…” Mouser agreed to take the bait, to stop the derailing. “They are… blissfully empty. Like when mother’s tell a lady ‘be nice, be good, smile always’. It’s just the mask you slap on before going out the door.” They also told that to whores and to the orphans when they had to be presented to customers, potential adopters and the benefactors. But the boyo might not be able to relate as well to that comparison.

The chapel was small but carefully restored, the large wooden pews still pointing towards the apse where the services would be conducted. The usual symbolism was gone, replaced by the images of angels. Angels in flight, angels with open wings, angels with closed wings. Chubby angels. Avenging angels. Blondes, blondes everywhere. Quite… well it was a tacky paradise of blooming winged people that looked girlier than Grell.

Mouser lit a cigarette looking up at the stained glass the boyo was staring at, unimpressed.

A simple symbol was depicted there. Two parallel circles, equidistant, connected by a curved line underneath.

“What is that?” The boyo asked quietly. Sebastian looked up was well.

“An old alchemical symbol.” The demon elucidated after some thought. “It means to purify.” Which meant it was applied to ‘things’, materials. It was telling.
“Layin’ it kinda thick ain’t they…” the thief grumbled and popped down on one of the pews, placing her boots on the one in front of her, lounging. After a moment the killed the butt of the cigarette against the old wood as a trio of boys in different “religious” outfits, mostly white with red sashes came running, playing.

“Good evening.” One of them called when he noticed that they were not alone, stopping what seemed to be a game of tag. They looked young. No more than six, seven. Nine at most.

“Today was a wonderful day again, don’t you think?” one of them said, hopping around merrily.

“Oh, they are so cute.” Grell observed, chuckling. “I have no interest in kids though.” Grell added with nonchalance and a small smile. Mouser scoffed a bit, changing her position, looking up. The place looked in a rather good condition for such a recent cult.

“Good evening Mr Unclean.” One of the kids greeted as their running came to a stop near the red clad Grim Reaper. “You really are dirty through and through.” Mouser held back her laughter, pressing lips together, a slightly chocked hacking sound escaping despite her efforts.

“What?!” Grell did not manage to keep any composure, voice dropping to a growl. The kids didn’t understand the sudden change.

“What happened Mr Unclean?” another one asked with big innocent eyes. “Are you not feeling well?” A plausible explanation. Grell was having none of it though. A closed fist slammed in annoyance against the hat and the head underneath, creating a frumpy shape and a crying kid.

“Brat!” Grell growled, deeply annoyed. “Leave the Unclean out of it!”

“I was touched by an Unclean!” The kid was shouting and crying in a panic.

Mouser’s eyes narrowed. So they were indoctrinating them young. No news there.

“You must be cleansed! You must be cleansed!” The others were shouting, sharing the fear, starting to run back towards the side doors.

“Why you little…” Still infuriated Grell gave chase.

“Ah we’re being chased by an Unclean!” that was not helping their situation but it was clear the Grim Reaper was also not taking the chase that seriously.

Mouser adjusted her position a bit as a woman in the cult’s clothing came out of the door, allowing the children to scurry in, contemplating them with a little simple chuckle and a perfectly sweet smile.

“After a certain age all people are considered impure.” She said softly as Grell stopped on her tracks, straightening and gaining a more mature look as she examined the new arrival.

“Not me. I was tainted even before I was born.” Mouser smiled from her place, tilting her head sweetly, lounging lazily.

“Mouser…” Sebastian called, benignly, patting her head as he approached the new target.

“I just had to say it.” The thief pouted, smirking as the woman looked confused for the barest of moments. “I am ever so devastated about that.” She batted eyelashes and lit another cigarette nonchalantly.
“Judging by your clothes you are all recent converts.” She came to that conclusion, the only one that made sense to her and nodded reassuringly. “Don’t worry. Once initiated you will be purified by the teachings of the founder.”

“This place…” the boyo whispered in distaste.

“They assume you can’t live with your own taint.” Mouser smirked. “Forgetting is not the same as overcoming.” And overcoming did not mean ‘purify’. You could jump that fence in two ways.

“Impure? That is strange to hear.” Sebastian began talking, smoothly, softly, approaching thoughtfully. “Such a beautiful lady such as yourself could not possibly be tainted.”

“Poppet.” Mouser called with a small smirk, waving her hand, trailing smoke. “Sit here and enjoy the show.”

Grell looked from the unfolding scene to the thief, arching one eyebrow as Sebastian approached.

“I know close to nothing about this religious society.” Sebastian was saying, approaching the confused young lady after the flattery, leaning, using his height and presence. “Could you please explain it to me in detail?”

“Of course… but then what are you…” in a smooth movement he slammed his hand down on the door, near her head, distracting her from the line of thought that should not be pursued, smiling, showing the white palm of the glove.

“A bug.” He blew it away with a smile before leaning down, invading her space, the blush covering her cheeks and eyes widening, letting out a trembling sigh as the demons smiled politely and touched her cheek, tilting her head. “You will explain it to me won’t you?”

“I’ll become unclean!” the nun-cultist girl was screaming to the night loudly enough to cross the stone walls. It was actually rather impressive of her.

“That’s why it’s called gettin’ down and dirty.” The thief reasoned as she flipped the page, following the plot of a murdered duchess who had given her jewels to the maid that was now fleeing, with the sparkly items and the knowledge of the evil plot, towards the house of the love of her mistress to ask him for revenge in love’s name. No doubt she would arrive to her destination and fall in love with the rake... then conflict because she had loved the mistress and woe what was she doing riding the bloke.

“So he can use even that approach.” The boyo glanced back, unamused. And slightly appalled it would seem.

“You didn’t think he got to me by saying tally-ho and hop to it?” Mouser asked. Oh, there it was. Humping the lover already. This what… two pages after a pleasingly gory murder. Quite a fast paced little chit there…

“No. I am pretty sure he got you by offering money.” The boyo retorted with a light smirk.

Mouser laughed then glanced at the shed, winking then at the boyo.

“You are the one who pays me. By that logic I should be shagging you.”
This time Ciel did not avoid the sickened grimace. Mouser laughed again, returning to her book, ruffling his hair.

Meanwhile Grell was fidgeting and stomping her feet.

“She is definitely going into my doomed to die list.” The Grim Reaper stated after another particularly loud cry, the annoyance clear, scribbling it down furiously on a side ledger.

“Leave her be poppet and check your Death Note.” Mouser called, flipping the page. The plot was moving again. Please revenge, no revenge… oh look it was rival the fiend who killed her. Revenge it is.

“Evee?” Grell asked in a slight appreciative purr after a quick look into the pages of the black-bound book where the actual list of souls she was scheduled to collect waited.

Mouser, her head still tilted down, looked up beneath her eyebrows with a little catty grin. She had no plans to do a thing to the poor girl. But the chances of anyone escaping that cult with their lives seemed fairly faint.

“The Doomsday Book records the taint of those who lived a long life.” The young woman named Matilda was saying as she combed her hair, completely tousled, still blushing. Sebastian was as impeccable as ever. And Mouser was in a slightly compromising situation, seated on Grell’s lap and being petted in the Grim Reaper’s small campaign to make Sebastian take notice. It was not like he was going to come to the rescue and it was not like Mouser could not free herself. But the Grim Reaper was a tad emotional, and snarly, so it was best to play the peacekeeping role. “The Founder purifies us through it, erasing the record.” She continued softly, the tone of a believer dripping heavily over the words. “He also says that through it we can see the past and the future.”

“Memory manipulation?” Mouser looked up under Grell’s hand. The Grim Reaper pursed her lips, eyes narrowed behind the glasses and nodded. If it was indeed one of the stolen records what was going on was grave.

“The future, he says.” Sebastian caught that tail, trying to drag more out of the woman.

“Yes. However the only ones who learn about that are the children chosen for the Heaven’s Choir.” She admitted, lowering her eyes dreamily.

“Heaven’s Choir? Are they singing hymns or something?” The boyo asked, also thinking about the implications with the information he had been told so far.

“The nuances of it are probably a bit different from simple singing.” The cultist blushed with a smile, looking away. “They let their beautiful voices be heard from the Founder’s bedroom.”

“Or something?” Mouser asked with a smirk.


“Mouser.” Sebastian called, turning, frowning a bit, regaining his calm façade almost immediately.

“Infiltrate the pervert’s den. Got it.” Mouser answered smoothly, sighting.

“Why are you sitting there?” The demon asked rather slowly.
“Poppet is trying to make you jealous and I am small enough to carry around.” The thief answered as she stood and left.

The rooftops of the old place were not in the best condition but they weren’t as bad as some of the London’s poorer districts. It was manageable. The Founder’s room was in the tower that, fittingly, dominated the area, overlooking all the little indoctrinated lambs sleeping areas, working areas and… well praying areas maybe. They didn’t seem to do much else.

Mouser began to move. To reach the tower she could just hop a few roofs and climb to one of those big windows. From there it should be rather straightforward. It was dark, quiet and most of the cultists were in bed. One could assume their Founder was doing the same. Most likely with some kiddos as company... There was a sudden smooth rustle behind her. Mouser’s hands barely got to her blades, half startled, half weary, as she turned when a sharp pain struck her back, making her breath catch, stop. Scent of brunt feathers… the thief thought as her step faltered and she fell, sliding down the tiles towards the edge of the building, gritting her teeth, sharpened nails digging into the clay, stopping herself from going over the edge.

“There is very little human frailty left in you for that to kill.” One, no… two familiar voices said before the blood loss caused by a razor-sharp white feather through the heart made her blackout.
“She is rather late.” The Young Master complained, leaning against a wall as the night crawled towards midnight. Sebastian glanced at him for a moment. His attention had been focused on the surroundings. To some degree he could feel his covenant in a similar way he could feel the whereabouts of a human marked by the contract. Mouser had not moved for quite some time.

“So it would seem.” Sebastian said without any particular inflection. He was uneasy with the delay, there was no use denying it. Recent findings were also slightly unsettling... “As only boys are chosen for the Heaven Choir the young master would be the only one able to get close to the founder.” They needed another way into the cult’s secrets if the mission was to have any chance of succeeding. “In a rather roundabout way but…”

“Really?” Grell made its grand entrance, wearing… well stuffed and overflowing the younger cult uniform in a rather disturbing way. “Entering the Choir is something I can do.” As if children often came in the form of a 5’7 person. And the Grim Reaper barely made any mark in the boy part of the request. “So? Does it suit me?” Grell continued the disturbing parade before the utterly repulsed pair. Before the sound of chanting cut through the air, stealing their attentions towards the cultists, properly dressed and veiled going in a singing procession, carrying candles that glowed faintly, wobbling with each step. Above in the tower that was the Founder’s room someone moved.

Sebastian’s eyes narrowed, catching the scent again stopping as the Young Master decided to see what the ceremony that was definitely about to take place was.

“Is something wrong?”

“Nothing.” The demon answered, following. “I just perceived the stench of a fallen apple that has rotted through.” And underneath that a hint of a familiar blood, cold an spilled.

Chains... Mouser though, feeling the familiar weight of metal touching her skin. It was warm enough, meaning she had been bound to it for a while now. She was kneeling on a stone floor, her arms stretched, in a cross, the short chains pinning them to the ground in constant tension. Couldn’t lower them, couldn’t lift them. At least without cracking the chains, the floor or her bones, whatever came first. Her clothes were gone. The bloodstains that should have marked her front and back were also gone and there was no scar in the way despite feeling a bit sore inside. She sighed heavily and moved a bit, just rolling her shoulders, unaffected by the situation, bothered only by the slight knot forming on her back.

Black nails sharpened suddenly, answering the movement. She glanced at them, noticing them recoiling as she relaxed. Mouser did it again, experimenting with some glee, noticing that the control over the shift was now completely hers, not instinctive, not a response to a threat. Her feet hurt… she glanced back only to chuckle when she noticed the black nails of her toes were also responding to any twitch of her muscles. Another change. There was a little bit of give and a smooth rattle around her flesh, the familiar tell-tale signs that she could escape. With some effort but it was good. Perfect.

The thief glanced around.

Underground most likely, judging by the smell… there were guards outside, fearful, twitching and
reeking of that burned scent, rotten. She stopped the appraisal as steps became clear, walking down the corridor accompanied by a salute of pure respect and awe. It was coming.

What did a thief do when captured? It depended. Escaping as soon as possible was, most likely, the best course of action. She kept quiet as the not human entered the small cell, looking at her with a smug expression. The thief looked up with red eyes and wide grin. There was just a moment where the angel, as there was no other explanation after all the dots were connected, faltered. But only for a moment.

“Ah. I see you have awakened.” Mouser didn’t answer and didn’t look away from the immediate threat. She also betrayed no expression. Habits, fall back into the old habits. “I am Ash Landers.” He introduced himself smoothly. Mouser arched an eyebrow but still kept silent. There was nothing to be gained by riling him at that moment and maybe if he was prone to gloating something could be learned. “I recall that in my shock I have forgotten to introduce myself.” The angel paused, staring, his lips curling in distaste and pity. “Such a corrupted thing… I was saddened.” The wings suddenly unfolded, filling the tight space. Mouser’s eyes narrowed, reacting to the sudden brightness. “But purification is possible…”

The first volley of sharp feathers traced the skin of her arms. Blood welled from the shallow cuts that closed quickly. Ash looked for the tell-tale signs. He was not looking to maim or kill her. Not at that time. Barely a whimper, barely a twitch. She just endured, grinning madly. He cut, cut, cut, the walls riddled by feathers, blood collecting and dripping over her skin, onto the floor. Barely changing yet. Ash grimaced. No matter.

“Even though I have to allow your corruption to be completed.” The angel approached, gripping her head, making Mouser look up, back, exposing her throat. She had those red eyes closed due to the blood dripping from the now closed cut on her forehead.

“Go ahead.” The thief whispered, showing fangs once again, grinning.

Ash gritted his teeth, wings opening for a moment, sharply, snapping closed angrily, the next feathers jabbing into the woman, not as hard as the one he had used to bleed her in the capture but hard enough to imbibe themselves into her flesh like needles, like knives, their angelic nature burning the demon’s nature. That managed to drag a grunt out of her as she curled in pain. Her ears where changed smoothing turning pointy and slightly triangular, like a kitten’s, peeking amongst the dishevelled locks. The earrings rattled when she shook her head, lips pressed together. He allowed the little movement not letting go.

If simple physical pain wasn’t enough, if even the presence of an angel was failing to shift that new-born, there were enough memories of hurt, true agony and suffering inside that one, memories he could use. She was already beyond the point where she could be saved by simple cleansing her cinematic record. If it were that easy no demoness would have ever been created.

He tugged at one of the memories, a single thread first, gripping Mouser’s hair, keeping her straight as more feathers slashed the skin. The female’s eyes opened suddenly. A single whimper escaped her, as she felt the pain in the now, the sting of the feathers, the old cuts and new and the suffering drawn from the past as if it was happening once more.

Ash’s eyes narrowed.

Not enough.

He drew form all her memories of pain… he drew upon them, intensified them, moulding them into a tool as the razor feathers flurried, cutting. Then he used them as a single entity, lashing from
Mouser screamed suddenly, eyes wide, throat exposed, a sharp high pitched sound torn from her. Her claws sharpened by instinct, the feet leaving marks in the stone as swirling markings of a smooth pearly grey colour started to trace her features, her body, faint at first, growing more noticeable as the angel kept cutting, kept using the past, harming her without pause until her screams began to fray into a broken sound.

A last hoarse groan followed by ragged breathing marked a bit of a break. Mouser shivered, reacting both to the pain and effort. The marks were still spreading over her. Glancing at her arm she noticed that the pattern was almost... tabby-like. Pained she gulped air and shook her head slowly, eyes closing.

"The pain will only be passing. You should survive the process.” The angel stepped back, speaking up smugly and calmly, stopping, letting go of her head. Mouser slouched down still panting heavily. The feathers that had been stabbing her stomach were gone. The wounds were gone. The blood was still dripping over her markings and onto the stone around her. Actually it was splattered around her, small droplets prickling the dark stone. “Still... such a shrill unpleasant and inharmonious sound.”

Even as he said that he unleashed another flaying. Mouser held on to what she could for a moment before screaming again, arching against the agony. Unlike the rest of the markings there was a single round spot, where her throat met her chest, the little dip between clavicles, that was paling becoming pure white under the blood that gathered there from the cuts on her neck and cheeks.

It ended abruptly, leaving the thief panting, struggling against the chains that still kept her down. Her wrists were slick with blood. That was good... if only. No. Don’t think of that part now, Mouser instructed herself, taking as deep a breath as she could. Her feet were still hurting... but they hurt differently than the pain of the memories, than the sting of the cuts...

“I am ever so sorry I did not inherit my mother’s voice.” The kick was rather unexpected due to the earlier methods and she had fully been expecting another blast. It reverberated through her pain-soaked body. Still it was better than feeling a pain where she could not see the origin but could remember each cut, each beating...

And again... each lash, each strangling attempt, each drowning in icy cold water...

And again... the bite of the cold, the burn, broken bones, shattered shrapnel biting the skin, bullets...

And again... the lack of air, the stinging pain, the throbbing, bruised flesh...

And again... coupled with the emotion, fear dread, pain, panic, terror, sickness...

The thief chuckled even though that also made it all hurt before screaming again as that was unleashed once more. Her screams echoed underground, fainter and fainter as voice started to fade, broken by use and effort, the pain going beyond the need to scream, the body struggling to simply breathe.

“Founder…” There was a knock on the door. Ash Landers closed his wings, allowing them to vanish. The man came inside, bowing. “It is time.”

“Very well.” Ash Landers left the cell, instructing his servants to lock it, covering his form with the more decorated version of the cloak, white in colour with a last glance at the demoness that was within.
almost fully corrupted.

Panting Mouser smirked, growling.

About time.

The steps had faded and all was quiet.

Time to go.
Chapter 54

The thief rolled her shoulders slowly with a groan, unsheathing her claws, growling a bit, the bones making small snapping sounds as she moved, stretching. She moved her legs, feeling the prickling through their pained numbness, moving one to the front, placing her foot on the stone. Her feet were different, as if locked into that shape, as if she was meant to walk on her toes. Claws traced the stone as she began to stand, the chains rattling.

The cuts were healed and all that was hurting was the nerve memory. Her flesh was pretty much unscathed underneath the blood and the designs that swirled over it. And she had fought with broken bones, ran with bleeding feet, worked with burned flesh, touched salt with scrapped fingers. Pain was a familiar thing to the underworld dwellers. They kept feeling it anyway.

In a normal event she would just have slipped her blood-slicked wrists through the not-tight-enough shackles. But she was sufficiently angry to just go for the flashy approach. She grinned widely, showing off the fangs to the dark, shifting her weight. The chains rattled as she pulled, trying to keep her down before the links shattered along with part of the stone.

Mouser stood up, her arms having snapped upwards with the sudden freedom, wobbling for a second before steadying herself, lowering her arms and staring quizzically at the shackles around the wrists, tracing the metal with one nail.

The door flew open, the pair of woefully untrained guards spilling inside, close to panicking, staring in fright as they realized what had happened. She smiled, poking the cuffs with the index finger, cracking them, the metal halves falling onto the floor with a clang, freeing herself as they fidgeted, not knowing if they should flee or fight. Also her nudity might have something to do with the hesitation. It would be flattering. One of them stepped forth, pointing a trembling gun at her.

“In the name of the Founder…” the thief snarled, moving, slashing his throat quickly, gripping the gun and taking it for herself. The pair shouted in fear, shooting his own pistol. Mouser sidestepped the bullet, reaching up, catching it, amused, kicking the man down, her clawed feet sinking into his chest in a killing movement, making a little purred chirp as she let go of the small projectile. She stole the other man’s blood-stained shirt, dressing as the life left his eyes, looking around calmly. No use in traipsing around the on the nude. Might shock the boyo…

She wanted her weapons back but… The thief flexed her fingers to see the pretty claws. The pearly grey swirls followed her limbs smoothly… it was beautiful… not to mention all that strength. Mouser pouted, breaking away from the allure. It was an illusion, a momentary surge of power, a defence mechanism, she was sure of it. So she had to move quickly and get somewhere safe before the “whatever” it was wore off and she was left defenceless. There was no such thing as power without price.

In any case she needed to find the rest of the group to inform them there were things they should be more concerned about than “plots to overthrow governments”.

Amusingly enough he had not left any more guards on the… well… cellar, it seemed.

Either that or their pious disposition was such that they had abandoned their duties to attend to the ceremony.
The service was starting and Sebastian observed it from the pews on the back of the chapel. The young master was sitting to his left, staring ahead and around with the usual focus, trying to find both the hints of the stolen records and the treason the Queen’s request asked to be erased. To his right the Grim Reaper had latched on his arm and was leaning against him, smiling.

The demon sighed in annoyance.

At least the regular clothes were back on Grell’s body otherwise he would have to take rather stern measures. Sebastian checked his clock as the hymns and religious paraphernalia started. Mouser had been away for almost three hours now. As a rule her jobs took an hour, hour and a half to be accomplished. If she took a bit longer she would usually let them know somehow. In London she just sent a message through the street urchins. But in there…

His eyes narrowed for a moment. He had not imagined the scent of her blood when the procession had passed. And he had not forgotten the fact that he had noticed another pair of scents. One familiar and rotten, the other foul and alike but also divergent. Worrying was not exactly something that came naturally. But both a contract and a covenant forged a sharper attention to such occurrences. He glanced at the Young Master. At least he had the knowledge that his covenant was, at the very least, able to handle herself without the need of constant supervision.

The noisy hymn accompanied by the organ gave way into a whispered murmur of tuneless song and whimpering and the one that was surely the founder, judging by the clothes and the attitudes of the ones present appeared, walking towards the apse. He stood there, opening his arms, reeking of burnt feathers and blood. Mouser’s blood. Sebastian gritted his teeth. So something had happened. But through the links of the covenant he was feeling very little… no. there was a difference. A spike of power, bloodlust and anger.

From what he could tell Mouser was irate. His eyes shifted too. The slight of one being… Amusingly she somehow had kept the echoes of her feelings from reaching him.

“Tonight all sinful unclean will be purified here.” The Founder announced as the music died down and he took his position, addressing the cultists who looked absurdly grateful and starry-eyed. Another covered cultist approached, carrying a tome between his hands, his speed slow and respectful, allowing everyone to see.

“Are those cinematic records?” Sebastian asked softly. There was no known demon apart from the ones that had once been angels that had seen a record after it had been taken by a Grim Reaper.

Grell’s eyes narrowed.

“It’s too far to tell.” The Grim Reaper admitted with a sigh, still holding onto his arm.

Outside people were screaming in pain, gurgling as they died. Sebastian glanced over his shoulder as the book was placed onto the stand.

The door was slammed open as a couple of cultist corpses were tossed in, interrupting the ceremony, bleeding all over the chapel’s masonry floor.

People shouted in fear, standing up, looking around for a way to run.

Outside all was dark.

The lights had been put out.

“I usually like to keep the things I do low key.” Mouser whispered softly, her voice carrying easily
in the chapel, walking through the left aisle soundlessly, swaying smoothly with each step. The shadow behind her was grinning, shaped like a cat, following in pitch black.

Sebastian followed the voice, finding her, the sudden tug of worry growing to apprehension. Then his eyes focused on the definitely demonic traits, smirking when he spotted the white mark on her chest. Despite the worry about the fully matured form that walked lazily towards the apse, half nude but for a shirt, vanishing when the eye looked away, appearing on the other side suddenly, there was no doubt about the demon species she belonged to.

*Cait Sith*. “The Soul-Stealing Cat”, they were called.

It was rather unexpected. But a demoness did not grow into adulthood in less than three hours unless severely threatened and pushed. It went beyond the physical. Even her shadow was demonic in that moment. Which meant he had to eliminate whatever had made her feel that way and hope that when the defensive state passed, when she collapsed, the toll would not be too high.

“No because I am embarrassed mind you…” Mouser continued rambling, one of the angel stained glass windows shattering as she lounged on the curve of stone that had cradled it, where the glass had been moments ago, black claws marking the stone lazily.

The Founder was the one following her gestures as well as the cultist just panicked, shouted and sobbed.

The Young Master’s eye narrowed as he observed.

Grell was looking rather admired, staring as well.

“What happened?” The Young Master asked surprised at the change.

“Mouser is mad.” Sebastian answered softly.

The thief hopped to the next window, her shadow grinning over the glass angel as she sat down, dangling her feet, the image dominating the cultists. There were whispers of demons that could not have been more correct.

“...but because low key keeps you alive for longer.” She continued as the glass shattered around her, raining down on the unflinching cult leader. Mouser allowed a girlish laugh out, covering her pearly-grey lips with a traced hand, graced by long black claws. “I like to get in, kill and get out, preferably with the valuables with as little fuss as possible.” Stretching she hopped to the next window, the panes shattering as well when she caressed the surface, first cracking it, then the irregular lines spreading and shattering the whole thing. Darkness outside graced by a pale moon. Gracefully she somersaulted down, landing on the middle of the nave soundlessly on her tiptoes.

“I haven’t blundered in a job this badly since I was ten.” Her voice dropped suddenly, chilling as she turned. “You took my cigarettes... you took my knives... you took my guns... you took my clothes... would you have taken my claws and fangs if you hadn’t this ceremony to host?” Mouser chuckled and then it bloomed into a low laugh before she was no longer there, appearing behind the Founder. Her arm shot out, claws piercing through the hood, slamming the man’s face onto the stand, over the book, pulling them out, red and gleaming. “Is it very noticeable that I am angry?” She whispered, going missing again. Then she was chuckling, sitting on one of the pews, watching.

Screams for the Founder echoed. Fear and dread swirled around, empowering. Cultist around her rose and tried to scramble away, making Mouser actually laughed once more as she stood and walked towards the centre of the nave again, still combative.
Sebastian frowned.

“Excuse me.” He said, stepping away from the Young Master. “I must tend to my covenant.” The demon approached the still thief that was sawing, touching her carefully, slowly, not surprised when she tensed up in contact, looking at him with red eyes filled with aggression, about to strike. Not unexpected. It was not focused on him, the demon noticed as she would not abandon the current state, giving him the barest moment of consideration and recognition before her attention split away, returning to the the apse.

The Founder was moving, standing slowly, the movement slightly broken. And then suddenly the white clothes were torn due to the spreading wings. More screams and some whispers of hope and praise from the followers believing in a blessing as a pure white angel rose above the apse, framed by the shattered stained glass windows, posing as the figure that had once been depicted there.

“There is no need to be sad.” She began to speak dragging attentions towards itself. “Entrust everything unto me.” She demanded of the cultists. And by extent the rest. There was not much room to quibble in that speech. It raised its arms. “Get rid of the unclean. Get rid of the unwanted. Get rid the barren.” It started to spout its doctrine against the sheer weight of its presence, of whatever power it used affecting the people around. Like something was slowly squeezing their hearts. Cultists started to weep. The wings rustled, beating once more.

Sebastian moved quickly, turning Mouser, placing her behind his back, facing the Grim Reaper and the boyo, deflecting the volley of arrows with the silver knives, staying between her and the attacker, eyes narrowing as the angel flapped her wings to gain a bit height, looking down on them while holding the book.

Some of the feathers had struck down the followers.

Some had already chosen to flee.

Others were pleading for salvation, kneeling and worshiping.

“As you deduced.” Sebastian said carefully. Mouser snarled and nodded behind him. “An angel was behind this.” Then the recognition came. The maid in the dog village. “Angela Blanc.”

“Wait a minute… what is an angel…” Grell shouted, surprised that Mouser’s theory was actually accurate. “That!” The Grim Reaper turned serious for a moment as the angel picked up a plain bound book and strips of cinematic record began to snake out. “That is a real cinematic record!”

The shout of alert came too late as Sebastian had already become entangled in the threads of memory, the annoyance showing on his features as he could neither move nor look around to ensure the safety of those bound to him by contract.

Any Grim Reaper had already experienced that situation, at least on the first assignment, when they were woefully unprepared for the simple fact that life resented death with unusual strength. So Grell was hopping about, avoiding the threads with a deft step and an unusually focused look.

Mouser simply vanished by instinct, getting out of harm’s way.

The angel swooped down, taking the chanced, going towards the boyo.

“Ciel Phantomhive!” It said, the voice booming in the quickly emptying chapel. “You are full of stains.” It appraised, circling like a vulture, looking for the barest opening. “Allow me to purify you, to let the pure brilliance emerge.” It continued, arms opened, as if still performing the ceremony. The shot the boyo was able to aim before the gun was slapped out of his hand by a
precise feather barely scraped the wings.

“Grell use the death scythe…” Sebastian called out, gritting his teeth, struggling only to feel the binds tighten, choosing to stand still as the angel looked down smugly, approaching.

“Wait! I’m on it…” Grell was mumbling, trying to snap the threads with miniscule scissors, even smaller than the ones she had been forced to use when in the dollhouse.

“What are those?” Sebastian asked, unimpressed, only to shout as the angel descended, plunging, arms outstretched, hands curling like talons, reaching for the Young Master while he could do nothing about it.

There was a crunching sound of bone snapping and grinding accompanied by a shocked silence interrupted here and there by the snapping of tiny scissors as Grell continued to work. Sebastian had managed to turn, to look, his eyes widening then softening, a little grin appearing on his lips.

Mouser stood in the way, head tilted back with an unsettling grin, gripping Angela’s wrist, the white hand twitching as the skin and dress became red. Broken bones and sunken claws, in an impasse of strength. Ciel Phantomhive was standing in the grinning shadow with a protective hand raised over his head peeking when nothing came to pass. Mouser mover her fingers, pulling them out of the flesh for a moment before sinking them again. To the angel’s credit it did not scream.

“You got demoted again poppet?” Mouser whispered, swaying with a chuckle, keeping the vicious grip on the angel. It struggled and was allowed away. Mouser chuckled. “Do you know your blood smells rotten?” She whispered to the air, shaking red droplets away from the claws.

“There nothing I can do about it.” Grell complained, working frantically as the angel circled and tried to strike, stopped by Mouser who gleefully attacked, slashing red marks all over the white. “Will confiscated my death scythe.” Grell continued, finally getting a grip on the threads, pulling and “I’ve cut them!”

Sebastian shook them away, turning to examine the fray.

Mouser stepped forward and reached out, going for the throat. Her shadow still fell on the Young Master, always around him. There was a brief glimpse of terror in Angela’s eyes as Mouser squeezed, forcing her down.

“I should rip your hand away.” Mouser whispered playfully “Then break your wings. Then pluck the feathers one by one.” The angel fought, shaking said wings, slashing away with the feathers, gripping the book once more.

Grell shivered in delight, watching, still snipping away at the snaking threads of black and white. Sebastian nodded for a moment, approving and disapproving, dodging, trying to reach the fight, his knives of little use against the memories. He was allowing her to do entirely too much fighting in that state.

“Sebby was not joking when he said she was angry.” The Grim Reaper whispered while working.

“No. She fell into insanity.” A temporary situation brought by pain and overstimulation of the defensive powers. Quite simply her body and mind were not able to handle the onslaught so they broke into a place of no fear, no care. Which created a brutal, reckless combatant who cared nothing for herself until the perceived enemy was dead. Hence the fear Angela was experiencing.

He tried to weave through an opening.
Mouser shouted as the angel grew frantic and aggressive, thrown out of the way, by a sudden flurry of wings and an onslaught of cinematic records, slashing and feathers flowing, slamming her against some of the pews, breaking a few on impact, her shadow abandoning the Young Master to gather around her.

The angel, without a barrier, without a protector, avoiding the knives Sebastian had thrown while assailed by the remnants of cinematic records that still tried to attack, was able to reach the boyo, gripping his head, a surge of memories flowing out of him and around of him, coming from the book, binding him in place while the angel was starting it’s trickery to rewrite the record.

“Evee!” Grell shouted, stopping his chopping and hopped to the demoness, crouching by her side. Mouser moved under the splintered wood and snarled murderously, looking ready to attack.

“Don’t. If you try it now his memories will shatter, fragment.”

Sebastian stopped after hearing that piece of information, both cautious and enraged, tossing the silver knives, watching as they got deflected along with Angela’s attention. If there was nothing he could do for the young Master at the moment… well the threat was still there. Even through heaven and hell’s manipulations there was still such an unpredictable thing called human will. And knowing his young master machinations like that would do little.

The angel attacked him, the wings always moving, avoiding the volley of knives. She laughed, taunting.

“Do you think a demon can fight equally with an angel carried on pure wings?” She was not coming down. Mouser shifted a bit, focused on those wings, appearing on the broken space of the windows, her shadow trembling, fading. Sebastian’s eyes narrowed in thought, planning. He could use his own wings but… for the moment he was a butler. “A wingless demon is bound to the ground eternally.”

“To the ground? Maybe it is so. But if that is the case you should be stuck to the sky.”

William T. Spears slammed the Angel against the ceiling, gripped by the throat by the open blade of his death scythe, looking less than amused. Grell approached grimly. Summoning him had been a last resort measure clause in the current mission. But it seemed it was needed. The primly dressed male tossed Grell a second Death Scythe resembling his, much to her delight.

“An all new Death Scythe!” Grell shouted, striking, the closed blade piercing the hand and wing, staining it red while the other mangled palm tried to grip the other scythe that pinned her to the wall by the neck. The angel struggled in rage and frustration. “I caught it.” Grell announced gleefully.

“Return it to me after cleaning.” Spears demanded, focused on the job.

“Ah… so mean.” The red head complained in a low, hurt voice.

Sebastian joined the duo, facing the angel, drawing the knives, smirking.

“This is rather entertaining. Let’s put that dartboard to good use.” The demon announced, tossing one of the knives, sinking it into a still white part of the bloodied figure.

“I’d rather just kill it and be done with the nuisance.” Mouser gave her opinion, approaching. Sebastian smiled slightly, leaning down, kissing her forehead. Some of her tension faded. Proximity. The covenant demanding that she relinquished all the defences and placed her safety in his hands. A way for him to say, no more, no further. It was his duty to defend those contracted to
him. On the background Grell huffed.

“I seem to have missed.” He remarked. “Where should I place the next?” Sebastian asked. Mouser scoffed and leaned against him, seeking closeness. The covenant’s presence was a sign that she could let it all fade. He had been interrupted earlier but now there was a bit of time. Mouser was stable and they just had to force the Angel to use its ability to return the young master’s memories to his body once more.

“I want to play too!” Grell called, waving. “Evee choose the target.”

“How distasteful.” Spears mumbled, holding steady, glancing at the fallen book that was still gripping the Phantomhive.

“Ciel Phantomhive is being purged.” The angel still had that thread of confidence, of backup. “Becoming a pure human.” It looked absolutely certain of it. “I may have failed with your corrupted female but in the end all will be pure.” Sebastian frowned, readying another strike. A bit of a sore spot as it were.

The boyo screamed suddenly, breaking the attention they had been keeping on the new game, his memories returning to him, slipping through the cinematic records that snaked out of the book, opening his eyes with a start, looking around, disoriented for a second, staring at the angel pinned on the ceiling with anger.

“What? He restored himself?” Grell stated, shocked before being nudged to recover the item that the Reapers had come for. All that was left to do was deal with the thing.

“Stubborn bitter boyo.” Mouser whispered.

“How dreadful a tainted heart is.” The anger started through gritting teeth, ignoring its bloody state due to sheer hatred, moving against the blades that held it in place. “Corrupt, stagnant, dark.” Each word grew louder, growled.

“Thank ye kindly.” Mouser whispered, peeking, the markings paling.

“Showing mercy was no use.” It shouted, starting to glow. “I will purge all.” It screamed before the sound grew into a wordless shout that rattled the very stone and the brilliance started to get blinding.

Mouser broke away from Sebastian, going for the boyo, getting him outside.

Grell and Will simply walked away, their mission complete, despite Grell giving a couple of backward stares. Spears seemed to be complaining about the whole situation and the matters of overtime.

Sebastian lingered for a moment more as the building crumbled, staring at the now silent angel abandoned pinned to the wall.

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A note about cats...

Some of this was in the DevArt pic but I’ll reiterate about Mouser’s “feline vibe”. She was created by Sebastian. Seeing that she likes cats and Sebastian likes cat, despite me knowing that giving him cat-like oc’s is quite... everywhere... I’m thinking the logic behind this one is: he creates from the
human form whatever he finds most pleasing in hell. The demoness also influences this shift somewhat but hey… it’s his blood-ichor that created her.

Then was doing some research and stumbled upon the epithet “The Soul-Stealing Cat”. Kinda latched onto the ideas. The Cait Sith is a Scottish mythology fair-folk. Some of those myths were demonized by the Christian church so it causes me no confusion in that angle to call a “fairy” a “demon”. Most of the Fair Folk were not very nice in any event. What this means is very little. Sebastian will explain the specifics in a while.

Sebastian is Raven Demon, Claude is a Spider demon, Hanna is a *****; the triplets... not sure yet.
Chapter 55

There were perks to having a title, and the wealth did no harm either. One of them was being able to walk into an inn, any inn, anywhere in British territory, and demand their best room and service while making the staff, owners and other guests ignore the fact that one of the members of the Earl’s party was a woman that was partially naked under the black outer coat, barely awake and being carried in the butler’s arms. Mouser had collapsed when the chapel crumbled, the markings fading. So using Ciel’s title they had a room that was passable, a fireplace, a bathtub, water and better quality food.

Ciel looked around as Sebastian left them to make some of the extra preparations and take some more precautions. He was not particularly inclined to talk after having to see shards of his own memories manipulated into two figures that spoke of forgiveness and faked peacefulness, a clean conscience. There was a slight headache forming ad he was sure it was because of those events.

Not that he had anyone to talk even if he wanted to. Mouser was curled on the bed, having pulled the blankets into a fortress around her, sleeping and shivering. When a particularly strong shiver ran through her the hand that peeked under the small stronghold flexed, making the claws elongate for a second.

So the Earl took out the writing materials and stared at the blank page for a while, waiting.

Sebastian arrived moments later, tending only to the minimum of the Earl. Apparently he took his permission to take care of Mouser when she had been in… that… state as some sort of leave. So Ciel just received the basic of the basic service as he began to outline the report before being abandoned for the thief.

Mouser sighed without moving, eyes closed. Sebastian dipped his hand into the water, rising its temperature again, using less than common methods, having refused the offers of the servants to heat the liquid in the kitchen or fireplace, dragging a satisfied purr from her. Washing away the blood and warming her body at once. The cold was a side effect of the shift and would remain for a while. So far she only seemed a bit skittish but mostly unaffected. The white spot on her chest was not fading or vanishing though, simply marking the caste she belonged to.

The boyo blushed slightly with the sound coming from behind the screen and stared at his report, tea and frankly subpar cake. There were also things that needed clarifying and Sebastian was being even less helpful than his standard self. The first one was off course the events within the church. In the following order was preferable: what had the angel done to him and would there be any side-effects; what had it done to Mouser; and lastly why was it here and going after the Phantomhives.

“Open it.” Mouser was saying to Sebastian. He folded the screen. The boyo blushed deeper. The thief chuckled. She was mostly under water in the metal slipper tub they had brought in, hair pinned up so it would not get soaked.

“Have some modesty!” The boyo shouted turning.

“I was naked in front of an angel, a demon and lots of people throughout my life. It ain’t gonna be a prude boyo that’s gettin’ me out of the warm water here.” Mouser smiled. “And knowing for a fact that you can’t see through metal… We need to talk because I seem to know something you don’t know.”
“Quite.” The boyo coughed into his hand, still not quite looking that way. “Sebastian. Explain.”

“Vagueness boyo…” Mouser whispered, stretching and wincing. Even her hair touching the skin hurt. She was sore and cold even as the water worked to soothe away some of that. She was ignored by the now focused Earl.

“First what happened to me?” The boyo demanded.

Sebastian tilted his head.

“Angels can rewrite memories to suit their purposes.” He explained. Whatever he had seen or felt was of little interest to him at the moment as it seemed the Young Master had both overcome and conquered it without anything feeling off about his person and soul. “It seems that the Young Master possesses a strong will and clear focus.” Half a compliment, half a truth but it served to soothe the ruffled feathers. “So it failed.”

“It was trying to lure me into…” The boyo shook his head. The lure had not been effective but it had been mentally painful for him to watch, to see, to listen. More likely it had related with some sort of hopeful future that could not be built because its foundation was a lie. “Why?”

“Why, it is quite simple.” Mouser said, straightening a bit, ignoring the beet-red tainting the boyo’s cheeks her shoulders were exposed to the air for second before she shivered and got the back under the water. Sebastian knelt by her side, his hand touching the water again, a small burst of hellfire heating the surface. Both ignored the boyo’s frown as that happened. Mouser adjusted again. “For a fallen angel it had quite an obsession with purity.”

“You were able to identify it as such?” Sebastian asked, standing up again, walking towards the luggage, opening the small trunk she used to travel when part of their “noble entourage” appearance and took out one of her uniforms with the cape ready. Along with towels, unmentionables and some things she was sure they were not hers. Like that comb. Or that… whatever it was called.

“He dropped the masks at the curry contest…” Mouser stated casually. Her hands threading the water’s surface. Then they disappeared again underneath it.

“He?” The boyo noticed.

“The contest?” Sebastian frowned, catching on that.

Mouser smiled slightly.

“Oh… awkward…” She moved a bit as if trying to ease something on her shoulder. Sebastian leaned to help. “No. Don’t touch me. Really, it hurts less if I’m hurting myself.” The demon shook his head, stopping as she moved, stretched and then sighed. “It seems it has both genders and it can shift between them.”

“One of those…” Sebastian said in distaste. Mouser made a note on her mind to ask later about angels and how to kill them easily.

“Smelled no less rancid in either when not masking it.” She mentioned. And Grell had said that angels rarely bothered to come down from the up-above so… it was not a complicated puzzle to piece together. Then again Sebastian had no way to know if she had gotten any information from other sources.

“It approached you before?” He asked.
Maybe that had been the reason for her sudden leaps in power and capabilities. A threat that she had dealt with but not felt truly hard-pressed. But her body knew better than her mind.

“Yes. That time we just fought.” She admitted, confirming his hypotheses. “Too many people around… Also he didn’t seem invested in killing.”

“Angela Blanc.” The boyo said, the memory of the incidents in Houndsworth surfacing.

“As a male it calls itself Ash Landers. He was the one behind the dollhouse.” She stopped talking as both males stared at her. “Me and Charlotte have been hunting for them.” She admitted softly. “So far we had little success but I still have some information that might have the threads to follow.”

Sebastian nodded. He had been quite adamant in the belief that the angel had not died in the crumbling building.

“What does it want?” The boyo inquired further. Mouser shrugged.

“If what he did to me, and you, and the girls, and Pluto, and Houndsworth are any clue I’d say… experimenting.” Seeking a way to purify himself even if he isn’t quite aware of its own lack of purity. The dog fucking bitch.

“The conspiracy?” The boyo asked, making a note on the paper. He was trying to build a valid report that did not make him look like some sort of raving lunatic.

“Test subjects. A proof of worth and efficacy.” Sebastian built on that idea, speculating. “It is either trying to return to heaven or turn earth into its heaven and rule it.”

“Like Lucifer?” Mouser asked, splashing a bit. Being dragged to church like a flock of thankful girls was part of the “good-headmistress requirements”, making sure the poor little souls were saved too… bored throughout it all. Most of them used the time to sleep. Or steal. Or gather clients.

“Lucifer had his reasons.” Sebastian stated calmly. There was something in his voice, a familiarity… Mouser chuckled. “And as he fell he did not delude himself about remaining an angel.”

“Who are you under that skin?” She breathed out. The demon merely smiled. “And what am I? I understand what happened. I went there before.” Mouser smirked and yawned, snuggling into the water. “Not quite as spectacularly, mind you but I know survival.”

“You are a Cait Sìth as that white spot attests.”

“Like the witches and fairies?” Scottish legends, Mouser thought, the name ringing something in her memory. Fairy tales, old tales the scots brought, told to the urchins.

“Like the demonesses that bear that name and abilities. True, most of them were called witches by the humans to begin with.”

The boyo scoffed, stopping his writing.

“Witches were just humans falsely accused in rubbish trials.” He stated with absolute conviction. It’s not like they flew through the air or summoned storms… That is what I think” Sebastian chuckled.
“I wonder. So many promising females were hunted down by humans in the witch trials before demons could find them. Cait Sith never called themselves witches. They knew full well what they were and welcomed the covenants that were offered. In any case Mouser had some Scottish-‘witch’ blood in her and my preferences seem to have triggered it.”

“If I sprout fur, tail and ears and start ending my phrases with meow in the next few hours I will be angry.” The thief said, closing her eyes, sleepily.

“Nothing so literal” Sebastian gave a small chuckle. “You are one of many in that line of all-female demons. And possibly the only one not to have the distinct Scottish brogue and be younger than 300.” Sebastian said, half joking as he placed the screen in front of the, tub, helping her out, covering her shoulders with the towel, trying to be as light as possible. Mouser winced and then sighed, drying.

“You will learn from them.” The demon continued the conversation, lowering his voice, too low for humans to hear. “The Cait Sith only have three forms, unlike many others. The demonic, to which you shifted when threatened, the human in which you are now and were born as, and females cannot change, and the feline form, A black cat with a white spot on her chest.”

“Unlike others?” Mouser whispered back, going for the clothes, the shivering returning.

“Often demons are shape shifters. Demonic and whatever they please though most of us are also associated to an animal or thing. Demonesses inherit that trait, despite keeping their human shape as well. Cait Sith are limited to the cat as alternate form although rumour has it the feline can change size.”

So when she decided to answer a summoning she could only appear as a demon, human or cat. Mouser would not be able to look like anyone else, male or female, or anything else, animal, object or mineral.

That clear limitation was compensated by a rather unique trait that gave them their nickname. Amongst demons Cait Sith were the only ones able to take souls away from contracts, unwilling souls, unaware souls. They were able to walk pass a human that had no belief or connection to demons and take their souls, leaving a living, soulless husk.

Any other demons with only three faces or less would be considered minor, little more than a hellhound who was born as a dog, gaining humanoid form with age and later on self-awareness and a modicum of intelligence. But not as lowly as an imp. The soul abilities of a Cait Sith and the simple matter of gender allowed them to be in a higher caste than the shapes they could take.

The white spot was easily concealed as she tied the bow around her neck, slipping then hastily into the cape.

In the end it was a madman. He wanted to purify the country with a strange religious doctrine. There were plans to overthrow the Queen’s rule and take over the country, and its colonies by default, launching then in a crusade to rule the world within the purification dream… The cult has been disbanded but some of the information about how far it had reached was destroyed when some of the fleeing cultists set fire to the place. I will stay alert in case of any resurgence.

Ciel appraised his report after another bout of modifications and adjustments, frowning, placing it down.
It would have to do for now, he though, looking around as the carriage moved at a fast pace. Sebastian was still on “leave”. Mouser was sleeping in the blanket fort, head on his lap. One of his butler’s hands was covered by the glove, formally placed over his thigh. The other one, bare, displaying the mark of the contract was tangled in the thief’s hair. It was uncomfortable to notice that his usually mocking and cold eyes softened when glancing down at the sleeping Mouser that sometimes jabbed his thigh when a shiver made her claws twitch.
Chapter 56

“So that was that and we believe they ran.” Mouser bit down on a pastry, frowning at the faint flavour with a bit of pitying look. Well it was not as if it came without any sort of warning. Charlotte looked thoughtful, sipping her tea from the lily cup. Her foot was bobbing up and down under her skirts and under the table as she thought and mulled over the information.

The tea house was full of ladies as always, gossiping and mining for new information. The season would start in a mere two months and they had to make sure everything was up to date, the fashions were correct and their weaponized tongues were sharp and demolishing.

“So what was the relation?” she pinpointed and asked the subject that had been somewhat left out, scanning the tea table for the next sweet victim on the three tiered silver platter. Her eyes narrowed predatorily over a confection of chocolate and cream. A new set of ladies entered as others adjusted their fancy winter hats, jackets or capes and left. Some stopped and stared at Charlotte, deciding if a famous whore presence was a good or bad thing. But the potential gossip was too much to resist.

Mouser smirked sheepishly, lowering her head, slipping some strands away from her face. Her hair was longer than it had been in a long, long time and she was unsure if she liked it or not. It was getting from shaggy to wavy and it was just plain strange.

“Twins as far as I could see.” She lied easily with the simplest way to not make any of the events weirder than they had been. “We are convinced they have escaped the collapse.” She added after a sip of the tea, a light spring-like mix of herbal and green. A primly dressed waiter carrying a white porcelain teapot walked by in a hurry. By the excited buzz of whispers around them one could deduce someone of station had walked in with her own gaggle.

“Well that is good because they have been sighted here in London.” Charlotte disclosed, confirming the suspicions, placing the cake onto her plate, picking up the dainty fork. She appraised Mouser for a moment with a knowing eye. The thief nodded simply, confirming her friend’s suspicions. Harm was common.

“Not even a week…” Mouser sighed, dismayed, placing the cup on its saucer, trying to be gentle. Already on the move. Well it was riled. Didn’t take much brain to notice that. “Can’t give us even a week.” Still it was worth complaining. Her skin no longer felt like a big black bruise despite showing nothing. She was not looking forward to feel like that again. Maybe if they acted fast… no. It had been in town before and managed to kidnap all those girls for too long before they interfered. She should assume the plots were in place and ready to be triggered. “What’s the word?” She inquired, lowering her voice.

“My people have seen them and reported.” Charlotte shrugged softly, thoughtful, glancing at the woman that was making the ladies, one by one, stand up and go greet her. “Isn’t that Marchioness Midford?”

Mouser peeked and paled. Then shook her head.

“I am not on the official clock at the moment.” She whispered, sipping tea.

“At the same time rumours of adults fighting over candy arose just a couple of days before I got word the Phantomhive was back in the manor.” Charlotte chuckled and continued.

“Adults don’t fight over candy unless it’s between someone’s’ legs or drugs.” Mouser pondered,
placing her tea down, sighing at the annoyance.

Drug wars would be bad. They would make the Queen’s entourage, and Victoria herself, look a bit too closely into the underworld businesses if the repercussions grew too large. No one had any wish of that. Between spiders and dogs and yards there was entirely too much surveillance already for most tastes. Not that any coup had been able to do much to change that.

Charlotte nodded gravely, also knowing the implications.

“Drugs are not my area of expertise according to the deal.” Her knowledge on the subject varied from the fact, though. Not dealing was not the same as not knowing. “You should contact Lau.”

“What else do you know?” Mouser tried to pry a bit deeper. There was always something more. And if there was chances were good Charlotte knew about it. Her friend nodded, the flowery hair pins shimmering in the bright light of the salon. She looked around for a moment, checking for curious looks or ears.

“The very badly hidden Scotland Yard Agents” The people that they though so well infiltrated and integrated into the criminal underworld. “monitoring the dark trades have been reduced by a knife. More than one. More than enough to make the old dog get rabid.” Her friend supplied with a grim front. Killed coppers were bad news when there was no obvious reason. “Someone is making a bold move.”

“Or setting something up.” Mouser whispered, standing, bidding her friend goodbye and leaving the tea salon.

She was walking down the East end riverfront, smoking thoughtfully when the commotion caught her eye. The Yard was gathered around one dead, bloated, rotting body along with a crowd of shocked onlookers and various members of the trade. One of their own, one of the “secret” infiltrators. But they were making a show of treating him like an unknown man. But you could see the truth behind the gritting teeth and frowning face of Lord Randall and the grim, saddened looks of the ones going through the meagre possessions and bloated form.

“Probably a robbery.” Lord Randall was saying more for the populace than to his men. They knew that was not it. “He was killed and dropped into the river.” Randall continued, teeth grinding. Mouser smirked, placing the cigarette on her lips for a moment, observing.

“Single stab wound. Seems too efficient for a robbery.” Aberlain was saying. Even if they could not discount robbery as a reason to attack it was still a very clean execution.

“It could be a mafia dispute then.” Lord Randall conceded, looking around, checking the faces of the crowd kept away by a handful of fretting men.

Mouser smiled at them and walked away, losing interest, moving on, into the labyrinth. Despite that she noticed the terse shift in Lord Randall’s face.

Opium den, the same, unchanged, filled with people trying to run from reality through smoke and oblivion. Cigarette smoke seemed acrid, out of place amidst the other silvery, sickeningly sweet clouds that wafted through the air. That did not keep her from smoking along the way, ignoring the
shapes that lounged about, reaching Lau’s overseeing spot.

“Lau.” Mouser called as the Chinese stood up, shooing most of the girls away gently. “Just some questions.” The thief explained as the Chinese and RanMao walked with her to the sunny and more business-like-looking housing upstairs. “The mutton shunters are getting jabbed and I heard about a new drug.”

“I did hear of the murders and before I learned that it was the Yard I had indeed thought it was because of that.” Lau usually showed a bit more focus when dealing with people other than the boyo and upper class. “Someone has started spreading new merchandize lately. To be frank it’s causing me some trouble. Rumour has it’s very effective, cheaper and lighter than opium. Lady Blanc they call it.”

Mouser frowned for a bit. It was likely that the deaths and the drug were connected. But why? The Yard would not ask the boyo for help if the thing’s aim was attract his attention. The name was a rather large warning sign for those that had dealt with Angela Blanc before, adding to its narcissism. Well if it did catch the Queen’s attention it was bound to but…

“Is something wrong?” Lau asked, his eyes opening, shifting the look from blissful to sharp.

“Cats eat birds so nothing is that wrong.” Mouser answered with a chuckle, exchanging a look with RanMao.

As she walked out of the opium den Mouser decided to make a small side trip to Jack’s place. Both as a bout of nostalgia and as a way of gathering more information about the street’s happenings. But before she could reach the backstreets where the Pig was located a fight broke in one of the alleys. The dealer was beaten by a group of four desperate-looking men, shouting for Funtom candy of all things. That gripped her attention a bit more sharply than a normal fight would have. Mouser shot one, seeing the dealer was still alive for interrogation as soon as she finished examining the addict. The act unnoticed by the others, who ran away with the looted drugs, happy to have their fixes. She checked the body for the candy, finding it indeed wrapped into the real deal, a real Funtom wrapper. Still there was no doubt that the irregular lump of white was a drug, not the… pink wrapper… hard candy, usually fruit flavoured. She knew both from the bitter but faint scent and the fact that it was unsightly. Having to deal with paperwork of the Funtom Company there were a lot of little things she knew about it by now. One of them being the shipment of wrappers missing every week that both she and the boyo had been chalking up to some sort of delivery misunderstanding.

It was not trying to drag the boyo to the streets. It was setting him up for the Yard to catch and leave vulnerable. And Lord Randall would be happy to help with its goals, aided by the planted evidence and personal grudge.
Chapter 57

Pluto came running on all fours in human form and crying from upstairs after a clear cut commotion and a rather stern order. Going by its upset air, as he clutched Mouser’s cape and whimpered, Sebastian had not held back in showing displeasure. But then again he had been on the edge lately. Not much guesses left as to why that was happening. She ruffled the hell hound’s hair as she slipped out of the outwear, leaving the black fabric on the kitchen’s hook, half listening to the happenings inside the house, walking towards them. Pluto stayed in the kitchen, not daring to follow beyond its threshold.

Tanaka had just noticed the candy was fake despite real paper and Sebastian had no problem identifying the drug, down to the components. The trio had no idea of the origin. They had just been handed them rather innocently. Mouser stopped on the stairs top, huffing a little cloud of smoke.

“Well you got there without my input.” She said with a slight note of snark, making everyone turn towards her. She tilted her head. The boyo nodded, turning and walking back inside the tea parlour. Sebastian followed and closed the door. “That is new merchandise going around without permission. Lau said it’s called Lady Blanc.” The thief began as the boyo plopped down on the couch, in front of the tea and cakes, frowning. “The missing wrappers, the embezzling bosses, the lost workers, the dead coppers…” She enunciated some of the events loosely and quickly. “It is framing you.” Mouser concluded softly, leaning down against the back of the couch, staring at the boyo from above.

“What is the point?” The boyo inquired, picking up the tea cup, eye narrowed in thought.

“What can you do from the chokey boyo? Because if you get arrested they all get arrested.” She gestured vaguely towards Sebastian and the rest of the household beyond the door. “And no one is going to help.”

“They?” The boyo spotted the self-exclusion, pacing. Mouser smiled. “There are pawns that I can control.”

“Then you are an idiot, believing you hold everyone in your palm.” Mouser shrugged, killing her cigarette, lighting another almost without pause. “Chess is a daft game to play. Little leeway to cheat. You play chess when everyone around you plays poker with stacked decks.” She gestured lazily with the smoke. “No one will come for you when you have nothing to offer to the criminal class.”

“Even if I am deprived of all my chess pieces and only the king remains on the board I will not give up.” The boyo stated with all the dignity of the title.

“All the king can do is run away and hope someone comes close enough to fall into a pit trap while fearing each step will make him fall into another’s trap.” Mouser scoffed smirking. “Your legs can’t keep up until said board is clean.” She shook her head. Sebastian was smirking slightly. Whether he agreed or not was neither here nor there. Contract stated he should refer to himself as whatever the master demanded. Still in her game she was sure he was both the house dealer and the cheat. Moving on. “Check the London factories and warehouses.” Mouser advised. “It planted evidence everywhere and no doubt the Yard already got the tip. If you can move faster than the already poked Yard you’ll be in a better position than just sitting on your rump and waiting for a whooping.”
“You would come for me Mouser.” The boyo stated, standing up, going towards the door.

“Well sure.” Mouser shrugged. “You paid me in advance.” She smirked at his back. “Still I could run with the money if you’re being a bratty hassle.”

The carriage clattered through the streets loudly as they made haste, as sunset faded and the night started to darken and spread. There was only one actual factory in London proper and two warehouses in the same area. In one of those three the incriminating evidence would have been planted, although Mouser was not sure it would be only crates of the product or an actual lab to make the situation for the Earl as dire as possible. She was betting on the whole ribbon and whistles deal. It wanted the boyo dead and hadn’t been able to bypass two demons and a sour demeanour. So it had to kick the nuisances out and break the prim and stiff spirit of a British noble. That being said the actual breaking would be a bit of a task.

“Why was this plan in place if it wanted to deal with us earlier, in the cult?” The boyo mused, fists clenched, as if wishing for even more haste. Mouser glanced at him, shrugging.

“I am making some guesses but I believe it learned. It was not expecting you in Houndsworth. It was not expecting you in the dollhouse. But by the time the cult was set it had learned to make a backup plan in case it failed and have another way to make its dream world happen.”

The silence fell again, broken only by the sounds of the horses and vehicle.

“Stop!” The young detective’s voice, Aberlain echoed on the street, sharp and sudden. Mouser heard his movement and the whisper of clothes. He had just jumped in front of the carriage’s path. Sebastian tensed, pulling the reins. It would do them no good to run over a member of the Yard. At that point they had too much against the Phantomhive household as a whole.

Mouser smirked suddenly.

“I have a bit of extra advice now.” She said as the whole carriage shook when it came to an abrupt stop. The boyo struggled for balance on his seat. The thief steadied him with one hand and smiled seriously. “Leg it.”

“You really are reckless. If it were not me you would have died.” Sebastian was saying as the carriage stopped shaking, the horses calming down. The boyo stood and opened the door, peeking, using an authoritative tone.

“What’s wrong Sebastian?” He demanded while looking outside. In the dimly lit street the detective and about twenty guards had the carriage surrounded. They were not pointing guns yet but it would only be a matter of time if they showed any hostility.

“Earl Ciel Phantomhive, we are detaining you under the suspicion of violating the Medicine Act.” Aberlain said with a steady voice. When truly on the job he had proved he was nowhere near as innocent as he looked. All focus and seriousness.

“Oh? You want to detain an Earl?” The status he possessed was his best defence against such thing and Ciel knew it. So he would play it to the hilt. “A mere officer without a title?”

“Indeed.” Aberlain was undeterred. Either he was very sure of his evidence, uncaring about social classes or trying to climb higher in the promotion ladder. “You are suspect of being in league with a Chinese man by the name of Lau in selling a new drug.” He explicated the accusations.
So the evidence planting had gone that far and the Yard had indeed found it where it conveniently spelled out what the angel wanted. How much of the underworld was tangled now?

“With Lau? Don’t make me laugh.” Ciel stated haughtily, standing taller by not leaving the carriage. Sebastian was standing patiently by his side. “He is but a pawn in my hand.” Sebastian just allowed a put upon sigh to escape. Letting him know he believed he had just set himself up for a fall. Mouser said nothing. “Besides the fact that he was running an opium den was well known and tolerated by Randall. If that is a problem you should take him alone. Lau was well aware of the risks.” He dismissed the case and moved as if to return to the inside of the carriage.

“There is a Funtom Company warehouse in the docks. A short while ago a large amount of the new drug was discovered there along with a hidden facility to process it.” Aberlain stated the evidence found clearly, his hands clenching.

“What do you intend to do, Young Master?” Sebastian asked politely.

“Sebastian…” Ciel began to formulate the order.

“Shut up brat.” Only to be stopped by a harsh shout coming from Lord Randall. The old man was approaching with a gun trained on him, dour as ever but with a wicked glint in his eyes. Belief in victory and in his fall. Ciel schooled his expression and waited. “Aberlain I have instructed you to separate him from his butler and the toffer at once.” No derisive comment came from Mouser in the inside of the carriage despite just having been called a whore. A posh one. Ciel frowned. He glanced inside for the first time since he had stepped out to confront the Yard, towards the thief, his face failing to keep straight for a brief second when he noticed that she was no longer there.

“Randall.” Ciel acknowledged the presence after a moment, gathering what he could control, thinking about what could be done. “Don’t you realize what it means to point a gun at me?” Still using the title as a shield.

“If you want to resist feel free to do so.” Randall stated. All of his men, except Aberlain, had followed his example. “However it will mean the end of the Phantomhives.” Ciel frowned as the man rambled. “With such a crime and in the name of Her Majesty the Queen of England the Yard is allowed to suspend the privileges of Nobility until the matter is clarified. If you defy this law you will be stripped of your tittle and executed.” Formality was over and the Commissary opted for the mocking, dismissive tone. “Would you like to confess to your crimes?”

“I am terribly sorry but no.” Ciel said haughtily. The guards were moving, preparing the arrest. Lord Randall moved closer, with what in any other would be consider a gleeful enjoyment. “If I could I would love to torture you.” He looked down on the Earl, spiteful. “Unfortunately even with the crimes you are surely guilty of the law of this country still protects a noble bloodline.” He spat. “Should I question your butler instead?” A proxy was always good.

Mouser lit another cigarette as the chains were being brought out, slapped onto their respective wrists. The thief was sitting on top of one of the buildings that created the lane, watching as they were locked and separated, thinking and examining the new situation. Sebastian would most likely go to the Newgate prison and the boyo was to be kept under tight security at Holloway Castle.

Maybe she should have dealt with it, all of that before informing the boyo. But then again it would make little difference seeing that she had only had till now, sundown, to do it all.
Ah, well.

The servants and dog were out of the town house, as were Soma and Agni who had been, at first, tasked with finding some “important items” in town and then driven to the new location with the others, well hidden. The Yard had gone after Lau. So should she. Mouser stood up. There was also a trick she wanted to try in Lord Randall.

Soon the underworld would be in an uproar and it would be a good time to take advantage of it all.
Lau’s respectable house, the place where he presented himself as Kunlun’s representative to high society, was full of bludgeoned dead bodies in the dark uniforms worn by the beat, and surrounded by empty carriages with fidgeting horses. Amazingly no one had reported the obstruction or the noise. Most likely terrified by both. The neighbourhood was good and respectable, filled with merchants and social-climbers. No one wanted to interfere or blemish their records. Mouser peeked into the open door, the smoke following her in broken waves, smiling pleasantly. RanMao looked up from the job of finishing off any survivors that rested on the mosaic flooring. Reassured the thief walked in and by the Chinese woman with an acknowledging nod, going into Lau’s office. Predictably he was smoking from a long pipe, watching the night through the window, thoughtful as if nothing was going on downstairs.

“So it happened.” He stated, looking at her, sitting down.

“With all that was being done it was hard to avoid.” Mouser shrugged, using his ashtray, sitting as well. “Did you find anything?” She asked after a moment. RanMao’s light footsteps crossed the house. The screams had died down. The scent of blood, bile and bodies was heavy, coming from downstairs.

“Indeed I have. Right, RanMao?” The Chinese girl nodded, entering the study and crossed the room to sit on Lau’s lap as always. “I found out who is trying to get into my area. I found out who gave the Yard the information.” Lau tapped the pipe harshly on the ashtray’s edge, making an audible and sharp clack. “Are you going to chase the mice with me little kitten?” he asked, showing the truth behind the usual blissfully closed eyes.

There was a clear cut list that should be done although the order of the variables was slightly flexible.

The first item Mouser dealt with was Marchioness Midford, appearing at the estate before the news started to spread, reassuring the woman that the tale of the boyo’s capture was part of the Phantomhive’s duty, manipulation and a trap. Any wild accusations or gossip would be the product of idle minds with little else to focus on. She dared to give a few instructions as well in the way they should behave in the next few days. Unwavering loyalty and hint conspiracy, jealously, revenge, make society think that there was an intruder there, working to ruin the noble’s reputations. That would make them wary of spreading tales lest they be targeted later on.

Lizzy had been listening in, looking worried, the green eyes usually so bright and innocent showing an uncanny resemblance with her mother’s for the briefest moment. She understood perfectly what was happening, losing her own mask for a moment, just before she was caught and scolded by the harsh Marchioness, regaining the cute demeanour everyone saw but never questioned.

Mouser reread the note nervously, questioning herself about the quality of the handwriting and the
Next they were to trap and lure out the culprit of crafting and distributing in a way they could get both the evidence, the confession and a source of reputation cleanser for the imprisoned boyo later.

The Ferro Family, the troublesome Italians that had tried to play with things they should not last year and had been dealt with accordingly, were back, assisted by Angela or Ash’s, whatever it called itself and whatever for it had used to settle the deal, promises. Mouser was not sure which form would have been more convincing for the plot. But she was sure the new boss, Signore Corallo would not resist the chance to get his hands on Lau’s business. It was illegal, yes. But that only made it more profitable seeing that they now did not have to jump through the loops the Chinese man had to when he struck the underground deals.

Charlotte had dug things up as soon as the note had reached her.

The Italians as whole were the ones working on the framing of the boyo. They had orders, according to a weak willed one, captured and persuaded by Jack, to take out the boyo and then use the tainted remains of his business to spread the drug in Her Majesty’s name so the world would be “consumed and reborn”. Half indoctrination, half promise of money and the Ferro family were the new lapdogs of a crazed angel.

Word had been sent to the other street factions.

Mouser was just waiting for the answers from that part as she, Lau and RanMao were guided into Signore Corallo’s meeting room. It was a normal, tastefully decorated room according to the latest fashion. And the man was dressed wealthy, waiting, sitting on a three person blue brocade couch, legs crossed, arms spread, occupying all of it. Trying to make himself look bigger. Mouser smirked as the maid bowed and walked away, closing the door. Even though her presence gave him a slight pause Corallo had no reason to suspect anything. After all both Mouser and Lau were part of the criminal class. They followed the money and power. Although Lau’s allusion to butterflies and flowerbeds was a bit too “poetic” to let go without a grimace.

However he said what they needed to hear. That it was his doing, despite not mentioning the patron, that he had murdered and placed the condemning items in place. All they had to do was track the hands he had used and make them talk.

The Pig was as stuffy as ever, smoke, booze and rot, coming from within, from the outside, but the environment was familiar. Any copper approaching and she would be warned. Any event taking place and the whispers would reach her fast. As the sunset approached it started to fill.

Mouser had been there since noon, drinking and organizing the plotting, ignoring the faded sting that jabbed her from time to time. There was no use in worrying about Sebastian but… She rubbed Tobias’ head gently, placing the rum down, crossing and re-crossing her legs. There was a clear
discomfort in that area. The thief lit a cigarette. They were at the end of the first day and the news had spread like wildfire.

Nobles and Powers That Be were warned;

Facts had been gathered;

Facts were being planted and forwarded;

The Italians were being followed.

The Undertaker was working on the copper’s bodies.

A single word and the true culprits, at least the ones who had done the dirty work, would be rounded up, gagged, bound and sent to Yard with little bows on their heads. The streets were in a quiet uproar.

A steady silver cloud escaped her lips as a sudden silence filled the place. It was hard to kill the noise in a place filled with thugs from everywhere in England and some of mixed races from the empire. But he managed to do it with just stepping through the threshold. Mouser scoffed, leaning back on the rickety chair. Tobias opened one eye, glancing at her and then at the newcomer before readjusting his position, stretching and curling.

“For a vermin you look remarkably out of place Mr Faustus.” The thief called out as the spider’s envoy walked into the tavern and towards her. Leery, worried eyes followed his approach. The thief gestured towards the people, a snapping, quick motion of her hand. Blades and pistols returned to their hiding places, conversation, drinking and games resumed. “Sit.” Mouser told him curtly, watching as the demon tied to the Trancy household did so, stiff and showing little. “I believe you are not after what the Pig can offer. So it stands to reason that you were looking for me. I feel rather nauseated by the thought.” She grinned, shaking the ash away. “Are you trying to be a Dark Cully?”

As expected he did not react to the cheat accusation.

“The news of the Phantomhive’s fall have reached the Trancy household.” Claude Faustus said rather simply. The thief arched one eyebrow sardonically, crossing her legs.

“Indeed. So why track me down when the protocol has established that your little kiddo should send a letter to my boyo asking if he needs to be sprung?” No answer, just a rather blank stare. “Let me ask something else then. Why the sudden interest in the boyo after… well…” She made a little show of counting fingers, giving him the middle one for a little longer than required as she dragged the three. “four years now of not even knowing your existence.”

“It is because of the Master’s orders.” Claude sated.

“My, my…” The thief chuckled, placing her head in her palms. “I was growing worried about the no lying thing but it does seem to be a contractual clause.” There was another moment of silence and surprise in the Pig. The thief looked up, picking up the bottle again, leaning back.

“Now you’re the one hogging all the good men Evee?” Grell complained with a semi-pout, approaching. Mouser repeated the placating gesture towards the usual clientele. Jack shook his head behind the counter.

“You can have this one poppet.” Despite feeling a little bump of surprise at being sneaked on like that Mouser just glanced over her shoulder at the Grim Reaper that had just joined the scene,
smiling and quieting. “I have no particular attachment to that pretty face.” Tobias woke up and migrated to Mouser’s lap, his vicious eyes opened and sharp. Grell sat down with a scoff, examining Faustus carefully behind the red glasses.

“A Reaper?” Claude identified with a distaste similar to what one had found in William T. Spears when faced with Sebastian, growing a bit agitated, cautious and on the defensive. Unlike her he had no loophole clause to be safe from an execution on a whim.

Mouser smirked, watching.

“What brings you here poppet?” She asked sweetly, petting Tobias.

“After your nature was apparent Will though you should be watched.” Grell said, stretching, helping herself. The Thief signalled for another bottle and a glass. Or a cup at least. “And when your name came up associated with a very high death toll in the London area in the next couple of days I was sent to do it.” Grell glanced at her coyly over the rim of the glasses. Then settled back with a sigh. “As part of my punishment.”

So Grell was trying to win back the custom death scythe once more. Mouser snuffed out the cigarette, making a show of being comfortable with the Grim Reaper.

“Am I going on rampage?” Mouser asked, amused. “We could go on shopping trip afterwards.” She offered as compensation, not mentioning Charlotte in front of the suspicious and untrustworthy one. “I hear the new Season’s collection has arrived.”

“Is this Reaper your ally?” Faustus asked, tense, glaring.

“Poppet is someone with an acute interest in... Should I say love?” The thief asked, playing with the steel lighter.

“Supreme love is always a battle to the death.” Grell took the cue with a chuckle and a flourish of the red locks.

The other demon grimaced, stood stiffly and made a short, strained bow.

“I will bid you good day then. Excuse me.” Then he left with little explanation as why he had come at all.

“What did he want?” Grell asked in a low, gossipy tone.

“Who knows...” Mouser placed another cigarette on her lips, eyes closed, ignoring a sudden pain, the faded echoes of a whip. “I have work to do poppet but I will be happy to show you around while I do it.” The thief stood, placing Tobias on the chair, ignoring his protest, and smiled. Poppet would love the first stop she had to make, Mouser was sure of it.
What waited beyond the nondescript façade of a simple house in the East End with its crumbly looking surroundings was a collection of every weapon capable of causing pain and destruction amidst the human race. And then some. Sure it would not be a stretch to find similar places in the same area, as gangs were known to be well armed but still…

Grell fluttered about in delight, examining the multitude of crates, boxes and potential.

Mouser smirked and walked by her after securing the door, placing the cigarette in an ashtray, sitting on the available table and starting to disarm what she was currently packing in her bloomers. And everywhere else. With the chapel and cult’s collapse she had lost six daggers, thirty nine penknives, twelve pistols and revolvers, eight derringers and one of her favourite hair-comb-pins. She was still fiddling away with the different shape and weight of the new daggers.

“What is this place?” Grell asked after calming down a smidge, sitting, watching, trembling with excitement over the death count that she knew everything about down to the name of the victims. Mouser picked up another cigarette, lighting it as she checked the bullets on the firearms that she had been carrying. All loaded, all ready. She moved on to checking the blades and holsters. There might not be a chance to double back and gather more materials until the next night so everything had to be just so.

“A warehouse I got after the boyo set up Woolsey.” The thief explained. “He had a nice score of illegal weapons.” She tossed a rough duffel bag onto the table, cigarette held between her lips as she tiptoed to get a colt ammo crate from one of the high shelves. “So I added it to my collection. It’s quite conveniently placed as well.” Good to go.

The usual number of weaponry was fine with the added weight of the loading supplies. Just in case. But the plan was to get the Italians in a twist by going directly after the labs where the drug was, without any doubt, still in production.

A bit of murder, a bit of arson, put the city into a small panic over fire and the guards everywhere on the streets to find culprits only to find evidence about their error towards the Phantomhives. Still they would hold the boyo and Sebastian for a few days after that to make them stew.

So she went to get some more toys. A foursome of shotguns, three of the old but tried and true Spencer Repeating rifles and a couple of the relatively new, and reportedly improved, Winchester Model 1887 rifles. A good way to test them out for Meyrin. Her birthday was coming up and the single shot rifles on the Manor roof while useful and deadly due to the maid’s amazing accuracy were somewhat challenged on the firing rate. Hence the massive number of them and a shared habit with Mouser of tossing the empty gun to the ground and get a fully loaded one without pause. It only highlighted Meyrin’s also less than peaceful past.

The thief placed them on the table along with the respective ammos, humming as she went for the explosives. Arson was easy in a drug lab. Chemicals were flammable and everywhere. But she needed a flashy start or finish to the fire. It had to be attention grabbing. TNT had a good supply and was the easiest to get as it was not illegal. Not according to the Explosives Act of 1875. It was not even considered an explosive in a clause that referred to storage. Ten sticks should do it…

Grell was watching carefully as the thief started to arrange her clothes methodically, making sure the waistcoat was thigh, rolling the sleeves up and pinning them in place before starting to add the belts and empty holsters, tightening and loosening them as needed, testing with a few quick
motions after each adjustment.

Then the main weapons were placed into place, the gestures quick, practiced and instinctive this time.

If the holders were in place the objects would be no issue.

Mouser moved on then to the impressive collection of small knives, tucking them slowly and diligently along the easy to reach seam of the clothes. Around the upper arms, around the inner neckline of the white shirt, a small brush aside of the ends of her bow revealing the now ever present white spot, around the inner neckline of the waistcoat. A small swish knife, different but as ornate as the black one had been was placed between her breasts. More went into the seam between the pants and the waistcoat, her hips undulating after each was placed, deciding if the location was right. Some more were inverted and placed into the pants waistband, followed by another pair of long knives strapped to her ankles, between the boots and black and white stripped stockings. Another handful of little knives were then placed in the pants proper. Mouser hopped a bit afterwards with a little frown. Amazingly nothing made a sound.

Between the lacing on her back the thief started to slip rigid and small throwing knives, mumbling about the shirt that would surely be lost after that day. They were not the sharpest of the bunch but they were rather pointy. She slipped them from here she could reach to the edge of the lacing and its bow.

In the derringer department she decided to cut a bit back, limiting herself to a pair stuffed into the pockets. With the rifles, shotguns and the usual pistols she had enough firepower for the night.

“Want something Poppet?” The thief asked, finished with the main weapons, checking the bag of tools with lock picks, rope, grapples, files and hammer. If all the Grim Reaper had were the scissors she could see how Poppet would be a little bit envious of her toys.

“I can’t interfere.” Grell pouted. “This time I am getting my scythe back permanently.” Poppet vowed with a little hopeful smirk

“I’ll be good then.” Mouser chuckled, placing the rifles on her back with a bandolier strap for each. “No soul stealing, no soul eating, nothing more than plain ol’ killin’” She picked up the shotguns in a bundle and shoved them into a second bag before shoving the cigarette into the ashtray. “Well, let’s start. I want to be in a sniping position when the lamps light up.” The thief climbed the stairs, going for the attic. Even in the East End people would find it a bit worrying if someone walked around carrying the supplies you’d expect in a soldier going to the battlefield. So they would take the cat’s walk.
The man was settling down with a little meat pie, squarely framed by the window. He was looking outside, down, towards the door, standing on the walkway that made a ring around the perimeter of the building, inside. It was used to oversee workers and clean windows if that was a normal warehouse. It also usually gave access to a little office where sometimes documents and the overseer lingered. Through the windows she could see lights and moving shadows. Production and packaging. That was what her info said about that stop. A couple of man-pulled wagons waited their cargo in front of the wide double doors of the warehouse. Her info also said that ten small boxes always left the place before dawn. No at that time of night all the workers and guards had to be stationed inside for the sake of production and effectiveness of delivery stability.

Mouser huffed a little smoke cloud to the side, following the movement through the lenses of the rifle’s scope. She adjusted her position and fired the first round. The glass of the window shattered loudly but the sound was muffled by the surrounding bays of the animals waiting to be killed and the machinery of the nearby tool factory. The Italians were smart enough to settle their labs into easily concealable places. Places where the surroundings provided an extra layer of camouflage. Like next to the slaughterhouse. The smell of blood and rot concealed the chemicals rather easily. And a little away from the factory whose smoke and machinery did much the same.

Her target screamed as the bullet only grazed him, standing up in bewilderment. A rookie’s mistake.

Mouser shot two extra rounds, the lever-action of the Spencer making them easy to line up quickly, killing him as he made a dive for cover, catching on to the error. Too late for him but it was good to see someone learn on the job. She blew a bit more of smoke, staring through the scope for a couple seconds more before standing and appraising the distance between that roof and the two story warehouse that was her target. She picked the cigarette for a moment and allowed all the smoke to slip away from her lips before placing it back on them.

With an annoyed tsk she placed the rifle’s barrel against her shoulder, holding it upright, stepping on to the ledge, hopping easily to the other side, landing on one tiptoed foot, the heel then lowering with a little clap as she swivelled, facing the street once more, pointing the rifle down, balancing her stance, waiting, lining up the next shot.

A handful of people carrying pistols came out of the building, shouting, trying to disperse and look for the sniper. The loud sound of the factory had not been enough to conceal and misdirect the fact that someone had been killed inside. Mouser started to take them down, mumbling about the long-range issues, dropping the first rifle after three more shots, leaving one bullet still in the seven-shot cartridge, the habit a remnant of the six shot pistols overruling the knowledge of what the Spencer could do, picking the second one of the same make she had brought to the roof and taking the rest of the men down.

She now only had as extras to the ones concealed in her clothes the now single shot rifles.

The other supplies had been left with the Grim Reaper.

Mouser walked towards the industrial skylight that would flood the relatively small warehouse with light in day hours, looking down through the glass, watching the activity. The guards had been sent and the others were still working as it should be. They seemed rather confident… with a little flourish she pointed one of the rifles down, stepping on the glass and taking dainty steps towards its centre.
Grell, still sitting on the roof of the opposite house, taking souls with the little scissors, making the needed annotations in each file, tallying and occasionally stealing glances at the show.

A single shot on the glass and a rifle tossed away.

The surface started to crack beneath her.

Mouser smirked and prepared the second rifle as she fell through the shower of shattered glass, landing on her feet, crouching to absorb and minimize the impact, aiming the rifle, still low to the ground, at the man farthest away from her, the one carrying a box of already done, wrapped and packaged drugs, the first of the night, judging by the empty wagon outside and the empty boxes inside, the one with the slow reflexes that was not already panicking and reaching for the weapons to deal with the intruder.

At close range there was no wasted bullet.

The man, the box and its content fell loudly as Mouser discarded the rifle, quickly looking around, counting.

It should be quick enough, the thief decided while reaching for her back-lacing, pulling two throwing knives free and chucking them at the incoming man with a metal pipe and the one that had been wrapping chunks of white and was standing up, gripping a pistol, not letting the distraction disturb her, going for the daggers, lunging towards the closest adversary, the one at the table, screaming about the piece of metal imbibed on his thigh, dodging a couple of stray bullets with ease pulling out a little penknife, slapping the pistol away from his hand, slamming the small blade through his palm, pinning him to the table amidst Funtom wrappers. The slashed throat started to spill all over the drug and wrappers soon after.

The other that was managing to keep the pain of a knife in the liver rather low key, dragging himself on the floor and his own little pool of red, the pipe still gripped as he tried to stood and attack.

Mouser turned calmly. That should be all, she considered while walking towards the last dying man, kicking the pipe away grabbing him by the collar of the shirt, dragging him, screaming in pain to the backrooms, created by weighted and piled up crates, where the smell of chemicals was stronger.

Sure enough the production was being done there, unattended. Either the one she dragged was the amateur chemist or one of the dead outside was. Or the chemicals needed little watching after the process started. Either or.

Chemical and distilling apparatus, burners and crates of raw material.

The thief let go of the man and used one of the burners that was refining the mixture to light one cigarette while searching the premises.

Little to no documents.

It meant they knew what they were doing but there was no way an operation that size had no means of tracking its own actions. So either they were kept in other labs, in a storage or warehouse, with Corallo or one of his high ranking gang members. But there was no hurry. The evidence was planted there, conveniently placed. It would not burn and it would look like it had always been in there when the aftermath found it. Other packages could always be placed down at a more convenient time.
Mouser turned up the burners, the mixtures starting to boil faster and harder, growing unstable.

The dying man’s eyes widened in fear as she set the stage.

“You left one alive.” Grell mentioned, finishing the count, closing the death note as Mouser joined her again on the roof, cleaning the dagger, gesturing the Reaper to move along.

“Did I now?” Mouser replied conventionally while they walked away in the cat’s walk, going towards the next target. “How clumsy of me.” A sudden muted explosion echoed, followed by the burst of high flames and the beginning of commotion, shouts and calls for the authorities. The thief smiled, amused.

“Never mind.” The Grim Reaper chuckled, opened the note again, rechecking the cause of death. Blood loss. He was dead as the explosion rang but the time overlap had made Grell assume something else. The Grim Reaper made the needed procedures to catch that last soul and close the first incident report.

First tally: 11 people killed.

More were scheduled to perish while fighting the fire.

Collateral, not added up to Mouser’s body count.

Other Reaper was now in charge of that area.

No soul missing.

No soul taken.

No soul corrupted.

No soul manipulated.

No angelic interference.

No demonic interference.

No further notes.

First lab eliminated.
Chapter 61

A warehouse. A brick building amidst so many others of the same style, make and degradation. The street was poorly lit and there was a bit of movement around even at that hour. The windows had bars but were not blocked by wooden planks. East End, riverside area. A common place for such a thing to be set up. It was also close to two of the labs, the one destroyed and the one that was next on the list, and the main source of the Lady Blanc in the area.

Mouser made a little sound, shifting the rifle, looking through the scope, continuing the place analysis. Now that it had started time was ticking. Events had to overlap perfectly to ensure the best result so dallying would do them no good from that moment forth.

Single guard. A normal looking, portly men with weary, wary eyes and smothered by the weight of a cloak, a protection against the chilly March night. He looked around slowly, left, right, then up and around. After that was done he paused and took a swig of a metal flask. Apparently he was feeling pretty secure. He should. Edwin Lowe. The one that had killed two of the coppers. He was marked for capture after the third place was dealt with in about fifteen minutes.

No guesses about what motivated the laid back demeanour. The territorial division was a mess as of the night before. Mouser’s interference and nudges had managed to hold them together against a single target instead of going after each other’s throats as they would have normally done. Order would be easily redone after the boyo was free and Lau occupied his seat once more. Most of the underworld was just waiting for a chance to pounce on each other’s throats.

Not too far from the just destroyed place was starting to swarm with action and onlookers. Actually the echoes that began to reach that area were making that neighbourhood grow nervous as well. Some peeked from alleys, others from the small houses hidden between the storage buildings. Fires were disastrous in London if not properly contained despite being mainly a summer fear. It was deeply ingrained in the minds of the city’s inhabitants that a fire was death incarnate.

Mouser stood up, abandoned the heavier weapons and walked down the building, hidden in shadow, waiting. Grell followed this time, looking around with curiosity as they settled directly ahead of the wooden doors, in a very thin alley.

The guard, already worried and glancing up regularly at the red that bled over the dark sky, not having reached for his pocket flask for a while, was distracted by the sudden swarm of kids running down the streets, chased by at least five guards, having waylaid and robbed a nobleman’s carriage. Screams and whistles joined the echoes of the fire-trouble a few streets away. The kids passed, running and carrying their stolen goods. The whistle started to blare. And the thuggish guard had to make himself scarce and invisible out of fear of incriminating his boss and compromising the whole operation. That was the moment that signalled the thief into action.

She had paid the kids by giving them the plan and the escape routes, allowing them to keep the money of the items for themselves. As an extra she had also done a bit of smuggling out of a legit Funtom factory. About thirty pounds of candy and chocolate waited in their hideout. It made her proud to see her kids could haggle. First to keep the money and then to get the extra as she had been misleading them by meeting while munching on a chocolate bar, pretending to be shocked, appalled and then tricked into giving up the sweets. It was funny to see them look so smug while knowing she was partially faking a lot of her reactions for their sake and amusement. Most of them knew her for as long as they could remember and living in the streets had taught them how to read people.
A lock pick versus a heavy padlock opened the way quickly. Mouser’s lighter was used on a single piece of “candy”, tossed back into its crate, allowing the insides to simmer, catching fire, spreading it to its peers and then to the box. And the other box, and the other… noxious, drugged, intoxicating fumes started to rise up and fill the space as Mouser walked out, closed the doors and said a polite hello to the returning guard who too his station once more in front of the door while the fire began to grow inside, shimmering against the windows, still low key.

“Why didn’t you kill him?” Grell asked as they recovered the weapons and kept moving towards the next lab, sounding a bit pouty and disappointed. Screams for water and help began to rise as they turned the corner. Mouser chuckled, shaking her head.

“Was he on the list?” The thief asked softly, shrugging to adjust the rifles into place, hopping, stretching and resuming walking. She checked the clock quickly. Ten more minutes before Jack unleashed the hunt.

“No.” Grell admitted. “But you could have changed your mind.” The Grim Reaper chuckled with a little playful nudge. “Then he would be.” Mouser laughed along and shook her head.

“He was in the other list. That one I need alive and talking.” She shrugged as they reached the next lab, settling on the lookout to examine what she would be dealing with first. “In any event he won’t survive long after he confesses to the Yard.” The thief admitted.

Jack would have the men.

Charlotte would have the information.

And as soon as both sides were completed Lau could come out of hiding to steady the underworld, quieting the upheaval.

From there on the law, plain and simple, would have to do exactly how Mouser wished it to perform.

After that lab and the hunt started the Italians would start to grow desperate and gather in three places: the labs and storages left, the safe-houses that peppered London and outskirts, and around Signore Corallo. Then the boss would try to leave. It was up for the boyo to choose the fate of the man afterwards. Personally Mouser preferred enemies to be dead.
Chapter 62

Pain on this back from a bullet with barely more than the glimpse of a shadow and the clacking of gears that signalled the reloading of a lever-action gun. The cold slam of the knees on the floor, the pain not as sharp as the other, as life bled out from the shot that had pierced him through.

The shock of death coming from an unknown origin, the burning of the bullet hole on his chest for the briefest second that took him to realize that he was dead, lying on the floor. The same echo of reloading that had caught his attention in the entry hall and the light tapping of heels, the image of a lady’s boots walking by his head as the eyes closed forever.

He had tried attacking when he heard the shots and his companions dying, having little doubt that it was a raid. That was why he was there, looking out into the night. He had been promptly knocked onto the ground and was staring up, breaking in cold sweat, feeling his fate sealed. A smiling face with seemingly innocent features was all he could focus on, standing at the other end of a long rifle’s barrel, fangs bared and red eyed betraying the pretty features, seconds before the trigger was pulled.

His legs were not stopping trembling as he saw the head of the man, Henry, someone he had known for years, burst into a bloody mess. The small woman made an annoyed sound, shooting him again, this time angling the rifle so the heart would be pierced cleanly. He knew a mercy kill when he saw it... but... She was looking at him now as he stood there with a limp weapon. He opened his mouth to scream. And she was suddenly gone, cutting his panic with surprise. He gasped, trembling, looking around, pistol-whipping the air around him. There was a sudden pressure against his back. The man barely had time to look over his shoulder when the shotgun blast struck. He fell down with the weapon that killed him as the woman walked away, prepping the rifle she had used on his friend as she disappeared into the shadows.

Dead... they were dead... his eyes darted around the hall of the house and into the open door of the study. Of the five lookouts only he was alive. Hands shaking he battled between fleeing the scene, screaming for help or just shrug the terror and do his job, checking the house’s ground floor for the intruder. Upstairs they were working and showing their product to a trio of interested dealers. That could not be... he saw the muzzle flare right in front of him, before the snap of the shot, as he walked into the mostly bare kitchen, the bullets lodging themselves onto his chest in an agony of heath and sharp piercing pain. A small woman was sitting on the table, her legs crossed, discarding a rifle, stretching and reaching for a cigarette, placing it on her lips has he died, staring up at her, terrified. The last thing he remembered beyond the though and memories running in his head was the click of the lighter and the scent of good tobacco.
The sounds downstairs were worrying. But there had been addicts that had tried to take the drug directly from the source before so he thought nothing of it as the opium refined on its beakers and mixers. The door opened softly but no steps seemed to have followed the movement. He barely had time to register pain as he was shot, dying in distraction.

The woman that had walked in spun after she had dealt with William Jones, her hands reaching behind her back as he picked up the nearest weapon available, a battered cricket bat. Something shimmered too fast for him to see. Metal struck him, one on his shoulder, one on his leg... What killed him and what he had five seconds to notice before bleeding out was the one that found its way into his throat. The bat hit the wooden floor with a clatter.

A clattering bat and two corpses made him scream in terror, turning away, dashing madly, his work station forgotten and the beakers shattering in his attempt to get away, the fire in the burners flaring, still alive. The woman turned from her kill, red eyes following him. Too cold, too calculated. It was not someone maddened by drugs... he tried to run, to reach the corridor. The pistol sounded, cutting off his retreat, the knees shot to impede movement. She approached, a shotgun pointed at his head. He screamed, wetting himself before his life was blasted away, splattering on the floor.

Hired as muscle was a normal gig for him. He had the strength for it and all the gin he could drink. The Italians paid well for him to check when those clever clogs called for help at the drop of a hat. As he burst into the brewing room with his chum he stopped cold on his tracks. A woman was crouched near the last one alive, checking his face and pulse. The man that went by the name of Corf Smith had clearly fainted. He did not need to ask questions. He shot at her. But she was not there anymore. There was a sudden poignant pain on his crotch and he grunted, looking down, curling over himself, crumbling in pain. The bitch had kneed him, right arm going up, around his neck, fingers tangling on his hair, pulling him down with a surprising strength, her left hand flashing a dagger that imbibed itself on his neck, pushing him off, stepping on him as he fell, kicking his chum on the chest, that simple action that should have been ineffective against the mountain of a man that was Matt, slamming him into the wall...

The air was knocked out of him, the wood and brick panel creaking with impact. The last thing he saw was a boot stained red by the blood of his bashed head.

Show them how great our business can be. Those were his instructions and the case he had presented to the three street dealers that had once been completely supressed by Lau had all the markings of that perceived greatness. But the lab he had been showing them was under attack. And that would not look good. But it could be a display of efficiency if he dealt with it in front of those
three would-be allies. That was what he thought when he offered a reassuring smile and armed himself, walking out of the second room where the already packaged boxes awaited retrieval and business was being conducted. As he stepped into the corridor that connected the rooms and into the brewing area and stopped, staring at the macabre scene. Without control he started shooting wildly, shattering the instruments, hoping to catch whoever had done that, trembling. A small cough came from behind him. He turned, gun ready, pointing at a smiling face that barely reached his chest. She smiled... Behind her in the faint gaslights blood painted the floor... he screamed trying to shoot, the gun clicking once, twice, empty. The woman’s hand shot out, grabbing him by the shirt, pulling him down, stabbing cleanly and quickly.

Three sets of eyes had watched the scene play out equally. A quick shadow after the Ferro Family representative had left and a swift execution by bullets and thrown knives. The sounds of gunshots wildly fired without target and the scent of fire started filling the air.

“Bloody arse-faced wanking git of a bloke.” Mouser cussed as she came out of the building that was now on fire. No explosion though. Grell looked up from the fight she had been watching through the cinematic records being drawn to the Death Scythe. The thief slammed her fist against a nearby wall, snarling a bit, annoyed making Grell jump up, startled. The brick directly under her fist shattered. Fine lines cracked around the area. The whole building groaned. “I needed that fucking buggering lickspittle alive...” Grell checked. There was indeed someone named Corf Smith that was the only whose death had not been dealt by Mouser. “Because a bleeding lily-livered twat that started going trigger happy all over a place with explosive and flammable chemicals...”

“Watcha.” A kid called from a side street, peeking. That stopped the ranting. Mouser turned, rolling her bloodied sleeves up slowly, composing her appearance slightly. Red was staining her clothes and skin. And she didn’t seem to care. The boy clearly had been waiting and was one of hers. “What’s with all the whinge?” He called out cheekily, without a worry. He has seen her come into the Pig in similar states before. It used to be a bit harder and slower to dispatch everything though. Mouser smiled at him and allowed a smoky breath to come out, crushing her cigarette on the cobblestones, leaving soot and blood on the ground before answering.

“No wind up, Ed. I ain’t throwing a wobbler for nothin’.” She shrugged, pinning the sleeves in place. “A berk just threw us a bit off the plans. Tell Jack that he can start and catch an extra one because they done in with Corf Smith.”

“Will do.” Ed, whoever he was, took off fast, into the darkness of the labyrinth.

Mouser shook her head. So far she had used up three rifles, two shotguns, one pistol, eleven throwing knives, one penknife and two dynamite sticks. Her back felt a little less stiff and prickly now that there were only six or seven at best of the throwing knives between the back-lacing of the waistcoat. She had to be careful because there was no time to double back into the warehouse for more tools. There were always the daggers though and tonight she even had a spare pair.

“Let’s move on poppet we have three more places to clean up before I can unleash Lau.”
Second tally: 14 people killed.

I person not added up to Mouser’s body count.

No soul missing.

No soul taken.

No soul corrupted.

No soul manipulated.

No angelic interference.

No demonic interference.

No further notes.

Second lab eliminated.

(I have a little challenge. If I did my job right this should be eerie with the dying POV’s right up until Mouser breaks down into dock-thug cussing. But to amp it up try reading with the Wraithmarsh track from OST from the game Fable II. Dolhouse from Kuroshitsuji soundtrack works too but that one is a bit heavier on the keys not as much ambience, more of a warning.)
Chapter 63

Lord Randall had not been amused by Sebastian’s reminiscing about an older contract as soon as a confession was asked after he had been guided through the prison, into its depths and chained to a wall in a spacious and rather well equipped torture chamber. Granted a confession with a few centuries of age was not exactly what he desired. The older man’s bitterness and hatred towards the Phantomhives and what they represented made him eager to extract information with impunity from the proxy he had been able to acquire while the Young Master was still invulnerable behind his title and status. Sebastian’s orders on the other hand were to put up no resistance and wait for the summons. In accordance to the contract he was also meant to protect the Earl’s secrets.

Torture had a purpose. Either information extracting or punishment. Fear and pain were basic tools. Fear of pain was what got the true results in the end. The human that had been called a torture technician, a little twisted man with the kind of appearance that made his peers want to keep him as locked up as the prisoners he dealt with, stinking of blood, bile, sweat and booze, had rudimentary skills and simple knowledge of the trade. It would have been enough had he been a frail, worthless human without any kind of pride. But even with those hints showing somewhat within his methods, in the way he held a knife for a cut that was not too shallow nor too deep, in the way he prepared the tools in the order meant for a steady pain increase, the actions he chose to perform were woefully subpar and clumsy, the questions asked meaningless and the timings off. The tools were either too sharp or too blunt, too hot or too cold. Unskilful maintenance and misuse had made most of them useless by any demon’s standards.

The technician was also fettered by Randall’s orders.

So for the night of the capture Sebastian had endured the worse they had to offer while they had no authorization to maim. Knife-work, short whips, a few burns and brands and a couple of drowning attempts. Uninspiring, uninteresting, unimportant. The blood the seemingly human skin seeped when harmed covered the fact that the wounds beneath had closed, healed and vanished in a matter of minutes, of hours, depending on their method and depth. After the little man had satisfied his bloodlust he had fallen into a drunken stupor from which he had yet to awaken.

Night was falling again making it one day since the capture give or take a couple of hours. The Young Master had not moved from wherever he had been left at. Somewhere to the northwest he believed. Mouser on the other hand had not been idling, appearing and disappearing from his perception and in diverse places throughout the city. And as the night fell there seemed to be some sort of agitation stirring. The jail above was abuzz, whispering in worry.

Sebastian’s wandering attention snapped to focus as the sound of heels walking at a leisurely pace down the stone stairs. The scent of burnt feathers sneaked into the cell before it. The demons smirked slightly. Interesting choice to torment when its interest had been focused before on the Young Master and his thief. Why come down, sneaking in, when the guards seemed to be either unconscious or not noticing?

“How lovely Sebastian.” It was in the female form they had first seen her in, wearing an outfit befitting of a second rate brothel. It wanted to be recognized as a female for some reason. Those were irrelevant for him. Still it was presenting itself in a sanctimonious self-satisfaction, carrying a whip and reeking of spite, corruption and anger, hidden behind the composed face, stopping with one hand on the hip and a tilt of the same, eying his bound form with interest. “Your devotion to your master is so strong and it lead to this situation.” The whip cracked in a threatening way. Such an obvious bait. The demon remained calm, without a scoff, flinch or reaction.
“That is all due to the contract between the Young Master and me.” It was the simple answer he had to give. Angela Blanc frowned slightly in her attempt to remain superior.

“That boy is now gnashing his teeth, realizing his own lack of power.” The angel moved closer, using the whip’s handle to skim his skin, the blood and the closed wounds disguised under dried crusts of blood. “And your whore vanished into the streets in betrayal.” The leather pressed on his stomach harder, trying to get a reaction through pain. Sebastian blinked politely and then a slow smirk drew his lips slightly apart.

“Yes. That may well be.” A concordance would be the way to keep it off balance and it was exactly what happened. When it had expected a loyalty that was unwavering enough to end up in jail for it, it had not guessed that the situation was part of a plan. The Young Master had his own plan of course. From what he understood he was trying to work with his title. Mouser had another plot underway, he was sure, otherwise she would have stayed still. But betrayal would not be something she did, especially when one looked at her past. She remained loyal to those who had shown her the same. Sebastian was sure he was in her good graces despite the spat they had recently had about starting to learn German now that the French was on its way to be mastered.

“Nevertheless the Young Master is not one that gives up easily.” The demon left his covenant out of the word game for the moment.

“How about giving into lust like a good demon.” The angel shifted her approach. Sebastian looked at it coldly, uninterested. Lust came in several shades that could have little to do with sex. But Angela was not something that shunned liaisons. So what exactly was it offering besides the body it was blatantly displaying and being met with an indifference that should be irking it? “In reality it must be hard for you. You probably haven’t eaten a human soul in a long time.” Details about covenants were scarce for the celestial entities. Those who might know a bit more about them were the Grim Reapers and they held little sympathy for meddling angels. Even if Mouser was still too young to fully sate him he was nowhere near being in a starved state. Also when one came to a certain age fasting was not as hard as it once had been. A ravenous young demon gave way to a picky eater, such was the way of hell. “That is why you have so many wounds.” Fooled by the blood, unwilling to actually peek under the scabs. Overconfident fool. “You must be so hungry you can hardly stand it. Won’t you make a deal with me Sebastian?” Sebastian grimaced but it was getting to the point. Investigating now should be beneficial. “In due time the true Doomsday will come.” The goal seemed to be unchanged. Destroy the world, rebuild the world and rule the world in its own terms, believing it was performing God’s will. “When that happens I will give you as many souls as you want.” A young one would be so tempted by that offer. Sebastian smirked slightly as she stepped back, caressing the whip. “Just abandon that child.” The obstacle. The Phantomhive boy that had destroyed its schemes more than once already. The one that could stop the first part of creating a war with the rush of drugs leaving England and using the Empire as a fuse. If the Young Master had broken the little kingdom in Houndsworth and prevented a cult in Preston… The solution it perceived was taking away the title and protection to pave the way of its plot.

“I must refuse.” Sebastian stated with a bit of disdain showing. “I have grown weary of eating them one after the other, tasting a little here, a little there without regard for flavour and seasoning.” The demon stated softly, watching as its face distorted in rage.

“I see.” It snapped acidly, extending the whip with a swing. “Well. This negotiation seems to have failed.” The whip whistled before striking. As inept as the human had been the angel fared no better. It was supposed to be a punishment but the strikes that drew blood were too weak, too light. Not fearful but lacking technique. It was telling about its former caste beyond its dual nature. Most likely a soldier, not a punisher. “Unclean, corrupted, impure being. You should perish.” It was shouting as the lashes rained over his skin, trying to strike the patches of blood it perceived as
wounds. Pain was starting to grow through the sheer number of cuts that were starting to litter the skin. Sebastian endured, thinking. It was not bad yet. Not when compared to hell’s punishments. “This pain is God’s blessing. Blood is an offer of penitence. May the accursed soul be burned…” It kept shouting.

The explosion rang out on the outside, shaking the depts. of the prison, stilling the angel’s hand, the whip falling limp as it looked around with a worried expression cracking the maddened mask it had worn while taking its anger on Sebastian.

Sebastian looked up, peeking through the blood a slash on his face was dripping over his eyes, curious. There was a sudden gleeful, mischievous laugh echoing on his mind. He smirked as the angel fled in a hurry, its playtime cut short by the unexpected event.

“Twats.” Mouser chuckled amused as the debris of the warehouse-safe-house rained. The place had been blown sky-high and it was now on fire. Panic was spreading through the streets. Guards were pouring out of Newgate Prison, just a stone’s throw away. And she was out of dynamite. It had been the good stuff too but she guesses that Woolsey had needed it like that to mine for his diamonds as well as trade with the mad bombers. “Who hides in the place that has been targeted all along?” And thanks to Cullen’s list she was sure no one not meant to die had been huddled inside when she had lit the fuses after planting the sticks inside the walls. The chimney-sweep had disappeared, now, gone for another job.

“You seem to be having fun Evee.” Grell said, hugging Mouser from behind, watching as the first cinematic records started slithering out of the debris, getting the scissors. The thief twitched a bit and looked up before relaxing in the embrace for a brief second, leaning against Grell to relieve a bit of the pressure on her legs.

“You are too poppet.” She both admitted and challenged. “But I would also like to know how many coppers are on their pockets because no criminal group makes a stash-house when the prison is on the line of sight. Not without some sort of guarantee.” But it was a good thing. That meant the last stages of the plan would be easier to execute. “I’ll be going ahead poppet. Meet when you’re done. I’ll be on the outskirts, in the industrial camp.”

Grell grinned and chuckled, growing focused on her work, feeling that due to it the chances of truly getting back the beautifully customized Death Scythe she had made so lovingly were closer and closer.

Mouser glanced at the prison for a moment, standing on the edge of the roof, nibbling her lip. The wounded feeling was back, touching her skin lightly along with a slash of hunger. She sighed. Sebastian was not exactly calling but she felt the pull nonetheless. Later on. It had to be later.

Third tally: 30 people killed.

Indirect deaths due to fire, explosion and building collapse.

No soul missing.

No soul taken.
No soul corrupted.

No soul manipulated.

No angelic interference.

No demonic interference.

No further notes.
Chapter 64

The numbers… Grell though, checking the Death Note, humming while running towards the next agreed spot, playing with a red lock, slowing down and stopping next to Mouser who watched through the scope, the cigarette placed on the broken bricks of what had been a low wall next to her, barely breathing to keep the aim straight. In-between traveling through London’s roofs after clearing the last site there had been a sudden spike in the souls present at the next target-house.

“This is slightly unexpected.” Mouser whispered through a chuckle, tilting her head, lowering the rifle and picking up the cigarette, sitting down, smoking calmly, rearranging the weapons and seeing what was still available. Still she didn’t seem overly worried about the situation, checking the clock. Fog was rolling in, thick and luminescent. The sounds of work, effort and whines of the addicts filled the air. There was no patrol, no sentinels. They were already scrambling, panicking to hide but still forced to work and turn a profit.

“What is?” The Grim Reaper asked airily peeking over the wall for a moment and crouching down.

“Increased number of guards.” Mouser whispered, readying methodically. All of them feeble looking, lost-eyed and showing some clear signs of withdrawal. “They called their addicts.” Hoping a wall of bodies would slow whoever was reaping their numbers down. And they didn’t need to promise much to them, just some more “candy”.

The thief chuckled. She had a schedule to adhere to.

Prisons were ever so strict with visiting hours…

The recently created demoness that was covenant to the raven demon that went by the name of Sebastian Michaelis was a shadow of black and crimson, blood-stained, moving with purpose, walking into another death field, smirking slightly. Alone, without a flinch or hesitation. Unflappable when confronting a small horde, as she had been site, after site. Merciless while taking the human lives. Dangerous. To be that young and that much of a threat to any enemy was… the raven seemed to have the devil’s own luck.

Claude glanced at the Grim Reaper, his attention shifting. She knew she was protected from it and had used the simple fact that he was not to shield herself from harm. Oddly enough it was gazing at the female with a soft, sharp-teethed smile as she slaughtered the field with ease, barely sparing a glance after a body fell and the tendrils of a record started snaking through the air. The Grim Reaper seemed giddy while watching the lives that were being cut short. Love for carnage, it seemed.

Then all stopped and the night grew silent. No sounds of carnage, no sounds of screams. The demon frowned in the silence. The Grim Reaper was busy, distracted with its book and the archiving of souls. Souls he could not touch at the moment. The repercussions far outweighed any reward.

The Master’s orders were absolute.

So, slowly, making sure he was not seen by the Grim Reaper, he walked into the warehouse, ignoring the corpses, looking for the female.
Mouser smirked and lit a cigarette when Claude Faustus walked in, the open space making anything easy to spot, slowly and appraising what had been done. She had been certain someone else was watching her work and had been trying to pinpoint who. Actually that was a good advantage at that particular moment when the stench of death was being overpowered by an approaching reek of burning. She checked a cracked clock amidst a pool of blood. It seemed right, even if she had to delay that site and by default the last one. If it all worked out it would be two issues out of the window by the time she left that place.

“Persistent, aren’t we?” Mouser said, crossing her legs, leaning against a slashed and bloodied leather armchair, the seat’s back turned to the crates that were starting to burn. She had to try and pry something more from that wall of a butler. Still that was the kind of inflexible formality she usually encountered while on the job.

“At this time I am merely here to assess the Phantomhive Household.” He relayed stiffly. Mouser’s eyes narrowed. Well then… she wanted to know the original words of his contract. She doubted they had anything to do with the boyo… but time had run out and that line of inquiry could wait. “My master’s orders are absolute.”

“We are demons, correct?” She muttered, amused, standing, approaching. Claude frozen expression shifted towards annoyance, suspicious. Well, he should be. Her tone alone was altogether too sweet.

The high dirty-glass and rusty metal windows suddenly shattered as a white form burst in, all rage and a flurry of sharp feathers. Claude by virtue of having being manipulated to walk to the point where Mouser wanted him took a volley for the thief, looking enraged soon after. Said thief only smiled. Angela Blanc descended onto the black and red field with a shriek of rage, looking ready to attack. Mouser gripped Faustus buy the coat before he could move and chose witch target to focus on, turning him and pushing him towards the angel, breaking his balance.

“Then do your part Claude Faustus of the Trancy Household. For the Queen, For the Country!” And then Mouser ran away, avoiding and evading both enemies, as the angel attacked the first one on its line of sight, that meaning the Trancy butler. After announcing his name and allegiance, pretending to be allies, making them a target as well. If her suppositions were correct the purity obsessed bitch was going to snap if it ever laid eyes on the kiddo. “And for my amusement and safety.” The thief whispered when she was out, re-joining Grell.

“That went rather well.” The thief said with a sigh and a stretch, both moving away, towards the last spot where two enemies nullified each other’s threat by clashing.

“Very cunning, using that handsome new toy.” Grell complimented with a chuckle, skipping towards the next rooftop. It was obvious the Grim Reaper was getting slaughter-happy. Mouser shook her head, half-amused by it. It had been a while since she had pulled such an all-nighter and frankly it was exciting to do so again with less fear of being hurt.

“Don’t get all moist.” The thief stated disposing of the dead cigarette. “I would have tossed you at it if he hadn’t taken the bait.”

“Ahh. How awful you are.” Grell stopped, picking up Mouser into a hug, laughing merrily. The thief shrieked and struggled, her voice muffled by the red coat, her hands clenching and
unclenching while she fought the urge to shoot Grell again. She settled for kicking shins repeatedly. “Cruel and cold under an innocent look.” The Grim Reaper pulled away, keeping her up. Mouser snarled a bit, annoyed. “All lovely draped in red blooms.”

“Put me down poppet.” She enunciated very clearly and slowly. “I don’t have bullets to spare on you at this moment.” She was placed down again by a pouting poppet. “Think of your scythe.” Mouser adjusted her clothes and remaining weapons and took a deep breath.

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**Fourth tally: 74 people killed.**

*No soul missing.*

*No soul taken.*

*No soul corrupted.*

*No soul manipulated.*

*Angelic interference.*

*Demonic interference.*

*Both currently engaged in combat with no interest in the archived and judged souls.*

*No further notes.*
“Jack?” Mouser said, surprised when seeing most of the gang standing on the next site, making a siege situation. Smiling Jack turned with his eerie smile, approaching. Grell hung back, unseen, checking the Death Note carefully to verify the current situation as Mouser walked into the gaslight, towards the members of the criminal class that had both raised and protected her. A bird appeared suddenly, breaking the Grim Reaper’s focus, swooping down, carrying a piece of paper on its leg appeared, delivering a message from the Personal Affairs.

“Ye look filthy luv.” Jack quipped amicably. Mouser chuckled, slipping a blood-soaked lock of hair away from her face. It was drying, slowly, getting uncomfortable. She needed a bath not only because of that but also because if that part of the night was done she needed to look a bit less conspicuous.

“I have looked worse.” The thief said airily, glancing at the surrounded house. No shots seemed to be fired at the moment. The place was calm. “What’s all this then?”

“Some of the targets decided to hunker down here.” Jack supplied, clicking his tongue. “Includin’ Auntie Row and two Italian’s top slashers. We’ll handle the rest.”

“Thanks Jack. You can let Lau act after you’re done with these.” Mouse sighed and stretched, turning away.

In the slight panic the city was at the moment the town house should be left empty and alone.

The steam misted the air, blurring the outlines of the boyo’s luxurious bathing room. There were signs it had been searched but they had abandoned it soon after.

Cold water would be best but she was not about to take a cold bath because of a bit of gore. Rivulets of red turning faint and pink traced her skin, dripping from the soaked hair, slithering into the water, in tendrils, fading the farther they got away from her. It was turning a bit red as the blood accumulated in the small amount of liquid a tub held. She wrung her wet, bloodied hair, trying to clean it as much as possible, sneaking fingers through the tresses. In the heat of the slaughter it was easy to forget how messy the clean-up tended to be. But if that part of the work was done for now she needed to look less conspicuous than a blood-spattered killer-for-hire.

Grell was entertained downstairs with the Death Note and answering to the message received. She assured her the deaths were not done for the night. The thief stretched with a groan, sinking into the water. Despite the disappearance of the twenty two deaths of the last lab there was still more to accomplish… Lau had contacted her, ready to reappear and take control of the drug dealing anew. Jack had sent word, saying the gifts had been delivered to the Yard. Charlotte was still working in finding all the tendrils of that weed.

How many times had she gone through those corridors exactly with the same purpose? Too many to count, Mouser decided, following the subtle pull of their connection, keeping to the shadows. She knew where the guards were and who had the keys, how often they patrolled and the patterns each hour assumed. At this time she could even tell who was screaming in agony deep within the
stone walls.

Grell had gone back to wherever Reapers went when not harassing them, to report, she said, promising to be back in time for the continuation of her grand performance. Whatever she meant by that.

The old gargoyle was drunk on the job again. Sebastian was chained to the wall, looking bloodied and bruised. The recent wounds were clear whip marks. What was beneath was faded but the blood covered their actual extent. He was watching, silently.

The thief clicked her tongue, eying the torture instruments, noticing the irons in the furnace, red-hot. A little smile appeared on her lips as she reached for one, picking it up, appraising the tool, stepping away from the furnace, twirling easily into position, striking through the man’s heart, pinning him to the wall. He screamed suddenly, jolted awake by the pain, drowned by all the sounds around them, looking up in terror. His heart was still beating, slowly, sluggishly, struggling, the instantly cauterized wound opening as the heartbeat crawled up the iron, opening and being closed again by the heated surface of the metal. It only took the down-tempo of the next heartbeat for his body to shut down completely.

“No need to be upset.” Sebastian supplied softly, eyeing her work.

“I am not.” Mouser grumbled, turning to him. Her eyes flickered between their colours. Then she tilted her head slowly, nibbling on the lower lip. It was hard not to respond with longing when she had just clearly killed for him, solely and selfishly because that man had harmed him. And when she was looking at him with a sharp interest on the parts of skin that were showing and a faint smile appearing behind the frown. “I may be persuaded to like you in chains and looking charmingly helpless…” The demon moved a bit within his restraints, showing off with a bit of pride. Mouser chuckled, coming closer, one small hand touching his chest, caressing the warm skin, clearing a path of blood away, staring at the wounds. “But I hate to see your blood spilled.” She repeated, growing aggressive for an instant before sighing. “What was your order to simply stay here and allow yourself to be hurt?”

“Your perceptions are tricking you about the extent of my injuries.” Sebastian stated, calmly, trying to ease her mind, although he had to admit her worry was rather balmy to bask on.

Mouser slammed a fist against the wall, near his head, cracking the stone, her skin tearing a bit, bleeding her knuckles. Sebastian’s expression shifted to a sudden disconcerted look the likes she had only seen when confronted with the marchioness. Caught off guard.

“Stop patronizing me or I’ll hurt you myself.” The thief hissed in annoyance. His expression softened for a moment as leaned down, chains rattling, forehead against forehead. There was a lingering scent of blood in her hair. Underneath it was just her, tobacco and woman, welcoming and familiar. She gripped the tattered remains of his coat and shirt, tilting her head so their lips met, slowly, lightly, letting go of the binds as the kiss bloomed, hungrily, warmth flowing between them, her strength seeping into him, allowing him to feed, slowly, surely. The chains rattled as Sebastian refrained from embracing her, especially when a shiver of strain crossed between them. She hummed and slid closer, pressing herself against him, gripping harder. Sebastian broke the kiss, tilting his head back, bodies still close.

“Enough. More than enough Mouser.” She pecked his lips again, a soft, brief brush accompanied by a sigh, a kiss for the sake of it. “Rough night?”

“In a way…” Mouser sighed, looking up, stepping away. “What was your order?”
“I am waiting for the Young Master’s call. I am supposed to offer no resistance.”

“I will persuade him to hurry it along then.” The thief whispered as she left.
A sleepless night, filled with work and disappointment… Lord Randall though as he looked out the window of the Scotland Yard Headquarters. Fires could be seen, pricking the town’s darkness, screams of worry came from all over the town, reports of carnage flooded his office... The clocks rang, telling that the time was two A.M.

There was a knock on his door, breaking his train of thought, one of the officers entering after the affirmative, saluting stiffly, glancing back, worried.

“What do you have to report?” Lord Randall demanded. The town would be in a panic if they had no solid reassurances to give in the morning papers.

“Sir, there is a woman here to speak to you…” The man stated, mumbling some of the words.

“What?” Lord Randall gritted his teeth, growling. “I have no time for…”

“You will make time, Commissioner.” The Phantomhive’s mollisher walked in, ignoring the guard, standing tall, voice silky and steely, flanked by an Indian man with white hair and a blond-haired bloke, both males in prim black servant suits, looking like a grim escort, she in a black and altogether too elegant dress with blue frilly trims, face hidden behind the veil of a hat. The crest around her throat left no doubt about her loyalties.

“I will do nothing but arrest you lot.” Lord Randall replied, turning, drawing upon his authority.

The woman grinned slowly, her lips twisting smoothly, left visible by the veil, sending chills down the Commissioner’s back and snapped her gloved fingers. The two men pushed the guard down, silencing him with some sort of exotic move. The blonde closed the door with a slam. Upstairs there were no other guards nearby to hear his order at the moment. Randall tried to scream for reinforcements, silenced when a paper with the Queen’s personal crest and signature was shoved in front of his face by the secretary.

“By order of Her Majesty, the Queen, you are hereby commanded to cease this affront and the groundless imprisonment of the Earl of Phantomhive.” She stated smoothly as both men resumed their places, flanking her. It was a demonstration of strength and intimidation.

“The evidence…” Lord Randall started. The woman placed the Queen’s missive on his desk very gently, straightening.

“You know full well by now that the evidence your men found yesterday was both fake and planted to incriminate the Young Master. The Queen was informed of this beforehand. I trust you will send word before my arrival to retrieve the Young Master in precisely...” A clock was consulted briskly, within a wide sleeve. “Twenty minutes, at most.” She signalled the men, both leaving. The woman lingered on the doorway. “Also our butler should be returned before tea time today.” Calmly the door was closed.

“That was it?” Bard complained, leaning back on the coach’s seat.

“I just needed you there as witnesses and to buy me enough time to give him the documents.” Mouser hummed, pinning her veil under the bow. And to work as a leash seeing it would look bad
in the night’s events if Lord Randall was found murdered in his office. “Otherwise he could have
taken advantage of the situation, imprisoning me as well and feigning ignorance of the Queen’s
orders that I was tasked to deliver.” Bard grumbled, accepting the offered cigarette. “Agni, thank
you so much for agreeing to help.” Mouser completed her story softly, nodding at the Indian.

“Sebastian is my friend. And Master Ciel has been very kind to Prince Soma… how could I not?”
Agni answered, smiling, joining his hands, giving a small bow.

The coach stopped smoothly.

“This is your stop. Return to the safe-house. I’ll get the boyo and we’ll be in another spot until the
air clears. Tomorrow, Agni and Prince Soma will be able to return to the Town House and we’ll be
able to depart to the manor.” Mouser smiled. “You can go back to sleep now Bard.” She joked
playfully, tapping the ceiling after closing the door, giving the next address.

The guards were stiff and fearful as she walked to them, veiled again, the choker crest displayed
plainly. Good. Randall had done his part without delay. Maybe he had thought that the shambolic
night was due to the lack of Phantomhive control. In a way… it was.

The prison’s corridors were familiar as well despite the fact that she had never been held in the
upper cells. Those were for the ones whose money gave them a chance of a trial. The candlelight
still flickered underneath the heavy door when they arrived at the boyo’s holding pen. One of the
two guards that had accompanied her opened the door, revealing still busy boyo writing furiously
fast. Mouser did not step over the threshold, waiting. A thief would not risk getting caught because
she had been foolish enough to enter a cell, trusting the enemy.

“Young Master.” She called, receiving a bewildered look. The pen was placed down and the paper
crumpled.

“Evelyn…” She glanced at the stiff, suspicious guards as the boyo stood without adding anything,
Draping the cloak over his shoulders and walking out. He too knew a chance should not be wasted.

“What is this?” The boyo asked as she closed the door after them, looking around at the weapons
and supplies. He pulled a bench and sat down, looking slightly exhausted. Mouser tossed her hat
on the table and removed the coat-upper-outer piece of the formal dress.

“My toybox.” She answered softly, glancing around.

“What is the situation?” The boyo asked calmly as the thief changed walked into another area of
the storage place, disappearing from sight, carrying the clothing items. Locks snapped open and
fabric rustled.

“I guaranteed the Phantomhive’s innocence. No that you were guilty in the first place but... well.”
Mouser voice came from whatever corner she was in, accompanied by faint rustling. “Kept you
credibility before the Queen.” She continued, walking out, barefooted but for the stripped
stockings, black-and-lilac this time, carrying her boots, waistcoat still undone. “Incriminated the
ones we needed gone.” She tied her bootlaces and began buttoning up the waistcoat. “Put the bitch
on the Trancy’s trail.” A small crate was placed on the table. “And appeased your Aunt.” Mouser
finished, displaying several sets of straps and weapons, counting them, displaying them, ready for
a speedy equipping. “What do you want to do now before the rest untangles on its own?”

“I want a meeting with Signore Corallo.” The boyo demanded after some thought. “We can’t have disobedience like this in the Underworld.”

“I’ll have his whereabouts by sunup.” Mouser agreed, nodding. “You can go to sleep. There is a bed in the room upstairs.”
“Corallo is running scared.” And he had been running all night long. Mouser stated as they watched the Italian man’s town house and the flurry of activity as he returned from one of the other ransacked safe houses to gather whatever values he could find, leaning against a nearby wall, looking away and down for a moment.

“Not the same house they had last year.” The boyo noticed, dressed in street rat clothes, arms crossed. Then the Earl glared towards the thief. “And why is he here?!”

Grell looked up from the Death Note, smiling widely. Mouser sighed.

“I am under supervision.” The thief stated with a sheepish look.

“And she has been giving such a grand performance…” Grell praised, bumping her hip companionably. “One hundred and thirty nine in four hours and a half. One when I was not looking. Eighty three more after three A.M. after the curtains reopened.” Grell counted, flipping pages, giggling. Mouser smiled slightly, benignly.

The boyo stared blankly.

“I had to make the inquiries and then Jack asked for help, Lau asked for help and a bunch of idiots tried to ambush me for money.” Mouser explained, swaying innocently. Then smiled. “Anyhow… People are squeamish about staying in a place where underlings were killed.” The thief noted. Corallo was coming out, amidst a handful of bodyguards, looking around nervously. Good. Mouser smirked and parted with the wall. “But even so he can’t help but to play this game. He is calling in everyone that was not killed last night.” About… forty left in the gang in town, readily available. At least one hundred coming from out of town and with arrivals due well into the next few hour and week. And they were not all there, surrounding the carriage. Which mean something else, another plan was placed. Most likely he felt like they would appear. “The course of action from this moment on is your move.”

Corallo’s hands clenched nervously as he closed the coach’s door, the vehicle still and surrounded by his men, fidgeting every time a loud sound came from the outside. Startled he looked around, meeting a gun, directly pointed at his face held by the queen’s watchdog. The carriage shook as someone climbed onto it and snapped the reins, the horses giving a start and pulling.

“Hurry it along boyo.” Mouser shouted from the outside as it picked up speed. If there were any doubts lingering in the mob boss’s mind they had just been dispelled. He had been played. Someone gave a high pitched scream outside as the coach tilted precariously to the side while making a high velocity curve. Those inside were only slightly rattled. “Sorry ‘bout that. Forgot I’m not stealing…” The speed lessened. “Let go poppet.”

“Corallo.” Ciel’s attention returned to the matter at hand and the man at gunpoint. “You were the one distributing drugs disguised as my company’s candy.” It was a statement, not a question. But as long as he and the Italians that had prompted that, stirred by the angel, were around it would only create troubles.

“Well I have no idea…” True to his nature the man started to deny all knowledge of the situation.
Every lying word was cut short by the barrel of the gun shoved into his mouth, prepped to shoot. It utterly shattered the smug façade he had been trying to keep.

“Children are short tempered, you know.” The Earl stated, coldly, calmly, without any patience for games. Not at that time.

“I… admit it… to everything.” The truth started to spill nervously. The carriage still moved fast, making the whole frame shake and groan. Then it came to a sudden stop that rattled everyone inside, the horses whining, hooves slamming on the cobblestones, the reins rattling.

“I found the ambush” Mouser announced cheerily from the outside. “Hold the reins poppet.”

“Mouser. Wait.” Ciel called as he straightened, sitting on the opposite cushioned seat of the coach, staring at the man. There was a pouting sound coming from the thief outside.

“Phantomhive.” Corallo was standing, the impasse where his life was on the line seemingly gone. He was about to get out of the coach, not resisting a spot of bragging. “I heard you were a dog that uses whatever tricks are necessary. To think this is all you’re capable of…” A scoff.

“I see.” Ciel reclined, crossing his arms with a slight smirk. “Very well then.” Corallo’s face lost a bit of the confidence he regained as the Earl’s hands reached for the eyepatch, touching it lightly. “The rules of the underworld are anything but set. But when I set a rule it must be followed.” The Italian man stepped out of the coach, clearly nervous. Ciel pulled the eyepatch away, revealing the seal. “Sebastian.” The call was short, clipped and decisive. He had had enough of London and wanted to return to the manor. “Come.”

“Kill them.” Corallo shouted as he made a break for it, taking the horse his men had readied for him. Shots started to fly against the coach.

Mouser flipped the page of her book, settling down behind and beneath the driver’s seat. The wooden panel would withstand a few rounds, surely. Grell glanced at her, leaning over and peeking.

“Why did you bring a book?”

“Reasons…” Mouser sighed. “Also it’s Watterson’s new volume.” A tale of adventure in the jungle, fraught with danger…

“Is it a dirty book?”

Mouser glance up, unamused.

“Yes.” She dragged the answer, tilting her head to the left to allow a bullet to fly by. In that brief interval between the bullet and the next page men screamed in a brief moment of fear and pain. Sebastian for some reason seemed to be feeling generous enough to make it quick for the enemies. Either that or he simply wanted that event over and done.

“You’re late.” The boyo walked out or the coach, proudly.

“As are you.” Sebastian answered without missing a beat, standing amidst the fallen. Poppet had already propped herself up and was wiggling her bottom on the air under the red jacket while staring at Sebastian, humming merrily. “You kept me waiting for an awfully long time, Young Master.” The Demons chastised politely. Then he levelled a glare at Grell for the briefest second.

Grell froze, still smiling, torn between keep ogling or getting away before moods soured any
further. But that one cruel gaze… Mouser sighed, closing her book, standing, glancing sideways at the Grim Reaper.

“I do hope you have done enough to recover your toy, poppet.” Grell hummed and checked the Death Note, leaning down against Mouser, pulling her a bit closer in a conspirator’s way, forehead to forehead, allowing her to peek as well, whispering a question. “That seems a bit excessive.” The thief said after a bit of consideration. “And I don’t think he would welcome it. Why don’t you try approaching with caution and offering…” Grell adjusted her glasses, paying attention to the words and suddenly yelped when Sebastian pulled her by the hair, tossed face first into the nearest wall. “That was excessive as well.” Mouser told Sebastian who was presenting his hand to help her step down from the coach as etiquette said. She took it and hopped down. “Especially considering what poppet was showing me.” The demon exchanged a grim glance with the thief. She glanced up, smiling slightly. Sebastian sighed, giving in. It could indeed be a worthwhile endeavour.

Grell was looking both pleased beyond belief and suspicious as a cornered bunny, watching Sebastian’s measured gesture while setting the table and preparing the tea in the lush ambience of the greenhouse. Mouser was pampering one of the glittering snakes that slithered about. On the branches, on the bushes and occasionally crossing the stone floor lazily. A shy-looking snake-skinned man was also walking around, one snake wrapped around his shoulders, the others following him faithfully. The thief offered a small dead mouse to the thing, turning away as it gulped it in one go. There was a faint click from the iron and glass doors as the youth left.

“That Sebby would prepare tea just for me…” Grell started softly, joining gloved hands, tilting her head to the right, smiling despite the swollen cheeks and chapped lips. “Ah, well I am happy! But…” Sebastian finished the pouring of the pale opaque golden liquid, presenting it with a smile that, while it made his face look very pleasing to the eye, was in no way reassuring. But Grell was, nonetheless enraptured by both sides of that coin.

“Suutei tsai.” Presented as a butler, carefully explained and placed on the tablecloth. “Mongol style milk tea with rock salt.” Mouser flinched, picking up a cigarette, lighting it, approaching the table.

“Salt?” Grell sputtered, flinching as well, staring at the cup, eyes wide behind the glasses.

“Spreading salt on a fresh wound brings about the best encouragement.” Sebastian continued with a smile, approaching the cart once more. “For a guest like Grell I have put twice the amount of rock salt as normal.” Grell flinched with a whimper. “And then twice more.” Another flinch and a glance at the cup, as if the salt would rise from it, take form and attack viciously. “I have prepared a generous amount.” Sebastian continued, keeping the smile, picking up a second pot and pouring. That liquid was almost black with thin shimmers of gold when the light was right.

“Well I… after all.” Grell fidgeted, trying to find a way around wit without spoiling the nice invitation.

“Go ahead.” Sebastian encouraged. “Irish breakfast with honey and Tyrconnell.” He gave Mouser a cup of the spiked tea as she sat down. Grell was cautiously trying the Mongol tea only to shriek, almost choking on it and letting go of the cup. Sebastian caught the chair as it was tilting backwards, on the edge of falling and pushed it back into an upright position, smirking as his little game worked.

“The encouragement of love is too much!” Poppet complained, eyes darting around, over her shoulder as Sebastian leaned forward and asked what he wanted to know, dazzling poppet.
Needless to say she spilled all the information Sebastian wanted to know and some Mouser would have preferred to keep buried. Like the other demon’s twofold appearance. The poppet moved on to the next set of deaths in the list she should monitor Mouser on, revealing a set of details about the next, and they would make sure it was the final one as well, attempt the Ferro Family was going to execute.

“I see… It is indeed worthwhile information.” Sebastian admitted after some though. “I trust you can show the guest out.” He asked of Mouser, leaving to return the manor to its usual routine. The thief sighed as Grell stared at the tea, giggling, having just received a backhanded compliment.

“Come here poppet.” The thief called, placing her fingers under Grell’s chin, appraising the damage. “Can’t let you go around with a swollen face, now can I? “Mouser said, placing a bowl of boiled eggs on the table, taking their shell away, gently pressing it against Grell’s face, rolling the surface gently. The poor man’s home medicine. It worked though. Even though the warmth stung at first the swollen parts never once failed to diminish and the pain faded like a charm.

“I would love to cover him in red but one cannot fight a battle of love without the proper weapons.” Grell complained with a pout, holding and rolling the hard-boiled egg.

“Good Morning Young Master.” The servants greeted the boyo as expected as he walked downstairs for breakfast. An acknowledgement without much spirit behind it was given by said boyo, leaving them a bit bewildered, staring after his retreating back.

“Young Master?” Bard mumbled through his cigarette, eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

“He looks dispirited.” Meyrin pinpointed the oddness of such a state of mind.

“He does.” Finny agreed immediately.

Snake fidgeted softly, looking down. A lone snake was wrapped around his shoulder.

Pluto was howling loudly outside.

“Oh… you can tell.” Tanaka stated, a bit more serious than usual, examining the servants. Snake continued to fidget under any kind of attention.

“Yeah.” Bard was still quick to answer, grinning proudly as Meyrin nodded, franticly, agreeing. “He may look the same as usual at first glance but we can see it clearly.” There was a little pause as they glanced amidst each other. “We should cheer him up at once!” He then announced, cheered up himself, pumped for whatever mischief came from that.

“That’s what we should do!” Meyrin hopped on that opportunity at once. “A spontaneous party!”

“Party!” Finny cheered, clapping.

“Composure…” Tanaka began, trying to contain their enthusiasm.

“No parties.” The group jumped, startled. Mouser was standing three steps above them on the stairs. She started to walk down, grimly. “Forget today’s duties. We have a small army to deal with and they should be arriving within ten minutes if the sources are correct.” Pluto howled again. “Get to your places and get ready.” He sighed as they scampered off, the mood changing towards serious. The thief sighed and turned to Snake who still looked nervous. “From time to time the
boyo is targeted because of his duties to the Queen. And it’s our job to defend him and this manor.” She walked towards the great double doors, opening them, scanning the grounds. “Not everyone is made for direct combat despite that being the majority of the people here.” She smiled at the nervous Snake. “So for now you just need to observe and learn. Later we will find a way for you to participate as well. I just ask you to stay safe.”

Business as usual.

Defending the house was no news to the Phantomhive staff and it was also something they excelled at, whether it was Meyrin sniping men, bard testing military-grade guns, Finny chasing and bashing them away or Pluto frying people to a crisp. Mouser stopped beneath the trees, near the lake and ruins that peppered the forest that secluded the manor’s terrains, looking around, shaking her blades, getting rid of the thick coating of blood.

There should be a path that lead to one of the vacant “hunting houses” the thief mused, leaving the intruder’s corpses behind.

“I will ensure that that dog-boy pays me back properly.” Corallo was bragging, surrounded by guards, petting a golden-platted gun, lounging in an armchair. “And it will be much easier to settle business in this country with him gone.” The man continued his appreciation and lack of insight about the British underworld system. “A so called evil noble like him is obsolete these days…” there was a little chuckle not belonging to any of his men, the scent of tobacco coming from behind him.

“You were given a small chance but still a chance to get away and return to the fold by the boyo.” The thief said, knife pressing on the underside of his face. His men aimed, nervously, close to a panic. There were only ten guards inside. He did not think… the woman made a little clicking sound with her tongue, free hand rising, telling them no wordlessly. Then it moved, fast, gripping Corallo’s hand, slamming it on the armchair, piercing it with a small penknife, pinning him, repeating the gesture with the other hand, still using him as a shield, allowing his men to see their boss screaming, close to begging. “I was nice enough to leave you some men alive.” Mouser straightened, her blade not leaving his neck, picking up the golden gun, cooing at it. “Well…” She whispered sheepishly.

Corallo had lost the strength to scream somewhere along the way. He was just whimpering now, a little sound that gained new intensity as the thief moved, the blade disappearing from his neck and finding its way, along with a second, similar one into the bodies of his men who started shooting wildly, trying to kill that woman. The Italian man watched as they fell, as some of the bullets narrowly missed him, as the scent and colour of blood stained the floors. She stopped when all but him were dead, checking her blade. She approached.

“As a mob boss you should know that when a stranger offers you candy you should say no.” the thief whispered before delivering the last blow, finally cutting the threat by the roots. At least until the Italians decided to send another representative. That new one should be disciplined as soon as he arrived.
A whistle was enough to call Pluto to the main doors. Mouser petted his head softly, giving him the order to get rid of the last, pesky trespassers, closing the doors then and picking up the mail on the way up.

Last tally: 59 people killed.

No soul missing.

No soul taken.

No soul corrupted.

No soul manipulated.

No angelic interference.

No demonic interference.

No further notes.

Grand total of 282 people killed;

Grand total of 281 souls collected;

Missing soul collected by the responsible of the Newgate Prison area;
Chapter 68

The departed rising from death!? Karnstein Hospital performs a miracle.

The newspaper could not have thought of a more overwrought title to catch the public’s fancy. But that kind of drivel was to be expected. But still… Ciel looked over the edge of the newspaper, glaring at Sebastian who was clearing the table. Had any rumours about “that” leaked and created some sort of craze that made the fools believe such a thing was possible?

“Is there something wrong?” Sebastian asked, noticing the look, pausing.

“No, it’s nothing.” The boyo grumbled, returning to the newspaper, frowning. Mouser chuckled from her spot in the corner of the dining room, highlighting news, articles and announcements of interest in the newspapers, monitoring the return to normality in London’s streets.

It had not taken too long to go from a bloodbath to the simplicity of everyday. The Italians were gone and she and Charlotte were monitoring any attempt to send a new representative. The territories had been divided once more and balanced between the remaining factions. The Angel had vanished again and there was no word from the Trancy household. The thief hoped they at least had maimed each other badly.

“Hello Earl.” Lau entered the room dramatically, followed by a calm RanMao and a wheezing Meyrin trying to say he could not just barge in. “How are you doing?” The Chinese man asked, eyes scanning the room, catching the Earl off-guard, shouting his name in dismay. “Oh… you’re done. I was aiming or breakfast.” As the threat was done he had resumed the usual drop-by for reports and mooching.

“What on earth could you want at this hour?” Mouser arched an eyebrow, amused by the glossing over of the breakfast remark, marking one of the new publicity of the new doll line. It looked good in black and white. “Surely you did not come all the way here to mooch a breakfast out of me.” Lau smiled sweetly with RanMao clinging on to his arm. Sebastian returned with plates and the breakfast itself. Lau waited until he was served before starting to really explain what had brought him there. Besides the good food. “A hospital that revives the dead?” The boyo tapped on the table’s surface, glancing at the paper he had placed down. “You mean that thing in the paper today?”

“That.” Lau nodded, working the knife and fork.

“Unfortunately I have no interest in the occult so…” The boyo said dismissively. The pair of demons behind him snickered, one breaking façade, the other openly mocking.

“It may not be occult though.” Lau continued after a small pause to chew.

“What?” The boyo asked, his interest sharpening.

“Karnstein Hospital” Lau started, leaving the name hanging for a while, cutting through the pie’s crust. “they seem to be doing a lot of shopping down at the back docks the Earl has me in charge of.”

“Drugs?” The boyo asked with a weary sigh.

“Again?” Mouser grumbled, placing the marked papers on the table for a speedy review before the schedule delved into the usual workload.
“No. People.” Another pause. Slavery while still existent was very low-key and could be easily hidden. After all the laws against had only been made official in 1838. History wise it was still recent… Not that the underworld noticed. 1844 had brought laws against child work and that only gave kiddos the right to a lunch break and a nine hour work day. “They come looking for foreign slaves illegally but quite often. Lately the amounts have been unusual.”

“Don’t they just dispose of them once they’re not needed?” It could be called cold but it was the logical solution. And none of their business until it started to affect the regulars.

“Not that I really care about that but” Lau jumped through that thought loop as well, gesturing with the fork. “would it not be bad if such a thing going on in a hospital to be featured in the news of regular society?”

“Scandal, mayhem, protests…” Mouser enunciated in a deadpan, reviewing the invitations. The approaching Season had every one of the high tiers abuzz. Apparently it was going to start with a duchess’s wedding.

“In other words you are saying that there is a possibility that the revival of the dead is occurring as a result of illegal human experimentation.” Sebastian stated, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Is there a legal one?” The thief piped in, invitations divided, list of refusals penned down as the boyo mulled over the information and action courses.

“When officially sanctioned by the Monarch and comprising of voluntaries.” The butler cleared the table one again.

“I see. Shanghaiing.” The thief noticed.

“That’s right.” Lau was the one to answer with couple of nods mirrored by RanMao.

“If that it’s true then it is indeed an unauthorized interference in regular society by an underground power.” As they needed authorization for experimentation. If he had worked that clause as well in the circus incident it would have helped to keep his name a bit cleaner. “However remove the thorns from the rose in advance and you will not hurt your hand. Sebastian, investigate immediately.”

“Leave it to me.” Sebastian bowed and left with the cart.

“Reviving the dead.” The boyo whispering, staring through the window. Lau had left an hour ago and he was taking a break from the first part of the day’s workload. Mouser looked up from her seat, noticing the closed off expression as he considered the event. “How foolish.” The boyo concluded. “Huh?” his attention was dragged away from the window by a sudden onset of running steps echoing through the corridor before the doors were slammed open by a brightly dressed Lizzy in spring floral and merry attitude.

“Ciel! Listen, listen! We’re having a family trip in April!” She gripped his hands, bouncing up and down, excited and blushing. “We will travel to New York on a passenger luxury ship for three weeks from the seventeenth!! And so father was wondering if you…”

“That’s impossible.” The boyo cut through the excitement with a flat tone, serious and quietly. Lizzy pouted and gripped his hands harder. One could actually see him flinch before she let go, gesturing wildly.
“It’s a ticket for the Campania’s maiden voyage!” Lizzy began to present her case. “They say it’s the most luxurious ship in the world.” The boyo was still unimpressed. “Mother said it would be good if Ciel took time to rest once in a while…” There was the other part of the argument and another thing that made the boyo step back cautiously and rethink his general answer and attitude.

“I appreciate the thought but I can’t take that much time off.” Still trying to stay away from every part of that event but now with a little bit more structure to the excuse. Lizzy looked crestfallen and sulky. And that made him backtrack as well. “I’ll go if it’s somewhere close. I can make time for a few days. Then I’ll go wherever you want. But close, you hear me?! So… what!?” The shout was due to the sudden hug that enveloped him in blonde curls and pink frills.

“As long as we’re together anywhere is fine.” Lizzy was improving on the whole knowing when to relent and seize the best offer thing. “I’m so happy.” The young lady added, tightening her grip.

Mouser chuckled, noticing the shades of red floating through the boyo’s face.

“Anywhere is the most difficult you know…” and still he tried to dampen her enthusiasm even as he struggled to keep his hands from actually returning the hug in a little hovering flinching twist of arms.

“I’ll bring back lots of souvenirs!” Lizzy promised before leaving in a hurry, checking the clock that stood on the mantel, smiling and appeased.

The boyo stood there, back to the window, staring at the open door with a little smile actually formed and frozen on his lips. Mouser chuckled slightly. Well he was thirteen. It was about the normal age to start well…

“What are you grinning at?” Sebastian appeared sideways on the window, startling the boyo into a shout, chuckling. Mouser stood as the boyo tried to keep himself from going into cardiac arrest.

“He’s blooming like a daffodil.” She supplied the reasons with a chuckle, stopping to stare. It was both a need and a want fuelled by desire and appreciation. Usually Sebastian in glasses meant bad things. Bad things involving Language, History, Geography and the like. And in that doctor’s outfit there was no hint of any doom coming her way. So she settled in for a good ogling.

“Don’t surprise me like that!!” The boyo managed to get his breathing, heartbeat and attitude back to normal, turning as Sebastian sat on the windowsill. “And what is that outfit!” he noticed the doctor’s clothes, frowning “And I was not grinning.” He finalized with a disgruntled grumble, looking away slightly, rubbing the still pink cheeks.

“Well as they say in Rome do as romans do.” Disguise was the sensible thing to do while infiltrating. Sebastian stepped fully into the study and closed the window, picking up the notes he carried. “Moreover I obtained some rather interesting information. It’s about the aforementioned Karnstein Hospital. It seems that the upper rank doctors, including the director Ryan Stoker, have created an association called the “Aurora Society”. Societies for science were no news in the Haute Monde. As common as it got, actually. Still when a group of something bonded together and rumours started to crop it was usually worth the attention. Like Ophelia’s Literary Group about six years ago. If mentioned, which did not happen often, mind you, society would still blush in embarrassment to know that a group of ladies preferred ladies in lazy afternoons with dirty sonnets. “The Aurora Society’s true face is that of a secret society that consists solely on doctors who have the “complete salvation of mankind through medicine” as their motto.”

“For those who can afford it most likely.” Mouser pointed out, shrugging.
“I have confirmed the members conduct illegal human experiments within the hospital daily.” And unlike the doctor Baron Kelvin had poached they were protecting each other so no leak or hint of scandal could cost them their reputations, facilities and financing. “According to the nurse that was convinced to talk…” Sebastian stopped suddenly, glancing sideways. Mouser was smiling with the edge of her fangs showing over her lower lip, impishly. Slightly wary, unsure if she was mocking his wording or about to bite, the demon continued. “the Aurora Society holds presentations for the results of their experiments regularly and collects donations from nobles. There was no sign of slaves inside the hospital and there was nothing pertaining to human experiments or revival of the dead.”

“It stands to reason there is a secondary laboratory of sorts.” Mouser stated, glossing over the nurse. Should be easy to find some place suited to that kind of needs.

“It could not get any more suspicious than this.” The boyo sighed and slouched down in his armchair, behind the desk.

“Yes.” Sebastian agreed, relinquishing the papers. “I am certain there is some definite clue to be found in this Aurora Society.” It was just the easiest path to follow for now.

“When is their next meeting?” The boyo inquired.

“It is scheduled to be on a passenger ship departing from Southampton port on the 17th of April.” Sebastian said after a short pause.

“Hmph… meeting on a ship is really something you would expect idle nobles to…” The boyo fell silent, thinking. Then something else clicked, eye sharpening into a sudden onset of focus. “17th… April…” The date was repeated slowly, carefully tested when said out loud. “what is the name of the boat?!"


Mouser clicked her tongue.

“A luxury ship from the company whose heir died because of you with a society that wants to revive the dead and is sailing with your fiancée and remaining family in it.” Mouser chuckled. “Your luck does not seem to be the best and your odds are tilting.”
“So this is the Campania.” Finny shouted, impressed after taking the luggage down from the coach, staring at the enormous ship docked amidst the festive ambience, the passengers boarding and people saying their goodbyes.

“So sure is huge.” Bard agreed, looking up with crossed arms. Meyrin nodded, open mouthed. Tanaka also seemed impressed. Mouser stepped out of the emptied coach, adjusting her heavy Spring hooded lace cape, making sure the hood covered her head just so and the silver button sat right, as they were on parade for the haute monde as soon as they stepped out, approaching the boyo who examined the vessel with the usual dour demeanour, his outerwear lighter than usual but still fur-trimmed.

“Please take these suitcases to 1st class and these for the servant class.” Sebastian was instructing the people in charge of loading their belongings, the luggage, trunks and suitcases marked clearly so there would be no mistakes or mishaps. Snake was staring with worry at the big Funton-marked crate two men were loading into the ship, the crate that stored most of his scaly friends and the ones he could not bear to part with.

“It’s nice that Snake gets to go.” Finny mentioned, twirling around to see the rest of the pier’s activity.

“It’s because it’s part of a footman’s job to accompany his master on his outings.” Sebastian approached, his chores done, giving the easy and fast explanation. It was also to prevent him from finding something he should not. Just in case. “Please do your jobs properly while we are gone.” He advised seriously, glancing at the boarding stairs for the first class area.

“Yes Sir.” The servants agreed, enthusiastically, waving and shouting their goodbyes.

“Well then.” The boyo called as they climbed the stairs. “We’re off.”

“We will set sail soon. All boarding passengers please make haste.” The crew was making that call occasionally, checking their clocks, asking those who were not going into the ship to step a bit away from the edge of the stone pier that was lapped by the dark swirling water.

Mouser sighed and glanced at the busy dock, eyes narrowing softly when she noticed a bespectacled young man bumping into Meyrin in haste, making his way towards second class. She shrugged a bit and moved along. There was really no need to get paranoid over a bump. He had made no move for her wallet...

Even if the ship was enormous, even if it was loaded with passengers, cargo and crew, there was no escaping the fact that people were packed in together according to their social class. So England had barely disappeared from the horizon when they came face to face with the Midford Household. Lizzy was the first to step forward, trembling, containing something. It actually looked a bit painful to see a young lady in a sailor-inspired gown, fists closed and nails digging into her palms, wide eyes and biting her lower lip.

“I… thought of making a surprise out of….” The boyo tried to babble with a smile that would not fool anyone. In fact it looked rather painful, as if someone was pinching his cheeks and pulling
them outwards. Sebastian just accompanied the mood. Snake looked a bit puzzled.

“Even though you said you couldn’t come! I’m so happy!” Lizzy decided to let go of whatever thoughts had been going around her head and simply hug the boyo into a squirming submission.

“Elizabeth!” It was cut short by the authority-laden voice of her mother. The Marchioness was looking as strong and sternly beautiful as ever, flanked by her son and husband, the three of them fair-haired and proper in their traveling attire. “Please do not display such indecent behaviour in public.” Ladies behind fans and under parasols were whispering around them. Most seemed just disappointed though. While it could be called indecent Lizzy tended to make very public her claim on the boyo’s person and, as a result, title, money and future. So far it worked because he never got the so called “husband-poaching” invitations. Not that the boyo knew anything about that side of the marriage market.

“That’s right Lizzy.” The brother intervened. Since February Mouser had seen him a couple of times. But the information about him was a bit scarce. “Moreover… I haven’t acknowledged you as my brother in law, you understand me?” He went from a composed young man to an angry teen in less than three seconds, pointing and growling. The Marchioness’s eyes narrowed slightly as she glanced at her son. But she didn’t say anything immediately. “So get off her already.” And he obviously was both overprotective of his sister, not noticing her affection and not noticing the death grip was all created by Lizzy’s sleeves. She did let go after the double scolding with a little blush of embarrassment and a small reproachful look towards the big brother. Mother was one thing. Brother seemed to be a bit below in her obedience scale.

“Marquis Midford…” Ciel started nervously as the scene passed and Lizzy’s father approached, looking rather serious. It was the kind of expression one expected to see in the head of the British Knights and someone with the strength of will, personality and body needed to be married to the Marchioness. “I have not seen you in a while…” the boyo stated nervously as the man approached.

“Long-time no see my future son-in-law!” In a blatant display of affection the origin of Lizzy’s cuddle-bug nature was revealed as stemming from the Marquis. “You’re as cute as ever!”

“Dear!” The Marchioness berated with the same intensity she used on everyone else.

“Father that’s not fair! I want to hug him too!” Lizzy intervened, shaking small fists in the air.

“Stop it you two!” the Mother of the family tried to put a dampener in all of the exaggerated reaction around her as the boyo choked.

Mouser smirked a bit smugly as the only one who had passed the Marchioness’s inspection without any major modifications to her clothes or hair. Sebastian had been forced back into a the slock combed-back style, as had Snake who was glancing up occasionally, as if wondering where had his fringe gone. The three of them were just standing there, waiting for the dismissal that had to come after the midday meal that was being served by the ships’ staff.

“So you will be with us for the whole three weeks?” the Marchioness was asking as the conversation started to flow, after the seats had been chosen and the people occupying them properly arranged.

“Yes.” The boyo stated simply, looking a bit nervous, sitting between his fiancée and her overzealous brother.
“We’ve never been together for so long before!” Lizzy clapped her hands once, smiling merrily, leaning towards the boyo and smiling. “Escort me to the dinner party. Wouldn’t that be fun Ciel?” She cornered him, extracting the promise easily despite the sour look that crossed his face.

“Right, right.” Ciel mumbled, trying not to edge away from Lizzy while her brother simmered, growled and glowered on the other seat, his attention on the boyo.

“I was supposed to escort her!” He snapped at the Earl.

“What the hell?” the boyo whispered as the Marchioness snapped her son’s attention away with a small sermon of appropriateness and social decorum.

“Isn’t it all right?” Sebastian encouraged after a small snicker, amused by the small tangle in front of him. “The meeting will be held in the night of the 19th.” Which meant he needed some form of entertainment until then. “The Young Master shout take a few days to rest occasionally.” Perfectly reasonable advice from a servant.

“I will have to dress up…” Lizzy was whispering, already making plans. Ciel glanced at her, his eyes softening for the briefest moment. Mouser noticed, tilting her head thoughtfully.

“Well… I would say that it is good to do so.” The boyo agreed. “Occasionally.” He was in a boat. Unless he wanted to swim to shore he had to submit to his class’s obligations, especially in the presence of the Marchioness.

Mouser stared warily at the ocean as the boat cut through it, moving away, towards America, of all places. It was the first night so the nobles just wanted to be pampered and sleep before really throwing themselves into revelry. Too tired to do anything else, they claimed. She exhaled slowly and closed her eyes. There was an odd feeling within the ship only truly apparent when all the activity quieted.

How many souls were in there and why had she found herself counting when nothing was occupying her mind? And why did the number always felt wrong?

In any event the rest seemed to be going smoothly. The Aurora Society was in no way hiding. They were in the ship and they had an event prepared for founders, old and new members in a few days. All one had to do was inquire with the right questions and have the money to back any claim. As far as they knew there was not a single reason to fear any persecution or repercussions. Sebastian had been able to gather what was needed in less than an hour after they had been dismissed from service and with a minimal amount of money-waving. Even though the newspaper article seemed to be a bit of a slip of one of the doctor’s tongue it was seen as little more than the usual speculation about a noble-created society. All of them had a member with a waggle tongue.

There were no traces of Trancy, Queen’s envoys or Angels. So one could hope for smooth sailings, if a sea-faring pun could be pardoned. Mouser chuckled, leaning over the rail. Not bloomin’s likely. Nothing ever seemed to go “smoothly” for the boyo. Like a jinx. The thief yawned softly.

There were so many pretty precious things around, just waiting to be plucked. And they were so easy to acquire...

Her lacy hood was placed over her shoulders and buttoned. Mouser closed her eyes and leaned back as Sebastian’s arms went around her frame, warding away the cold. It could be Spring, it
could be April. But it was also a vast sea of nothing in the north of the world and a single ship harassed by sharp, icy winds.

“There are places to hide but nowhere to run.” She reported. “Too many people question where you go or why are you in some place.” The thief whispered. As a servant they could move in the noble are and in the commoner’ areas without arousing suspicion or questions. Hell they even had a little space that was just for the housing of servants and no one would question where she had slept. But the storage and cargo holds were a bit more contained. It seemed the crew had a guard placed in each of the accesses, there to stay put. One had to see if that vigilance slackened over the next couple of days. And the Marchioness had already made some requests for the boyo’s time. And hers.

Sebastian’s hands moved slowly over her hips, turning her towards him, leaning to kiss her. Mouser chuckled, tiptoeing, letting her arms go around his neck, levering herself up, placing the heel of her boot on the lower bar of the railing, lips brushing his lightly. His hand moved against her cheek, making her stay, draw a little closer as the kiss was returned, lacking any hurry, the movements deliberately creating her downfall, languid and hot tongue making her lips part with a small moan for him, tangling for a brief moment. Mouser broke the kiss with a sight, nuzzling his neck, warm breath against his throat as he pulled her closer, plucking her away from the edge, easily keeping her away from the floor, the movement and intent clear.

“It seems your indecency runs deeper than your face.”

Both demons froze, startled, looking away from each other. Sebastian moved faster, defensively, shoving Mouser behind his back, turning, keeping her half-hidden, half-protected. He stiffened a bit more when coming face-to-face with the disapproving Marchioness, grasping the situation. Mouser shivered, blushing hard and peeked, gripping his arm a bit too tightly. Then the thief blurted out the only thing that might salvage the whole situation with some grace and social polish while still trying to get how had the woman sneaked up on them.

“We’re married and off-duty.”
Chapter 70

Society was easy to fool if one had the right words and justifications readied. So that was the simplest backup one could have when caught doing anything that could have been considered unsightly. And they had already crafted that excuse and used it at the Queen’s requested party. It was a firmly set backup, smoothly woven into the background in case of emergency and it was true enough to skirt the contract’s impositions. So what Mouser had said should be enough. It had taken a bit of convincing after being dragged to the lounge for a bit more of seclusion but the Marchioness had relented and even acknowledged the fabricated reasons as laudable.

All in all it was a successful cover of a slip and a way to avoid further questions. The incident and all its circumstances had been deemed “personal” and “occurring within the appropriate time” and as such it would not be used against them.

There were some activities that had been scheduled and that the nobles would be unable to dodge if they wanted to keep their social status intact. Some were meant for men, other for women and others for the simple mindless mingling of conversational bragging. Snake was the one that had been assigned to the boyo as he was dragged about by the Midfords. He needed practice in Sebastian’s opinion and the task delegation gave them freedom to do what they needed to do.

There wasn’t really much that could fit beneath the grey dress as an afterthought, like the usual paraphernalia she carried. On that angle, as added weapons, she was wearing the simple straps that kept the blades locked to her legs, foregoing their usual place at her forearms.

So from the last time the dress had been worn and that trip Mouser had been making some alterations to it with the help of Charlotte’s seamstress. The thief buttoned the skirt part, placing it securely around her hips but without finishing the closure. It fell stiffly around her, like a maw trap, waiting to close. Stiletto sheaths had been sewn within that area between the edge of the dress and her waist, before the draping started, creating an effect similar to boning while concealing them. It amounted to fourteen straight smooth, guard-less blades around her lower torso. She glanced down, hooking her fingers under the black corset, adjusting it with a grimace. It was just not sitting completely right…

“Permit me.” Sebastian whispered, walking into the cabin, closing the door calmly on his wake, hiding the hustle and bustle in the corridors, a flurry of servants trying to see to their master’s requests, hands moving lightly over the black fabric, appraising it, his figure towering behind the thief, reflected by the mirror. Mouser smiled lightly and raised one arm, pulling her hair out of the way, exposing the back of her neck, using the other hand to centre the corset’s neckline, as Sebastian found the ribbons, untangling and loosening them again, dragging the thief closer, standing, leaning over her while rebinding the satin, the methodical movements woven with sneaked caresses over the curve of her spine, despite the reflection showing nothing but seriousness an focus.

“Leaving the boyo with Snake again?” Mouser asked, arching against the pressure, helping the fit.

“He should learn how to do a footman’s job properly and quickly.” The demon reiterated without
any particular inflection.

“I see.” Mouser chuckled. Sebastian tied the ribbons, creating a small bow that would be easily crushed and concealed by the skirt, the corset finally sitting right despite the tightness. Mouser let go of her hair, undulating a bit to get used to the feel, stopping, surprised when his hand pushed the hair out of the way, leaning, a light kiss, warm, brushed lightly, lingering on the nape of her neck before stepping back. Mouser smiled and caught his hand as it was releasing her locks, opening the little button that closed the gloves, pushing the fabric away with her lips to leave a kiss on his palm. “What is the plan?” She whispered, clearing her throat, buttoning the rest of the skirt.

“The Aurora Society meeting is being held in the smoking room on the opposite side of where today’s main party event is taking place. The ticket in is an empty glass being carried around by the party waiters.” So the place was finally certain. In the last few days it had varied from the Writing room to the secondary lounge, to the verandas.

“Most likely they don’t know why but it is part of their orders. So they just do it.” Mouser reflected, sitting down in front of the mirror, carefully ruffling her skirts around her hips. Forty eight little flat flechettes were hidden in the draping, layered for structure and easy use. That was Charlotte’s favourite trick when the gun could not be totted around. But it warranted a bit of caution when seating down if one did not want an arse full of needles. “Strange it’s in the smoking room. It seems too… big for a thing that has been managed in relative obscurity…” Mouser pinned her hair up, making the usual bun, slipping the raven comb in. “They must have someone with a big title, a big fortune and a big ego backing them.” Casually she moved her boot against the edge of the dress, finding metal. Slightly above the lace and where the weight would benefit the fall of the fabric six derringers hemmed the skirt. With the bladed fan it summed up all of her toys for the event.

“Unsurprising.” Sebastian nodded, acknowledging the thought. Some things were simply impossible to achieve without the aforementioned advantages. Resources and ways to make society look the other way, much like the ruse of the formal marriage contract. “Stay in the lounge room and keep an eye on the Midfords while managing appearances.” Sebastian instructed, appraising her preparations with critical eyes.

“I left your disguises in the cloak room.” Mouser pointed at a brass circle with numbers engraved on it, amused.

“Save me a dance.” Sebastian asked with a small smile.

“The waltz?” The thief inquired with a laugh. “The dance society still whispers that it is… oh what was it the old book said… riotous and indecent… right in front of the marchioness?” Her eyes gleamed of mischief. She loosened a lock of hair pulling it down to frame her face, staring at the mirror. “And considering how every single one of those practices ends…”

Sebastian’s lips parted in a slow smirk as he left, closing the door deliberately and silently.

Mouser chuckled, nibbling her lower lip lightly.

Besides she doubted they would dance.

The night promised to be too busy for any extra activities.
Chapter 71

As befitted the passenger’s lounge of a first class cruise the room that was exquisitely made and thought out from the get go had been redecorated and rearranged with the same attention and pomp to host the party that celebrated the maiden voyage and should gather all of the noble-born and money-loaded characters into a single two tiered room. It could be the third day of it but something so grand needed, in the mind of the noble and rich and the ones that had built the ship, coming from the same social strata and mentality, an equally lavish celebration. Any other excuse would do, in any event.

Everything glittered, from the furniture to the expensively dressed people under the bright gaslights, encased in polished iron, brass, glass and crystal. Music floated through the air, coming from a hidden spot, the classics everyone knew so no one could be embarrassed in a conversation about the harmonies being performed. Some people danced, young couples mostly, enjoying themselves in revelry already. Most of the guests were still admiring and picking through the food strategically placed in impeccably set tables reflecting the Blue Star logo. Beverages were carried around by the waiters, from alcoholic to lemonade, juices and water, and absently picked and sipped by the party-goers while talking and mingling.

Lizzy had ambushed the boyo as soon as they had entered the lounge, dragging him through the second floor, down the stairs and towards the tables, ignoring anyone trying to talk to them, including her brother who walked away sulking, talking excitedly. She was wearing a new dress of white, two shades of dark-pink and small rose-gold embellishments, fitting her signature cheerfulness even as it hinted at the fact that she was a grown young lady. As usual it hid and forgave that little, almost unnoticeable, difference in her posture.

“Ciel! Look! That cake is so cute.” She announced, gripping the boyo’s arm, scanning the tables, low heels making soft sounds on the steps, soft, smooth and fast. The boyo’s steps were less coordinated as he struggled to keep balance and to keep her back. Snake was trying to do his job as a footman and chaperone, left behind by Lizzy’s energy. Mouser and Sebastian walked behind them, more calmly. “I’ll get some for you.” The young lady announced, darting off. “Wait here, all right.” She turned, piercing Ciel with a blink-and-you’d-miss-it glare before running off towards the deserts, skirts fluttering lightly.

“Wait… uhr…” Without a say in the matter the boyo groaned, looking around grimly, the three days weighting hard on him. “Nobles really don’t do anything but gather every day and talk about irrelevant things like what family did this or that… and with a straight face.” He had been forced to do just that, bombarded with questions about family, friends and businesses. “It feels stupid to have abandoned work for this…”

“You could use some more practice.” Mouser stated, reaching the end of the stairs, looking around, getting a feel of the layout. It was quite open in itself if one subtracted the crowd and the tables. Sebastian had approached the table with the warm savoury dishes, plating up a dose flawlessly. “Even though you have improved you are still far from limber when it comes to word-twists on the spot.”

The boyo groaned and found one of the chairs peppering the lounge, mostly placed against the walls and closed windows for the nobles that had no stamina, no dance partners or just wanted to eat calmly while scanning the crowd for a lesser ranked noble to impress. Or was an old lady. Or in the case of the youngest daughter of the Pearson’s entertain a host of suitors that competed for her hand like a muster of peacocks.
“If boredom and lack of purpose is your main grievance why did you not accept the Marchioness’s invitation to the fencing sessions?” Sebastian asked, teasing. Also the Young Master’s skills could use a bit of brushing up. He tended to neglect or find ways to skirt any activity that veered into the physical. “Here you go.” He relinquished the plate and silverware into the boyo’s hands with the forms etiquette demanded, bowing slightly.

“Are you not going to let me see the statue of liberty’s face at all?” If he got caught up with the Marchionesses’ lessons he would most likely end up in bed, severely bruised and unable to move. Sebastian insisted in making him attend every event to further his social status, as it should be done so no suspicion was raised, and keep him away from the investigation also played into that little rant.

“Young Master. You do recall it is tonight.” Sebastian said, glancing around, ignoring the words, scanning the crowd, looking for the sign the meeting was starting to gather in the opposite room.

“Yes.” The boyo perked up slightly, taking a bite out of the meat, work giving him drive. “As soon as you see a chance we will take our leave.” He ordered, calculating the odds.

It was simpler to delegate the task of monitoring the goings-on of the Aurora Society to Sebastian. With the crowd, the movement and the anonymity of being a servant it would be easy. Also it was a height issue.

“As you wish.” The demon acknowledged.

“I believe it will be most likely that the invitations are delivered here because of the proximity to the food.” Mouser said, glancing at the waiters, demarked from the nobles by the bowtie and white jackets. Some had trays with food, some with cups. It would also be easier to distribute all the invitations if the members had been warned that they would only be given away in a relatively small area. The effort a noble made should be minimal.

“Look… did you see that skin?” The first hints of gossiping came from the brightly dressed women that had just returned from the powder room with her friends, targeting Snake, left alone for a bit as they schemed. They were huddled in a bright circle of ruffles, whispering none too quietly with looks of revulsion and arrogance.

“It looks just like a snake, doesn’t it?” Another said, opening a fan, looking over the embroidered edge.

“When did this place turn into a freak show?”

Snake looked up, startled, his already shy expression closing in sadness.

“Madam I think he heard you.” Another whispered with a little smug giggle.

Mouser sighed, touching Snake’s arm lightly when walking by him, opening her fan, moving it softly, as if just cooling herself, walking towards them smoothly, in all appearances just aiming for one of the tables set with delicacies.

“Madams...” She greeted with a little bow of her head, staring straight at them. They preened. Mouser was known to society as the Phantomhive secretary and having been seen with the Marchioness also made her somewhat of a desirable target. If they could flaunt a connection it would improve their status. Even the acknowledgement was enough. And who knows maybe even an introduction to the Earl… “It became thusly from the moment you were allowed in wearing...”
She closed the fan with a snap, gesturing softly with it, mimicking the boyo’s face of utter revulsion when faced with unwanted advances. “…that.” Then she smiled, a little wicked tilt of her lips and walked away.

There was a scandalized silence amidst the trio, the hint of tears starting. One even looked closer to a fit of vapours. It was clear the ones around had heard Mouser’s words as clearly as they had heard the gossiping hens. And it was also the norm that everyone in that hall would side with Mouser because of the crest she represented. Sebastian chuckled a bit. It was not often that she employed catty manoeuvres and viperine tongue against gossip.

“You aren’t used to crowds?” The boyo approached Snake as Mouser returned with a plate of fruit.

“I look different from everyone else.” Snake whispered, looking down. “And since I’m with you people will laugh at you too. Says Dan.” The diminutive pearly-pink snake peeked over his ear, its head bowing low.

“So what?” The boyo said, his voice cutting.

“Huh?” Snake looked up, surprised.

“You are another person so of course you look different.” The boyo shrugged, eating a bit more. “What do you need to be ashamed for?” The boyo shrugged, indifferently. “Besides I am free to be with whoever I want. No one has the right to say anything about it.” He finished his point, glancing around, making sure everyone was reminded that those people belonged to him.

“That is right.” Sebastian approached, forcing the young man to stand straight. “You are now the footman of a distinguished noble family. So straighten up and have some confidence.” He corrected his posture once more.

Snake’s lips were trembling. The poor thing was getting emotional.

“The glasses are starting to appear…” Sebastian announced. Discreetly some picked them up, either making an excuse to those that were with them or silently walking away from the lounge with their empty glasses in hand.

“Get one.” The boyo ordered, readying. “You clean up.” He ordered Snake, giving him the barely pecked meat dish, as Sebastian returned with the item needed to enter the meeting.

“Silk… what does he mean by that?” Snake asked, shy once more, blushing under his scales, unused to compliments, staring at the thing on his hand. Mouser chuckled, picking a fork, stabbing a piece of the food.

“Here.” She lifted the fork. He stared at the offered morsel for a bit before leaning down and taking the bite in an absolutely confused and dazed silence.

“It’s good!” He blurted out loud, amazed, after a long chew.

Mouser laughed, amused, turning to her honey-glazed apples.

Lady Elizabeth was still eyeing the cakes critically. The Marchioness was still in the adjacent room with a few friends, detached from the revelry. Her husband and son were on the other side of the lounge, near the entrance of the bar. Her eyes narrowed suddenly when a blond-haired man with a familiar soul and look walked by.

“Ah… blow me…” Mouser hissed low. “Please no…” She groaned. Yes, he had an empty glass as
well. “Bollocks.” She cussed, rubbing the bridge of her nose in annoyance as the blond noble left the lounge, heading towards the smoke room.
“Would you like some «completely purified water»? It costs 30 pounds.” The waiter in white, standing in front of the smoke room, offered politely stating the price without pause to the man that had walked up to the decorated door, coming from the lounge. Said gentleman had crossed paths with them as they walked out of the coat room, holding the glass that would allow him in. A beefier man in a black uniform was clearly serving a guard’s purpose, watching the corridor, standing still, shoulders squared.

“That’s quite an extravagant price for water.” Sebastian stated thoughtfully, standing at the end of the corridor with the Young Master, examining the scene, both peeking around the corner, holding the glass, distracted, twirling it by the slim stem.

Disguising for that particular even had to be easy and effortless. Mouser had chosen to do the minimum needed for them so they lost as little time as possible getting in and out of their covers. Wigs and a bandage to disguise the eyepatch and the seal held in it the formerly blue orb. A sleek black tail with a fashionable bow for him and a blonde straight page-cut for the Young Master, hiding most of his more recognizable face.

“Which probably means that if one can’t afford it they are not qualified to get in.” It was also a way to gather even more funds without being vulgar. Asking for something had its own etiquette and for the nobles usually involved complex dances around the core issue. Sebastian spoke up once more after a moment, as the waiter stepped to the side and opened the door, bowing as the gentleman walked in. The door was closed once more and the waiting position resumed. No words were exchanged between the men.

“Let’s go.” The Young Master demanded, impatient.

“Wait for a moment.” Sebastian stopped him, before he could be noticed by either the guard or the waiter. There were still some things he needed to be informed of. “According to the gathered information there is a fixed greeting every member or invited person of the Aurora Society must know. If they do not, they will be asked to leave.”

“Say things like that sooner.” As usual the Young Master disregarded the fact that he had been ignoring any attempt to inform him beforehand. “What is that greeting?”

“Well…” Sebastian leaned and whispered the instructions with precision, quickly.

“What?!?” A deep dark red tainted the Young Master’s face before it became a rather sickly pallor. “I can’t believe it…” Mortification settled into a rather interesting expression upon his face. “Do I really have to do that?”

“If you can’t we’ll be seen as outsiders and your investigation will be compromised.” The demon announced grimly. Such a thing was actually a clever way to tell an outsider who was able to bypass the simple triage they had placed to go from lounge to smoke room. “Please do not hesitate under any circumstances.” Sebastian completed his advice, stepping out, into the corridor. “Well… Let’s go.”

The trek was short and the Young Master still looked rather ill.

“Would you like some «completely purified water»? It costs 30 pounds.” The waiter said his line flawlessly, not even changing the tone or the pose.
“Indeed.” Sebastian answered, polite and neutral as if barely noticing the help, proffering the money first, in a neat, organized clip, as a meaningless amount, and then showing the empty glass, completing the transaction.

“Welcome.” The waiter said, finishing his job, opening the door and letting them through.

It was a smaller room that mirrored the Lounge. It was about a third of that area. Same decoration, same lavish details. But for the meeting of the Aurora Society the food and music that were being given in the other celebration had been discarded. Men and women walked around, chatting, all carrying a glass of the purified water. Those who had no glass were clearly paired with someone else.

“Are you first timers?” A portly gentlemen in a formal suit approached, carrying his own purified water glass. The First thing that caught Sebastian’s eyes was the pin with the mythical figure of the Phoenix. There had been no mention of that but it made sense in identifying members. A visual cue in addition to the greeting. Sebastian glanced at the Young Master, noticing all the hesitation signs. But after a little nod of resignation he started, to firmly erase the look of suspicion.

“The complete flames in our chest shall not be extinguished by anyone.” The Young Master recited, his voice slightly strangled. “We are…” The mandatory pose was struck, balanced on one leg, arms outstretched, mimicking the bird. “The phoenix.” All that posturing led to the final statement of dramatic weight met with a deep silence as the man observed them and the Young Master fidgeted with impatience and embarrassment.

“The phoenix.” The gentleman said, half-shouting, striking the pose with a lumbering shuffle. He coughed and took a sip of the water, examining them with a nod, reaching inside the inner pocket of the jacket. “Welcome to the Aurora Society.” He stated with dignity while the Young Master hid his reddened face. “These are your membership badges.” He said with a respectful nod, giving similar pins to the one that adorned his lapel to Sebastian.

“Thank you.” The demon said and then busied himself with placing the pins on their place to defuse further doubts on the prey’s mind.

“I am not doing that again. Ever.” The Young Master was grumbling beneath his breath, teeth clenched, red-faced. As usual he was quite susceptible to embarrassment. There was a sudden, familiar giggle that broke into a fully-fledged laugh bubbling from the crowd, approaching.

“To think the Earl would ever do something like that…” The Undertaker approached, contorting with laughter, elbowing a few people out of his way. “That was the best!!” He continued, hopping a bit in place, trying to settle the laugh that was not stopping.

“Undertaker?!” The Young Master interjected a bit in shock. Sebastian felt less surprised. Bodies had to disappear somehow after the experiences. Success rate also had to be low so more corpses would need a steady and relatively tight-lipped disposal service.

“Saying the Phoenix with such a serious face.” The Undertaker burst into laughter once more, tears falling, accompanying the effort. The man was simply exuberant when he found something amusing.

“You bastard…” Ciel growled, the red of the blood flowing underneath the relatively thin skin of his cheeks increasing its pressure, the red staining deeper. It was actually amazing that his veins hadn’t shredded and shattered already.

“Not now Young Master.” The demon said calmly, standing, placing the pin on his own lapel,
turning to the newly arrived acquaintance. “Moreover, what are you doing here?”

“My job.” The undertaker coughed, giving a last giggle, swaying back and forth with amusement as he answered. “The hospital is a regular customer of mine.” As Sebastian had been expecting. So he simply nodded and allowed the Young Master to lead the inquiry.

“We’re investigating the illegal human experimentation going on in here though.” He stated, regaining a bit of the lost dignity, staring at the man. “Do you know anything about the revival of the dead?

“One moment then…” The Undertaker tapped his chin with one long black nail, thinking. Then he grinned widely. “If you want information I want compensation. Let me see… how about you do that pose again?” He suggested merrily, easily getting the rise of the Young Master.

“Who the hell would…” as expected he reacted with a low hiss, growing stiff and uncooperative.

“The Phoenix!” Another voice butted into the conversation, startling both Master and Butler. Dramatic, flamboyant and annoyingly resilient to every encounter with the Phantomhives, Alesteir Chamber stood a few feet away, striking the code-pose. Oddly enough he was not wearing the usual white suit. But it was still an overworked piece of fabric. But for someone in a society to be allowed to have a personal way of giving the code was something that could mean he was part of the higher tiers...

“Sorry, I’ve arranged the pose to fit my own style.” He stated, walking towards them, rearranging his hair, holding the water glass classily.

“Is that the viscount Druitt?!” The Young Master hissed, hiding behind him. It was to be expected, after all sorts of unpleasantness the arrival of that man announced. “What is he doing here?!”

“Come to think of it he had a doctor’s licence, didn’t he…” Sebastian stated thoughtfully, creating the most likely scenario in his mind. “I forgot.” He shrugged slightly.

“He’s coming over!” The Viscount of Druitt greeted them. He seemed to be making the rounds around the room. Like the host of the soirée. It only gave credence to his theory. They clicked glasses in a greeting, the Young Master still trying to remain hidden by clinging to his tailcoat.

“Yes.” Sebastian admitted easily. They knew the sign at the lounge. They had the money to walk through the door. They knew the code words and the special stance that showed others that they belonged. And now they had the pins. There was really nothing to be concerned about at the moment. “We saw the article in the newspaper.” The demon continued, trying to pry some more information out of the situation.

“Oh. Madam Samuel’s light-lips are rather troublesome.” Druitt said with a perfectly executed shake of his head and gesture of delicate aggravation. “To think she would leak our secrets so easily. All we asked was for a small article about an amazing medical advancement. Just the thing to attract investors but no... That woman has such a dramatic vein that if being an actress was not such a scandalous endeavour for any woman she would certainly...” He stopped midsentence, noticing the Young Master. “Oh… have we met before somewhere?” the Viscount asked, leaning down.

“NO!” The Young Master shouted panicking for an instant before backtracking and trying to make
a suitable introduction and answer. “I am sure this is our first meeting!”

“Indeed.” Druitt stated, leaning uncomfortably close. Sebastian made himself scarce. As long as there was no actual threat the Young Master should learn to fend for himself. “I would surely never forget such a beautiful boy such as yourself.” Ciel made an effort to not show too much of his repulse. “Ah but what a pitiful bandage you have.” Druitt continued, his tone definitely not one that should be used on a young boy.

“My father said that if I came here they could heal it.” The Young Master squawked out, trying to step back.

“Father?” Sebastian murmured in the background, frowning.

“That’s right. I am sure Ryan will heal it for you.” Druitt smiled, offhandedly catching the Young Master’s face, examining it closely. “I am already looking forward to stare into both of your eyes. No.” The viscount stepped back airily, striking a pose of doubt and tragedy. “Wait. It’s decadent enough the way it is now. Quite nice even…” He began to ramble, apparently forgetting the actual person he was leaving increasingly repulsed and itching to run.

“Where did the Undertaker go...” The young master whispered, approaching Sebastian with short, fast steps.

“I wonder…” Sebastian answered, looking around.

“It’s starting you two.” Druitt snapped out of his ramblings and gripped them by the shoulders, dragging the pair to the front of the smoke room where arrangements seemed to have been concluded. Four Aurora Society members were carrying a coffin made of golden planks and dark metal handles. A man in a white lab coat over a formal suit walked in after them. His look was a bit on the unremarkable side, light brown hair swept away from his face, thick eyebrows and a friendly smile on his face. “He is our founder, Ryan Stoker.” Druitt pointed out.

“That’s him?” The Young Master whispered to himself, thinking about what information he had. Perhaps he had been expecting someone older.

The crowd had gathered around the coffin and equipment, staring at the man that was now occupying the centre stage. Stoker was waiting for them to quiet down, assuming a bit of a more solemn look.

“The complete flames in our chest shall not be extinguished by anyone.” He started the recitation calmly. “We are... the phoenix.” The pose was struck only by him without the slightest sign of embarrassment before he recovered the calm expected of someone giving a presentation, delving into the Society’s actual businesses. “Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for coming for today’s research presentation of the Aurora Society’s Complete Salvation of Mankind Through Medicine Project.” Rather long winded but people tended to do that. Sebastian glanced around, uninterested. “What is Complete Salvation?” There the man started to get excited with the explanation of his ideals. “Complete Health! A healthy body, healthy teeth, healthy spirit housed within that healthy body... and finally a healthy mood.” Master and Butler agreed on the point that all that perkiness was disturbing and unnecessary. “Healthiness is truly splendid!” His mood turned sombre then as he turned to the coffin. “However there is the worst kind of health issue that we can’t overcome no matter how hard we try. That is to say... death. And the great power that will save us from it is... the Aurora Society’s medicine.” The coffin was opened, revealing a young lady. She was not exactly dressed for burial, wearing a pale underdressed and a corset along with a thick ribbon of lace-and-silk that covered her eyes. Stitching closed what seemed to be deliberate cuts in her body. So resurrection apparently started with some sort of surgery upon the cadaver. Much like the
creature described in that book Sebastian had found the other day mixed with Mouser’s questionable reading choices. Frankenstein was the title, if he remembered correctly. “We will now show you, Ladies and Gentlemen, the fruits of our Complete Salvation of Mankind Through Medicine research. Margaret Connor, 17. This young lady lost her life at an early age due to an unfortunate accident. It is truly pitiful. An accident that should not have happened. Her death not only put her but also her family’s hearts into bad health.” There was a couple weeping, dressed in mourning apparel. “I want to save them completely!” The doctor stated dramatically, starting to exhibit the process, he and his assistants attaching some sort of electrical devices to the corpse’s skin, preparing to show their results.

“Is the body real?” The Young Master asked in a low tone as the crowd watched with quiet curiosity.

“Probably.” Sebastian nodded, sniffing, rubbing his nose for an instant. “The smell of death is so intense that is making my nose twitch.” He admitted. There was the scent of a corpse, of medicine, chemicals and metal overpowering in his senses the smell of the overly perfumed cattle around.

“Well then, Ladies and Gentlemen…” Stoker said, his voice loud and clear, assistants leaving the presentation area, approaching the device that would supposedly rekindle life, gripping a handle. “I will show you the power of medicine.” He enunciated, excited. “The Complete Salvation!” Electricity buzzed through the cables, flooding the corpse inside the coffin as the doctor encouraged it and spouted his philosophy to the crowd. “Come, rise from Death! Like the Phoenix!”

A slender but still deathly pale and ashy hand rose from the satin-lined coffin much to the crowd’s gasping excitement.

Mouser clicked her tongue, glancing around the crowded lounge, checking where the ones she should be watched were. Lizzy was now chasing the boyo’s trail, miffed by his sudden disappearance. Snake had plated up some food and was sneaking away towards the cargo hold, most likely to see his little friends stashed within the Funton crate. As he was not going towards any place that would interfere with the boyo’s plans Mouser allowed him to go. Poor thing was not feeling well amidst all those people anyway. One might as well give him some reprieve. The Marchioness and a group of her fashionable friends were in the writing room, adjacent to the lounge, in the opposite direction to the smoke room. The Marquis was drinking with a group of gentlemen, the group of grown men surrounding the cold cuts table. And the Midford firstborn was trying to find his sister while grumbling under his breath.

There were 2254 souls in the boat. She had checked when she noticed the idle counting of souls was not fading away as the trip proceeded. The ship’s records said so and she when the thief had found a quiet moment she had spent about two hours counting. But sometimes there were still more, flaring and disappearing.

The thief had briefly thought about mermaids, amused by the silly supposition.

A living soul had a very specific feel to it, a buzzing energy that was insistent and vivacious. Then, from person to person, its flavour and feel varied but the general sensation a living soul left in her senses, when not focusing hard or caught unawares, was that simple.

The feel of a contracted soul, using the boyo as baseline, was the same buzzing but with a sort of brand over it. Like a place-card at a restaurant table. The table looked no different save for that
little piece of paper that said “not for you”.

Then she had thought that maybe they were just sailing over shipwrecks filled with uncollected souls, like the ones they had encountered at Ludlow castle, in the catacombs. Those at first felt complete, buzzing light and low, but sour, sticky. The ghosts of the princes were similar to that but with faded edges, their buzzing mostly gone.

But all those glimpses of more had been too fast to feel what kind of souls those flare ups truly were.

Mouser groaned when a sudden piercing pain snapped against her skull, fingers touching her forehead when a clear 2255 came up in her count, the extra one flaring up in the smoke room. Some people glanced at her sudden look of discomfort. She just smiled and waved away the concern, fanning herself, finding a chair, sitting down for a moment, avoiding her own blades. Ladies being ladies and fainting was not uncommon and the gestures assured the ones that had noticed that it was just... that.

It was not disappearing and it was... bland, stale, irregular, stitched… fake.

And that fake mimicry of a soul gave out a constant, dissonant screeching wail.
“Take a look!” The Doctor continued, excited as the young woman sat up, still and serene, as the assistants approached, taking the wires away from the skin. There was absolutely no movement from her. No breathing, no sound of heartbeat, no traces of confusion crossing her partially hidden features... even if those sounds were being muffled by the thunderous clap of the members of the Aurora Society there should have been other signs of life. “With our medicine we can even overcome death!!” That was the point of that whole setup.

“Maggy!” The grieving parents showed nothing but happiness as they were allowed to go and embrace the unmoving girl. Still no reaction. If the corpse had been truly brought back in accordance to the doctor’s standards there should be a semblance of emotion. “Oh, Maggy! Thank you doctor!” The mother was saying between sobs, holding the body close.

“This is complete salvation!” The doctor announced smugly, amidst the clapping and murmuring of approval and admiration, looking rather satisfied.

“What on earth is going on?!” The Young Master whispered, thoroughly confused. Sebastian glanced down for a moment before refocusing on the body, eyes narrowing. “Did he really revive a corpse?” It looked like it but... he focused, trying to glance beyond the physical. There was something irregular about it...

“As long as you’re alive mother will...” The older woman was still saying, not noticing the thing in her arms moving in an odd, jerky way, opening its mouth wide, snapping the stitching that had closed a gash that, if healed, would have made a Glasgow Grin. “Maggy!” She noticed the motions. “What are you!?” The question was cut off by a scream as the reanimated sunk its blunt human teeth through the fabric and flesh that covered the older woman’s throat, ripping it off with a gurgle.

106 souls were held within the smoke room.

One was fake.

One was real and currently being detached from life.

Mouser sighed, leaning against the plush back of the armchair, staring at her own red eyes reflected in the ornate mirror. She was in one of the pearly blue powder room small nooks reserved for the ladies to fix their hair and outfits. And secretly their makeup. It was still very frowned upon to use, called the mark of loose women. And yet... men had no idea. No lady got that kind of red lips and flushed cheeks just by biting lips and slapping themselves silly. Seeing the party was reaching its peak it was a relatively secluded and calm place.

There were four souls she was familiar with in that room. Sebastian and the boyo. Druitt came as no surprise, having spotted him in the lounge before. The Undertaker. Now that was unexpected. If he had previous connections with the hospital due to his work was the logical approach. But the revival of the dead had seemed secondary to the illegal human experimentation conducted in slaves. Why would he be invited in any of those cases...

That kind of awareness to souls was the hallmark of the Cait Sith. And it was the most annoying
ability one could have at the moment with all the souls packed in a relatively small space and one of them constantly shrieking. The thief stood and sighed, slightly unbalanced, struggling to cut off the impression.

There was one thing that felt vaguely similar but it was a sensation she had overlooked, detected when she was starting to develop as a demon.

Drocell Keinz and the Dolls.

Drocell had had what Sebastian had called a Temporary Soul. It was something created only by an angel through a process that was similar to the crystallization of a ghost, placed within a vessel and manipulated through Angel Threads. The Threads were a silvery substance an angel could produce and use, manipulating physical and metaphysical. They were what had dragged out her memories and used them for her pain, what had tried to manipulate the boyo’s mind, what had made the little girl dolls move even though they were automatons dressed in human skin. Drocell had a soul like a ghost, a faded buzz but laced by a constant dissonant sound. Back then it had felt for her like a faint mosquito buzzing and she had shrugged it off, uncaring. It was all too new.

Screams were coming from the other side of the ship.

Whatever possessed the fake soul was dangerous then.

As the corpse killed the one that had once birthed it panicked screamed and ran away from the gruesome scene, only growing more frantic as the corpse gurgled low, crawling out of the coffin, shuffling towards the crowd that struggled to leave the room, trampling and cursing.

“Sebastian!” The Young Master shouted, stepping back, pulling the wig as its weight and shape impaired his already partially blocked vision.

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian answered swiftly, using three of the silver knives, tossing them against the creature. They struck its chest and throat, imbedding themselves deeply into the desiccated flesh, bringing forth thick, rotting blood, the impact making it stumble and fall backwards on the wooden flooring.

“Did you get her?” The Young Master asked, peeking.

“Stay back.” It was still moving, bowed at an awkward angle as it tried to straighten itself up, gurgling, joints cracking, muscles snapping and readjusting. No living creature would have been able to do that without experiencing crippling pain. It stood to reason no living creature would try.

“What on earth is she?!” the Young Master shouted, clearly perturbed.

“I am sure I stabbed her in the heart.” Sebastian answered thoughtfully, stepping back, preparing another volley of knives. “It is a being I do not understand.” It was foolish not to admit one’s own failings, especially when knowledge or lack thereof could be critical for survival.

“The Aurora’s society bringing the dead back to life may not be occult.” The young Master repeated slowly. “I’d never have though Lau’s words would be true…”

It was easier to believe in any case for those who had seen the effects the black plague had had in Europe. People, foolish, unknowing, affected by the disease, panicking, thinking it a punishment from the heaven, throwing the dead into mass graves. But some of them were not completely dead.
Some had just fallen sick and confused, fevered, diseased, crawled out from the corpse-ridden wholes and tried to return to their lives. Great periods of massive plagues were the origin of the walking dead myth. But few tales spoke of perfect returns to life.

“Shit. It failed.” As the doctor was now witnessing first hand, grimacing in dismay. “What are you standing around for?” He turned to the guards in simple servant uniforms, carrying the Aurora society’s pin. “Take it down!” he ordered hastily, annoyed at the inaction.

“The Phoenix!” The guards complied, striking the pose quickly and drawing guns, shooting wildly, making its attention shift towards the new attackers, shuffling towards them, managing to reach one and push him down, proceeding on to maul him with hands and teeth, ignoring the multiple wound and missing parts in its own body. The second men panicked, falling down, becoming prey as well.

“Damn these useless guys!” the doctor mumbled angrily to himself, managing to break the fascination and run away, vanishing in the corridor.

“Wait!” Ciel shouted, by instinct, trying to move, stopped by the demon before his steps took him to close, attracting the creature’s attention, it growled, turning towards them with bits and pieces of the man hanging from its partially torn mouth. “How the hell are we supposed to take care of that?” The Young Master said, gritting his teeth, still staying back.

“I could dismember it so it doesn’t move around anymore…” Sebastian considered drawing knives once more. It was time consuming and less than ideal. But if it was what was needed...

“These guys can’t be killed unless you smash in their heads, don’ch’ya know?” A new voice sounded in, accompanied by a loud whirring. “Like this!” A young man in a proper suit and black-and-white shoes, bespectacled, dual-coloured hair, blonde on top, black underneath it, crossed the air in front of them, aiming at the creature’s head, the circular blades of the death scythe crushing the skull, running over it with a gleeful grin. “Ya should pay attention to the important stuff.” He stated, hopping away with the weapon, leaning against it with a low whistle as he appreciated his handiwork.

“You are…” Sebastian noticed the colour of his eyes behind the wide frame and glitter of the lenses. The interloper had fished out a notebook with a leatherwork cover, leafing through it with a frown, glancing at the unmoving body from time to time.

“AH.” He gave a little triumphant shout. “I told them that this bird was totally dead. I so told ’em I had collected her properly!” he grumbled, closing the notebook, looking around.

“What is he?” the Young Master asked in a hushed, concerned whisper.

“You should know them well by now, Young Master.” Sebastian sighed in annoyance. Another interference was really not needed at the moment, despite the usefulness of the information.

“This one has it, alright.” He was approaching the first victim of the reanimation, the whirring of the scythe blades restarting for collection “Here we go…” The cinematic record flowed from birth to the shock of death, each piece verified as the scythe took the soul and respective record. “Susana Connor. Born on the 23rd of July 1841, died of shock due to blood loss on the 19th of April 1989. Remarks… none. Completed.”

“A Grim Reaper…” Ciel blurted out. Said Grim Reaper glanced at them, leaning against his scythe.
“That getup…” He muttered after a once over. “Don’t tell me you’re the rumoured Sebby?”

“I have quite an aversion to that diminutive.” Sebastian answered formally, making sure he was in the way of any potential threat to the Young Master. Even though people had ran away, knocking over furniture and pouring out of the smoke room “I am indeed the butler of the Phantomhive Family, Sebastian Michaelis. And you are?”

“Grim Reaper Dispatch Association, Collection Division: Ronald Knox. Thank you for taking care of my senior.” He introduced himself with a little flourish. And from the little moniker used, it was not hard to guess who was that particular “superior”.

“You just said you can’t kill them without smashing their heads.” Which implied more knowledge than what they possessed at the moment. It would be best if some investigation was made at that point. “Do the Grim Reapers know anything of this revival of the dead?”

“Nope.” That particular Grim Reaper answered cheekily, looking away. “No details yet. Just the reports of moving corpses whose souls had been collected.” He proceeded into a disgruntled look, bemoaning his job. “So the Administration said it was our miss. I came here to investigate…” He sighed, grimacing, looking down at the bloodied broken thing. “However… this thing here is a genuine soulless corpse. Cos I definitely go Margaret’s soul two weeks ago.” He waved the Death Note about, clearly frustrated.

“So the dead don’t get revived.” It came as no surprise even after seeing that creature shambling about and murdering four people. “It was just a corpse moving…” The Young Master pursued the investigation, turning towards the Grim Reaper.

“Is it possible for a soulless body to move around?” Sebastian asked, thinking back. When it came to souls demons knew what to make of most of them, seeing they were food and nourishment. So, by the very definition, soulless would be the very thing they would not be interested in.

“It’s totally impossible unless they have a Soul-Stealer.” Sebastian flinched. Ah... there was that. “And even then people are alive, their souls in the hand of the demon, used as a leash.” Not to mention Mouser was still too young to take and finely manipulate souls to such an extent. And he was fairly sure his covenant would not have the time or disposition to play with the likes of the Aurora Society. Or her playtime would end up in a greater amount of bodies. “But these are soulless corpses up and about.” Knox groaned and stretched, still frowning. “Grim Reaper Dispatch Association has to look into this.”

“So the only way to kill them for sure that you know of is «smash their heads»” Sebastian summarized, thinking.

“It’s not killing. Just stopping their movement.” Knox shrugged, standing a bit straighter, watching.

“Looks like our only option is forcing Ryan to speak. Let’s go.” The Young Master ordered, turning away, walking fast towards the direction where the doctor had fled to.

As soon as their backs were turned the death scythe’s blade whirred to life, the movement to attack clear in Sebastian’s perceptions. He turned, stopping it by the blunt sides, the force of the attack dragging him a bit back as the Young Master ducked, startled by the sound, turning as well. One thing as certain. He had the aim-for-the-head idea locked in his mind and at the moment they were locked as Sebastian was slightly preoccupied by the spinning blade currently trying to make contact with his face. The Grim Reaper struggled in his failed surprise attack attempt turned into a parry.
“If the administration gets wind of a demon being on board, you betcha they’ll be sayin’ aren’t you just hiding the fact that you let him snatch all the souls away?” He began talking, adjusting his weight. “Dontcha think that those kind of false accusations will get me in trouble?” There was a little chuckle in there. “And I’ll pass on overtime.” Dismay showed up again. So won’t you just vanish?” Knox finished his phrase, trying to look threatening. Sebastian merely stared back, blankly, annoyed at the delay. He was not the only one.

The Young Master glanced at the doorway through which the doctor had disappeared and tskd. There was no threat at the moment other than the deadlocked Grim Reaper tangling with his demon. Waiting the result could take too long...

“I’ll go on ahead.” The Young Master announced testily, taking off, in pursuit of the man that had demonstrated the odd skill. “After you’re done playing hurry up and follow me.”

“As you wish.” Sebastian acknowledged the request without any particular intonation.

“Man he’s nasty…” Knox followed the Young Master’s disappearance with a very confused and rather comically disturbed expression. “Kids these days…” he muttered, derisively, not noticing the slight shift in Sebastian’s stance. And the demon did not bother to inform him until he was ready to strike.

“Should you really be looking the other way?” Sebastian said calmly before tossing the death scythe up, letting its weight drag the unsuspecting Grim Reaper backwards, to a point beyond swift recovery, aiming a kick with a bit of vicious retribution to the Reaper’s head, almost hitting as Knox managed to escape by just letting go of any inkling of control and using the Death Scythe weight to pull him completely back and as support for a backflip evasion when it hit the floor. The whirring blades and wheels that framed the box that held them facilitated the escape, letting him cart away through spinning and twirling, getting out of range. Kicking range at least.

Sebastian threw the knives, quickly, a barrage of blades, not waiting or willing to give his adversary any breather. Knox stopped his carting, kicking the ground, stumbling slightly before finding a steady stance, swinging the Death Scythe in an arch, catching the blades before they hit, the blades of his weapon crushing the metal almost effortless.

Knox showed off, tilting the scythe, letting the shredded pieces of the knives fall with a clatter and a cheeky, smug grin, slamming it down, gripping the handle with both hands and revving the blades into a frenzy.

“As expected from a Grim Reaper.” Sebastian examined the adversary, regaining poise. “Impeccably sharp.” Admiring a weapon was something of an habit. As was plotting to take it for his own advantage. That one looked a bit unwieldy and overly complicated to use.

“That it is.” Knox stated smugly, with clear pride, leaning forward, ready to attack, charging, riding the Death Scythe. Sebastian shifted, ready to block and riposte. His high kick was dodged by the somersaulting Grim Reaper easily enough, through what seemed to be a thoroughly, the Death Scythe moving ahead, caught by one hand, moving away again. “Ya know for a Grim Reaper to be all about the death Scythe is kind old fashioned.” Knox grinned, adjusting his glasses with a bloodied butterfly knife.

“Kids these days really are nasty, aren’t they…” Sebastian smirked, cleaning the cut that had been traced on his cheek with his thumb, smearing blood over the white fabric. It was indeed unconventional for them to use anything but the Scythe. True to that though Knox charged again. The demon charged as well. If he met the strike head on there would be no time for the other to change his approach and the chances of landing a blow would increase.
Knox moved, hopping off of the charging Scythe, opting for a swing. Sebastian lowered his upper body, knives drawn for an attack. Heels clicked against the flooring, purposefully, and suddenly Mouser was there, between them, smirking. Sebastian stopped his movement and straightened, looking down, appraising her presence carefully. The Grim Reaper completely faltered on his attack, stumbling back, dragged by the impetus of the swing and the weight of the weapon, looking absolutely dumbfounded when he was forced to slam the Death Scythe down to keep his balance.

“Move woman!” He shouted, revving the weapon again, not picking up on a simple fact...

Mouser smirk widened slowly, brown eyes gleaming with mischief, fangs showing, her left hand moving slightly over the fabric of the dress. She pulled the skirt up suddenly, moving fast, her black boot making contact with the Reaper’s chest, the kick sending him against the wall, cracking the wooden panels, a mirror and crooking the adjacent light fixtures. The thief balanced for a moment on one leg, the skirt still up, showing the black-and-red horizontal stripe stocking, the small decorative bow, where the garter belt latched on the fabric, fluttering in the aftermath of the movement. There was a fair amount of skin showing between the stocking edge and the bunched fabric before lowering her leg and letting go, the fabric chiming softly around her hips.

The completely confused expression on the Grim Reaper was actually rather amusing as it fell down from the somewhat deep crater his body had created on impact. Knox chuckled a bit, with bravado and cockiness.

“Evee, I assume.” He wheezed out, grabbing the Death’s Scythe handle again standing, bowed over it. “You’re as good as the rumours said.” Knox chuckled, turning to Sebastian, the free-of-repercussions target clear, ready to continue the brawl.

“Thanks.” Sebastian said dryly, not caring about it any longer.

Mouser was looking away with a pained expression veiling her features, breaking abruptly the slightly smug look she had been wearing moments ago, her eyes were fully red and the pupils shifted. Faint hints of pearly grey were showing over her lips, around her eyes, tracing her nose and cheeks. Something was causing her distress and it was not the Reaper.

“Ups… look at the time.” The Grim Reaper seemingly lost his fighting willingness, looking down at the watch strapped to his wrist. “I was not supposed to be playing around. No way am I going to write an apology for being late. One should know how to do their job right?” He mumbled as he rushed to the smoke room’s exist. “So anyway... see ya Sebby.” He says that cheekily, vanishing into the corridor.

“What?” Sebastian whispered flatly, shaking his head.

“I am assuming that thing without its head was the problem.” Mouser whispered, starting to rub her temples, shedding the calm façade when the enemy was out of sight. It did not fall completely but the uneasiness became a bit more visible. Sebastian moved closer and slid his hands under hers, taking over the soothing motion, warmth seeping through the fabric. Her fingers gripped his wrists with a little whimper, pain being the first sensation to go through before the motion actually started to feel calming. Her eyes darted up, finding his. “I can’t count them all... I can’t, I need...” She gritted her teeth, fangs piercing the lower lip slightly, pain bringing focus and control. Sebastian stood close, stopping the motions of his hands over her skin, his arms moving around her, one hand resting over her hip, the other cradling the back of her head, a familiar gesture, a wordless reminder, the tender warmth of closeness, darkness created by the simple fact that he towered over her and in an embrace could shelter the thief. Same issue, same method. As before, at first, everything seemed to be a painful and constant assault on the senses... habituation had made her forget that somewhat... Mouser took a deeper breath, closing her eyes. Control... It was simple
overstimulation due to the numbers and noisy nature of those bizarre simulacrums of souls. “The boyo chased whoever he was after into the storage areas. Snake is there, so is the girly. And there are more of those and I can’t count them... they keep shrieking.”
Chapter 74

*He sure runs fast.* Ciel though as his footsteps echoed on the stairs that lead to the storage areas. Despite having lost the man when he had left the smoke room a brief run-in with Mouser had given him the right direction. She had also said that they had been unable to search that area where he seemed to be heading because of social obligations and heavy security. And had added that if he needed help Snake was down there as well.

Ciel moved as stealthily and quickly as he could, always keeping a wall to his side or back, holding the gun, ready to use it if needed. And he was already winded. Just how many stairs did that ship have just to reach its bottom...

The shadow of a movement followed by the rustling sound of fabric caught his attention, the approach of a semi shadowed hand making him jump, startled, pointing the gun towards whoever was trying to grab him, the sudden shriek of said person making him jump again.

“Lizzy!” Ciel hissed, crushing his surprise as Lizzy’s expression changed from startle to a little pout, balancing a fine plate with a cake decorated with chocolate and strawberries. He relaxed a fraction, looking around, concerned about the noise.

“Are you planning to shoot your fiancée!?” She complained, adjusting her skirts with a huff.

“Why are you here anyway?” Ciel hissed a bit nervously.

“Even though I told you to wait you just disappeared!” Lizzy regained her expression after a sigh, smiling. “I was looking for you.” She stated proudly, tilting her head, offering the plate. “This is your cake…” Ciel clapped his hand over her mouth, silencing her with it and a hushed hiss accompanying the gesture for emphasis.

“Shhh. I am sorry but I can’t be fussed over right now. It’s dangerous here so go back to Aunt Frances.” He asked, still holding the gun, staring into his fiancée’s eyes, urging her to understand that she should not be there. “Understood?” He said, running off, trying to catch up and recover that lost time.

“Ciel!” Lizzy called, worried. With a little sigh that made her cheerful mask disappear she slumped down, sitting on the step, looking down at the plate she was holding with both gloved hands. She nibbled her lower lip, looking at the shadowed hall, curls bouncing. Then she made her decision, springing to her feet. “Wait! Don’t leave me here by myself…”She called, giving chase.

The freight storage was dark and the lantern he had picked up at the entrance did the bare minimum, showing the shapes of crates and bulkier luggage pinned in place by ropes and nets. Ciel’s steps grew louder against the metal stair and floor as he ventured deeper into the place. A sudden shuffling startled him, both gun and light pointed towards the general area of the movement and sound, followed by a slightly high pitched, nervous question.

“Who is it!?”

“Too bright!” Snake hissed along with his snakes, trying to cover his eyes. “Really bright! Says Wordsworth.” Ciel assumed that Wordsworth was the Snake that was hiding his head on his hair currently as the others slithered about around an empty plate. Snake was holding another plate that
“Snake?” Ciel relaxed slightly. He hadn’t expected to need or find him right away but what he was doing was different than what he expected. “What are you doing here?” He asked, lowering the light slightly.

“The food was really good.” Snake said softly, still crouching, his friends playing around. “So I thought I’d share it with everyone. Says Dan.” He continued, voicing the diminutive snake that perched on his ear.

“The cake was even better than the food.” Lizzy huffed.

“I see…” Ciel answered, distracted. “huh?” Then he noticed. “Lizzy?”

“Come on. Don’t leave me!” The young lady complained, still holding the plate and cake.

“I told you to go back up!” Ciel chastised, nervously, looking around, trying to find dangers.

“But I wanted you to eat the cake.” Lizzy stated with big, innocent eyes. “It’s the one with strawberries that you like so much. I even got the bigger piece for you. See!” She extended the plate, to illustrate her point, her expression turning into confusion when nothing was in the plate. “Huh?” She whispered, blinking fast for a moment.

A male reanimated corpse stood behind her, the missed attack splattering his face with the remains of the cake, advancing. Snake gasped in confusion, Ciel shouted making a short dash, grabbing Lizzy as she started to turn, noticing the strange behaviour and movement. He pulled her down, away from the thing as it lunged to attack, the light clattering on the floor, skidding away, the light from bellow hitting the thing head on, showing the corpse as it moved towards them, groaning, gait uneven and dragged.

“This… isn’t the one from just now.” Ciel whispered, gripping Lizzy tightly. “There are more?! That’s the mark of the Aurora Society… Ryan brought another revived corpse?” His muttering to himself was cut short as he was reminded of the situation, standing, dragging his fiancée with him. “Snake! I’ll do something about him.” He still had the gun... “You take care of Lizzy. Snake! Are you listening…” He stopped when snake and his friends pointed ahead, to the depth of the shadowy storage a bit beyond the fallen coffin and the shambling corpse.

“That bird mark…there’s a lot more over there. Says Oscar.” Snake voiced Oscar cautiously.

Rows and rows of coffins were hung there, trembling, wood and metal groaning along with the dried out sounds of the things within. Binds snapped, dissected hands gripped and broke through wood. Corpses flopped from their suspended coffins, struggling to stand once more. Some crawled. Some fell within their confines and walked out of the splintered wood, pierced by it. In the dim lighting all they could see where human shaped things in various states of preservation or decomposition wearing their funeral clothes, either tattered or pristine, moving towards them, mouths open, hands outstretched into rigid, claw-like forms.

“Lizzy run!” Ciel shouted, pulling her along as they tried to make their way to the stairs.

“They’re in front of the exit too!” Lizzy shouted, frightened, stopping when she saw the mass of bodies blocking the path. Ciel gritted his teeth, aiming, shooting the first that got too close as they were forced to back away into one of those piles of pinned luggage. Too many to deal... with just one gun.

“Snake!” Ciel shouted, keeping himself in front of Lizzy, still aiming. “Take Lizzy to the top of the
luggage!” Snake obeyed quickly as he tasked himself with their protection. Training paid off as he was able to aim and down each of the approaching corpses. But... “Shit. There’s too many!” He growled, glancing around.

“Ciel! Behind you!” Lizzy shouted suddenly as one of the corpses came from the other side of the crates, diving towards him, hands outstretched, nose-less and stitched. Defensively his arms shot up, instinct closing his eyes. When nothing struck him Ciel peeked. Groans echoed as the corpses were forced to be still by a tangle of snakes.

“Smile!” Snake shouted, breaking his daze, reaching for him. “Come quickly while we’re restraining him! Says Oscar.” The snake on his shoulder hissed, relaying the words.

It was easy to pull him to the top of the crates. The snakes slithered away from the corpses, sliding up the crates, gathering. Now that they were free they kept moving, pressing themselves against the wood and rope, heads upturned.

“It seems they can’t climb.” Ciel said with a small sigh of relief, looking over the edge before going back, towards the centre of the crates.

“What are they?” Snake whispered. One of his friends had climbed onto his shoulder, curling around his neck, its head bobbing, a tongue wagging out and retreating. “Aside from our poison not affecting them they have a horrible smell... says Webster.”

“I don’t know the details but for some reason these corpses began moving about.” Ciel said, arms crossed, glancing at his gun. It was empty and useless until he reloaded it.

“Corpses?” Lizzy paled, shivering, spooked.

“They don’t seem to have any intelligence anyway. Nor any sense of sight or pain.” Snake continued, calmly.

“How do you know?” Ciel asked, glancing sideways at him.

“Says Oscar.” Snake completed with a nod.

“They didn’t react to the snakes at all.” When bound the struggle had been minimal. They had just tried to continue towards him, Lizzy and Snake without a care or pause. Ciel shook his head sharply. “If they could see or feel pain they would try to shake off the snakes first.” He glanced at the shadowed stairway that was now completely open. “Also... if they had intelligence they would leave us and head upstairs. They would find more food that way.” He considered out loud, musing.

“Food you say?” Lizzy paled further, covering her mouth, frightened.

“The only thing left is their hearing.” Ciel considered with a cough, changing subject a bit. “If they rely on their ears we might be able to get away by distracting them with some kind of sound.”

“How about we try throwing this, says Emily.” The snake touched the empty plate Snake was still holding.

“I won’t ask why you are still carrying it but throw it.” Ciel said. Snake did as told, the crash clear and far enough. The corpses kept groaning and pressing themselves against the crates, still facing up. “No use.” Ciel shook his head and tried to think, to figure that problem out. How are they following us? There are some without noses as well and their own putrid scent would make it hard to get anything else. Suddenly the crates started to shake, the wood groaning and splintering. “What’s going on!?” Looking down made clear what was happening. “They’re clawing with teeth
and nail?” The pressure and insistence were breaking the wood, the contents spilling and the corpses moving, uncaring about what was in their way, mindlessly trying to reach them. “Snake!” Ciel turned to the only piece he had available. “Can’t you stop them with your snakes?”

“There are too many of them... says Oscar.” Snake shook his head along with Oscar, looking frightened.

Ciel gritted his teeth, thinking. Lizzy latched on to him, hugging fiercely. Why is your playtime taking so long Sebastian... he thought, worried, his arms going around his fiancée when she whispered his name in fright.

“It’s ok...” Reassuring was not exactly something he was able to be but he did attempt it, pulling her closer. “I will protect you at least...” He said, his voice steely, closing his eyes for a moment, resting his cheek against the top of her head. “No matter what happens.”

“How admirable, Young Master.” Sebastian remarked, tossing a few long blades against the corpse wall. Mouser pulled a couple more of those out of her dress, handing them to him. “That is how an English gentleman is supposed to be.” The thief grumbled as he spoke within butler act, fishing out the last stiletto, tossing it herself to one of the stragglers from the main group.

“Sebastian.” Ciel shouted, pressing Lizzy against him, giving the order. “Don’t stand around. Just clear them out.”

“As you wish.” Sebastian acknowledged the command, charging, barehanded. “It’s not very stylish but if just destroying their heads is enough then I guess this...” He commented, reaching the agglomerate of putrid threats, reaching out. “is the fastest way.” The demon completed the thought, gripping a skull and crushing it easily, blood and brain matter splattering about. Mouser sat down on the stairwell, observing, elbows on her knees, hands supporting her head, looking ahead with a bit of a blank look. Those that had taken refuge on top of the crates observed shocked and wide-eyed. Except for Lizzy who was being shielded by Ciel.

Sebastian dove into combat easily, breaking through the mass, splattering crimson... Ciel’s eye widened, focusing on the scene, the imagery taking him back, to the bloodied spectacle of their first meeting, crushed bodies, severed heads, mangled carcasses hitting the ground, their blood pooling under them, spreading around in slowly moving threads of sticky dark red in the flickering light. His mind wandered as he witnessed it, going back. This is a dancing demon. This is... the same scene as that day. Ciel grimaced, shaking his head. No. It's not the same. I'm... outside the cage. Twisted images ran through his mind, images other than the slaughter occurring in front of him. My butler isn’t killing the ones who soiled me... pain, fear, a knife and blood. Ciel isn't there anymore... I am the Earl of Phantomhive. I am me and I am...

“Ciel!” Lizzy called for him when a shudder ran through his body, looking at him with big eyes, questioning the sudden state of nervousness.

“Lizzy...” Ciel murmured, returning to the present when a lighter echoed in the sudden silence. He looked around. Mouser was standing up, having placed a cigarette on her lips, frowning as she approached. A soft squelching sound echoed as well as Sebastian surveyed his work, smiling and looking up smugly.

“I am done Young Master.” He announced. Ciel’s breath hitched when he looked down and saw the blood staining not only the surroundings but Sebastian as well. “What is wrong?” Sebastian asked, his tone positively dripping with irony as he extended his arms, the gloves dyed red. “Please, come over.” He requested, almost mockingly.
Mouser huffed, searching through the crates as the Earl of Phantomhive steeled himself and started to descend from the perch, cautiously.

“Don’t touch me with those hands.” He stated haughtily. “They are filthy.”

“Oh.” Sebastian looked down, as if just noticing it. “I am very sorry. I’ll change them immediately.” He did so quickly, picking Ciel and placing him down on the bloody puddle that was the floor.

“Couldn’t you have done it a bit more elegantly?” The complaint was immediate after a few hops of disgust. Mouser smiled slightly, exhaling smoke, starting to unbutton her skirt. “Just like a beast.” The Young Master continued snidely as Sebastian picked up and placed down Lady Elizabeth. Snake hopped down on his own.

“I am sorry. It was an emergency.” The demon answered in amusement, glancing back as they walked a bit away from the slaughter area.

Mouser tossed a big sturdy backpack at Snake, glancing at the snakes that were gathering around him again, dropping her skirt, letting it fall to the ground with a heavy clatter. That left her wearing the black corset, the lacy snug bloomers, the suspenders decorated with little bows where they joined the belt and clasped the socks both in the front and back. Lizzie looked immediately shocked at the display. It took her head off the carnage for a moment.

“Also the bodies seem to be much softer than a regular human being.” Sebastian continued, glancing at Mouser’s preparations a bit puzzled. “Quite weak, in fact.” He appraised. Although in those numbers they were rather annoying to deal with.

“But why are there so many on the ship?” The thief picked up the fabric and scavenged her guns, placing them in Ciel’s hands along with ammunition, startling him mid-question before moving on, pulling flechettes out of the fabric and tucking them along the edges of her clothes, her eyes distracted and distant, red.

“I think…” Sebastian began, glancing a bit to the right, tossing his knives, stopping the man that was trying to sneak away. “it would be good to ask him.”

“Ryan Stoker.” Ciel recognized the man, that was looking around nervously, stopped on his tracks by the blades that had sunk into the crate in front of him. He shouted in fear and glued himself to the solid wood.

“It’s not like that!” The doctor shouted, attempting to explain. “That was an incomplete salvation… I did not plan to revive them in that unhealthy state…” Sebastian approached with a smile, restraining him. “Please listen to me! I am in a hurry and…” The man continued to plea.

Mouser’s eyes regained focus and she spat out the cigarette, stepping on it.

“Sebastian…” The thief called.

“No need to be hasty.” Sebastian kept smiling in a way something that was anything but reassuring and the doctor was squirming, also noticing the mood. “There is plenty of time until we reach New York so we will listen to your tale leisurely.”

“Sebastian.” Mouser called again, approaching.

“Wait… wait…” the doctor shouted, babbling.
“What is it? I already cleared them up so...” Sebastian’s eyes widened suddenly when Mouser pinched his bottom sharply, annoyed. The demon turned his head looking at her, the expression changing to something both dark and questioning. And Ciel pretended that he did not just see his butler having some sort of very perverted though crossing his mind and mirrored on his expression.

“There are more.” The thief stated. The doctor started to nod and squirm, trying to convey his story.

“This ship has the latest gigantic boiler with a reciprocating steam engine installed at the centre. This place is divided in two sections, the boiler room separating them.” The doctor said, words pouring frantically.

“What of it?” The boyo asked calmly, not understanding.

“In other words this ship is divided in a front and stern. There are two freight storages. And in the front storage we stored ten times as many samples as there were here.” He finished speaking with a pale look, trembling, scared.

“Ten times as many?!” The boyo shouted.

Mouser took a deep breath, looking up, closing her eyes.

“There are 2192 left to be exact.” She announced. Counting and listening to that was still grinding her head but she had adjusted enough to make it bearable. “And the number of humans is decreasing rapidly in second class. A few have reached first class already.” And that was why she had dropped the skirt.

“Well... this is taking a rather unpleasant turn Young Master.” Sebastian put it simply. It was hard to tell if he was mocking or in his view it was really just an annoyance.

Mouser scoffed and gripped the doctor’s face, pulling him down, her eyes changing sharply to red. Might as well memorize that one if he was so key to that whole thing as Sebastian and the boyo believed. He looked at her, terrified, pale and sweaty.

“Do you think unpleasant covers it?” The boyo shouted, tense and annoyed. Now he understood why Mouser had placed and armful of derringers and bullets on his hands. “Even one of those is a hassle. Just imagine that number...”

“Trust me it’s not hard where I’m standing.” Mouser let go of the man’s face and groaned. “Noisy cadavers.”

“This ship is infested with a horde of them.” The boyo groaned. “Sebastian, Mouser. Go ahead and take my aunt and the others to a safe place.”

“What are you going to do?” Sebastian asked.

Snake was looking serious, ready, having placed his snakes in the backpack, some of them staying wrapped around his shoulders. Lizzy looked nervous, hands clasped and moving grinding.

“We’d just be a burden.” The boyo finally admitted his lack of use, loading the gun. “I have the pistols so we’ll be all right for some time.”

“The little ones are two shots each and they are very weak in long range.” Mouser instructed. The boyo nodded and pointed the gun at the doctor as Sebastian allowed him to go, one of the thick boa snakes taking the place of restraining bolt. Webster, Mouser believed.
“Come back as soon as you are sure they are safe.” The boyo instructed further.

“Certainly.” Sebastian said as he left. Mouer sighed and followed as well, running faster without the skirt weighing and tangling on her legs, stockings and daggers.

“Well then.” Ciel sighed and turned harsh, his mind on the job. “How about telling me everything? And be brief because I am not very patient.” There was no time to concern himself with Lizzy seeing him as the Watchdog or with how harsh all that was surely being for her. If he wanted to keep her safe, get out of there and perform his duty he would do whatever he needed. “First of all how should we deal with them? There is no way you decided to transport something so dangerous without any kind of insurance. Isn’t there another way to stop them aside from smashing their heads?”

“Well... there is one thing...” As before the man was talkative when exposed to a threat of harm. “There is a device that allows us to render the patients subjected to complete salvation inactive again by exposing them to supersonic waves.”

It did not matter what. It was enough that such a thing existed.

“And where is it?” Ciel asked calmly.

“In my room in first class.”

“Take me there.” The Earl continued his question, slightly displeased at the answer. It meant they had to go up and towards the other end of the ship. And they were risking being detected again by any straggler corpse. But maybe it would be better than staying down there in the storage area with the corpses of the corpses oozing blood and a pungent stench.

“All right... there is a freight elevator in the boiler room. We can use it to go upstairs.” Stoker said. Most likely he had supervised or had people within the crew. An operation that size would fall without people to do the backbreaking work.

“I have another question.” Ciel spoke up as they walked through the darkened storage area. Snake was carrying the lantern that still worked despite the cracked glass surface. “How do the corpses move?”

“We implant a special device in their heads that generates small electric currents. This way we can send signals to the various parts of their body and they recover the healthy physique of when they were alive. Basically it means...” The doctor explained, looking like he wanted to continue. Ciel cut that short with a jab

“That’s enough.” He said, shaking his head. “Do you really think you can resuscitate people?” The doctor glanced back, ready to run his mouth on the subject. “I’ll change my question.” Ciel said making a sharp gesture to break the man’s chatter. “What is the purpose of carrying all these guinea pigs to America?” He continued the inquiry.

“I can’t tell you...” Ryan Stoker squared his shoulder, looking serious.

“I see.” Ciel sighed and placed the gun against the man’s ear, cocking it nonchalantly. “You seem to want me to pierce your ears.”

As expected Stoker broke down, playing up his value.

“What! Wait! If you shoot me you won’t be able to use the device!”
“You’re right.” Ciel admitted, not moving the gun away from its threatening position. “It’s annoying but I guess we’ll just have to smash all their heads.”

Seeing his only value being dismissed made him talkative once more.

“A company called Osiris bought the whole project and its technology.” He blurted out, ducking in an attempt to avoid the gun. “Rumour has it they work mostly with drugs...” He continued, his voice dying when he found himself with nothing else to add to the tale.

It’s probably a dummy company created just to make the deal. Ciel thought, trying to make sense of the pieces he held. But drugs... Especially considering the recent events. It should be investigated as soon as land was reached. Also if it does no harm to the Queen it can be left alone. As always he did not look for any extra work. What he did was either to himself or the queen.

“It’s here.” Stoker said when, after the trek in semi darkness they reached a metal door.

Ciel sighed and shook his head. They should prepare to meet with other people and they should not look too suspicious. So... he turned to Lizzy and Snake, appraising them.

“Snake.” He called. The most glaring thing about that group at the moment was... “Take that snake off Ryan. It will go smoother if we pretend to be friendly.”

“All right. Come Webster.” Snake whispered, reaching for the snake, letting it joining the other four wrapped around his shoulders.

The door opened into the turbine engine room. It was loud and about as dark as the place they were leaving. Workers moved around, doing their tasks and chores. The place was hot and steam escaped from time to time, heating the air further. Metal, gears, engines, pipes, the bones of the ship without any of decoration and pomp.

“It’s so loud...” Lizzy complained, covering her ears. Ciel had to admit they had done a good job to conceal that part from the guests.

“Hey, you lot! Passengers should not come here!” One of the workers noticed them right away, approaching with the warning. Before anyone else spoke up the doctor took the lead, reciting.

“The complete flames in our chest shall not be extinguished by anyone. We are... the phoenix.” Both he and the worker of the Campania struck the ridiculously overworked pose, shaking hands afterwards. “Would you let me use the elevator my friend?” He then asked calmly, as if the pose had not happened.

“Right.” The man nodded. Ciel believed for a little moment that that would be all. “But who are they?”

The Earl froze, worried. If the doctor decided to spill the truth...

“Comrades.” Stoker answered, sweat beading his forehead, nervous.

“The phoenix.” Ciel’s voice was accompanied by Snake and Lizzy as they struck the pose as well, left without any other option. His wobbly and half-hearted, Lizzy’s blocked by the layers of her skirts and Snake accompanied by his snakes.

That seemed to satisfy the man’s doubts as he smiled and showed them the way, leaving the Earl flushed and embarrassed, in misery, red faced and fussed about by a snake slapping his cheek with its tongue and Lizzy patting his arm while trying to make sure he was all right. Throughout it all
Snake just looked a bit shy and baffled by the course of events.
Chapter 75

Like the dolls before them those went quiet and still with a simple blade through the head. Although in all honesty it was hard to find things that did not do so when a hard piece of metal went through bone and flesh in a part as delicate as the brain. Although she had seen some people survive shots to the face. It was a bit harder to aim due to height constraints but… Mouser spun, dodging the corpse, dragging it through the dagger still shoved into its cranium, kicking it, freeing her right blade, towards one of the approaching blindfolded rotting gentlemen.

The moving ones.

Not the half eaten bodies that littered the sparkling and luxurious corridor.

Without any sense beyond the need to attack it was easy to make them fall for the simplest tricks. A flechette pulled from the upper edge of her corset went through the head of the struggling corpse under the other corpse, making it go still as the thief turned, gripping the dagger a little harder, decapitating the one that had broken into a shambling trot, looking around as the head flew off the neck and bounced against the wall. Mouser stepped back and pulled out another couple of flechettes, throwing them hard. The metal went cleanly through the heads of her targets, imbedding itself into the walls. With a little click of her tongue and a deft step she moved within the last corpse’s reach and angled the dagger up, driving it through the lower jaw, hilt deep, hopping a bit to make sure it got perfectly into the head.

That was all for that corridor. Six. The corpses had scattered into small-ish hunting groups as soon as they came out of the storage area. It was not deterring them from being efficient against the untrained and the unarmed. Which explained why the Marquis and his son had retreated from the lounge and made a dash to their rooms. They needed weapons.

Groaning she rubbed her forehead with the knuckles, not putting the daggers away, waiting as the heavy steps of her targets ran towards her, stopping abruptly when they noticed there were no corpses.

“Evening.” Mouser said, opening her eyes, lowering her arm, smiling. Both the Marquis and his son looked shocked as they stepped out of their room, further down the corridor, ready to fight and finding nothing. “The Marchioness is in the Elevator Hall, so if you would follow me...” Edward had stopped on his tracks, looking flustered, red to the root of his hair. His father was not hesitating, hurrying to Mouser’s side, carrying his knight’s weapon, a broad-bladed long sword. His son’s was a much thinner blade, almost rapier-like.

“What is the reason for that shameless display?!” The young man exploded, pointing and shivering, reddening further. “Your legs...” They were showing. Her underwear was showing.

“Shameless?” Mouser pouted then chuckled. Easily flustered, sheltered, prudish and unaccustomed to women. Someone should really take him to a bordello to unwind that coil... “You are mixing survival with morals, young lord. You really shouldn’t.” She turned to the Marquis and bowed her head. “This way then. There are four in the corridor connecting this path to the Marchioness’s location. These things can only be killed by destroying the head so keep that in mind when attacking.”
The Marchioness balanced her stance with the unfamiliar blade taken from the decorations, standing protectively in front of three of her friends, reduced to a weepy, screaming, panicked mess. She counted eight of those slow moving... people. Well... she was not entirely sure they could still be called people but... the Marchioness grimaced and attacked, a simple forward jab piercing the chest cleanly through.

“What!” She gasped, surprised by the continuation of movement, stepping back, her heavy skirts getting slightly in the way, prying the blade free, her face traced by confusion and slight worry.

“Marchioness!” The call for her, using the official title of nobility she detained was made as the head of the creature was smashed to pieces and the body fell forward. “Are you injured?” Her nephew’s butler asked, taking a place next to her flank, helping holding off the creatures as her friends shrieked.

“Butler! What are they?” the Marchioness demanded, looking around.

“I really don’t know but the only way to defeat them is by smashing the head.” The butler supplied. With that piece of information the threat was easily dealt with. Every attack just had to be perfectly aimed and timed at that precise spot. As the creatures seemed to possess no self-preservation instinct it was also easy to do as they barely defended, focused only in advancing.

“Umh.” She stepped back as the last creature fell, wiping the blade clean briskly. “Apparently your information is good.” She announced calmly. “So, for the time being, I will excuse your slovenly hairstyle and indecent face.”

“My face...” Sebastian stared blankly, still puzzled by the simple insistence on that issue and particular wording but he readopted the servant’s façade easily enough. “Thank you.” Just take the phrase as a compliment.

“Frances, Dear, are you all right?” The Marquis and his son barged into the elevator hall. They were received a bit more warmly by the woman. Mouser followed them, blades still out, looking around, up and down.

“Butler! What happened to Lizzy?” As recognition sunk that was Edward’s first concern.

“She is with the Young Master. They are both safe.” Sebastian assured him with calm professionalism.

“If they are together we have nothing to worry about.” The marchioness smiled a bit, glancing at her husband.

“Indeed.” The marquis agreed with a nod, looking warmly at her as well.

“That boy will protect his fiancée at all costs.” The marchioness finished the line of though before glancing at Mouser. Her eyes narrowed. “That is a rather scandalous look.”

“Practicality, my lady.” Mouser answered with a small bow. There was a little tilt of amusement on the Marchioness’s lips before she apparently overlooked the issue.

“At all costs, as you say.” Sebastian repeated the Marchioness’s assessment of the Young Master’s capabilities and disposition with an amused smile before stating the purpose given by his instructions. “I was ordered by the two of them to escort you to a safe...”

“Impossible.” Edward stated with the authority and resolve of someone older seeping into his voice.
“What?” Sebastian stopped on his tracks, caught off guard. Few would refuse a chance to leave safely, given the circumstances.

“The members of the Midford household have protected England for generations. As knights we would never abandon people in danger.” The Marquis stated, sword raised in a traditional salute and oath, rather solemn.

“We are English knights.” The first born continued, sheathing his sword. “We protect the weak.”

“Right Mother?”

“Right Frances, dear?”

Having been drenching nobility they broke into little boys looking for mother’s approval as soon as they turned to the main source of strength of their household.

“Yes.” The Marchioness stated, ignoring the pleading puppy looks. “Go back to them right away.” She instructed Sebastian.

Mouser yawned and looked to her left, showing one hand with the five fingers outstretched.

“But...” Sebastian had his orders. But as a butler he was also rather constrained.

“Don’t you trust our skills as swordsmen?” The Marchioness challenged in amusement as she turned away, drawing the blade and standing ready to face the five shambling corpses coming from the passenger cabins area.

“As you wish. Please be safe.” Sebastian relented.

“Be sure to tell Ciel... That if anything happens to my sister I won’t forgive him.” Edward took a little break from readying to face the enemies to make a petty threat.

“Certainly.” Sebastian took it in stride and turned to Mouser. “How many?”

“2165. People really can’t fight them too well.” The thief sighed and glanced at her blades. Barely half an hour had passed and the people inside the ship had been swiftly reduced. “They are moving down below us. Most likely going to an elevator. The path there is mostly clear.” She clicked her tongue. “Ideally what we need to do is simple.”

Sebastian chuckled.

“Kill 2165 moving corpses in the least amount of time?” He jested lightly. Clean up duties.

“But the Grim Reaper...” Mouser whispered, glancing down. Second class, dining hall, moving towards the deck at a fast pace. Sebastian nodded in agreement. Even with the number of lives lost and the moving corpses the presence of the Reaper on board seemed sketchy.

The sudden impact and groan of metal echoed throughout the ship, the structure quaking. The almost imperceptible motion the ship was abruptly felt, slowing it down to a laboured crawl. Outside something was shattering with a grinding sound.

“What! What was this?” Edward babbled, turning away.

“What was that shock just now?” The Marchioness shouted, keeping her balance. The Midfords had dealt with the corpses easily and were now looking around.
“Impossible...” Sebastian whispered, moving toward the balcony.

Mouser started to follow, stopping suddenly and glancing towards the ship’s bow, eyes narrowing.

As soon as they stepped outside it was clear what had happened. The ship moved away at full speed from a great ice formation. The side was dented and there were shards of ice everywhere near the dent and broken rails.

“Did we crash into that?!” Edward’s eyes widened, in shock.

Sebastian tsk and moved out.

“Go to the communications room. Contact rescue ships.” He asked Mouser. The thief nodded as he entered the wheelhouse. There was a diagram of the flood-gates on the wall, next to the lever that would engage the procedure.

“To prevent flooding engage the water-tight doors... this one.” Sebastian mumbled to himself while going through the motions to secure the ship’s integrity. The lights flared up, signalling which gates were responding. Three bulbs remained dark, unresponsive. Whether that was due to damage to the gates themselves or the wiring that signalled the board it was anyone’s guess. “This should prevent flooding for now.” The situation had taken a sharp turn to a decidedly less than manageable situation. “All of the crew in this area seems to be gone.” He dodged and attacked one of the corpses remaining, a kick throwing it through the windows and into the sea. “And the night just grows worse...” he complained adjusting his tailcoat.

Mouser stopped and looked up, noticing the corpse flying towards the darkened sea, frowning for a moment.

The rescue current estimate was six hours. It seemed way too long a time for a rescue if not for a note she had found in the hands of one of the dead crewmembers detailing their current coordinates and warning them that the ship was way far off-course and heading for a dangerous area of the sea. The man was killed while heading towards the inner communications of the ship. And if that “off-course” did not seem suspicious nothing would be...

The thief stopped once again as she rounded the corner and looked towards the bow, sighing.

Of course.

It really had been Poppet’s soul there, dealing with eleven corpses. Although she was not sure what she was doing with Knox standing on the ship’s railing, facing the sea. It looked like something out of her books. Mouser moved a bit, disguising her presence as Knox looked that way, his attention caught by the flying cadaver.

“Hey! Don’t look the other way!” Grell chastised merrily, looking ahead, arms wide open. “Come on... why don’t you try feeling it?” Grell stated dramatically, taking a deep breath. “The salty breeze! It’s like my body is being caressed!”

“Um... senior Sutcliff...” A very uncomfortable look was playing on the younger Grim Reaper’s face.

Grell ignored him for the drama of the moment.
“A sky full of stars! A luxury cruise ship! This is the perfect stage for an actress to spread her wings.”

“Are you trying to torment you subordinate?” Knox whispered in a very small voice, glancing away meekly.

“That’s rude!” Grell snapped with a little huff, looking ahead once more. “And well... you know I’d rather do it with a more handsome guy than a brat like you.”

“By more handsome you mean...” Knox groaned, still going along.

“What?” Grell questioned glancing back.

“No, nothing.” Knox answered.

Poppet hopped down from the railing and sighted, adjusting her red glasses, waving dismissively.

“I just can’t get excited at all this with you as my partner. I give up, I give up.”

Ronald bristled at that but seemed to be more focused on the job, fishing out his death note, checking it.

“Anyway we really shouldn’t be getting out of our way like this.” He quickly leafed through a whole bunch of pages and looked up. “We still have 1034 souls to collect.” Mouser’s eyes narrowed as the number reached her. Not too bad. Especially if the ship was really sinking. “And while doing our regular work they’re telling us to investigate some moving corpses. Total slave drivers.” The Reaper complained.

“Humph. You shouldn’t cry over such little things. Soul recollection is a Grim Reaper’s most important job!” Poppet picked up her toy. Mouser smirked. Well her efforts had helped her after all. “You can just quickly finish up that investigation on your break time.”

“I don’t want to be told that by someone with so many suspension orders under his belt. With a straight face no less.” Knox complained, riding his scythe.

“Shush up you.” Grell played the offended part, shrugging off any insult that came with the comment. “Let’s get this over with already and go home. Having to do overtime while getting scolded by Will isn’t so bad but I really don’t need another suspension...”

“To be honest I’d rather be spared both...” Their voices faded as they entered the hall that led to the staircases.

Mouser nibbled her lip lightly, suppressing a shiver of cold as the wind nipped at her. Now... should she tell Sebastian right away about the second Reaper or try to keep their paths separated... with the boyo’s luck affecting them it seemed unlikely that they would not cross. Maybe she could convince Sebastian to walk around on the nude as a form of distraction ploy. The thief clicked her tongue and headed towards the wheelhouse.
Chapter 76

The groan of metal echoed through the lower reached of the ship, created as its metal scraped against some rough and tough surface. The creaking grew louder and louder as the metal resisted. Suddenly something snapped with a tremor that shook the ship harshly accompanied by a low, continuous rushing rumble. Those sounds that accompanied the impact, although faint, also reached the second boiler room that was at the moment being traversed by the small group leading Stoker upstairs. Some, including the boyo and various coal carts lost their balance, looking around, worried.

Some men turned and verified their equipment, checking engines and pipes. Others looked worriedly into the faintly lit darkness. Snake twitched nervously as he helped Smile to his feet. Oscar said he smelt salt. Webster wriggled nervously into the backpack with the others. Dan tightened his coil around his ear. Emily peeked over his shoulder, her tongue tasting the air, agreeing with Oscar.

The rumble and groan of metal grew and echoed.

“What was that crash just now...” Smile whispered.

As if answering to the words a sudden rush of water broke through the metallic walls, icy cold seawater rushing in at a great speed. Rumbling dragging with it all that had stood on its path, the debris clattering against walls, breaking machines, overthrowing crates, devouring people.

It swept over them just as easily, all the noise aggravated by the screams of the people panicking, some hurt, tossing them down before dragging them back as its force calmed. The tremors of the outer walls ceased. An alarm started to blare, gears groaning into place, creaking, not as smooth as they had once been, the insides of the ship shifting.

“This alarm means the water tight doors are closing!” the member of the Aurora Society that worked on the motors shouted, worried, standing, ordering his men around, trying to get as many as he could out of that situation. “Hurry or we’ll be locked!” He called as Ciel looked back, noticing Lizzy’s struggle.

A woman’s multitude of layered skirts were not light. He knew that because of that unfortunate event. Wet as they were the weight doubled or even tripled and it was clear that she could barely move, gripping the fabric with gloved hands and pulling the wet and stained mass of pink to try and advance. Her face was marked by effort and her hair was falling from its curls and headpiece.

“Lizzy!” he shouted, turning back, waddling through the water as the metal doors groaned, closing gradually.

“Ciel!” She answered right away, trying harder.

“It’s too late kid!” the man grabbed Ciel before he had time to move any further, trying to keep him from harms way.

“Lizzy!” Ciel shouted as the metal was low enough to obscure her from view, a sudden instinct taking over, the struggle to escape successful, the sudden bite of the water on his body as he dove, cutting the space between them with a stroke, coming up for air, determined, advancing towards his fiancée as the metal hit the floor, sealing them within that part of the ship.

“Ciel why?” Lizzy was surprised as he advanced, determined, gripping her hands and pulling her
“I promised I’d protect you at all costs.” Ciel stated emphatically. He tuned to the metal gate blocking their way, ignoring the water whose rising had been considerably slowed. A faint banging sound was coming from the other side “Snake!” Snake stopped and waited. The snakes within the partially wet backpack were wriggling to keep themselves warm. The ones on his shoulder were hissing a cacophony of worries, questions and instructions. “You guys go on ahead.” Smile ordered, his voice muffled.

“I can’t leave you behind! Says Emily.” Snake said for her. Black would be angry. Silk would be cheerless.

“Don’t worry!” Smile shouted back, his voice still full of confidence and authority. “We’ll escape via the duct.” Ciel informed his servant after a quick look around the area they were trapped in. Stairs, pipes and some crates on the upper level had been undisturbed by the rushing sea. It was as good a plan as any and both he and Lizzy were small enough to fit and move on. “Your friends can’t be soaked in cold water for too long right? Go!” He gave the last order before starting to move towards the metal stairs, dragging Lizzy.

“Smile!” Snake shouted, gripping Keats and tossing him up. He was a green tree snake, an agile climber and jumper. He would help Smile. “Keats will guide you through the duct.” Snake shouted one last time through the metal. “We’ll meet later. Says Emily.” He relayed her assurance both to Smile and Keats as Snake turned and resumed his task. He had to take the doctor to the upper levels and meet up with everybody...

“Yeah. I will definitely see you later!” Ciel answered, resuming the need to move fast, feeling the drag of the heavy skirts even through an action as simple as pulling Lizzy through her hand. “Hurry Lizzy.” He asked, stepping on the first step, gripping the railing with one hand and moving up, making sure he could get the grid that protected the duct free and that they would fit. It was tight...

“Take those clothes off!” he told Lizzy in a clipped tone. They had to move fast and that place was no longer safe for Lizzy.

“No!!” Lizzy stepped back, defensively, hands clutched to her chest.

“Don’t be stubborn.” Ciel hopped down from the perch he had found. Letting go of the metal grid, approaching, attempting logic. “You can’t wade through this” Ciel pointed towards the narrow tunnel that was their best chance of escaping the icy water and the threat of drowning. “with that skirt.” The fabric was growing darker and heavier, drooping and making the skirt look like it was melting metal.

“No way!” Lizzy shouted, emphatically, eyes closing in her vehemence. “I want you to think of me as cute until the end.” She said, putting the emphasis on the value of the perceived quality of cuteness.

Ciel’s eyes narrowed sharply as he approached, anger building. It was not directed towards Lizzy but its focus was her attitude, the obsession with cute that could be overlooked when in society, when they were not in danger. A stubborn clinging to a useless aesthetic that would definitively cost her her life in that situation. He did not understand why nor did he particularly care at the moment. He had made a promise to keep her safe.

“Ciel what are you doing?!?” Lizzy shouted frightened when he pulled her up the stairs, to a relatively dry part of the ship, turning her around and ripping the dress open, buttons popping free, clattering on the metal floor. The loss of those few buttons were enough for the dress to sag immediately, fabric rushing towards the floor.
“If you die you will never be able to wear the clothes you love again!” Lizzy was trying to clutch the dress in place as he shouted. “It’s all over when you die, all of it.” Ciel’s words were filled with a bitter knowledge, standing harshly in front of the girl. Lizzy’s eyes were filled with tears.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered, lowering her head, fingers still clutching the edges of the dress. Despite the echo of tears in her voice, the small catch of those words in her throat, she did not fall into overwrought sobbing. She did nothing to get rid of the tears that fell, cutting through the salt water that had undone the wide curls that usually bounced around her happy face.

Ciel looked away and took his jacket off, leaning and placing it around Lizzy’s shoulders, his demeanour gentling. She was young, proper lady from a noble family. She had not been taught anything of the ways of the world beneath the sparkling of the ballroom crystals. Just a normal happy girl that he wanted, tried hard, to keep that way.

“I’ll ask Nina to make you a new dress next time. A much nicer one than the one you’re wearing today.” Ciel offered blushing a bit as Lizzy stood, allowing the soggy, destroyed dress to fall, donning his jacket over her proper undergarments. While still soggy and heavy they would be more manageable than the dress and the volume was considerably less. She would fit in the duct as well as he. “So please…” He continued, his voice dying.

“No Ciel.” Lizzy shook her head, the traces of sadness and tears gone. “I’m sorry I was being stubborn.” Lizzy admitted, approaching their escape point.

“I’m sorry I was so rough on you too.” Ciel looked away, still feeling a slight warmth over his cheeks, relieved that the issue had been resolved relatively fast. “Well let’s” A hacking cough suddenly caught his throat, closing it for a moment, the aftermath leaving him gasping. Lizzy called his name in worry but he waved the concern away, shaking his head. “I just choked on some water.” It was a plausible cover story...Still she was staring, seemingly unconvinced. “Hurry up and climb.” Ciel encouraged, looking back into the water, avoiding eye contact, feeling the rawness in his throat.
Chapter 77

Mouser smiled through the smoke of her recently lit cigarette as Sebastian hauled himself into the ship, dripping wet, stripped to trousers and shirt. Not that a white wet shirt concealed much of anything of what was beneath. He vaulted over the metal bars, standing, pulling the wet hair away from his face, spitting a bit of the salt water. The vessel was now still in the dark sea.

“A little odd time for a swim but I don’t mind.” Mouser hopped down and looked around quickly. They were alone. No corpses and no humans around. The Reapers offed few of the walking corpses, seeing that they were after the souls and the creatures did not linger long over those killed. The Midfords dealt only with those that came closer. But the souls were concentrated a bit below so first class was mostly clear of those noisy things.

“Are the maritime rescue boats coming?” Sebastian inquired as he moved towards the control room again. Mouser followed suit, tilting her head, focusing on the way the water was pulling the trousers.

“In six hours at best.” She answered the question, sighing, blowing smoke, seeing it mixed with her own breath, a white cloud of cold mixed with the silvery tobacco. “I have relayed the information to the Marchioness. They seem to be placing everyone they can find into the lifeboats.”

“The standard time for a rescue is two hours.” Sebastian shook his head in annoyance at the disclosure of another setback. Mouser chuckled, amused by the subtle change in expression that spoke volumes about his discontentment.

“It should not surprise you that things are not going according any kind of favourable plan.” Mouser shrugged. They entered the hall and found the stairs that lead to the wheelhouse. “We were way off course.”

“Another strange event.” Sebastian stopped on the doorway and allowed Mouser to walk in first. The thief shrugged and walked into the map and schematics inner room. When she saw him go into the water Mouser had taken a few precautions. Like going into their room and retrieving a dry uniform. It was not exactly vanity although calling it aesthetics came close enough.

“When I saw that note I thought that maybe it was a robbery.” She watched as the still wet demon looked through the drawers, taking out the ship’s blueprints. “This is a luxury liner after all.”

“How many of those happened?” He asked conversationally, spreading the papers on the desk, examining them carefully.

“Four in the last seven years.” Mouser answered, sitting down, snuffing her almost dead cigarette on the chair’s arms. “It is very costly and the amount of people you have to bribe to make it happen is huge. But the payoff is very enticing.” In that room, a room that was meant to be for the crew, practical and uncluttered, there was silver on the handles of the drawers. “Ransack a ship, sever the connections and you have a window of at least a week to turn the stolen items into profit before the authorities catch on.”

Sebastian chuckled lightly and found the schematics with the vertically cut ship, his expression darkening, wet tresses of black hair falling around his face, covering narrowed eyes.

“At a quick glance the ship seems to have taken damage over a quite extensive area.” Mouser nodded. Quite a few engine workers had not made it. She felt them and had made sure to track her
people down. So far they had split but were moving roughly on the same direction. Up and left. “In this state three…” Sebastian frowned and tapped one finger on the wooden surface of the table. “No,” He reconsidered. “four divisions should have flooded already. The ship can only handle a mass of water as heavy as the vessel itself. Which means…” Sebastian paused, straightening a bit, nonchalantly smashing the head of an approaching corpse that was reaching for him, emerging from the wheelhouse. It crumbled to the floor, head split open. “That the ship will start to sink within an hour.”

“And then?” Mouser asked. That still left... she searched for a clock, finding it under the dead captain. Five hours in ten minutes from... the hand moved... now.

“Then it is up to luck how long it will take until it goes past the point of no return.” Sebastian abandoned the maps and picked up his change of clothes. “The architect gives it only one hour to fully sink.” He completed the thought, unbuttoning the shirt, letting the wet fabric fall without caring about it. Mouser grinned for a moment, observing the process of dressing, methodically, drowning the shrieking echoing in her head.

“Would you consider going around nude?” She asked as the placed the clock in the pocket and adjusted the tie. The hair had dried out with a couple of sharp shakes of the head and a pass of bare fingers.

“Any particular reason as to why?” Sebastian asked, pulling the gloves into place, closing the button.

“Poppet popped up.”

“I will pass then.”

“One hour after that hour until it starts to sink.” Mouser muttered after a short silence cut by the sound of the jacket fluttering as it was donned. “We should book a lifeboat.”

“The water should be about two degrees. To be soaked in it for a long time will harm the body.” Sebastian calculated. “So we must hurry to their side.”

A few dead were prowling the hall, chasing a handful panicked nobles that had not been able to reach the Midfords and hide behind the Marchioness’s skirts. One of them, true to his station and upbringing was trying to bribe the uncaring corpses, showing a signed and filled bank bond as the creatures approached.

“Servant! Help me!” He shouted towards Sebastian, the closest living person. “I will give you this check!” Mouser perked up and approached. “When we return to land we can have a good life!” There was a sudden rumble that made the floor tremble. The corpses lost their balance but did not stop their crawl towards the target. Mouser’s eyes widened and reached out, plucking the piece of paper out of his hands. Sebastian plucked her from the floor, holding her on the crook of his arm. “Save me” the man was still shouting as a coach, pulled by dead skeletal horses and driven by yet another corpse, trampled him to death.

Mouser folded the piece of paper and placed it inside her corset, leaning against Sebastian’s shoulder and kissing his cheek as he watched the coach go by. His skin was still slightly chilly, a faint scent and taste of salt lingering. Picked up or not she had not been near enough to be in danger.
“Thanks for indulging me.” Death never made those things void, amusingly enough and he was not joking about the sum being a gateway to a good life. Fear and cowardice had always their charming way to loosen purse strings. “There are still 2088.”

“We must hurry downstairs.” The demon repeated with a small smile, placing her on her feet, both moving once again towards the stairs.
There seem to be no movement to be seen through the thin slits of metal that created the closing grid. Lights were still on and bright. Few shadows flickered. All in all a good sign. Oddly enough he could see no corpses despite the fact that the corpses had been walking freely through the ship and he could see signs of struggle and death. Fallen chairs, tables askew, blood splattering walls and floor... Ciel took a deep breath and started to try to open the way out. Lizzy was still, waiting behind him, peeking, watching him and his attempts to make the rattling metal budge. They had been crawling through the dark for a good bit now, leaving machinery behind, shifting towards passenger areas.

“Damn... can’t get it open...” he cursed low, his cold hands lacking sensibility, still rattling the structure, sure that persistence would pay off. Blunt force sometimes was the way to deal with those things. Something snapped abruptly, his support vanishing in a sharp moment that sent him plummeting down from the vent, an empty sensation of vertigo and fear filling his head and stomach. A short shout was uttered as Ciel fully expected to hit the ground headfirst, instinct closing his eyes.

“Are you all right Ciel?” Lizzy asked suddenly, moving fast inside the small space, peeking through the opened rectangle with worried green eyes. The girl voice cut through the sensation of time standing abruptly still and warned him to the lack of harm he was suffering, prompting the young earl into looking around, into trying to piece together the logic of the events. Sebastian had caught him, smirking slightly, amused.

“Please excuse my tardiness.” Sebastian stated pleasantly, placing the boyo down, looking up, gauging the distance carefully. They had not been hard to track but to make them leave the vents had taken a bit of cleaning. Obviously no sane bloke would leave a good hiding place if all he could see out of it was corpses. “Are you two injured?” he asked, appraising the Young Master first, as he stood for himself, slightly damp. Mouser leaned on the doorframe and looked straight up clicking her tongue. The creatures seemed to be walking aimlessly, small hunting groups lured by whichever soul was closer. Understandable due to the slim pickings...

“Ciel protected me so I’m fine.” Lizzy said with a bright smile. Mouser huffed, doubting the boyo’s ability to actually perform that task.

“Excuse me.” Sebastian asked as he plucked the young lady from high and placed her down. The thief noticed the considerable lighter garment the girl was wearing. And the jacket. The thief glanced at the boyo and grinned slightly. The boyo avoided her glance pointedly, blushing as he noticed her silent mock, just confirming pretty much everything she was inferring.

“What about my aunt and the others?” He asked after a short cough, a scratchy sound, clearing his throat, checking the completion status of his orders. His voice had sounded a bit off, choked, thin.

“They are unharmed.” Sebastian confirmed, turning, assuming a more serious demeanour as he delivered the summary of the present situation. “I tried guiding them to a safer place but they said they wanted to rescue the other passengers.” A bit of strain entered his voice at that point, a sort of annoyance at the other’s wilful stubbornness.

“That’s just like mother.” Lizzy no longer had a shadow of a worry behind her eyes, chuckling softly. “As long as they’re together they will be fine.” She adjusted her still damp underskirt and curtsied slightly. “Thank you Sebastian.”
“Not at all.” Sebastian took the thanks with a small smile, turning worriedly when the boyo suddenly sneezed. Mouser tensed as well. He was wet. And it had barely been four months since the asthma incident and it would be bad if something like the last attack happened in the middle of the freezing cold ocean.

“Young Master... please wear this.” Sebastian started, unbuttoning his tailcoat. The boyo should be kept warm and dry to avoid inconveniences.

“I’m fine. I’d just get caught up in the tails.” Ciel said stubbornly, turning away.

“But if your body remains cold your cough will...” Sebastian argued.

“Don’t mention that now.” The boyo hissed low, glancing at his fiancée worriedly. What he hid was not only for his own wellbeing but also for her peace of mind. A way to keep himself shielded.

“Certainly.” Sebastian agreed, glancing at Lizzy who was watching the exchange in a bit of confusion.

The young lady then glanced at Mouser, her eyes searching for an answer. The thief nodded. Lizzy’s eyes narrowed sharply for a moment as she processed the information returning to normal without a pause or hitch. A little smile, a look of happiness. Such little things and yet she fooled the chessmaster. It was her shield.

“Well then...” Sebastian changed the subject smoothly to avoid any further doubt and turned around, herding the younglings. “The lifeboats are being prepared as we speak. Let’s hurry to the deck...”

A loud sound started to echo through the ship and corridors. Worrisome thing to hear in a sinking ship. But there was a systematic movement and sound to it that concerned more those who had memory of what produced it. Metal scraping metal and big pieces falling, crashing, making the structure tremble. Something was coming. And swiftly, abruptly and lacking in all kind of subtlety or safety concerns, a circular piece of the ceiling fell down accompanied by two Grim Reapers with drawn and whirring scythes.

Poppet was grinning wide and wild.

Sebastian flinched raising his arms to keep the younglings away as contract and orders stated.

“Found you... handsome.” Grell chuckled, red jacket fluttering dramatically as she straightened, balancing on the debris and slamming down the death scythe, posing as she found footing and balance.

“Grell Sutcliff...” The boyo spat the name out through gritting teeth, stepping back, he himself making a rather sweet protective gesture towards Lizzy.

“Long time no see Sebby.” Poppet announced with a flick of the red hair and wide smile that showed off the sharp teeth to their best threat and charm. “It must be fate for us to meet here.”

“It’s just a coincidence.” Sebastian hissed tersely.

“Ahh bollocks... he found him.” Knox mumbled, frustrated on the background, still standing over the debris, leaning against his death scythe. “Please do not forget about the souls.” He tried to keep
their duties on track with a long suffering groan.

“Ronald you should have told me sooner that Sebby was around. I would have put more effort into my makeup!” Grell chastised the younger Reaper, not amused, patting her cheeks and pouting, fussing over her appearance quickly.

“That is exactly why I did not say a thing.” Ronald complained, looking away.

“Aww poppet you don’t need it.” Mouser stated in a soft tone, stepping in front of Sebastian, a bit turned to the side, looking nonthreatening, plucking out a cigarette from her right garter and a lighter from the corset, clicking the flame to life balancing it on her lips, as the lighter was returned to its place, one hand on her hip, tilting her head back. Reaper control time. A compliment was the easy way to lure Grell in whatever game needed to be played. In all honesty it was the easiest way to lure anyone in.

“Evee you really are not the person to judge make-up.” Grell adopted a grim, fatality-filled expression, sighing, adjusting her glasses. But took the compliment any way. “A woman can always use a trick or two to make herself shine. But then again you are young. Anyway...” Grell glanced away, changing the topic, stopping when she noticed that Sebastian was walking away hurriedly with the boyo and girlie and was already halfway through the corridor that lead to the stairs. “Wait up there!” Grell hopped after the demon, scythe ready to strike. Sebastian grabbed the younglings and got out of the way. Girlie shrieked, startled. The boyo grunted, caught by his midsection.

Mouser stepped between them, her blade parrying the death scythe, making sure to catch the portion that did not cut, up and personal against Grell. The impact made her knees tremble a little as she widened her stance, slamming her right heel right through the wood. Grell stepped back and huffed, smiling, sidestepping Mouser without immediately going after Sebastian. At least it was a break in the momentum.

“Setting my body on fire and then neglecting me! How mean!” The Reaper continued, getting ready, scythe held before her.

Mouser sighed, pulling her heel free, tracking Knox. It probably would have gotten her throttled but maybe she should have talked some bullshit about wrinkles to buy time. Then again the boyo was a slow runner.

“Please refrain from catching on fire by yourself.” Sebastian answered acridly, letting go of the burdens. “We need to hurry on. So would you please open the way?”

Still keeping a polite and pleasant look for Lizzy’s sake. Girlie was staring at Grell, having placed her on the play situation but still unsure about who the Reaper was. They had never actually answered to her inquiries and she had been deceived by the feeling of urgency placed upon the play’s staging.

“And if I say no?” Grell asked sweetly, smiling widely.

“I’ll have to use force.” Sebastian answered in a kind tone, the vein similar and his eyes red. Mouser looked over her shoulder, her lips tilting a bit in a mild smile, inverting the blade on her left hand, shifting the grip on the right.

“That’s fine.” Grell allowed a giggle to turn into a full blown laugh, throwing her head back, red tresses flaring brightly with the movement, downright gleeful. “I don’t mind you getting a little aggressive.” The death scythe was held and tilted, ready to dice and rend “Well then let’s have a
death match that’s even hotter than a romance!”

“Poppet, really?” Mouser piped in, amused by the antics.

“Oh shush. I have seen you work.” Grell waved a hand dismissively before refocusing.

“Belt up yourself.” Mouser snorted, shaking her head.

“Who is he?” Lizzy shouted, stepping back nervously along with a sweetly protective boyo.

“Just a pervert.” Sebastian dropped the relative politeness of terms and struggling a bit to find a definition that could be said out loud and understood by the young lady without harming her sensibilities. “I’m afraid he might be contagious. And he seems to have tainted Mouser.” Said Mouser cracked a cackle, shaking her head. She was fairly sure her corruption predated any Phantomhive-related event.”So please step back and stay away from him.”

“That’s rude!” Grell accused, attacking. “I’m just honest with my feelings.” She stated, swinging the scythe,ducking low when Sebastian kicked. The demon slammed against the wall, legs bending to use the momentum for recovery, moving out of the way when the scythe slashed down again, striking the metal, whirring against it, tearing the surface for seconds before going deeper.

“No!” Sebastian shouted, noticing the fact that it was an outer wall and the ocean was starting to lap at the window. Which meant a tear would...

Grell shrieked when water started spraying out of the gash. Its strength was enough to slam her on the floor. Sebastian was tossed against a wall by the fiercely unleashed force of the water. Knox crouched, letting the wave wash over him, grabbing on to the death scythe as he was dragged. Mouser lost her balance and fell down somehow managing to thread and ride the wave. For that heavy mass of icy liquid it was child’s play to drag both the boyo and girly, whom he had grabbed in an attempt to defend her further, to the other side of the corridor, breaking them apart as the space opened, the boyo bashed against the wall. Girlie was laying flat on the corridor as the water thinned and calmed.

Mouser sat up on the puddle, spluttering with a gasp, water sloshing around her legs, wet to the bone, having lost her cigarette, chignon coming undone, silver comb gone.

Sebastian stood, all wet once more, gritting his teeth, eyes following the boyo, noticing that he was in pain.

Grell was blinking, glasses fallen, dangling from their cord, placing the scythe down and moving to place them in their proper position.

Knox was laying flat on his face still holding the scythe, bubbles of frustration bursting under him. He had not gotten up yet because of annoyance.

“Blimey that was cold...” The thief hissed, standing, shaking her wet hair away from the eyes. She flinched suddenly when pain flashed in her head, hands pressing her temples. “Fourteen.” Mouser whispered, absentely turning towards the corridor where the boyo and his fiancée were.

Sebastian tensed and turned, going for a dash towards the Young Master. He was struggling to stand, ankle twisted at an awkward angle. Lizzy was getting up slowly, dazed and the corpses were approaching, very slowly, shuffling through the now shallow water. As contract and issue orders demanded he had to go to them and help.

“Lizzy!” the boyo shouted as girlie started to scream.
Sebastian’s dash was suddenly interrupted by the swinging of Knox’s death scythe. The strike had been blocked but it had left Sebastian pinned while keeping the weapon away and the Reaper still.

“Lizzy, get up! Lizzy!” The boyo was shouting, trying to move, the gun clicking, wet and useless.

“Forgot about me didn’cha.” Knox was saying with a cheeky, smug grin, pinning Sebastian in place. His smugness turned into a sudden yelp when Mouser’s boot made contact with his back, breaking his balance, the scythe falling on the floor and the Reaper wobbling forward. She gripped him by the scruff, pulling him back, one blade pressing itself against his neck, the other pointing towards the crotch. He made a little squeak, glancing at her by the corner of his bespectacled eyes.

“I didn’t.” Sebastian turned away without a second thought as Knox’s eyes widened further, concerned about the blades’ placement and not being in a position where he could break the pin. “Girlie! On the left!” Mouser shouted.

Lizzy scream of fear was frozen into a small broken sob as she looked at Ciel with teary eyes, lips pressing together, slowly, carefully.

“I... I... I wanted you to think of me as cute...” She stated, trying to smile, standing slowly, taking a deep breath. “until the very end.”

“Lizzy!” The boyo shouted, desperately, his eye widening, truly frightened as decomposing hands reached for the girl. Sebastian was almost close enough o interfere but still too far to do anything in time. Mouser chuckled softly as the head flew, severed from the neck, bouncing on the wooden floor, bringing almost all the living in the area to a stunned stop.
“What are little girls made of?” Lizzy whispered the old question that doubled as a kind of nursery rhyme with a forlorn glance towards the scenery outside as the carriage moved at a smooth, brisk pace through the countryside roads, taking her home. The Young Lady glanced up carefully. Her hair was almost dry but the dress she had worn before was most likely ruined. Still Mother would know.

Evelyn Crows, Ciel’s secretary, was sitting in front of her after offering secrets, waiting for her answer. She was cute, even if she dressed mostly in black, the young lady thought. Mother approved of her. Said she was a bit shady but overall had no great objections towards the woman. Her hair and clothes were barely moist. To answer her softly uttered question the woman tilted her head, waiting. She had not told her yet what had she noticed but Lizzy decided to talk, to accept. It was for Ciel’s sake.

Sugar, spice and everything nice...” Lizzy completed the saying with a sigh, slipping one strand behind her ear, a pearl earring on a dainty golden chain dangling from her earlobe, shimmering as light was caught on it. “Cute and weak, naïve and sweet.” She sighed again, closing her eyes, repeating the words she had been taught by Auntie Ann, the tutors, and well... everyone in the social world. “Poetry over philosophy, embroidery rather than cooking, dance instead of chess. Be an unknowing angel.” Evelyn grimaced and yawned along the lines. Lizzy chuckled. That was such a different reaction. Most ladies would nod and murmur in agreement. “Every girl in this country of roses is raised by these words. I am the same.” Lizzy looked down at her hands, kept smooth through soft creams made of flowers and oils. “However... there is one way I was always different from other girls.” She took a deep breath and decided to take the leap. “I am a genius swordswoman...” A small smile played on the other woman’s lips. She was not mocking or doubting. It was something akin to smug self-satisfaction. It seemed like a good start. “When I said dance lessons I was almost never talking about waltz...”

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“You grew up with the boyo” It was an informal way to address one’s master but Ciel did not seem to mind too much. Lizzy found it cute. It was nice that Ciel had people looking out for him. Like Sebastian. “So some things are as easy as recalling details.” She paused for a moment, looking at her thoughtfully. “But you should not focus solely on the past. People change.” And the time he was gone, that void space where she did not know what had befallen her cute fiancée. “You should focus more on who stands in front of you now than what he once was.” Mouser concluded her thought with a shrug before moving on. “Now... what did I notice... Even as scrawny as he is you are strong enough to lug him around like it’s nothing. The arms you hide under the frills are not skinny pale twigs and your hands, despite not being calloused or marked, have a very telling resting position.” Like they were always ready to grip a blade. “Your posture is always flawless and springy. No dance instructor can hammer that in place. They favour the nervous behaviour of a bird while you move with a grace that is more focused, rooted and fluid. It comes through even though I can see you hiding it.” Much as Mouser hid select traits when moving from role to role in the street. The omission of one thing, be it a skip in a step or a twitch of the hand was sometimes enough to be someone else.

Lizzy blushed a bit at the compliments, giggling before continuing her story. She had not called her mad nor odd. Had just accepted what was in front of her. Other women would gossip and call her strange. Even mother was seen as a bit strange but that was ameliorated by her status and drive.

“Mother was also teaching Ciel.” And as usual mother was demanding and rigid. She measured everyone against a high standard and had no doubt they could achieve it under her supervision.
and with adequate training. But Ciel was young, a beginner so... he was usually swiftly defeated and scolded. “Ciel said... that a strong wife, someone like mother, scared him. I was... worried.” Lizzy shook her head and faced Mouser, her green eyes big and filled with an old sadness that just kept growing, being fed by fear and doubt. “Ciel, my cute fiancée is one year younger than me. At that time I decided that I would become a wife that he could protect.” She showed her smile again, as much as a trained reflex as a part of her. “Mother was angry. And I was not allowed to stop. The Phantomhives have a duty to the Queen. I was to marry into the family. I had to be able to fight. To defend.”

Mouser heard something else. She did not want to stop either. It was as much part of her as loving all that was cute. But for Ciel she would. The thief clicked her tongue. Crippling herself for someone else was... foolish.

“Then that day happened.” Not hard to guess what day. “I had embroidered a gift for Ciel. I was happy, about to visit him for his birthday...” A wistful memory, broken by the reality that ensued. Her face was closing, saddened. “Becoming a cute wife that could be protected by Ciel was my dream. But that dream was never to be fulfilled. So there I was, wearing my pitch-black clothes, with my pitch black feelings... one month of pitch black winter passed when Ciel suddenly came back... with a pitch black butler.” A lost month that she had not forgotten and that she knew was the source of all the distress along with the event that had lead to it. How much had the Marchioness told her and how much had Lizzy pieced together through her grief and the fog of joy? “The Ciel that had returned had become thinner and shorter than I was.” There had been happiness with his return. And there had been sadness. “But soon I realized... it wasn’t Ciel that had grown shorter. It was me that had grown taller. At that point I made a decision.” And there was a determination forged by all of that. “That I would become a wife capable of protecting Ciel.” Her hand gripped her dress hard before she sighed, letting go, smiling once more. “But... it’s better to be cute after all... for Ciel... who is trying hard to be seen as an adult I will smile and walk beside him, cheery and childish.”

Evelyn was looking at her with dark eyes, thoughtful.

“Why would someone who wants to be seen as an adult walk around with a child as a fiancée?” She asked, the words harsh. Lizzy flinched a bit but was listening. “Being cute is something you are. No harm in it. But when you break yourself to be less...” Mouser sneered. “Why? To keep the boyo’s pride? He has enough. He can stand to have your pretty shoe imprinted on his arse from time to time.” At first Lizzy looked shocked. The words were curt and harsh and their meaning was... mean. Then she chuckled at the tirade. It was funny as well and she had a feeling she lived by them as well. Evelyn smiled as Lizzy’s mood lifted. “You should not hide. He cares for you as Lizzy. Show him that little Lizzy is more than capable of shouldering, enduring and thriving in the darkness that comes with being the Queen’s Watchdog’s wife.”

The head fell when the movement Lizzy had used to get the blade from its decorative mount moved in a scything pattern, arching before she brought it down, to a still moment in the classical form of fencing, advancing to stab the next one through its rotting head. It would be considered unsportsmanlike. But such things had no place in a true fight. The focus should be on the enemy and in the ways that they could be dealt with. If striking the head was the only way it was the choice that had to be taken.

There was no need to parry.

It was a simple point and thrust, keeping her movements light, choosing whoever was too close.
The blade she had picked was slightly dull and too light as it befitted a display trinket but the corpses were not too hard. That being said after a few had been felled, a couple even dispatched through the same thrust, it was clear they would be able to crowd her, curbing her movements.

Lizzy moved quickly, taking her chance, using the wall and the fixture to summersault over the creatures, gripping a second blade as she did so.

Mouser whistled, sitting on top of Knox, keeping one of her daggers pressed where it would keep him still. The boyo was staring in silent, wide-eyed shock. Sebastian was also staring, brought to a halt by the simple weight of the girlie’s strange actions. Grell was mumbling under her breath and fussing with her clothes and hair.

Girlie went into a reverse scissor movement, the blades crossing briefly in front of her before arching outwards in divergent directions, the sweeping motion taking off a few more heads even before the frills that hemmed her petticoat stopped flowing. She spun on her heel and thrust towards the two corpses that were slowly making their way towards her stunned fiancée, the blades piercing the heads neatly, keeping them upright, looking down. Her cheeks were stained with tears and sea water.

“This... this uncute appearance.” She whispered hoarsely, tense, her grip trembling. “I didn’t want you of all people to see me in such a state.” Lizzy’s voice grew harder and stronger. “But this time... I will protect you.” She declared, her expression set, pulling the blades free, turning to face the rest of the corpses, blades fanned out, the whipping movement splattering droplets of old blood through the water and walls. “I am the daughter of the Leader of the British Knights, Marquis Alexis Midford: Elizabeth” Lizzy took a mixed stance, right blade pointing outwards on the end of her outstretched arm left held high and defensively at her shoulder’s height.” The Wife of the Queen’s Watchdog.” She declared in challenge.

The attack was calm, calculated and quick. Lizzy was aware of what she was doing, of what needed to be done. Low heeled shoes echoed in her mind as her footing was sure and quick, lining a strike. Mother’s teachings whispered softly within the single piercing strike that took down another creature. Evee’s lessons... Lizzy though as the blades scythed in tandem, dealing with the last of them. Lizzy straightened with a deep sigh, the blades steady, looking around, eyes narrowing as she looked for more threats. A blade to protect you. She though as her eyes paused for a moment over Ciel. Those are the nice things my current self is made of.

Creatures gone... that left... they had attacked Evee and Sebastian first. That meant they were the enemy. She turned toward the red one that was adjusting the glasses, staring at her in what looked like confusion.

“I’m fine with not being cute” Lizzy shouted, attacking. Mouser stood, letting go of Knox. “as long as it means I can protect you.” She declared, the blade moving forward, suddenly stopped by Sebastian’s interference.

“My lady...” Sebastian asked in a calm voice, stopping the attack. “no further.” Mouser approached as Lizzy lowered her weapons, stunned as he got down on one knee. The thief pulled her hair up and back, wringing the water out of his, shuddering when icy droplets slid down her skin. “To have forced a lady to go through so much trouble...” He said in a contrived tone. “I have failed as a butler. I am deeply sorry.”

Lizzy did not seem to know how to react. The boyo was still stunned. Mouser patted the girl’s head with a chuckle. She looked at her, waiting with a serious expression that hid a bit of smugness.

“Beautiful form girly.” Mouser praised. If the silence before was deafening now it grew to a dead
pitch, adding to shock and awe. The thief moved, poking Lizzy a bit, appraising. “Your hips still
need to be a bit looser for a truly successful and fluid dual wield but you’re getting there.” Lizzy
nodded, agreeing. She also felt it. “You have finally learned how to dodge instead of parrying
everything thrown at you.”

“You were adamant on that point Evee.” Lizzy answered dutifully. Mouser smiled.

“Yes…” There would always be someone stronger if one could not take the impact they should
just avoid it altogether. “Also your grip on the left blade is too stiff. You have to mirror your right,
not hold harder. If they had any intelligence they would have gripped your blade and your wrist
would have snapped. See.” Mouser moved around Lizzy and slapped her left and right blades at the
same time. While the left one was jerky and halted the right moved softly, going and returning to
its position as nothing impeded it. “We’ll work on that if we get out of here alive. Should take you
no more than a few days to get the hang of that if we deprive you of the right during training.”
Mouser sighed. “Other than that it was very well executed. Mirroring was an especially clever
tactic to take.”

“Thank you Evee.” Lizzy giggled and hugged the thief quickly, still holding the blades. Mouser
huffed, looking up, disentangling, ruffling her hair with a chuckle.

“I’ll take it from here.” Sebastian managed to recover from the stunned stupor going around the
corridor, turning towards the Reapers ready to retake his place in the fight. Grell was waiting
smugly. Knox was trying to straighten his clothes and hair.

“I guess my entrance was ruined.” Grell murmured with a bit of disappointment, tossing red hair in
a quick flick. “Well... whatever.” The red reaper shifted positions, the death scythe ready once
more. “Let’s continue.”

Sebastian scoffed and moved, ready to fight. Mouser sighed, giving up any attempt to fix her hair,
simply picking up her daggers again. A single twitch would be enough to send them clashing.

“Wait Sebastian!” The boyo was finally able to snap away from his stunned silence. They had to
move fast and... “We have no time to worry about those guys!” Sebastian had been stopped,
listening without turning. The Reapers did the same, curious about new information. After all they
did say investigating was part of the night’s job. “Ryan holds the key to everything in this case.
Follow him!”

Sebastian glanced at Mouser. The thief looked up and clicked her tongue, nodding.

“What?” Grell dragged her voice softly, processing. Knox on the other hand went immediately into
his Death Note, turning pages, murmuring under his breath. “Wait... you are saying that if we put
the screws on that guy, we can learn about the walking corpses?” It seemed to be a better
perspective of action for them as well. Mouser sighed. He could have given the order in a different
way, one that did not tip off the greatest competition.

“Ryan, Ryan...” Whatever Knox had found was being show to Grell. “Senior... Look.”

Grell’s expression changed. It was enough.

“I see. Indeed we have no time to waste.”

“Care to share poppet?” Mouser called out as the reapers retreated though the hole they had
created. Grell chuckled.

“Not this time Evee.” She blew a kiss towards Sebastian. “It’s too bad but we’ll have to leave it like
this for now Sebby I’ll wrap you in the red of roses next time, for sure.” She was not deterred in
the least by Sebastian’s appalled looks and clear abhorrence. “Tatty-bye!”

“Frisky poppet.” Mouser mumbled. “Most likely he will die soon.”

“Have you found him?” Sebastian asked, shaking the situation away, focusing on the group and
order, casually pulling her hair back and tying it into a simple ponytail with his pocket
handkerchief.

“Yes.” The thief sighed, rubbing her temples softly, blinking. “How good is Reaper hearing?”

“Too good.” The demon answered. Mouser pressed her lips closed and nodded.

“We should hurry as well…” the boyo was saying, trying to stand, crumbling to the floor with a
wince.

“Young Master…” Sebastian approached, appraising the situation, noticing that the ankle was
twisted. He lowered himself to the ground, gripping it lightly. Ligaments could be snapped or even
the bone broken. “It’s quite swollen…” He said in an even tone. It was showing through the leather
and laces of the boot. But from the display of pain the young master was showing it was nothing
too grave. A sprain at best.

“Oh no…” Lizzy approached quickly, worried, placing the blades down, crouching in front of the
boyo, extending her arms. It seemed that she had indeed devolved some traces of a practical nature.
“I’ll carry you on my back.” She was telling the boyo, completely serious.

“What?!” The boyo squawked out. Mouser held the laughter in. Sebastian managed to make a
mirthful smile look polite as he spoke.

“Lady Elizabeth… I can take care of that…” He reminded her. A lady should not overexert herself.

“Ah…” Lizzy blushed suddenly, catching herself, fidgeting. “Yes, right…” Her palms went to her
burning cheeks before she stopped moving entirely, eyes widening, expression turning scared and
teary. Master and butler gained a semblance of dread as tears started flowing. “No… I... I’m the
kind of scary girl Ciel hates!”

Mouser snorted.

“Girlie… you do remember…” The thief started softly.

“What?” Ciel interfered, moving until he was on his knees, leaning towards his weepy fiancée.
“What do you mean by that?” True. It was odd that Ciel would not like a scary girl like Lizzy when
he bossed a knife nut as Mouser. Not to mention handling Sebastian.

“Before you said you didn’t want a strong wife, didn’t you?” Lizzy blubbered, trying to stop the
tears, smearing blood over her cheeks unknowingly.

“That was in the past.” Ciel’s blunt statement stopped the tear flow. Mouser patted the girl’s head,
winking when she glanced up. “Anyway I should be the one apologising right now.” The boyo
leaned back, his expression softening. Sebastian had, meanwhile been able to return to the polite
face of a waiting servant.

“Then… you will take me as your wife?” Lizzy asked, her spirits returning. “You won’t hate me?”
But the remnants of the self repression she had bound herself in still remained.
“I could never...” Ciel blurted out, the words rolling over each other in their hurry to leave, to show her that he was not opposed to either the marriage or Lizzy being a scary sword wielding girl trained by his terrifyingly powerful aunt and sharpened by the conniving woman he called secretary who was bound to the demon... and both of those latter two were watching... he stopped talking, face going entirely red, frozen in an open expression. Then he started to stammer. “We don’t have time for this!” the boyo said, his voice cracking. Sebastian covered his mouth to keep a sudden laugh in, amused. “Let’s go upstairs already!” Ciel demanded squirming.

“Even the young master can’t help himself in front of a lady.” Sebastian said, picking him up, still chuckling under his breath.

“Shut up!” The boyo growled, arms crossed. Lizzy was smiling, happy, if a bit confused.

“I told you he was blooming.” Mouser interjected, leaning against Sebastian for a mischievous second.

“Shut up!”

“So amusing...” Sebastian still had a chuckle in his voice as he walked away.

“You bastard...” The boyo was growling as they turned the corner and disappeared. “Stop laughing!”

Mouser heard that last echo before she hopped up, through the holes poppet had left on the ship and followed Ryan’s soul. He seemed to be heading towards first class, on the opposite direction the Sebastian had taken the boyo. But if he was not searching for a lifeboat then... Poppet and the blonde bloke were closing in on him too.
Chapter 80

The steps that echoed as they approached were not from someone that could be considered a threat. Still Lady Elizabeth tensed and gripped her swords harder and shifted her weight, readying herself even as she walked fast a bit behind Sebastian. Snake turned the corner, looking worried, one snake over his shoulder, the others writhing within the backpack to keep themselves warm.

“Smile!” He shouted, sprinting to reach them, relieved.

“Snake.” The Young Master’s voice acknowledged him but his eye was searching for the prisoner he had left with the newest servant. That must have been the information Mouser had discerned and had not disclosed due to the Reaper’s proximity. In any event she had the soul memorized and he could track her at any given moment. No true harm had been done.

“I’m glad you are all right. Says Emily.” Snake relayed his feelings through the serpent while regaining his breath.

“Where is Ryan?” The Young Master asked the rather obvious question, grimacing in pain, responding to the swollen ankle.

“I’m sorry he managed to get away. Says Oscar.” Oscar peeked from the backpack and lowered his head in an apologetic bow.

“I see.” Ciel sighed. It should be left to Mouser then. Now the main concern was to get Lizzy away from that place. “In any case let’s meet up with the Marquis for the time being.”

Panic was deeply settled into the minds of the people that had been able to claw their way towards the area defended by the Midfords and were vying for a spot in the lifeboats. And as soon as panic gripped a human’s mind all kinds of social and polite lies they told themselves to function in a group faded into meaningless prattle. For most at least. Amidst the chaos of fear Edward Midford was trying to keep his morals alive. And he was both succeeding at it and trying to impose them on the mob through hearty, snapping shouts.

“Out of the way.” He ordered a bunch of men, opening the way to a couple of ladies, one in a delicate ball gown, the other in working clothes, carrying a child. He helped them in the next-to-be lowered life boat, still holding his blade. “Women and children first! You dare to call yourselves English gentlemen.” Edward continued, chastising the men, walking away, searching for any others that fit the description of «first to go».

“Brother!” Lizzy called as she saw him, running, siblings embracing.

“Lizzy! I’m glad you’re all right...” Edward laughed, happy, relieved by her safe arrival, his mirth stopping as he noticed the blades. “It must have been hard.” He whispered, tightening his one-armed hug before letting Lizzy step back.

Sebastian placed the Young Master down to deal with his relatives and the situation in general. He checked his clock quickly. Surprisingly the ship was tilting, not really sinking for the moment, teetering on the edge. It was buying them time. The one hour expectation given by its architect had been largely surpassed. Three hours had passed since they had rammed against the iceberg. Only now was the ship looking like it was indeed sinking, even if a bit unevenly. About three hours till
dawn. Roughly the same time until the rescue came, according to the previous estimates.

“I’m sorry but I have been completely useless.” The Young Master said calmly, approaching, limping. Snake was close by, looking around shyly, worried in the confusion.

“I’ll say.” Edward did not let the chance to preach. “Well, no matter.” He relented, looking at his sister. “I will save the lecture for later. You two hurry up into the boats.” The heir of the Midford household returned to the task of controlling the crowd.

“Edward. I have a favour to ask. Instead of me let him on.” Snake turned, eyes wide as the Young Master chose to discard himself from the burden of an untrained servant. They still could not allow him to know that much. Lizzy had a similar reaction of shock, stepping away from her brother, making a movement to approach. “I can’t get on the boat just yet.” The Young Master continued to speak with all the dignity he could muster while being small, wet and suppressing both the need to shiver and a light cough. Breeding came through, Sebastian believed, noticing he was being solemn and successful enough to convince the elder brother.

“I see. I’ll take him.” Edward acquiesced.

“If Ciel’s staying I’m also…” the young sister, however, was nowhere near as compliant. She was cut-off mid phrase when Sebastian borrowed one of Agni’s movements. Striking the marma points so she would not be actually harmed but causing a small blackout.

“Pardon me.” He said calmly, catching the young limp lady. Her hands, however, did not go lax on the blades.

“Butler!” Edward gave a mildly startled shout. Such an action was not something easily forgivable for a servant to do.

“It would take too much time to make Elizabeth understand so I had to be a little rough.” Sebastian justified his actions. The situation was, in on itself rather mitigating. There would be no way she would be allowed back into a sinking ship swarming with dead on the prowl. “I’ll take any punishment afterwards.” He completed the required formalities while giving back to her brother, lowering his head in a small bow.

“No. I should be thankful. I can’t do that kind of things to her.” Edward said those sentences in a quiet voice, looking down adoringly at his sister. At least he realized what and why it had been done. Such a thing helped to make the situation run smoother.

“The ship has already tilted heavily. It just a matter of time until it sinks.” Sebastian shared the information he was in possession of, stepping back and returning to the young master. “Please escape quickly and get as far away from the ship as possible.” Sebastian leaned down, picking up the movement-impaired Young Master.

“I’ll leave Snake and Lizzy in your hands.” Ciel relayed the last instructions before turning to him, glancing towards the tilting bow of the ship. “Let’s go Sebastian.”

“As you wish.” The demon acquiesced. Mouser was moving towards the lower first class, the servant rooms.

“You don’t have to come back!” Edward shouted, his voice returning to the grumpy tone he often used when addressing Ciel. “I’ll be fine not having to give you my cute little sister as a bride.”

“I’ll be sure to make it back then.” The young master provided a taunting answer with a wide smile before they walked against the flow of the crowd, back into the fray.
Ryan was trying to traverse the first class hall, gripping the rail, huffing in effort. He had to reach his room, find the device, his research... there was no way he could leave it all behind not with the Osiris deal and all the hopes and time poured into the research, the experiment. Even if the subjects were brought back unhealthy it was another step closer. He had managed to escape those strange people that had cornered him, the snake-skinned man, the boy with the gun, the red-eyed woman and the black-clad servant, those who were no doubt going to destroy the entire Complete Salvation project.

“Damn... it has tilted a lot already...” He complained, taking a deep laboured breath, shuddering. “Where in the world are...” He shouted when the ship’s structured groaned, tilting further, tables of the partially destroyed party sliding down. The doctor lost his balance, falling over the decorative banister, eyes closing in fear as he the drop became unavoidable.

A grip around his ankle and a harsh tug that stopped his motion and almost pulled his hipbone out of its place stopped the drop. Tables were crashing against each other, silverware falling on the floorboards, food spilling from its platters, corpses in fine clothes slipping along with it, smearing blood. Instinct and fear made him struggle until he looked up. Whoever had caught him looked human enough until one noticed the wide, sharp smile.

“My... quite the handsome one, aren’t you.” Grell spoke up, amused, grinning merrily. “Got you.” The Reaper spoke in a half reassurance, voice smooth and almost too smug. “So you are Ryan.” She continued as the human dangled like a pendulum.

“How do you know my name?” the doctor spoke in a strangled voice, between the fear and the blood rushing into his head, fearful. The situation was growing increasingly stressful for him.

“Yeah, yeah... no need for the routine talk.” Knox interrupted whatever tirade Grell was going to launch into, leaning against the senior reaper agent. What use was there in telling him there was a picture of him along with all vital statistics in a book that told them he was going to die soon enough. “You are the guy that is moving the corpses around with some sort of trick, right?” Even though the Death Note said a lot it didn’t bother with colloquial details like that until after the cinematic record was archived and the case closed. The doctor’s eyed widened in shock. He had thought the only ones he had to worry about were the group led by the young man... but if there were more after the Complete Salvation... Knox sighed and glanced at Grell. “Irregulars are really annoying.” Then he smiled, launching into a moralistic tale of the common world view. “In this world death is a rule that no one should ever overturn.”

“So where does the cheating death angle come from?” Mouser asked, leaning against one of the curved iron arms of the massive and tilted candelabra, amidst glittering crystals. It was like being back in the circus, in display as Joker announced the acts of the night when she had performed. Reapers and captured quarry looked up. Mouser waved, smiling. “Hi poppet.” Grell grinned as the thief stood, balancing, the crystal and metal chiming, hopping onto the banister, balancing gracefully, heels not touching the metal. Knox stepped back, staring at the garter bow that was fluttering in front of his nose before the demoness sat down, next to Grell, looking down at the doctor, crossing her legs. He had had quite enough of those boots stepping all over him.

“From human wistful thinking and things like you Evee.” Grell answered with a grave nod. “There was also a reaper with a gambling weakness once...”

“Can we share this one poppet? At this time we have a similar goal.” Mouser asked. The corpses
were ambling aimlessly. Some were gathered right bellow the people that boarded the lifeboats, trying to claw their way up without bothering with stairs or elevators. It was a fruitless, mindless effort.

“Really?” Grell arched one eyebrow masterfully, doubtful. “Don’t you have to capture him?”

“I’m happy with just the information.” Mouzer answered with a shrug. “Share with me poppet. You know you can ask for something in return…” Mouzer whispered, slipping one of Grell’s tresses away from her ear, leaning so that last part came out like a breathy secret. Grell smiled widely suddenly, eyes sparkling with interest. Knox sighed as the demoness’s smile showed her fangs to a mischievously frightening degree.

“So? How do we stop the corpses?” Grell asked after a sharp shake, making the doctor tremble and whimper. As a true meater the man started to spill after that fright.

“In my room there is a device that can render the complete salvation ineffective.” The words almost ran over each other in their hurry to leave and in the hope that they would return him to an upright position.

An empty, messy and ransacked room was what awaited the small group. Fear swept over Ryan again. If the device, if the research was not there... there was no telling what those people would do to him if...

“...so? Where is it? Where is that device supposed to be?” The red-headed one said, unimpressed. The blonde leaned against the machine he carried, also less than thrilled. The red-eyed woman had moved on to a room further away. She had returned now, standing on the doorway with the others, carrying a long-handle black parasol.

“Is he trying to give us a fill?” there was a new set of belts around her hips too, the doctor noticed as she spoke up.

“No...” Ryan shouted in fear and horror. He counted at least four colts in those holsters. “It was definitely here... could it be that... that man...”

Mouzer sighed and looked away.

“I have a feeling I know to whom he refers.” She sighed again after a short pause where her mind seemed to wander. “Yes. I know the blighter. I will say I am not happy with it and I definitely know that he should not be there either.” The thief groaned, leaning against the parasol she had placed against the floorboards, resting her forehead on the round pommel of the handle. “To the hall again.” Mouzer straightened, turning, walking a few steps before pausing, a light smile touching her lips. “By the way poppet.” She tossed Grell a rolled up black piece of fabric, winking.

“That is new.” Grell noted, catching it, approaching, touching the lacy frills that adorned the edge of the parasol as she pulled the Doctor along, Knox still keeping his distance, the cravat pocketed.

“Yes. It was expensive as well so I’m glad that I was able to come back to get it.” Mouzer answered as they walked towards the fancy hall with a bit of effort due to the angle.
Chapter 82

It was easier to re-enter the ship halls through the passenger’s hallway of deck C even though they would still be going through first class. Granted it was a bit of a detour from where Mouser had surely caught the man they were after but it was an area that seemed less crowded and where the ship’s tilt wasn’t too steep. Surprisingly the Young Master had no comment on the matter as Sebastian carried him away from the lifeboats. The halls seemed to be deserted and the sounds coming from the outside, the panic and screams, lessening.

The echo of footsteps and straining came as a bit of a surprise. Rounding the corner and continuing their course brought them to a path blocked by a peacock of a man sipping wine calmly while some more sternly dressed people carried a rather big bit machinery. Unfortunately it was not hard to identify the man who paraded along the workers with a glass of wine on his gloved hand and a flighty disposition.

“The Viscount of Druitt?” The Young Master blurted out, caught off guard.

“Hm... Who are you...” Druitt stopped and turned slowly, eying the pair as the men continued their efforts to turn the corner. “And how do you know my name?” Sebastian and the Young Master paused, realizing the slip. Druitt just shrugged it off gracefully and posed. “Oh well. Considering I’m well known in society as the incarnation of beauty I suppose it’s rare for someone not to know me.” The man’s vanity worked in their favour as he overlooked every and all detail that would cast a shadow over his pride. That also meant never really noticing those he felt ranked beneath some sort of personal guideline. Either that or he forgot faces, names and events easily.

“Please allow me to ask why is someone like you in such a place. This ship is full of corpses prowling around.” Sebastian took on the role of the concerned party, speaking with a calm and understated inflection, seeing a chance to gather information. An annoyance Druitt may be but he was also part of the organization that was responsible for the whole event. And as expected of a noble of his quality a small prodding was all that was needed for him to start bragging, showing off and talking without a care.

“You know there is something I absolutely want to protect, even if it means risking my life on this sinking ship.” The man grinned smugly, tilting the glass towards the machine that had managed to get out of the corridor and was now being manoeuvred so it would fit on the next trek of its path. “Actually these corpses are like puppets to me.” He continued smugly, chuckling, adopting a tone that dripped of look how naughty I am being, a playful demeanour that would look best but no less annoying or appalling on a young chit fresh off from the schoolroom. “Oops. I spoke too much...” Master and butler exchanged a look. It was ridiculous, yes, but the litany had been useful more than once in that forsaken night. Also if that was the machine the doctor had mentioned then the situation could be improving. “Well then, excuse me.” The Viscount turned, prepared to follow his workers as Sebastian started the recitation.

“The complete flames in our chests...”

“Shall not be extinguished by anyone.” Automatically the cue was taken.

“We are... the phoenix!”

Pose struck, code words given and his tune changed.

“So you were comrades. I do remember seeing your faces before.” Druitt shrugged, satisfied that
now he had been able to recognize them, their ranking improving in his eyes and personal charter.

“That device. Could it be something to stop the corpses?” The Young Master inquired. The Viscount’s demeanour changed, turning grimmer, slightly more serious, more secretive.

“Where did you get that information?” Druitt asked carefully.

“As I though.” The Young Master said, dispelling the doubt, as if it was only an educated guess. “Is it you then?”

“If you want to know just follow me.” The viscount conceded, raising his glass, turning his back carelessly, walking on. “I will show you too the coming of the new aurora thanks to medicine.” He reiterated the supposed Aurora’s philosophy.

“Should I try to steal it from him?” Sebastian asked as they walked behind the small group.

“No.” The Young Master shook his head calmly, eyes narrowed. “We don’t know how to use it. Let’s wait for him to activate it...” A familiar shape and giggle cut his train of though. One of the carriers... “Undertaker? What are you doing here?” Answering to the recognition Sebastian approached, allowing the master to inquire.

“Hi...” The Undertaker smiled over his shoulder, carrying the device, apparently making very little effort, greeting them without looking surprised. “While I was escaping I was asked to help carry this.” He shrugged and then broke into a fit of giggles much to the Young Master’s mortification. “And then you did the phoenix thing again.”

“Forget that right away!” Sebastian kept his face composed while the Young Master fidgeted and sputtered. Then Ciel calmed down and leaned, whispering. The Undertaker was also part of the Aurora so he could know something. “By the way... do you happen to know how to activate this?”

“Who knows...” The Undertaker was still giggling under his breath, shrugging. “How will this thing be of any help I wonder.” So with a distinct lack of answers they kept moving towards the lounge hall.

Of course the place chosen by a narcissistic man was the landing where the stairs met, creating a balcony overlooking the dead bodies under the fading glittering glamour of the hall.

“Please be careful. It is worth more than your lives.” Druitt said softly as he descended the steps, approaching the machine that was being set down. The men stepped back afterwards. Most likely they had been hired by Aurora as guards, like the ones Ryan had tried to order around to destroy the first risen corpse.

“Are you going to activate it?” The Young Master asked, the worry showing a bit.

The ship was slowly but surely tilting. It hadn’t been as noticeable since the last sudden jerk but it was moving and time was ticking surely and slowly. Even if the vessel was living up and overcoming the best expectations there was no way it would last long enough for the completion of prolonged theatrics.

“Not yet.” Druitt looked around assessing his stage. The Undertaker had taken a seat on the stairs, watching. Sebastian was still holding the young master, in-between the machine and the way out. “The cast is still incomplete.”

“Cast?” Sebastian whispered, turning his head slightly when he heard footsteps.
“Bastard why did you take the device?!” Ryan broke into a run as soon as he noticed Druitt, gripping the railing, leaning over it, shouting, angered and concerned. His life was on the line and he was being held hostage by two mad creatures and one bored man and his supposed benefactor had made off with the one extremely frail and important item that could keep him safe from a shot in the head.

“Welcome Ryan.” Druitt stepped forth, arms opening, voice growing into a grand pitch. “I was waiting for you.” He announced, taking everyone as his audience. “Tonight the empire you built will collapse like Pompeii. And in its place my new realm shall be born.” That seemed to deflate the doctor into a sudden state of confusion and silence. “With the power of this device I will create a new empire.” Mouser snorted in derision, stretching, balancing the parasol against her shoulder. Everyone in power dreamed of having even more power. Business as usual. “The one who conquered eternity shall rule over everyone else with corruption and decadence.” He did some odd posing, amused by his own cleverness. “It will be called the Aurora Empire!”

“Sounds kinda complex.” Knox mumbled, still bored.

“I'll paint him red right away.” Grell placed one boot on the rail and leaned, scythe ready to go.

“I keep saying that...” She whispered, yawning, aiming one of the colts. It was a rather easy, open target. She smiled slightly.

“Don’t you care about the device?” Druitt stated dramatically, tilting his wine glass over the device.

“Senior, wait!” Knox let go of his scythe grabbing Grell who growled at him.

Mouser sighed, placing the parasol against the rail and stretched, putting the gun back. Her answer was no. She did not care a whit about the device. And the man was also forgetting that without it there would be no little personal empire. So in itself the threat was rather minor and powerless. But the boyo seemed to be interested in something else so she would just wait.

“Ah this is real power.” Drunk with it even if it was a mimicry. “I can win against all of you with a glass of wine.” Then he broke into a theatrical laugh of delight.

“I am getting quite irate.” Sebastian said after a moment, glancing at the boyo. “Can I kill him?” he requested formally.

“No. Wait.” The boyo said, eyes narrowed as he thought it through. It looked like he wasn’t taking the threat seriously either. What he was after was the information the megalomania could produce in the form of bragging. “Though I understand your feelings.”

“2043” Mouser shouted, startled by the noise approaching, hopping back onto the chandelier, leaning against its curves for balance, placing the parasol she had gripped before hopping between two vaults of metal and crystal, taking two guns out of their holsters. The volutes groaned a bit under the item’s weight but as they had been made to withstand a lot more the sound was all they produced.

“What!” the boyo screamed when the glass shattered around them, the corpses trying to get in, pressing each other in their attempts to overcome a simple waist-high wall. Still slow, still unable to actually think and execute the easiest course of action. Those able to find an opening, or simply lucky enough to be awkwardly shuffled inside the hall were hardly a threat but the numbers gathered outside the walls... ammo was limited, as was stamina, all complicated further by the area that was actually available to fight.
“Wait! There’s too many...” Ronald said as he stepped back, scythe slightly raised, back-to-back with Grell.

“Please activate it Viscount!” The boyo shouted, gripping Sebastian’s shoulder as he turned towards Druitt who looked less than concerned.

“I am not a viscount anymore.” He announced suddenly, hair tossed dramatically. “Caesar.” He smiled and turned to the shocked boyo, winking. “I will activate it if you call me that way with that lovely little mouth of yours cock robin.” It was a flirt. It was indubitably a flirt.

“Yes, let’s kill him right now.” The Young Master acquiesced with his face set in stone, hiding the disgust he felt.

“Please wait. Although I understand your feelings.” Sebastian retorted, a slight stab of delay as payback for the earlier denial. But at that moment it would indeed be advantageous if Druitt activated the machine. So he fought using his legs mostly as the Young Master was in no condition to not be a burden. Grell and Knox used their death scythes in the usual way. The doctor screamed and ran around, avoiding the dead. Mouser was sitting high up, eyes closed, gripping the metal under her, having let go of the emptied guns, the weapons falling on the floor with a light clatter, trying again to drown out the effects of the sudden appearance of too many of those things too close to her.

“Oh... how many paladins are putting their lives at stake...” Druitt was talking, immersed in his fantasy, kept safe by the guards that had carried the machine there. “This place is like a coliseum of corruption. And I am watching them from above, slowly enjoying my wine. Just like the emperor Nero.”

“AHHH right! Do we kill him now!?" Knox stopped for a moment, turning in annoyance, growling.

“You just stopped me earlier! Do you want to be punished too?!” Grell rebutted, equally annoyed. Mouser groaned, drowning in the shriek, falling backwards, hanging upside down listlessly.

Why had they converged there?

There were easier prey to catch in the ship, closer to where they had been gathering before.

Was something calling?

There was something calling...

Subtle at first but it was so loud now...

Opening her eyes drowsily the thief focused on the machine. Looked so... clunky... made no sound... power sources had sounds, often loud...

She flinched, knowing, feeling that the call had been cut off, leaving only the shrieking souls to work through.

Mouser looked away, finding a female rotting form with a shrieking soul mimicry, focusing solely on that one... she reached out, her claws elongating softly, her thoughts scattered, distracted.

Pluck it out, shred it, make it quiet... she mused idly.
“Hey! You! Make that thing work already.” Poppet shouted, thoroughly annoyed now, her sharp voice startling the thief into sitting upright again, gasping for air. Immediately her head hurt. Groaning Mouser refocused, gripping her parasol with the right hand, the claws on the left piercing the palm, forcing herself to cut the connections through physical pain, dropping down onto the hall’s floor, pulling out another gun, aiming for the ones that turned to her as soon as she touched the wooden floorboards.

“Fine.” Druitt deigned with a little shrug, going into another flourish, raising the wine glass. “It’s time to found my new empire. Come on everybody.” His tone was a smug order. “Show me the dance of the Phoenix to pledge your loyalty to the emperor!” He demanded.

Everyone in the room exchanged a quick glance and then glared back.

“Let’s kill him.” Grell, Sebastian, Ciel, Knox and Mouser announced, grimly.
Chapter 83

Druitt’s death was an oath but... the situation was truly in no way favourable. The silence was a chilly thing, broken by the thing’s groans and the sounds of slaughter and the Undertaker’s giggling. It was not like there were plenty of choices to take at that moment.

“Are you sure you don’t want to know how that device works?” The Undertaker asked with a big wide smile, still laughing, not really looking like he cared about the corpses that were being held at bay by the guards while Druitt fluttered about like a preening peacock.

Unfortunately it was indeed looking like the piece of machinery that was the Viscount’s whole gamble was the thing that would get them out of that particularly tight situation.

“What are you waiting for? Come now...” Druitt encouraged merrily, open arms towards his audience, fabric fluttering, taking the spotlight, overenthusiastic. Mouser turned and shot, avoiding stepping on someone’s entrails. The sound of grinding teeth as actually very noticeable. It was with a grim sigh of regret and resignation. It was in no way a surprise when the recitation started to come out in a dry monotone.

“The complete flames in our chests” Sebastian and the boyo started much to Druitt’s glee. “Shall not be extinguished by anyone.” Grell and Knox picked up the words midway through, joining in. “We are the new incarnation of...” Druitt slipped in for a dramatic finish. “The Phoenix!” the tone was of a grand drama, full of meaning and power. A pose was struck.

“Cancan dancers?” Mouser mumbled, taking in the scene of eight grown men, a lady in red and a brat putting their hands on the air and kicking up a leg, blinking a few times in astonishment, casually sidestepping a corpse, tripping it and putting a bullet through its head, tossing the emptied gun against another incoming thing, the weight of the weapon and the force of her throw turning the head into pieces.

“Well done gentlemen.” Thrilled to have everyone doing as he demanded Druitt turned to the machine. “Now I will show you how the dead army prostrates himself before me!” He announced the incoming encore of control before dramatically pressing down a single button. Mouser chuckled. As those more jaded expected it did nothing. Not a beep, not a whirr, no reaction from the machine. No reaction from the dead beyond their continued advance. Although for some reason the others also looked surprised at the non-responsiveness of the thing. “NON!” Druitt shouted with a remarkable and exaggerated look of distress as the corpses continued.

“What does this mean?” The boyo gritted out as Sebastian continued to fight.

The Undertaker burst into a laugh, twitching in stitches.

“Ryan the device you built is not working.” Druitt complained. The doctor looked as shocked as the Viscount.

“That is...” he shouted back, bewildered, screaming when a corpse lurched closer, stabbed by Grell quickly.

“So it wasn’t you who built it?” The boyo turned to Druitt. Mouser sighed and shot another one of the things. It was fairly obvious even before the failure that the Viscount would not have been able to build a machine. From skills, training, technique, knowledge and abilities it seemed safe to say it was not something someone like Druitt would be able to fabricate. And that was simply concerning
the mechanical part. When it tangled with the supposed purpose of that thing, which seemed to be control and swift deactivation, the technicalities, details and in-depth knowledge of how exactly the corpses moved came into deeper play. So...

“How could I build something like this?” Even for a glory stealer like Druitt it was ridiculously easy to admit he had no clue on the workings of the machine. Just a sense of its purpose and an idea on how to put it to grand use. “I just decided to borrow it.”

“Bastard! So you fooled me?” the doctor shouted, his face filled with grief and despair, broken by the sudden disclosure. Sebastian glanced up, eyes narrowing. To whom was he speaking... A medical degree the viscount had but it was close to impossible for anyone to envision the man in expensive clothing working on decaying corpses.

“What a useless farce.” Grell finally snapped, hopping down the banister, charging, cutting a direct path through the corpses with ease, gunning for Druitt. Mouser stepped aside as Poppet moved nearby, following her at a sedated pace towards one of the bifurcating stairs. Not even the sudden groan of the sinking ship and a sharper shake and tilt that, helpfully caused most of the corpses outside to lose what passed for balance and slide down the decks and into the frigid waters, leaving the area with a manageable 327. It was a rather grand testament of skill for poppet as she closed in the distance with sure steps, decapitating what was on the way.

“That’s wow...” Knox whispered after a little whistle. Then he noticed the breach in protocol and started to scream in a vain attempt for Grell-containment. “Wait! Senior! We must not kill people.”

Poppet’s death scythe connected suddenly with something equally hard, the grinding sounds, the surprise spreading around. With a whimper and a swoon worthy of The Lady of the Camellias Druitt fluttered down, dramatic hand over the mouth, eyes closing. Even in terror he was posing.

But the flamboyant noble was not the issue.

The true shock stemmed from the one that had done what could be considered impossible, using only what seemed to be a wooden burial marker. The Undertaker had stepped between poppet and her mark, casually parrying a death scythe while his back was turned, nonchalantly holding his hat in place. The laughter had subsided for a moment. Then he chuckled again, still keeping the block, glancing up.

“Hehe... it’s been a while since I’ve laughed so much.” The Undertaker admitted, shrugging easily. “To lose such an amusing man would be like losing the whole world to me.” He continued calmly as his mask was shed, slowly, almost teasingly. “Don’t you agree...” The Undertaker glanced over his shoulder casually, focusing for the first time on the adversary. Poppet was struggling, trying to go through the defence and at the same time prevented from withdrawing. “Grim Reaper?”

The casual way in which he described Grell’s nature made Mouser frown. His hair was pale but he didn’t smell or feel like an angel. She had known the Undertaker for almost two decades and... A long list of names and faces of nameless crossed her mind. Innumerable visits to the funeral parlour. Little flowers on little coffins whose height she couldn’t reach at first. Bone cookies and warm tea. Laughs shared over men she had murdered. He had never changed. The thief sighed. Pity. She was going to lose another friendly person. That was her saddened though as she stepped on the stairs, walking towards Sebastian.

A wide movement tossed Grell away, followed by a sudden flutter of the Undertaker’s coat, revealing a good handful of those markers at his disposal, grinning widely.

“The death scythe can’t cut it?” Poppet was still whispering, flabbergasted, not realizing what a
target she was, not having recovered from the forceful shove, screaming when the surplus of wooden stakes was tossed hard against her, the movement causing the Undertaker’s hat to flutter off his head, slamming her against the glass-and metal ceiling, shattering it, the pieces falling.

Sebastian moved, shielding the Young Master. He felt a bit of surprise when nothing struck him, glancing up, over his shoulder, using his back to keep the Young Master away from harm. Mouser smiled for him, the parasol opened, shielding them all. She tilted it softly, allowing the glass to slide off the chemically treated silk, shaking glittering shards away from the frills, waiting until the harmful rain stopped. The demon stood carefully, placing the boyo down, still allowing him to see. She adjusted the parasol to his height, approaching.

“How sad...” The undertaker whispered amidst a chuckle, slipping his hand through the white fringe of hair, pulling it back, away from his eyes for the first time since any of the present folk had memory. “How sad it would be if such laughter was to disappear...” He mused, arms opening wide.
“Undertaker?” The boyo whispered in shock as glass continued to fall, the bigger pieces shattering with a dissonant clatter on the flooring. Grell fell down, groaning, straightening with a bit of effort, her back a bruised mess. The Undertaker glanced at them with a soft expression, just a little smile, the hair away from his singularly coloured eyes, looking rather calm amidst the messy hall.

“You’ve been hiding yourself well.” Sebastian spoke up, his demeanour grim. Mouser’s lips pressed a bit harder, turning into a thin line. If he was worried it would be bad. Carefully she pulled the parasol down and closed it, nails tapping on the glossy surface of the handle. “Since you’ve kept your eyes hidden I never noticed it either.” An oversight that was telling. Clearly that one was used to be in hiding.

“Me too. I’ve been had.” Grell retorted, straightening her glasses, wiping away the blood that seeped from a cut right under the brow. Knox was fast to get to her side, stopping when he glanced up, at the Undertaker.

“Those eyes...” Knox whispered, leaning towards Grell who was standing, groaning with effort.

“Yes.” Poppet sounded exhausted, dead serious. Blood was still dripping over her eye, without a doubt clouding her vision. “There is no mistaking that gold and green glimmer. A Grim Reaper.”

Mouser scoffed. And that one would not have any issues in putting a blade through her. It was rather obvious he no longer belonged to whatever organization ruled over poppet and Knox.

“How nostalgic.” The Undertaker laughed slightly, a chuckle much smoother and contained than before. “It has been half a century since someone called me that.” He continued to talk, tipping the marker against his shoulder, smiling with something akin to wistfulness.

“What is the meaning of this Undertaker?” The distressed Doctor stormed down the stairs, charging towards the grey haired Grim Reaper, his eyes wide, paling and confused. “Didn’t you tell me we could control the corpses as long as we have this device?” he was struggling to understand, gesturing wildly, voice cracking and weaving irregularly through the words.

“Is that so?” The Undertaker looked up, giggling, scratching his chin with a long black nail.

“Did you fool me? Was it all a lie?” Doubt, fear, all the weight of what he had done clashing with education and beliefs. A single phrase could break him. “All those plans... going to America to spread complete salvation?” his hopes, his dreams, his lifework... broken lies, wasted effort.

“But you see...” The Undertaker started calmly with a softness in his voice that one would use to talk to a child. “I thought it was funny since you were trying to bring back the dead in all seriousness using medical science.” He smiled, shrugging. “You were the perfect person for my purpose.”

“So our goal of making the entire world healthy was...” There. Cracking.

“That was your goal, wasn’t it?” Breaking. “Also... you couldn’t perform the resurrection of human beings with the kind of medicine you possess.” The Undertaker continued his explanation smoothly, without a care. “In my book, from the moment you relied on my skill it could no longer be called medicine.” He chuckled slightly, waving a wide sleeve. “The kind of man who administers a treatment without even understanding it is no longer a doctor, you see...” Broken. Ryan Stoker fell to his knees and sobbed. “You were a good boy who honestly believed in my
story.” The Undertaker said softly, patting his head, moving on without a care. “A bit naive but...” another soft giggle as he turned towards the boyo, soaking in the ripples of the shocking reveal.

“So in other words you are the mastermind behind the Aurora’s society human resurrection experiments.” The boyo took action, angered by the fact that he had been tricked as well.

“That is a secret.” The Undertaker whispered with a trembling voice, making a childish shush motion with his bejewelled index finger. Then he chuckled. “Is what I would like to say but you have paid me for an awful amount of information with all those phoenix poses. So I will tell you.” He chuckled before moving down the stairs, making a grand gesture, showing off the corpses who simply moved about without aim, without attacking. “It is true I am the one who made these moving corpses.”

“Why?” The boyo demanded the answer, inflexible.

Mouser exchanged a glance with Sebastian. It seemed they were both curious as well. He also seemed to have a measure of control over the corpses needing no machine. If the deal had not fallen through he might have done that while Ryan presented the corpses as docile, pretending the effects stemmed solely from the piece of metal and wires.

“Ah, yes.” The Undertaker smiled, having expected the question, slamming down the wooden marker, leaning against it. “At first it was probably... just my curiosity towards humans.” His tone changed slightly into a bit of a recitation. “Humans are body and soul. If you bring these two together one can exist amongst the living. The brain within the body and the soul keep on documenting their life’s memories as a cinematic record. And when the flesh body withers and the Grim Reaper collects their soul the record ends there, where and when the living become the dead.” He paused, glancing at Mouser for a moment. “There are exceptions but those are so few.” He giggled and moved on. “Reapers take the soul from the body according to a list, the Death Note, causing an end to the kaleidoscope of memories.” He sighed, his expression hidden beneath his fringe, the laughter gone for a moment. “Day in, day out, peacefully, indifferently.” The Undertaker sighed and looked up, tossing ashy locks away from his eyes once again, looking at some faraway point. “I had lived that life of a dutiful Grim Reaper for a long time when one day I...” His voice perked up again, the energy returning. “What would happen if the end had a continuation?”

That simple statement caused poppet and blondie to look aghast. One thing was cheating death by becoming a demon or dealing with one. Bend it slightly as a ghost. Be freed from it temporarily due to a positive evaluation of the human’s value. But that was thwarting it in a way that seemed to be beyond unacceptable.

“What would happen to the flesh body if you were to connect a continuation of the memories that had come to an end without a soul?” That seemed to be part of the driving question and the methodology used to create a walking corpse. “Grim Reapers only take the souls for judgement after all.” And within those the judged cinematic records. “The body and the brain that holds the duplicate recording of said memories are left in this world.”

“No way...” Knox whispered.

“You edited records?” Grell tossed that hypothesis. It was an angel ability and it had been, so far, only performed in the living, tampering with both the record and soul in tandem. It was the only explanation she had offhandedly.

“Well... not exactly. Editing means meddling in the middle.” The undertaker giggled, amused, pointing at one of the wandering corpses. “Take a look at their records with your abilities.”
Gritting her teeth but too curious and duty minded not to do it, Poppet lunged against the nearest corpses tilting her scythe while slashing, releasing the strands of the cinematic records, the lives of the slashed ones unfurling quickly, the end playing out. Mouser groaned as it creaked, like a train running on crooked steel rails, hitching for a second, coming to a standstill. Then it continued, producing the constant screech that had been plaguing her head since the whole event had started. The train was still running on crooked steel...

“What is this?” Grell shouted in shock as the images continued, nonsensical frames of the undertaker wearing some goofy clothes, hat and excuse of a moustache, playing around in each space.

“Strange.” Sebastian whispered. “I can indeed see how it would be distressing.”

“My head hurts and now my eyes are burning.” Mouser rubbed her forehead, bitterly. Then she tapped at it, shaking her head. “Why a silly speck of a moustache though?”

“What’s happening?” The boyo asked, confused without being able to see.

“The end of a cinematic record comes with death.” The Undertaker continued. “By connecting these fake records I made it so the end would never come. And if you do that... somehow the body mistakenly believes life is still continuing. And starts moving again without a true soul.” Sebastian grimaced in disgust. Oblivious the Undertaker continued. “All living things instinctively try to find whatever they lack. If your body is wounded it will close it up. If the spirit feels lonely one will seek others to fill this emptiness. That is also why they instinctively know their soul is incomplete and seek what they lack.” His hands moved softly, gesturing, illustrating his train of thought. “So in order to fill this need they will try opening the bodies of the living. To settle the balance of their never ending cinematic records.”

“Is that why they came after us even though they lack hearing or sight? Our souls?” The boyo understood the process, but he still needed to ask more. The Undertaker paused, thinking.

“It’s impossible for them to take make another’s soul theirs.” He answered. “I can add to the records but I can’t truly create a soul.” He shrugged slightly, as if pitying that inability. “I experimented a lot but most never became anything more than flesh dolls without a self.” And there was a sadness in his voice that was easy to miss. Whatever he wanted to achieve by reanimating corpses seemed to be beyond the excuse of curiosity. “That is why I call them not living and not dead. The Bizarre Dolls.”

“We are trying to kill and angel that could do roughly the same.” Mouser mused. “But its creations were true puppets, meant to be soulless.” She waved her hand lightly, leaning against the parasol. “There was one that was actually made by placing a ghost within the puppet. Poppet had collected him...”

“How perverse can you be.” The boyo hissed, interrupting her train of thought, squinting, gritting his teeth, disgust shadowing his features.

“That you can’t understand just means that you are too young Earl.” The Undertaker answered with a chuckle, returning, walking up the opposite set of stairs, gently pulling the Bizarre Doll of a once young lady, her clothes white and simple, one arm going around her waist, one hand tangling with her bloodied fingers. She made no motion against him, as he embraced her gently, groaning mutedly. “This beautifully stitched skin, as white as wax, sewn to be just like when they were alive. Their mouths cannot clamour noisily or tell lies any longer. Aren’t they all far more beautiful than when they were alive?”
“I seem to disagree on the noise level they produce...” Mouser answered, glancing around.

“It makes me sick.” The boyo groaned, actually looking rather close to heaving.

“That’s what you say but... there are humans that would want these bizarre dolls, you know.” The boyo looked shocked, Sebastian looked confused. Mouser sighed. Yes, she could see that one coming as soon as the corpses had started piling on the corridors. “They don’t feel pain or fear.” He continued, enunciating the creature’s qualities. “They eat the living, craving their souls.” The Undertaker smiled widely. “What do you think? It is the best army one could have.”

“What?” The boyo shouted, shocked. Grell and Knox looked appalled. Sebastian was also looking a bit queasy now, as the explanation was unravelled. A rather hard feat to accomplish in three of those four.

“War makes corpses that could be in turn turned into more dolls. It makes sense.” Mouser answered, thoughtful again. “And as people die all the time the start of an army could be as easy as digging up a single cemetery.” She chuckled to herself. “And what is more terrifying for the enemy to see their own, fallen in battle coming back from the dead to kill them too?” The undertaker kept smiling, nodding at her, appreciating that at least one member of the audience understood the mechanics behind the reasoning. “Although it seems to me that some squishiness is required for the process and that might mean that not all cemeteries can be used... skeletons lack...”

“Considering necromancy to such an extent does not suit you.” Sebastian advised his covenant.

“Was I speaking out loud?” She whispered teasingly. “I can’t hear anything but screeches inside my head.” That made him smile just a bit. “In any case I do prefer my dead quiet, buried and forever out of the way.”

The Undertaker shrugged.

“An eccentric bunch said they wanted to see how they could be used. So we decided on experimenting by throwing the same amount of bizarre dolls and humans on a luxury cruise ship. Let them kill each other and the see how many survive on each end.”

“Quite deranged.” Sebastian gave his appraisal.

“Quite human, actually.” Mouser countered.

“I’ll defer to your knowledge on the subject then.” The demon conceded.

“I feel you just sniped at me.” She chuckled. “Should I jump on your stomach?”

“But I never thought we would crash into an iceberg.” The Undertaker continued, his laugh growing. “Having left the Grim Reapers I have no access to the lists.” So all in all the events were just a strange coincidence. Mouser glanced at the boyo, mouthing jinx at him. Quite understandably he ignored her. “Well... considering it saved me the trouble of making it sink I will consider this two birds with one stone.” The former Grim Reaper considered tapping his chin with his long nail again, looking absently up.

“I see. The ship was never headed to America.” Sebastian placed the simple truth into words.

It explained the reasons for their irregular course.

“But because of your presence there were a lot more of human survivals than expected.” He paused to consider the implications, nail scraping down his chin. “I wonder if I should be angry. Will I be
“The more he says the more I know I cannot let this pass.” Poppet stated in a more business-minded view of the situation. The blood on her face had stopped running, leaving a red stain down the left side.

“I know.” Knox scoffed. “For a Grim Reaper to distort the way of death is insulting.” Behind the big glasses his eyes narrowed. “Though he does not have glasses.” The musing gave way into a question. “Is he one of those deserters we hear about from time to time?”

“He can be anything for all I care,” Grell answered rather brusquely. “It is against Grim Reaper rules to come into the human worlds and meddle with life and death matters.”

Mouser pursed her lips at that. Sebastian scoffed. The boyo’s face closed up.

“You are not the one who should be saying that.” Knox chastised his senior partner, looking slightly dismissive.

“The quickest way to get him to cough up how the moving corpses work is probably just tying him up and handing him to the bosses.” Grell stated, scythe ready before her anger bubbled over. “Also... even more than being against the rules his crime is that of hurting a maiden’s face! No matter how hot you might be I can’t forgive you for that!” Poppet’s shouts were full of righteous anger on that.
Burning with righteous rage poppet attacked, breaking away from Knox, striking from above, hammering down on the adversary, going for a swift strike, filled with force, being parried far too easily by a smiling Undertaker, the whirring of the Death Scythe still unable to go through the decorated poles, the strength behind the blow fading. But in that charge the point was not really to get through the defences of the enemy but to get them open for the ally to make a sneak attack.

Unfortunately for poppet, Knox did not have the common sense to realize that a sneak attack was no longer sneaky, unexpected or effective, if one announced the intentions out loud and went after the enemy’s back with a weapon that produced such a loud noise.

“I have your back!” he called out enthusiastically, answering promptly to the situation his partner had created but losing his momentum when Sebastian’s sharp kick, barely defended by his forearm, sent him slamming against the nearest wall, parted from his scythe while the demon used the rebound from the hit to try a swipe at the Undertaker.

Their current target dodged the hit with little trouble, using the awkward movement of his bent back and tilted head to disengage from poppet as well, pushing her back. Sebastian stepped away from his own volition, eyes narrowed, having tested the waters, even if it was just a light brush against the true depth.

“What the hell Sebby?!” Poppet shouted, taken by surprise, stepping back while getting her bearings back, scythe held high, defensive, slightly unsure. Behind the glasses her eyes darted to Knox, then to the target.

“I would be in trouble if I allowed you to haul him off.” Sebastian stated, his voice low and business-like, straightening, adjusting his gloves, ready to continue.

“What?” Poppet sputtered, incensed.

Mouser smiled and stopped leaning on her parasol, picking it up, placing the body against her shoulder, free hand on her hip, playing with the bow absently, glancing at the boyo who was gripping the stair’s railing, keeping his weight off his twisted ankle, looking ahead.

“We also have a duty to present the truth before the Queen.” The boyo stated, grimly, already steadied from the shock of the actual origin of the moving cadavers. “We cannot let him get away.”

“So you see... we will be the ones to take him into custody.” Sebastian completed the boyo’s thoughts, pulling the left glove tighter. The thief stepped down and approached, standing next to him, fingertips brushing the edge of her stockings, counting how many flechettes she had left before slamming the parasol down, planting the tip on the wooden floor, fine lines cracking the polished surface.

“This is a problem of the Grim Reapers. Outsiders should not meddle.” Poppet shouted, angered.

“I also have my job as a butler. In which you are the meddling outsiders.” Sebastian answered, equally aggravated.

“My, my...” the Undertaker whispered under his breath, chuckling.

“As fascinatingly stoic as always Sebby.” Grell changed gears with a wide smile, shifting her position. “Fine.” Red locks were tossed over her shoulder after a shiver of anticipation. “If you’re
“Okay. We’ll keep it simple and the fastest will be the winner.” Knox growled, standing up, reaching for his scythe. “But I don’t intend to lose to some old geezer.” His words were accompanied by a thunderous expression.

“Come play with me then” Mouser challenged, winking. “wee godfer.” She teased a bit more, pointing with the parasol, noticing the barbs were hitting just right.

“It’s almost like a rabbit hunt.” The Undertaker giggled, his suddenly focused eyes moving around slowly, from enemies to terrain. “Well then... I wonder which rabbit is being hunted...” He mused, only half in provocation.

Two Grim Reapers and one demon charged with the same aim.

The Undertaker did not move, waiting, watching.

Mouser tensed but she was also waiting.

There were times and opportunities to be taken advantage as soon as they started.

Sebastian drew the silver knives with his right, the movement to throw them stopped by the buzzing weapon that Knox wielded, forcing him to crouch without releasing the volley.

“Oops I slipped.” Knox drawled, self-assured, a sleazy smile on his lips.

“Your eyesight is pretty bad, isn’t it.” Sebastian answered tersely, the expression of aggravation fading when he felt a soft hand on his back, his head ducking lower as the black parasol jabbed above him, under the Death Scythe, aiming at the Reaper’s chest. Mouser slid over his tailcoat, sat on his shoulders, elbowing the scythe up as Knox stumbled back, trying to get away from her reach.

The thief smiled when the Reaper was exhaling in relief, almost escaping the blunt blow, twisting the handle, the gears within the metal body clicking and falling in place, allowing the extra thirty centimetres of a double-sided blade to jut from the parasol’s tip, cutting his tie.

The fabric fluttered down, the area around it and its owner dead silent despite the confusion of sound the Undertaker and Grell were producing, behind the younger Reaper who looked surprised, wide-eyed but otherwise unscathed, scythe standing upright in front of him, still.

Sebastian stood quickly, one arm going around Mouser’s legs as she whipped the spear-like toy, both hands gripping it, lowering it as he made his attack, the tandem working with the moment.

“Grim Reapers are heavily near-sighted you know...” The Undertaker offhandedly commented on the exchange with a giggle, turning away from poppet to use the pole-turned weapon to deflect the silverware aimed at his unprotected back. Knox looked from his near call and to the enemy or enemies. There was little keeping the white haired man at his back from an attack.

“You are at a disadvantage then, aren’t you?” Poppet shouted, keeping the Undertaker’s attention locked, attacking once more, trying a diagonal carve, dodged easily with a chuckle, proving her wrong.
Sebastian’s fingers brushed against Mouser’s inner thigh, asking for her focus, extending his free hand as a perch. With a small grin the thief stepped on his palm, allowing him to toss her in poppet’s general direction. As soon as she was out of his arms the demon moved, trampling Knox, going directly after the target.

Mouser landed easily, inverting her parasol, slamming the blunt round end against Poppet’s unprotected back as he reeled from a failed plunge against the Undertaker’s defences. Prodded and barely avoiding a fall by digging the death scythe into the floor, spared an attack from the Undertaker because of the adversary shift, the Grim Reaper turned wonkily, working on pulling the weapon out as soon as she regained her balance.

Having missed his attack on either of the supernatural entities engaged in combat, composed of a wild swing and a mad dash, Knox scythe came down on Mouser’s head. The thief eluded him, moving inward, towards the godfer, the parasol blocking the blow overhead. It was nice to see blanching on someone’s face. The metal was holding up nicely. Her arm slackened a bit the pressure before pushing up, gripping the handle with both hands, slashing in a wide arch, catching no part of the retreating reaper.

Poppet went around the thief, going back into the main fray.

Knox was keeping his distance, scythe whirring, continuously glancing back.

A sharp pain within her head made Mouser duck, opening the parasol, rotating it fast counterclockwise, completely under it, releasing the trigger that unlocked a razor edge under the border frills. The approaching Bizarre Dolls, too close to the circumference were beheaded while walking by, three corpses falling in tandem, two later on, their shambling slower.

Transfixed by that but fast enough to notice the backstabbing Sebastian had just unleashed Knox turned, swinging his scythe, catching and crunching the silverware with the revolving blade box, going after the demon without a second thought.

The open canvas of the parasol followed him, catching the Reaper’s front, engulfing him in metal, frills and black, the thief pulling back, as if reigning in an ornery colt, getting dragged by his struggle.

Sebastian paused, waiting, seeing which enemy was more pressing. Even though the orders were for capture the two Reapers were constantly in the way.

Poppet was shrieking in aggression, the blocked movements turning increasingly wider and heavier in their hit. It seemed she had decided that if the Undertaker could not be hacked to pieces he would be at least bruised to a purple pulp.

Mouser huffed in effort, dragging her heels. Knox grunted, pushing the parasol with hands, elbows and the caught scythe, turning on the opposite direction of her grapple. The stalemate was broken by the freedom of the Reaper. Unfortunately for him said freedom came with such force and momentum that his scythe went flying, still whirring, its trajectory while arching down, spinning wildly smashing a few heads, taking out legs, arms and midsections.

Knox slipped out the knife almost immediately, ready to chivy duel. Mouser stepped back, closing the parasol, adjusting, rotating it clockwise to hide the razors again. Sebastian pressed on almost immediately.

Take out the Reapers, one by one. Allow poppet to tire out the biggest threat and then pounce on the prey.
The knife sliced the air, met by the spearing movement Mouser used defensively, the tossed knives fended off by a quick sidestep. A thwack from the blunt side of the thief’s parasol, barely blocked was certain to leave a bruise. But the block was enough to Knox’s knife to lock with the metallic body of the parasol and perform a disarming motion. The weapon clattered on the floor, sliding, stopping when it tapped the nearest wall.

Cautious Mouser allowed the weapon to go with little resistance, hopping back, reaching for her stockings, throwing the flechettes in two waves as Sebastian pushed the Reaper back through hard kicks, aiming to the bruises, to the vitals, to every place where a hit would mean crippling pain. Despite that his attention was divided, kept on the Undertaker, ready to step in as soon as poppet faltered.

Mouser pulled her daggers out of the sheaths, walking a few steps backward, taking a deep breath. The gradual tilt of the ship was now very noticeable. It would not take that long until the inclination was prohibitive and the whole thing sank down like a pole of stone. The strain was starting to echo through the ship’s insides, a low gurgle, a high pitched shriek. She walked away, turning her back on the fight, going for her parasol carefully, slashing corpses on the way. Quite a few had fallen away as well. Some had landed on their heads, smashed against floor, walls and furniture. Others were crawling about, the head undamaged, missing large chunks that would have otherwise provided mobility. All in all her head was a bit clearer without the press of high numbers.

The doctor was still in a stunned shock, half-hiding, quiet and pale.

The Undertaker raised the pole, nonchalantly, his face hardening into seriousness, barely glancing back, going for a block. Grell expected the same level of resistance from before but the constant rotation of the scythe cut through the pole easily, unbalancing the attacker.

“Huh it cut it?” A moment of triumph, a flutter of joy. “But why couldn’t it last time...” Poppet whispered in confusion, the victory turning into a liability, a state the Undertaker used for his advantage, kicking her back, pushing her down with a leering grin, vaulting off the Grim Reaper’s body and going after Knox that had disengaged from Sebastian to backup Grell.

The demon had the good sense to back away for a bit, to see what was happening without getting involved. The nature of the struggle had changed.

Mouser’s lips pressed together as the picked up the parasol and checked its body for damages. The blade was still locked in place. The fabric seemed to still be whole. It was still good for the fight that did not look like it was going to end soon.

The Undertaker’s landing was hard, slamming on Knox shoulders, the impact seeding him into a dive, the sliced pole spearing down, towards the younger Reaper’s head. Wearing a terrified expression Knox pulled his head back, away, the swift motion knocking the glasses off his face as the decorated wood was a hairsbreadth away from taking his nose.

“Crap! My glasses!” the godfer mumbled in astonishment, the phrase tumbling out instinctively. His legs were also struggling to accompany all the events, giving out as the Undertaker used him as trampoline. Knox glassless face hit the wooden floor with a thump.

“You seem to still be relying on your eyes.” The Undertaker mocked as he struggled. “So green.”

“What are you doing wish Grell shouted, gripping the glasses, tossing them back.

“Thanks...” Knox mumbled, kneeling, reaching for the glasses, his fingers barely brushing the frames before they were tossed out of his way by a silver knife.
They rained down on the Undertaker, fast and blurred. Sebastian had chosen to attack from above. The Undertaker laughed, discarding the shorter makeshift weapon to grab one of the others he had previously showed off and hammered down. He lashed out with it, deflecting some of the smaller blades, allowing others to be stuck to the material, twisting it and turning it before stabbing upwards, towards Sebastian’s head as he came close, within striking distance.

“My, my... are you sure you’ll be able to take me down with that small tableware?” The Undertaker hackled.

“It’s not as good as a death scythe but...” Sebastian dodged the blow easily, gripping the wood. “our silverware has top-grade sharpness.” The blade cut easily through the material, a combination of quality and strength. Sebastian moved, repeating the movement several times, dicing the thing quickly.

The Undertaker receded, tossing away the stub he held, a quick swipe retrieving and tossing three poles forward, against the demon. Sebastian hopped back in a quick evasion, landing on the railing, crouching, eyes narrowed.

“I see...” The Undertaker allowed his ululating laugh out, looking around. “But what is the matter? Three of you and you can’t do any better than this? Weren’t you going to hunt me down?” He called out.

“Excuse me?” Mouser called out her parasol’s blade slicing through the outer panelling of the fancy hall walls as she beheaded another of the now aimlessly wandering corpses.

“Ah yes. But you have not attacked me. Not once.” The Undertaker cackled, undulating, glancing around.

“This is annoying.” Knox summarized the situation, adjusting once again his crooked but miraculously not broken glasses, grimacing.

“Let’s hurry.” Grell asked grimly. “The ship is tilting badly. We are out of time.”

“I don’t care how it looks...” Knox started, kicking his scythe to life, readying.

“That’s right. We can only go for a head on fight.” Grell agreed.

They charged in tandem, aiming for the Undertaker. He just smiled as he blocked their attacks effortlessly, pinning them in place.

“Again? It can’t be! There shouldn’t be anything a death scythe can’t cut.” Grell shouted, actual fear crossing her face, trying angle and press back.

“How can you take on a death scythe?!” Knox answered, the same doubt and fear crossing his mind.

“The death scythe can cut through anything.” The Undertaker quoted calmly, countering their attempt to disengage or press on, smiling widely. “Don’t you think that phrasing is a bit strange?” he pointed out neutrally with a little quizzical tilt of the head. Poppet reached the solution fast, shock twisting her face. “Well... it’s not like I care either way.” The Undertaker chuckled, his eyes gaining focus, analysing what was in front of him carefully. He was going to strike. “There is one thing though, isn’t there?” He whispered softly. “One thing that it cannot cut.” The words were followed by a sweeping blow strong enough to knock both of his adversaries back and down. And instead of the hit of a blunt blade that strike cut through their clothes, rather impressively.
“No way…” Knox whispered, clutching his wounded chest, glancing up.

The shape of what the undertaker was holding shimmered and shifted.

“That’s… a death scythe.” Poppet gasped out, staring.

The Undertaker Scythe was... well... for one it was an actual scythe with the classical death theme one found in the usual depictions of a Grim Reaper from church and fable. The blade sprouted from a skeletal figure, big, widely curved on the outside, twice arched on the inside. Both sides seemed to carry a cutting edge.

“I see… so the adage is false when multiple death scythes are involved.” Sebastian concluded, calculating his next move. Fighting a scythe was troublesome. Fighting someone with the skill level the Undertaker was displaying was downright dangerous. The carefree attitude of the man and the previous acquaintance of his seemingly benign mask was creating a slight discrepancy in his ability to assess and fight.

“They should have collected it when you retired.” Knox shouted, outraged, showing off his age and naiveté.

“It was with me for such a long time that it became hard to part with.” The Undertaker smiled, reaching up, patting the flat of the blade affectionately. “I went through quite some trouble to take it with me you know… now…” His demeanour changed abruptly, both his hands sliding down the handle of his weapon, shifting it and his own weight into an attacking position, raising the scythe above his head. “How about I hunt you guys now? Like pitiful little rabbits.” The blade came down, cutting through one of the columns that supported the second floor.

The structure groaned, shrieked and started to sag, parts crumbling and falling. Knox shouted and curled. Grell covered her face as debris rained. The boyo made a startled sound, disgruntled, balancing, having hopped in one leg to the second floor to stay away from the fight. Sebastian dodged, grabbing Mouser and pulling her away from the debris.

“Do not attack him.” He demanded from her, voice low, reaching the tables, piled against the wall as the ship tilted more and more, slowly, gradually, inexorably. The point of no return could not be too far off.

“I have no intention to.” The thief whispered, gripping his jacket, eyes darting towards the adversary, worry starting to grow. “Divert.” She whispered. Sebastian nodded, grabbing a fallen table.

The furniture was used as projectiles, the tables flying at the Undertaker in irregular times, tilts and speeds.

“It’s no use.” The Undertaker laughed amidst the chaos of splintering and slashed wood. “Cutting the tables with this takes no more effort than cracking a cookie.” But even as he spoke he realized that he had lost sight of the demon he was fighting. Said demon was already up-close and personal, attacking with a kick.

“I just wanted to get within the wide reach of this death scythe.” He answered, slightly challenging.

“Learning from the little thief you stole, butler?” The Undertaker defended himself and moved. “Interesting.” A fast movement took him from the centre of the hall to the slowly collapsing second floor. “Then… I’ll have to be creative as well.” He announced, gripping the boyo. Even if he had had the time to run there was no way he could have done so in the state his ankle was in. “I
can finally put you in one of my specially made coffins Earl.” The Undertaker said, pulling the boyo up by the shirt, looking into his eye. Sebastian, due to contractual obligations, charged. Mouser had tensed to move but that little phrase, that smooth, flat tone, alerted her.

“Don’t!” The thief called out, trying to show him the trap before he fell.

“I knew that you would come at me.” The Undertaker stated smugly when Sebastian reached, a simple toss sending the boyo flying on the opposite direction. In that situation the demon had to break away from the fighting instinct and turn himself, understand that he had to keep him from falling, jumping from the banister with little time to coil his legs for a longer jump. His gloved hand reached out, to catch the boyo.

There was something very familiar in the sound of metal tearing through flesh, scraping and splintering bone, in the scent of blood gushing free, vibrant red, splattering around the wound, around the wounded, mixing with the tang of metal of the weapon that had delivered the blow.

There was something very wrong in watching Sebastian’s eyes widen in pain and shock as his own blood was spilled, flowing to his mouth in a clear sign that whatever was inside him had been heavily damaged. It was not the wound that had been that harmful. Those effects, the pain that was truly crippling, the blood that just was not stemming properly... those were due to the Death Scythe.

“They may be weak and fragile but the human life is quite hard to drag out.” The Undertaker spoke up, pulling the blade free with a quiet squelch, a creak of broken bone. “Butler… I always wondered… why would a vicious beast such as yourself dress up and play the butler part. Show me your record.” He called out, the scythe’s wound freeing the records at his behest.

“Sebastian!” The boyo shouted, unable to see more than the bloodied body of his butler.

Mouser’s eyes narrowed, red, movements having stopped mid-action, when the blade of the scythe had felled over her demon, following the unfolding of the scene she had been trying to reach. Her teeth gritted together hard, blood slipping down the corner of her closed lips. Claws pierced her palm as grey traced her skin akin to spreading ink on water, a slow snarl building in her throat before it died, turned into a smile, slowly tracing her lips, eyes closing, a little girlish giggle leaving them, the slight parting allowing the tips of her fangs out, her shadow blooming blacker larger behind her, grinning before her hands reached for the blades.
Chapter 86

The echoes of the multiple summons humans performed daily, unaware of the reaction their words, thoughts and wishes sparked, were like soft rain clicking harmlessly and uninterestingly against the barriers that separated the temporal world from the other realms. Most of the time they used no ritual, no sacrifice, no parcel of the knowledge they had spread throughout the human dominion to facilitate access. But even lacking that sometimes they heard the echo of a request through the ripples that touched the division and took an interest in it. They were even mildly aware of it with such saying as speak of the devil...

A call? Whatever was sounding louder was not a careless invocation, a casual curse, a scream of desperation. It was a call within the well defined instructions of the books. In the midst of sadness and anger, confusion and despair… the cursed words are spoken. Summoning me not by name but by caste and markings.

Why would I bother to show? The sacrificed was someone else. A soul offered by proxy. They were humans willing to dabble, to flirt with the darkness but not willing to offer all. Some demons would go to them, capricious and hungry, eager to play. Because it would be amusing, because the price was being met or just because hunger was stirring. I am far older and less likely to listen to the whimpers of lesser quality prey.

But something fixed my attention in that ceremony beyond the use of the correct seal and formulation.

So I crossed the barriers.

Cultists were caught off guard by their perceived success. They started asking, demanding, some screamed in fear, never having truly believed.

But it was the tiny little dirty creature within the cage, the one that was willing to make the true trade, the one to whom the sacrifice rang true. That was the key to the sacrifice that seemed to remain unclear for the humans who actually performed the rites written. A sacrifice had to resonate, to give feelings of true loss. Less than that and the ripple of the plea would likely be ignored.

The indelible first step into darkness and oblivion had been taken.

All it needed was acceptance and a contract.

Would the little thing be willing to go that far?

“You have given a big sacrifice. Now it’s your choice whether to make a contract with a demon and have your wishes granted… or not. The price to cross the river has already been paid.” Would he make use of the chance the cultists had killed for?

“I… I want power.” The slight hesitation was overcome as he looked around, frame shivering with rage, seeing a chance.

“Someone shut him up!” The cultist panicked, realizing their mistake. It was not entirely their fault. The texts were created just so. A daemonibus docetur, de daemonibus docet, et ad daemones ducit. As an old fool had once phrased it.

“The power to take revenge on the ones that did this to us!!” The child gritted out the word in a
weakened voice but filled with rancour and hatred, with a depth of feeling no little human would normally have held within its tiny body. “Demon! I’ll make a contract with you!” He called out, accepting the offer eagerly.

“So you are abandoning the path of light to hell.” It was a passing warning, unimportant. If he was as eager as he looked who was I to dispel such purpose when it suited my whims rather well. “Fine. Well then.” Slipping a little closer showed no fear of the form I had chosen to wear. Somewhat amusing. The cultist continued in a panic, finding themselves unable to leave the room. “Let us mark our bodies with the contract seal. The more visible the place the stronger its power.” Timidity and fear of discovery had created weak contracts and quicker meals. How far went the little thing’s hatred, his need to see its wishes fulfilled... “where do you...”

“Anywhere is fine I want a power stronger than anyone else’s!”

Something akin to amusement crossed my mind.

“You are quite greedy despite that small body. I shall put the seal in that big eye of yours, filled with despair.”

No branding was ever painless and neither need nor greed cancelled the fact that a human body was quite open to feeling every agony twofold. Some broke there, unable to keep the goal in mind, shattered by the moment. But despite the screaming agony he didn’t renge his plea.

Death had descended completely over the cultist in a flurry of claws and blood, the frenzy of battle a welcome thrill. Feeding at that point would be detrimental, bringing the attention of Reapers. And what use was there in gorging on lesser souls?

Turning I faced the child whose soul had been marked, his eye reflecting the carnage glassily, the colour twisted by the seal therein.

“What is your name?” Names were an interesting thing, a powerful thing sometimes.

“I am...” he hesitated, his eyes focusing on the bloodied altar. “Ciel Phantomhive.” The child declared firmly, his demeanour turning sterner despite his weakened state, the blood dripping from the marked eye. “The one who will inherit the house of Phantomhive.

“I see.” A light chuckled left my mouth. “That is fine.” It was also a good hint to decide the next form I should wear. Most demons were very scrupulous about that. “I should take a form more suitable of being in service to an Earl.” I announced with some smug pomp, stepping out of the shadows, having taken the form of a man in formal butler clothes. I could have been away but a peek into the world occasionally could reveal interesting things. And there was nothing more gauche than appearing in an outdated appearance in front of a master. More often than not it made them question our capabilities. “Very well. Now. Give me an order my little lord.”

He made three requests as the unshakable basis of this contract as we walked away from the burning building that had held the ceremony. That I protect him and never betray him until he obtains his revenge; that I obey his orders unconditionally; And that I never lie. They’re all quite difficult to accomplish when you’re playing the role of an elegant butler. For a child it was actually rather cleverly worded. And yet there were so many loopholes to exploit within.

Although his words and gestures, from the harsh tone to the bloodied blue ring, spoke of revenge and treated the events like a game it was easy to see that it was a lie, created as a shield. Quite
amusing to see in someone who had just requested no lies from me.

It was starting to look like a hassle. However even if it takes as long as his life to fulfil this contract it still will feel like an instant to me. If I can kill time and get a good meal out it that would be appropriate.

It did not take long for the complications to grow due to the lack of knowledge of the child.

I had ended up serving a boy that had been kept in cotton wool, shielded and away from the world he wanted to war against, a disagreeable, arrogant brat that named me after a dog, of all things.

Still the little bit of information he remembered was useful to take him to where the story would restart.

The hospital.

Where the former butler recognized me as his successor. He had no other information that could give a glimpse of who had been behind the attack.

Where the Lady in red, his aunt, gave him the second ring that marked the status of the family and his position within it.

The burned out husk of a once magnificent mansion.

The cemetery where the young master buried the remnants of a child’s mind.

It was the first and last time I heard him call his parents like that. Mother. Father. Predecessors was the word used from then on.

Restoring the manor was an easy job while he seemed too involved in the human process of mourning. After all those stories of palaces built in one night by demons were not born from bragging.

Taking care of the child on the other hand… it quickly turned into a rather bothersome task.

A little stubborn brat that could not do a thing on his own and was haughty and mulish, thinking he could. So, breaking role for a bit, but not straying away enough to break the true meanings of the contract, I had to lecture and correct that notion.

Humans are frail, weak animals. Any demon in a contract knows this and has to behave accordingly or his meal is lost. Exceptions existed but those usually did not need a demon to appear and solve their issues.

To aggravate the matter he took issue with everything that was not done with at least some fakery of humanity and demanded without pause.

A little brat in every sense I could place in the word.
The world kept changing so I had to adapt further to the part of the butler, know more than the occasional glance could reveal, all the while training him to become what his bloodline and pride demanded. The advantage in that was that I could start seasoning his soul right away with beliefs and skills infiltrating all the things a noble should know and do.

No easy task.

The discipline and punishment I imposed when learning was immediately and vengefully reattributed when I had to play the student part in the butler craft. Despite the annoyance it cause those little sparks of anger a swift retribution at the merest slight was a good sign for the development of a soul worth tasting.

Every night he would wake up, screaming, haunted by nightmares. It was a weakness I was willing to permit because in its simplicity it made the anger and need for vengeance burn. Despite soothing the fear with the simplest of truths my presence was a reminder that it would never go away until revenge was taken.

The roles became more natural as time passed.

No compliments from him while I doled them out when needed and within contract, but I had made my research and training. I had become one hell of a butler, ironic turn of phrase that amused me to use. Sometimes it was the little things…

Soon enough the Queen called, acknowledging the return of the Phantomhive bloodline. And with that acknowledgement the young master was gaining the power he needed to become the bait of his revenge. The desire to take it had not waned and seemed to be spurred every time he caught a glimpse of the mark left by the cultists, every time a nightmare reminded him of his losses.

The ceremony confirmed another step. He had actual power in the form or a demon. Knowledge he had struggled and worked to gain. Money gained from a company he had created. And now he had power in the eyes of society, the same power he believed had been the reason why his family had been targeted and eliminated in the first place.

It was the moment of choice all over again.

From that moment the contract would either be enforced or he could falter and relent, be devoured.

But the Earl of Phantomhive ignored the trap and reaffirmed his conviction, his desire and his order. He turned from the light and walked into the abyss at a dignified pace.
Beautiful and foolish.

A soul worthy of attention.

A soul for which I fell to one knee and pledged the contract... because when I deliver victory to the Earl of Phantomhive the cost will be more apparent than the loss of his soul. When his victory comes his soul will no doubt be extremely delicious.
Chapter 87

The thief charged fast with barely any warning, ignoring the memories that flowed in black-edged streams around the demon that had once lived through them, leaping towards the target, making sure what he saw was not enough to be ready, daggers slashing down, aimed directly towards her own feet, cutting free the lacing, left leg whipping first in a wide arch midair, the speed and movement loosening and tossing the boot against the Undertaker’s head.

It was a simple trick that triggered a defensive motion of the scythe, the wider blade moving upwards to shield the wielder from the relatively harmless projectile. It caught his attention as a projectile should. The Undertaker moved, turning away from the record he had wished to see in its entirety.

Her foot touched the floor lightly, the stocking’s tip ripped by black claws, a faint smear of blood staining the red, fading into the black where the blade had dug deeper than the leather and lacing, balancing on the toes with ease, eyes narrowing, calculating, before a fast spin tossed the pair-less piece of footwear, this time aiming low, the motion following through without hesitation or pause.

The goal was still placed quite simply in breaking the Undertaker’s focus, keeping it away from Sebastian.

Claws dug down on the boards for extra grip and stability, freed as the second boot flew, the other foot leaving the ground in a small step before Mouser vanished in a burst of speed, immediately going for a backstab, trying to gently place a sharpened blade straight through the Undertaker’s neck.

A simple tilt of the Reaper’s body avoided that strike with little surprise from both parts, the scythe turning to retaliate, its wielder leaning on his heels, turning, the blade slashing to follow before breaking away from the intent.

It moved rather slowly, the distance not ideal.

In a way that was what she needed it to do.

Mouser slumped down, sweeping her leg, forcing the Undertaker to hop to keep upright. With a little hiss the thief angled her leg up, trying to use the claws to disembowel him from below, pulling her leg away when the scythe came down, backing a bit before getting to her feet and lunging forward, swaying from side to side before imbuing as much speed as she could into her body to attack once again.

The renegade Reaper tried to put some distance between them, something that would allow him the use of his scythe. Mouser gave him no such chance the motions, pelting him with blows, slashes and plunging blades, daggers creating a blur of speed and harm dodged and blocked but barely returned even as she moved, trying to find new angles and blind spots.

Knox gaped, struggling to get up, shaking away debris.

“How in the world is she doing better than us?!?” He grunted out, his eyes attracted to the ongoing fight.

“Evee fights extremely up close. That places anyone with weapons longer than a dagger at a disadvantage.” Senior dispatch officer Grell Sutcliffe adjusted her glasses, pushing away pieces of the second floor balcony standing wobbly. “Still... I have seen her take down a fallen angel like
that.” Grell’s tongue touched her dry lips carefully, glancing around.

What Evee was doing better was just resting on stubbornly avoiding any blow coming her way and making sure the death scythe stayed a useless club.

No blade, no harm.

The records stopped flowing suddenly, snapping back into their body of origin, the images fading from the view of those who could have witnessed them as Sebby’s mind overcame the scythe’s pull and strained to reach the falling Young Master with a roar of effort, once more conscious of his surroundings and situation.

The demon tensed, reaching the outstretched hand, the mask of humanity the contract enforced cracking under the weight of too many efforts being piled on his body at once. But in that last exertion, teeth gritting and arm extended, he was able to grip the smaller hand, pulling the frailer human body into his grip, adjusting the fall so the brunt of the damage was taken by his back.

“Mouser” He called hoarsely, before falling silent, the impact having taken more than what he had expected.

The thief stopped all movement suddenly, the blade tip completely still, inches away from the smiling Undertaker’s face. She grimaced, glancing back quickly, jumping nervously when the Undertaker moved, faking an attack to take advantage of her distraction, jumping above her, approaching the boyo and Sebastian. Mouser crouched and returned the blades into their sheaths, approaching carefully.

“I knew you would be able to protect the Earl.” The Undertaker spoke up, looking down on the fallen demon, a light grin tracing his lips. “As expected from the butler.”

“Sebastian! Sebastian!” The boyo was shouting, true worry actually coming through as he saw the blood, that was covering him as well, the unmoving form beneath him.

Mouser picked up her fallen parasol, circling carefully, keeping her balance on the moving ship. While she had avoided the blade there had been some choice blows from the Scythe’s body that had made it through her blocks. But as the sharp part was the true danger Mouser hadn’t minded. The metal boning was twisted but had not snapped. It was simply uncomfortable and was pinching her future bruises.

“You’re loud.” Sebastian finally answered the boyo after a moment, opening his eyes, panting, his breathing pattern broken. “I can hear you just fine.” He mentioned, straining to sit, spitting darkened blood, eyes showing his actual nature very clearly, deep red. Blood had pooled where he had fallen and stained his clothes, seeping from the multiple wounds.

“Your record was pretty interesting.” The Undertaker stated, approaching leisurely.

Mouser tapped the parasol’s handle softly with sharpened fingertips, watching, moving slightly to relieve the discomfort. It was not the best angle but there was some room to work if and when things went south.

“But it seems like you only make the Earl miserable after all.” Ciel’s face was a mask of fear-tainted-shock and confusion, stained with Sebastian’s blood as the Undertaker dissected his findings, what he had glimpsed in the memories and what he had peeked at through the scuffle with Mouser.

“I would blame that on the boyo’s own luck.” Mouser whispered, moving the ring that separated
the body of the parasol from the handle. Inside the gears aligned.

“So maybe I’ll have to make you disappear.” The conclusion came without a surprise, accompanied by a smile.
The scythe was raised, poised for a strike.

Sebastian grimaced, ready to move and evade even if it would cost more than his current state could manage.

A chain rattled loudly, a round weight crashing between them, used like a whip, slithering as it returned to the parasol, interrupting the moment, making sure the Undertaker’s focus was split.

It started with a low growling rumble that soon was accompanied by vibrations and then turned into an intense tremor. The ship lurched tilting, the angle sharper than before.

“Could it already have…” Grell whispered, having the knowledge of events due to the Death Note.

“Crap…” Knox shouted, looking for a place to grab on to. Or to perch on. He didn’t seem all that picky.

The doctor shouted in fear, truly taken by surprise, falling down when the ship’s movement took it into an upright position.

“So soon?” The Undertaker asked, his thoughts voiced for no one in particular, leaning back, using the weight of his own blade to counter the momentum.

“Damnit…” Sebastian hissed, grasping the boyo, glancing around, searching for somewhere to hold on to.

Mouser allowed herself to slide down for a bit, claws leaving lines before slamming the parasol hard into the floor that was growing akin to a wall, sinking the whole blade into it, landing astride scuttling a bit back to avoid putting too much weight on the toy pulling her legs up, standing carefully, leaning against the floor, looking up.

“Need any help?” She asked Sebastian softly as he dangled, one hand gripping the broken metal of a banister, the other arm keeping the boyo from meeting the same fate as the doctor.

“I would welcome a boost if you wouldn’t mind terribly.” Sebastian answered tiredly.

The cold water flooding through the rips created by the ice had finally been too much for the ship.

Poppet landed on a column directly above the demon, looking down at the newest corpse as screams echoed outside. “Ryan Stoker. Born August 24th 1854. Death by falling accident on April 20th 1989. No special remarks.” She quoted. “Sebby as you can see there is no time.” The red haired reaper straightened and looked up, pinpointing the Undertaker’s location. “I’m sorry but I will be taking him. You just stay here and watch.” She stated before going for the chase.

“I cannot allow…” Sebastian shouted, moving to follow, the interception cut short by a charging Knox riding his scythe, traversing the width of the tilting ship, forcing the demon to back away instead of moving forward. The momentum took him to one of the columns, grabbing hold of it, mirrored by the Reaper who grinned.

“Senior is stronger than me so I’ll leave that one to him.” He announced merrily. “I’ll finish off the weakened one over here.” The younger Reaper’s tone changed to a smug self satisfaction.
Sebastian grimaced, annoyed.

Mouser leaned forward, reaching for the parasol’s handle, searching for the release mechanism. This time she had to make sure he would not move after. A few broken bones should do the trick.

Surprisingly the actual comeback came from the boyo, following a darkened look and a tight fist, the words backed by all the venomous haughtiness bred into the haute monde.

“I can’t have you looking down on my butler.” He stated, looking up with an absolutely mirthless grin so close to sneering smugness that it would rival any standard villain in a gothic novel. “Weakened? Lose to you?” Ciel scoffed. “That joke is not even funny.” He barely glanced back. “Correct, Sebastian.” Still the boyo asked, just a hint of doubt slipping into his stern demeanour.

“Yes, very much so.” Sebastian answered with an amused huff that, unfortunately, was too much for his lungs, triggering a hacking cough. Judging by the angle of the blade and wound they would most likely filled with blood.

“Oh man, it’s like I’m picking on the weak here.” Knox mumbled, leaning on his scythe with a grim, disgruntled expression.

Mouser freed the parasol, crossing the space fast, making use of debris and improvised supports, slipping down next to him, one arm going around his frame, claws probing around gently under the fabrics. The blood felt sticky and it was still flowing. With her other arm she relieved him from the boyo.

“His back and upper chest are particularly defenceless.” Mouser mentioned, balancing the boyo, letting go of Sebastian, knowing that what was under the fabric was worse than he wanted others to know, gripping the column carefully.

“Are they now...” Sebastian whispered, having leaned in to hear her words. The kiss was brief, leaving her lips stained with his blood, the edge of hunger unprotected, made jagged by the wounded state while he took as much as he could from whatever she was willing and able to offer. Mouser’s markings faded briefly, the surge of strength faltering, offered.

The boyo’s face grew embarrassed, nearly glowing with a blush that rivalled the moment where he had slipped and almost declared to Elizabeth.

Knox just looked disgusted, revving the scythe.

It made the devastating blow that connected with his face rather amusing adding to the twist of his features, throwing him back, off his feet, down, towards the debris that had gathered as the ship continued to shift towards true verticality. They made something akin to a rather nasty trap. That first flight was followed by a kick to the solar plexus, knocking the air out of Knox, his body bowing backwards with a choked gasp, almost blacking out.

The demon gave chase, reaching the gracelessly tumbling body of the reaper, gripping him by the tie, pulling up, coming up close and personal, showing eyes and fangs that betrayed the human façade, mocking.

“What did you say about picking on the weak?” Sebastian said in an even, condescending tone, relishing on the stunned fear within the younger Reaper’s eyes before landing another punch, throwing him away once more.

Knox staggered, swinging his scythe to avoid a slamming kick, teeth gritted, face bruised, finding his balance for a moment, using it in an attempt to sweep the blades against Sebastian, mow him
down. The demons somersaulted easily, avoiding the weapon altogether, using the height and movement to dive into a kick, bashing into his chest, driving him deep into the tables that cluttered what had once been the second floor of the hall. Tables and chairs flew, driven away by the smashing impact, making Mouser wonder if Knox hadn’t landed head-first.

“How are you still moving?” Knox groaned out, waddling in the broken wood, grimacing, thoroughly trounced.

Sebastian slammed him back down with his shoe.

“I have to answer to the master’s orders.” The demon answered, grinning wide, cracking his knuckles with glee.

“Trying to look cool when you can barely stand that is so disgus…” Knox tried to retort before the fist came down, accompanied by a chuckle.
Chapter 89

Grell chased and clashed with the Undertaker once more, the scythes unable to cut through each other, turning the match into a spar that she did not care much for. Hopping about through precarious platforms to reach, retaliate, rebuff and charge. Every step could lead to a mistake that would get her skewered and that was not acceptable. Evee had shown that staying close was somewhat key to keep the battle controlled and contained and while it was hard to do for someone with Grell’s expressive and expansive style the trick was indeed producing some results.

But the damnable renegade had also learned from the fight and was moving in a way that kept him backtracking and regaining the room needed for at least one threatening swipe before the weapons locked again. What was worse and what was annoying Grell the most was the smug, amused grin he kept plastered on his handsome face while he moved.

The blades hammered against each other, neither cutting nor breaking, the keen edge useless, the whirring slowing, stopping and skipping, screeching as they slid and disengaged, breaking apart, fast. Grell barely took a breath, acknowledging the change before divining right into aggression.

“You…” The Undertaker’s remarked, his attentions shifting slightly, recognition glimmering in his eyes, noticing the uneven, thick stitching, out of place in the exquisitely made coat, avoiding Grell’s next strike with ease, ascending through the now almost vertical ship. “I thought I’d seen you somewhere.” The renegade continued, defending himself with easy, without striking back. “You were the Grim Reaper who acted as Madam Red’s butler.” With the recognition and memory now placed into its rightful order the Undertaker pressed the issue. Keeping the adversary off balance had to do with more than striking hard and fast. “You also have been seduced by the curiosity that are a human lives, haven’t you?” and it seemed that he was looking to draft who he could into the game he played.

Grell was less than amused, teeth gritting and scythe cutting in a wide arch of destruction, severing everything in its path. The Undertaker, the one thing she wanted ripped open, was fast enough to avoid it, laughing in a small retreat, regaining the upper ground.

“I’ll have you know that no one likes nosy guys!” The Grim Reaper shouted in fury, ready to continue to give chase. There was no way she would allow him to get away and leave her stuck with a row of unfinished reports and fruitless speculations, not to mention the scolding that was coming, without probations if she was lucky, because of the timing in which the fight was occurring, cutting into one of the busiest periods of the night’s Death Note.

“Isn’t time almost up for you?” the Undertaker taunted, laughing, unperturbed by the Reaper’s murderous mood.

“With all these handsome men in front of me I’m not just going to leave like Cinderella.” Grell scoffed, still moving, still pursuing the target with a single-minded intent.

More than that it was a job that had to be done and he had pressed a rather sour spot. But with her focus on the capture and on the belief she had found a way to bypass the Undertaker’s defences and leave him vulnerable Poppet failed to notice the beaten lump of black that a very annoyed Sebastian had tossed her way. And noticing it did nothing when the impact was barely seconds away.

The young Reaper slammed against her limply, the force of impact sending both hurdling through the metal of a banister, into a column that cracked and changed their tangled trajectory and finally
into the mess of broken tables and chairs where Grell groaned, looking around injured and disoriented.

“Ronald?!” She shrieked in shock when she saw how battered, bruised and swollen her partner was, caught by surprise by the enormity of the act and the fact that he had been weaponized against her. Wood clattered around as she waddled to get away from it, more blood staining her skin, from the wound to the face, the corners of her mouth.

“Young’uns these days are really feeble.” Sebastian mocked, smiling openly, leaning against the stolen scythe, revving it once for the full effect of the jeer. The boyo stood next to him, stone-faced, the injured ankle suspended, leaning against Mouser for support. “Isn’t it kind of old fashioned to rely solely on your death scythe?” He continued with a small chortle.

“I will be taking my leave now.” Mouser answered, picking up the boyo and placing him on Sebastian’s arms. He accepted the weight with no problem, not giving away the extent of his injury. The boyo simply glared at being turned into an item but said nothing of it. She turned her back on them and walked away, towards the nearest horizontal exit as the ship slowly sunk, now fully vertical.

“We will find you shortly.” Sebastian answered, keeping his eyes locked on the target.

“We will find you shortly.” Sebastian answered, keeping his eyes locked on the target.

“See that you do.” Mouser answered in a little annoyed mumble, rubbing over a wet spot in the bent corset.

As they tried to tie loose ends in the hall her job was to procure and secure the means to leave.

The ship started shaking once more, the strain it was under reaching another breaking point, the weight of the water shifting, pulling it down fast and upright, speeding up the process that up until then had crawled as an ever present but easily dismissed threat.

“This is bad…” The Young Master shouted over the noise, worried.

Outside the screams were once more echoing in their full range. Volume, fear, panic. Those tried to help, those who tried to run. Those who pushed others down to save themselves. The explosions from the flares that kept signalling their location, the creaking of breaking wood and shriek of deforming metal.

Water burst through the weakened walls, starting to fill the hall, its flow between the Demon and the Renegade Reaper. That would only accelerate the sinking. It doused them once more, chilled and cutting, forcing Sebastian to think of the Young Master once more, moving away to a less advantageous but more secure position in the galleries.

“Well… it’s finally time to say goodbye.” The Undertaker stated, walking on the slender metal rail, approaching the weak spot that gushed water tirelessly. “It was pretty interesting.” The renegade stated.

It was not a full opening. But as he had said time was up and that would be a last, desperate chance. The expression of determination, shadowed by the strain of a last ditch attempt at doing any real damage was worn by both Sebastian and Grell as they moved fast in an attack that lacked the earlier animosity as their attention as set in simply taking down the Undertaker and not in getting into each other’s way.

And the synchronicity worked reasonably well to the renegade reaper’s surprise.

Grell’s scythe locked his, keeping the blade down when he blocked. Sebastian’s forced and
awkward dodge as his kick was aimed to the head, the heel of his shoe breaking the links of the silver mourning chain.

There was a look of distress covering the Undertaker’s features as the chain and its lockets fell down, away from his grasp, a semblance that turned into shock and then into a small, private smile when the Young Master reached out, acting on pure instinct, gripping the silver chain, pulling it towards himself.

As fast as he could he broke off the stalemate, returning to the rushing water, pulling his fringe away from his eyes, his voice taking a laugh-less, gentler tone.

“Earl…” He called out softly, not quite looking their way. “I’ll entrust that to you for a while.” The undertaker said, straightening, wet strands of hair framing his features. “Please take good care of it. It’s my treasure.” He asked before standing fully and turning his back on them, hands gripping the scythe slowly, as if reassuring himself about its weight and the way it should be handled.

“Wait! Undertaker!” The Young Master shouted, confused,

“See you Earl.” The Death Scythe moved as its master commanded. “Let’s meet again.” The Undertaker added before striking, the wide movement finding a myriad of weak spots, spreading a shockwave, the impact latching on to every broken structural point.

It effectively decapitated the ship, breaking it in half.

As the water-filled stern kept sinking the bow tilted back into its original horizontal position, groaning, going fast, slamming into the dark waters. It increased the victims once more as the ones safely away screamed about the event, fearful, despairing.
With the ship truly doomed and the target gone Sebastian broke away from the quickly flooding hall, hopping above the vessel itself, looking around fast, deciding his course of action before hitting the deck, running towards the bow.

It had held a slightly horizontal position for a while after breaking, falling, slamming hard into the water, the shockwave driving the rescue boats further away, crushing the fallen that had had a brief respite of luck and were still alive. But, unsurprisingly, it was once more tilting, water gurgling as it entered the gaping hole that exposed all of the ship’s floors.

Corpses, people, bizarre dolls were all falling into the dark, disturbed waters, unable to fend for themselves for long. Some clung to ropes. Other grabbed others. Corpses still tried to eat their way into the souls that were forever out of reach. Their sounds of fear, panic and help went unheard, unanswered, unimportant.

“It doesn’t look like this side will hold either…” Sebastian stated tersely, feeling his blood gush out, each movement dragging a new wave to the surface that refused to heal at an acceptable rate. He flinched in pain, feeling the annoyance deeply.

In the chaos around he gripped a floatation device as he reached the tip of the ship balancing on the metal railings, looking ahead, at the calmer, darker waters beyond the struggle lit by lantern, flares and the dying lights within the ship itself. He smelled fire, fuel, smoke. Quickly he shoved the ring over the Young Master’s head.

“Young master… take a deep breath.” The demon urged, picking the little frame easily as the structure beneath his feet sank fast. “With the situation being what it is, please forgive me!” He continued with the words a butler should utter when about to treat the master like a ball.

“What are you…” The Young Master started, confused, before screaming as he flew through the cold air and the ship sunk fully with a gurgle and a surge of agitated waters.

Mouser observed the vanishing broken vessel without paying it much attention, placing the oar inside the pinched life boat next to its pair, settling in the middle as the small wooden dinghy bobbed, slightly precarious but keeping the ocean away nonetheless, responding to the sudden agitation of the waters. Even at that distance it was possible to feel the distress going on within the wreck.

Tiredly she sighed, reaching her lower back, pulling the ribbons of the corset free, undoing the bow and simply taking the strip away, ripping it out of its holes, tossing it aside, letting the cloth, stained by water, salt and blood settle in a lump at the bottom of the boat, grabbing the corset’s front, yanking it free, the boning she had tough simply bent having snapped into two, the pieces of metal ripping the black fabric, both sharp ends slipping out wetly from her stomach. They hadn’t gone that far in but it still hurt.

A few flechettes fell, clicking softly against the wooden bottom.

She hissed, teeth bared, bracing the forearm against the wound, the blood having stained the silk, breathing deeply, allowing it to close before pulling the straps of the undershirt up, having them
hidden for aesthetics and worn because of chafing, slipping her arms into them, rubbing the cold skin, looking around.

Then Mouser had a little startled moment, digging through the silk, patting her skin until cold clawed fingers found the bank note. Its heavy paper was slightly soggy but the ink was there and the words were legible. No blood had come near it either. She trapped it in the suspender belt with a relieved hum, glancing out.

The ship was completely gone, the place where the ocean had swallowed it peaceful, unassuming.

People were still screaming.

Some panicking, most drowning.

Lights flickered and wavered a bit further away, in a cluster of lifeboats like the one where she sat and waited.

Flares were still being thrown into the air periodically.

Still shivering the thief settled back, closing her eyes. Something was still not quite right. Her markings and claws had not faded back. Which meant that instinct was still feeling that something was either close or coming.

A weight fluttered around her, heavy, a scent of chemicals and cookies, startling her. She looked up, around, finding the black fabric dry, still slightly warm. The Undertaker’s cloak. The dagger was in her hand, retrieved by habit, but he was not around.

Grim Reapers seemed to vanish and appear from nowhere with ease. It was a skill that she could envy.

Nibbling her lower lip Mouser sheathed the dagger, her finger brushing against a small piece of paper conspicuously shoved into a button hole.

_Curious?_ It said.
black nails scraped the wooden surface as he gripped the lid.

“Welcome little girl.” He said in a low voice, chuckling. “Curious?” He had to be that parlour’s undertaker, she thought as he stepped out fully, still smiling, straightening a crumpled black hat.

“No.” Mouser answered, pouting, getting to her feet, hiding the knife as the man’s back was turned, closing the coffin while humming, picking up the flowers she had dropped to go into a defensive stance. She strained, tiptoeing, trying to reach, only to leap out of the way, startled when the man moved much too fast, looming above her, still smiling widely, unchangingly.

“Did you come here to try one of my coffins?” He asked, gesturing wildly and widely, making her attention split and jump around, moving through the several boxes, empty and occupied alike. The little girl’s eyes narrowed, Mistrustful and stubborn. Most people got frightened, skittish or screamed and ran.

“Are they comfortable?” That question created a surge of laughter. She blushed a bit, looking away with a small embarrassed smile. She extended her arms. “I can’t reach.” Amused the Undertaker picked her up, allowing her to look inside the coffin she had been trying to reach. Mouser stared at Iphigenia for a moment, leaving the flowers. “She looks pretty.”

“I cleaned her up nicely.” The undertaker answered with a chuckle as the girl hopped out of his arms, wincing when she hit the floor but showing very little beyond the grimace. She turned, winking, showing a bone cookie, stolen from his jacket, the upper pocket where he had stored it for a quick snack, running away fast and without any other glance back.

The Undertaker closed the door, going back inside. It was an interesting comment though. Did she know how grisly the other young lady looked when she had arrived? He stopped for a moment, thinking. The smile that had appeared when in the higher point of view she had caught a glimpse of the three other corpses he was working on. The small knife that was a perfect match for the wounds. The little stains of blood under her nails and the remnants of red on the boots, socks and edges of her skirt. Well then... but he still had those guests to tend to.

Mouser’s claws slid softly over the fabric without tearing, thinking, frowning slightly.

What he wanted to obtain by using those small gestures of past gentleness was rather clear.

If her skills as a demon had a focus on souls they would be rather useful for whatever purpose the Undertaker was chasing, having now been told what he was tinkering with. And her ramblings about how the Bizarre Dolls worked probably had given him some sort of idea about her inclinations. She liked weapons.

And it was not like someone belonging to the Reapers, even if he counted as a renegade, could go about summoning a more experienced demoness of her breed to further his research.

There was even a cookie in the upper inner pocket. The thief stared at it for a moment before nibbling, holding it on her fang, looking around.

It was true she had not been adverse to work with the man before. He had an excellent knowledge of the human body, one she had used time and again. Dissection was a good way to learn where to cut, where to strike with precision and to deal damage and pain.

Although dismembering people was actually something Hugh, the pig-farmer-butcher-in-charge, had taught her. It was in point of fact nastier than just working on the corpses with the Undertaker. Hugh made people disappear by cutting them apart and feeding them to the pigs. There was a nice
side-profit in it as well. Selling the hair to the wig-makers. Selling the pulled teeth to the denture businesses. Those pigs dispatched the chopped up corpses in no time. But they did not eat the hair and teeth. Hence the profiteering. Still nasty, having to shave people for disposure.

But now he had nothing to offer her. She was no longer as easy to bribe as she had once been. Although calling easy to a negotiation of 300 bone cookies was maybe overshooting it. The Undertaker had provided them, though. The thief crushed the little note, shaking her head.

An agitation in the water made her reach for the nearest oar, concerned.

Ending up in the ocean would be very bad for her.

As a true city dweller she was clueless about swimming.

And, keeping in mind the frigid weather and her dislike for it, Sebastian had not pressed that issue nor tried to toss her into the nearest pond to waddle in an attempt to not mimic an anchor while panicking with memories of having her head shoved into the Thames.

Sebastian broke the surface, gripping the edge of the rowboat, levering himself, looking inside. The thief lowered the oar, smiling lightly, approaching, cupping his wet face between her palms, thumb clearing away the blood that clung stubbornly to the corners of his mouth. He looked better than when he had faked his death.

But it was very noticeable where his energy was fraying. Her claws became a bit shorter, less pronounced, the markings fading again. Her stomach showed pain again, making her flinch for a moment as the thief willed her state of awakening, force-feeding it into him.

“Are you hurt?” He asked, breaking away, resting his weight on the wooden structure for a moment, staring, breath laboured, almost wheezing. Mouser grimaced. Not enough.... That was indeed a serious wound.

*Not anymore* would be the correct answer but she just brushed it aside. It was a trifling thing, no more worrying than the broken suspender and the stocking that was pooling around her ankle.

“I am not the one that was skewered.” She answered, gripping his jacket, tugging. “Get in.”

“I will be faster to reach the Young Master like this.” Sebastian returned to the ocean, starting to push the boat, swimming alongside it. Despite the fluid movements his breath was still not right. Not to mention the faint trail colouring the water in his wake.

Annoyed Mouser lightly whacked his head with the oar, forcing a stop, staring down threateningly. Her eyes had remained red. She smiled, showing that her fangs had not changed either.

“Get in the rowboat before I shove this thing into that new orifice and hoist you in here like a speared tuna.”
Ciel shivered, teeth rattling as he clung to the life buoy, one hand still gripping the Undertaker’s mourning chain, partially out of the water. It was more a feat of stubbornness than of strength. Determination and a willingness to do what needed to be done were traits he would never let go of. And the contract was clear... *It’s cold. It hurts...* His thoughts whispered though the pained haze. Around him all that could be heard was the bitterly cold wind and the screams of those who had, somehow, made it that far. *My body feels like it's being stabbed all over because of the icy water...* and his breath was starting wheeze, promising another bout of asthma brought on by the whole ordeal and exhaustion. *My limbs won’t move...* Ciel thought idly, eye closing, his grasp on the buoy lessening, exhaustion taking him, the dark waters around gulping him without a care, inviting him to the deep, cancelling all noise, all air, all light.

A dull sound echoed before Ciel’s scruff was gripped, his body forcefully pulled out of the water, thrown against something made of wood, instinct taking over, pulling a greedy breath in before the sharpness of the very air forced him to cough. A second pair of hands pulled him inside what he assumed was a boat, into a warm cocoon, going around him as he spat out water and tried to get a decent gulp of air in, patting his back. It was a familiar smell, dominated by tobacco.

“I believe they couldn’t lower all the lifeboats in time.” Sebastian said, gripping the edge of the said vessel, hoisting himself up so he could be seen and heard with a bit more ease. Ciel looked around, blinking, trying to shake away the frigid haze. The thief murmured something in a low tone, rubbing his arms, wringing the water excess away. “Mouser borrowed this one from the sinking ship.” The demon continued, taking off his tailcoat, twisting it until it was relatively dry, throwing it to the boyo. “Please wear this.” It was not much but another layer would not hurt. The thief helped, stiff hands draping the thing around the boyo’s thin shoulders before pulling him into the veritable tent that was the Undertaker’s cloak. “I’m sorry I can’t prepare any hot tea for you.” Sebastian continued keeping the façade. “Please bear with it for a while.”

Even without reaching for his clock Sebastian knew that time was almost up. A couple more hours at best. Dawn at worst. All they had to do was keep the Young Master alive.

The boyo glanced at the people a bit away, screaming for help, clawing, every person for themselves.

Any help reaching them would prove to be perilous for those providing it.

“If we go back they will sink this boat. Let’s get away.” Sebastian remarked, noticing the general direction of the boy’s gaze, pushing the boat towards the open sea. Mouser resisted the urge to pick up the oar. At least they had rowed that way instead of what he was doing at that moment. He had to dive for the boyo though.

*My hair if freezing up...* Ciel noticed, shivering. Mouser was warm, almost painfully so. He slid closer, arms going around her waist, head bobbing down, eye closing. Heat seared away the icy feeling, uncomfortable at first, then blanketing him, lulling and calm. He was growing so sleepy...

“Young master! You can’t sleep!” Sebastian shouted, concerned when he noticed, hoisting his body partway out of the waters, reaching the boyo. Mouser was startled as well, blinking, looking around with a concerned expression.

Then her eyes widened, looking around without seeing.
Sebastian frowned, glancing at her before feeling a forceful tug on his legs, turning around fast.

A Bizarre Doll, once a young woman, gripped his leg hard, sinking blunt teeth into it. Grunting Sebastian kicked it fast, avoiding a graver injury, crushing its head, shoving it away from the boat.

“They can move in water?” The boyo whispered, confused, concerned, slipping away from the cloak, peeking into the dark waters, straining to see.

Mouser made a little whimpering sound, closing her red eyes.

“They don’t need to breathe so I guess they can’t drown either.” Sebastian answered, panting, still pushing the boat, getting it away from the threat. It seemed logical. And the human body did float rather easily so it was not only a matter of breath but also locomotion.

“Then…” Ciel continued, growing concerned.

“Quiet…” Sebastian reached in, silencing him by pressing his palm against his mouth looking around.

There were gurgling sounds in the waters. Like when someone plunged an empty glass into a sink.

“No way…This is…” All the ones that had fallen off. All the corpses that had been trapped somewhere on the sinking ship. All the Bizarre Dolls that had not been stopped. “Sebastian! Get in!” the boyo shouted, adding to the noise, startled when the Demon hopped off the water, avoiding the attacks, gripping the only thing that could double as a weapon, striking down the closets ones, the boat rocking beneath them.

“How many are there?” Sebastian asked softly, tilting his head towards Mouser who had stood up as well, back pressed against his, wincing as she used the oar as a bat, cracking heads with ease. Without her heels or tiptoeing as a demon she looked much smaller, barely taller than the Young Master.

“About 1930, give or take a few extremities.” Mouser answered grimly, her eyes full of aggression, unfocused. More than expected had survived the confusion in the main hall while the focus had been on the Undertaker.

“They will keep going after souls until their bodies rot away.” Sebastian stated. The ones closest were destroyed. But the true horde was fast approaching. “Which also probably means you are the only living human soul around here.”

The boyo glanced towards the cluster of lifeboats, illuminated by small lights, standing still under the occasional flares, waiting for the rescue ship. They would be very vulnerable if those things approached. What had happened would have to be reported to the Queen due to the deaths of nobles but it would be reported as just a note of survival, to assuage the Monarch fears.

“Then we can’t escape.” The boyo decided amidst the rocking and the wet sounds of the ocean and crushed heads. “If we do Lizzy and the others will be targeted. We can’t expose survivors to this.”

“Whether it is good or bad they are only interested in the soul nearest to them.” Sebastian mentioned, striking against yet another approaching corpse. They were starting to bloat in the water.

Mouser attacked as well but her movements were slightly slower. The interest... it was their single-minded focus of claiming soul to complete their own that was making that moment screech worse in her head. Before their goals had been scattered, easily changes as a soul or another came closer.
but now with just them inside the lifeboat. It was like a magnifying glass under the sun.

“We’ll stop them here.” The boyo decided, his voice still just part of the noise. Mouser frowned, trying to focus, to catch his words. It was just noise... “You can take them, can’t you Sebastian?”

“There is no need to ask a servant to do anything.” Sebastian answered, keeping to his role, weeding out that momentary trace of what looked like compassion. It was groundless, pointless and without true purpose. “Please give me an order.”

“This is an order Sebastian.” The boyo shouted, pulling the eyepatch away, showing the contract seal for an extra boost. “Eradicate them.” The boyo ordered. He was shouting but it sounded so faint.

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian answered promptly, attacking, the boat shifting wildly under their feet under the pressure of the dead, the strikes and the sea itself. “It’s going to get a little shaky so please hold on to the boat.” The Demon advised, manoeuvring the oar, aiming always for the ones closest.

Mouser dropped her oar and crouched, catching the boyo, keeping him down, closing her eyes for a moment, her breath growing ragged, head tilting o the side. Pluck out, shred, make quiet... she mused idly once again, the words somehow dampening the sound. How many in my palms... one, two, three, twenty, ninety... something warm slid gently down the corner of her eyes, down her cheeks. Small droplets of blood dripped, splattering on her cupped palms. One hundred seventy five, seventy four, sixty three, one hundred ninety eight...

“How interesting.” Sebastian whispered in the frenzy, destroying heads, noticing how the corpses clawed and climbed over what remained to reach, to get what they wanted “Humans will drag each other down in order to get what they want, even in death. What truly insatiable creatures...”

Strike after strike, echoing in the darkness a never ending wave of dead, hard to kill, ever shifting.

“Stop.” Mouser whispered, breathily, lips parted for a moment longer, looking up, coughing, a gush of blood coming out, making her curl forward, staining her palms, the long claws folding gently over the palms, caging something within. Sebastian stopped as well, as abruptly as the commanded, turning, looking around. The corpses that remained, still a host of them, had stilled, gurgling, arms stretched but unmoving. “Out.” She whispered softly, entranced.

Strands of cinematic records burst out of the Bizarre Dolls, reaching for the dark skies. The corpses screamed, actually screamed as much as their rotting vocal cords could produce, as their fake souls, their mimicry of lives abandoned them. Mouser smiled slightly, ignoring the blood that was starting to pour out of her nose as well, reaching out, claws unsheathed.

Sebastian’s eyed widened, recognizing what she was doing, what she should not be able to do yet, what could very well kill her after so many events that had sapped her energy. And yet he could do nothing to stop it from taking place. He was as worn as she was. If he accidentally took any more... Sebastian scoffed. He had had an order that annulled the usual cover of humanity he was contracted to wear, which meant more power, even if the Death Scythe wound was proving daunting. Touching her at that point was a gamble but it was better than to lose a covenant. He gripped her bloodied hand, pulling her closer to him, embracing her as some of the corpses that were not under her control climbed over those who were to continue their assault.

“Rend...” She breathed, soft as sigh, closing her eyes, cheek resting against Sebastian’s chest.
William T. Spears fished out the dispatched officers, mumbling under his breath, his annoyance rather clear and sharp as he pulled Grell into the boat, tossing the Reaper unceremoniously on top of Ronald Knox.

“Not even able to make collections properly… honestly.” He griped, adjusting his glasses. “Did you slack off too much during your suspension?” Spears asked the unconscious Reapers, close to sneering. “Try putting yourself in my shoes. Having to be mobilized from a different department to deal with this. Looks like I can’t finish up in time today. Again. Honestly…” With his frustration and anger boiling over Spears began the process of a rather rude awakening. “Wake up Grell Sutcliff! Ronald Knox!” Kicking the sodden sorry carcasses of those two slackers Spears shouted until they came to and seemed focused enough.

“Will!” Sutcliff sprung up, immediately perked despite the complaints about the pain, filled with a sudden burst of loud, obnoxious energy, charging for a tackle. “You did come for me!” Spears stepped aside, barely disguising his annoyance, allowing the redhead to fall into the ocean, slamming his Death Scythe against the officer’s head, pressing down, glowering, teeth gritting.

“This is no rescue.” He growled out. “I came to clean up after a certain piece of trash dispatch member that can’t even manage their own jobs.” The Scythe recoiled as he turned to glare at Knox. “Hurry up and start collecting.”

“Wait a minute! We’re all beaten up over here!” The blonde complained, struggling to sit.

“It is our job to collect souls at any time.” Spears scolded but there was a little less bite to his tone as he addressed Knox.

“Ah…” Grell chirped, balancing on the boat’s edge, face resting between her palms, staring at Spears with a somewhat smitten expression. “That gaze is even colder than the sea. Ignoring all kind of human rights. It sets my body ablaze.” She continued merrily.

“I don’t know how you manage to look lively…” Knox groaned bemused, trying to stand. “Can’t say the same for me and I have no clue how you manage.”

Spears looked at the sea, taking a deep breath, getting the death note, checking it, ready to restart. “After we’re done collecting return to headquarters and file a report about the violator…” He began the scheduling the next duties, pushing his glasses into their rightful place, pausing when cinematic records surfaced. The white-and-black ribbons shimmered in the night, perceived by those with the abilities for such, struggling, shivering and then, as suddenly as they appeared they were shredded, exploding into shards, dissolving into nothingness. “And the soul stealer.” Spears concluded. Now they had to make sure she had not taken any of the souls scheduled for collection.

“Evee?” Grell whispered, confused before turning, staring at the shredding of the bizarre doll stitched souls “What…” The Reaper mumbled, frowning behind her glasses before understanding. There was a good chance that the report to be filled about Evelyn Crows detailed a baby demoness’ death.
With dawn came an uneasy silence. The waters were ever flowing, tinged red. Broken corpses floated about, surrounding the lifeboat, slowly sinking. The boats of survivors were still safely floating a bit farther away. Sebastian took a deep breath, looking around, gripping the oar firmly, keeping it upright. Blood stained him. His, Mouser’s, the cadavers’. Wind and water. Soft sounds. But most was indeed silence.

“Is it over?” The Young Master peeked from under the cloak and coat, careful, worried. “Sebastian?!” The boyo shouted, surprised when the demon flinched, dropping the oar, his arm pressing against the wound, falling to his knees. “A death scythe blow is quite hard to endure. Even for me.” Sebastian mentioned carefully, pressing the wound.

Mouser groaned, staring at the water and what she had just spewed. Blood that looked like coffee beans. Great. Internal bleeding, partially digested, meaning it had to be the aftermath of the stabbing corset. She closed her eyes, sliding back into the boat, curling, pulling her knees to her chest, breathing slowly. At least it had stopped now. Everything was quiet, inside, out. Absently she rubbed the blood away from her cheeks, groaning again.

The boyo looked away calmly, distancing himself from the situation. A bit for Sebastian, a bit for himself. Refusing to acknowledge something was for some a keen survival skill. Seeing Sebastian as fallible was not something the boyo would want. Hence his attention locked on the mourning chain he held. Strange thing to be holding. Mouser thought, closing her eyes.

“I cannot comprehend but as long as you hold those funeral lockets I am sure we will meet him again one day.” Sebastian answered, pulling Mouser into his arms. She made a small protest before settling. “He did not seem to want to cause you any harm.” The Demon continued. It was a truth, disconcerting as it was. “But I’d rather not run into him again.” Sebastian stated, tiredly, no longer bothering to conceal the pain.

“I’ve never seen you like this before.” The boyo stated without any particular intonation after a long pause.

“I am deeply sorry for my unseemly state…” Sebastian answered, grimacing. “I have failed as the Phantomhive Family butler.” He kept to the role. It was easier than admitting anything else.

“You’d look better than a blood spattered wax death mask if you stopped feeding me then. ’m fine.” Mouser whispered, voice dragging, fading as she blacked out. Sebastian lips drew a little smile, keeping his answer. Sharing what they had left was helping. So it was not as much feeding as it was keeping each other alive through whatever dregs of energy they could muster.

The boyo grew quiet, as quiet as the sea around them.

Cheers erupted in the distance as a ship finally became visible.

“It’s a rescue ship…” The Young Master had a look of relief on his face before carefully masking it. “Sebastian.” He called in a formal tone, bordering an order. “I can’t have the family butler staying like this.” He stated, calmly and clearly, as one might expect of the class he belonged to. “Take a good rest once we’re back in the manor. You did well today.” Ciel finished his order with a
nod, looking away. As for Mouser as soon as she woke up he was sure she would make him pay through the nose one way or another. “Young master…” Sebastian looked surprised for a moment before lowering his head in acknowledgement, smiling faintly. “For you to say such a thing…” The demon shook his head slowly. “Please stop.” He retorted in a dry tone. “I do not want a storm to befall us now.”

Unsurprisingly the survivors were crew members, nobles and a handful of servants high enough in the service caste to have been allowed in the ballroom. A handful belonged to the other classes, too little a number to truly matter.

The Marchioness swooped down on them as they boarded the rescue ship, claiming the Young Master to be cared for by family, ordering the crew to tend to the people as she saw fit. Apparently in-between stepping out of the lifeboat and into the recue ship she had commandeered the captain’s authority and taken charge.

The recounts of what had transpired within the ship were quick to spread as those injured were tended to. It seemed the next fodder for the sensation press had been chosen by those not even involved in it.

Sebastian kept an eye on Mouser as the nurses cared for her, shocked at first by the amount of blood staining them both. The flurry of activity and worry would keep them from noticing small details and the state of regeneration was sufficient for most to be regarded as minor and the blood to be looked at as splash from the corpses once they started cleaning it away. Sebastian’s were still deeper but the concealment of their depth and nature was made easier by his state of consciousness.

The humans left leaving behind their medicine.

Sebastian stood, ignoring it. Proximity was the best solution for what plagued them. Instinct alone made Mouser stir, half attacking before recognition stopped her and allowed Sebastian under the covers. The Demon slipped his around his covenant, inching closer, his eyes, still red, showing his nature, straining to keep the shapes in place, closing them slowly.

Sleep was something he had not needed or indulged on for such a long time... he kissed his covenant’s forehead gently feeling her move, nuzzling the bandages that covered his chest. Odd to think that at that time it was such a novelty when she so often slept thusly... just sleeping together, meaning vulnerability.

Mouser woke up drowsily, finding her nose pressed against Sebastian’s chest. Softly she moved on the nest of demon and blankets, peeking. Small cabin, boat, still at sea. Soft steps outside. Quieted, calm souls. Snake was sneaking around, shy, his snakes hissing, likely telling him where the familiar smells were.

The thief looked up, smiling as she caught him unawares, defenceless and asleep. That was a first. Could not say he looked younger or softer. Looked less dead than a few hours before. It was a good improvement. She assumed she looked as white and haggard. Sighing she settled again. Everything felt sore. He should feel worse.
Sebastian’s touch was heavy, warm. It slid gently over her back, over her thigh as he opened his eyes careful and grim, staring at her. It was a rather predatory look, appraising what he saw. Mouser shrugged and closed her eyes, returning to the last position while enjoying the feel of his hand petting her back and thighs. Sometimes he pressed down with the tip of his fingers, painful for a moment before unlocking whatever he had found, relaxing one or another ache.

“Do you know what you did?” He asked softly, voice low.

“No.” Mouser frowned, still sleepy. “I just wanted quiet. For them to be silent.”

“You ripped away their records, destroying them.” Sebastian recalled. She was not looking up, still fitting into his arms, warm but no longer feverish. “But there were souls, other records coming from the dying.” And that was something he had noticed only in the aftermath, after the frenzy as he tried to destroy the heads and keep the lifeboat from turning over itself. “You left them untouched.” It was not only the power and level of the skill she had used. It was the detail her hastily done manipulation of the stitched souls

“They were not noisy.” Mouser mumbled tapping his chest.

“I see. It was that simple?” Sebastian stopped for a moment, thinking, shaking his head, amused.

“It was hurting me. All that noise. Just wanted it gone.” Mouser answered, absently tracing the wounds. She smelled no new blood. At least the surface was closed.

“You nearly died.” Sebastian retorted, gripping her hair, tugging.

Mouser swatted his hand away, snorting in a rather unladylike manner, not even bothering to open her eyes.

“Happens all the time.” It was all the answer she gave before locking herself in sleep once more.
Chapter 93

Parting ways with the Midfords as soon as the ship docked was proving to be a more challenging plan than expected. They had prepared, booking a room in the nearest acceptable hotel, sending for clothes and necessities to be delivered on time at the specified place and for the coach to be there. Clothes were of special importance for some. But not even that practical proof of ability and capability was convincing the Marchioness to relinquish her claim of family equalled nursing.

The boyo was showing signs of his asthma, growing sickly due to the icy water, cold winds and prolonged exposure. Sebastian was also looking none too well, pale and drawn, moving slowly and carefully. Mouser experienced bouts of dizziness and fever that came and went suddenly. Snake had the sniffles.

However the demon pair was able to fake wellness for long enough for it to be credible and their separation was no longer delayed after they stepped on the dock.

The hotel was a short break, a return to luxury with warm water, warm tea and warm food. Sleep that was not interrupted by an overly affectionate Lizzy or nurses poking and prodding, making sure the important passengers were healthy and would not tell unflattering tales to the sensation press.

Then to the long-journey coach, taking the direct path to the Manor, avoiding London altogether. It would take less time and the boyo would avoid having to be coddled by Soma. The events of last time seemed to be quite clear in his mind. Even if it added a bit of strain to their bodies it was the less troubling course for their minds.

They arrived a few hours before dawn, still dark out. The dog howled, greeting them loudly as the coach crossed the marked borders, following from the shadows, avoiding the main path as he had been trained. There had been a small commotion when the coach arrived, the servants appearing, armed and ready, having been forewarned about their arrival, relaxing when they saw them, kept quiet through a hush. Snake was guided away by Tanaka. Bard and Finny were sent to patrol the grounds one last time. Meyrin retired to sleep. A few hours would do them good.

The boyo, soundly asleep from the moment the horses had been set into motion, his breath laboured, was put into his bed, bundled carefully. Linens had been changed and the room dusted and aerated. Nothing seemed to be missing due to any mishaps.

And the house was still standing.

“It looks better.” Mouser answered after a moment of consideration, walking around the bed, checking both sides of the parallel wound. Scabbing and deep red but better.

Sebastian shook his head as he undid the bandaging and prepared the new. Days. It had taken days for his body to behave right and even so he had had to actually focus on healing instead of letting nature act.

“It is still not right, is it?” Mouser noticed, putting down the clean clothes she had been gathering to dress and start the day, approaching, picking up a long piece of linen, weighting it with a frown that turned into a little smile.
The white strips of cloth looped, tightening around Sebastian’s wrists, a fast deft motion, pulling him down, onto the mattress, the thief straddling his waist, following the fabric, tying the demon to his bed. Before he could break free from the flimsy bonds that connected him to the headboard she gripped his wrists, closing her hands around them gently, leaning down, whispering low.

“Shall we make a deal?”

“What do you have in mind?” He deigned, settling down, looking up, amused by the offer.

Mouser sat back, letting go, hands starting to work on an intricate knot. It was not so much to keep him still but a safeguard. Even if he freed himself there was no way he could recreate the knots and make them look the same. Sailors and thieves had their tricks. One pull could unravel the knot. One tug could lock it into place. One twist could turn it into a noose.

“The boyo gave you permission to rest. I am sure you found a way to not do so and look like you did.” Sebastian chuckled. She tilted her head, looking unimpressed. “Even when you know that you will need at least a couple more days to seal everything inside.” She poked his chest gently over the dressed wounds. Then her palm splayed itself flat over it as she looked away, taking a deep breath, eyes closing.

“And?” he prodded keeping his interest in check.

“What can I give you?” Mouser asked in a patient tone, pushing away her dizziness.

“You almost died.”

Why was he still bringing the up... Mouser paused for a moment, thinking. Her outlook on death was still pretty much unchanged. Illness and old age had been removed, true. But a mistake, a blunder, a misfortune were still as likely to make her meet her demise as before.

“Sebastian...” The thief leaned in, pressing her lips against his, a soft brush, light and brief. A hint of softness and warmth that lingered but was deliberately not enough to give up any secrets, any tells. “If it did not happen it does not matter.” Mouser shared her view calmly, sitting upright, testing her knots with a pluck.

“What you can make a deal with...” Sebastian began, slowly, watching her movements.

“Brings advantages to us both.” She clipped his argument efficiently. “And all you have to do is stay bound in this bed for a day.” Her smile widened wickedly as she moved away, a lingering caress with a hint of claws. “And a night.” Mouser added as she dressed, leaving to take his duties for the day.

The kitchen was a bit scorched. But not blown up.

Some plates had been broken. But not the good ones.

Two trees had been knocked over. But the flowers were blooming in their predetermined patterns.

The dog was still slobbering in both forms. But he had not peed anywhere he should not and the eaten remains of intruders had been erased.

Tanaka seemed well rested.
It was an improvement.

Mouser thought, returning to the kitchen, lighting a cigarette, pulling a chair, tossing a bag of bloodied trinkets and letters on the table. Pluto had been taught to leave out anything that had a different scent from the men present when invading. It often helped the Phantomhive boyo to be aware of who was dispatching assassins and respond in kind if needed. Blowing smoke she smiled, purposely slamming her boots on the table, tilting the chair.

Still dark out. A few moments to rest before starting the day.

Messages and the Marchioness’s concern had triggered a few things. As in the arrival of a cook to help out about an hour after Mouser had finished her rounds. Proof of how observant the woman was. With Sebastian on leave there was too much risk in allowing their usual cook to try to cook something. Although she had to admit that he had finally learned the fine art of bacon and eggs and could scrounge up a very decent chicken soup. Too decent for an orphanage the thief had told him once. He took it as the compliment it was supposed to be. At least it was golden, not grey and lumpy.

Bard had bristled about the invasion of the kitchen but been placated by a small lie about the kind of things the boyo could eat in his current state. Tanaka, Meyrin and Finny’s duties were unchanged. Clean the house and garden, tend to the requests of the cook, polish silverware, do laundry. Some things just remained the same even when the Master of the house was sick.

The boyo was allowed to sleep until noon and forbidden to leave the bed due to the set of instructions that had been sent along with the help. Not that he was in any state to actually leave the covers, coughing and wheezing. Mint helped, mixed in the black tea in a heavy scent and flavour that soothed his ailment. He had no fever and soon after taking the tea was ringing for breakfast.

Mail, notes, bills, reports and invitations had piled up to the point where she believed it would be best just to hack at them with a machete and toss them into the nearest fireplace. Even if April was ending and the heath was starting to tell them the fire would be too much. So no available fire in the study.

With a resigned sigh she stole the boyo’s chair and desk, as he was currently napping again and unfit to sit down and work, and started to do her job, making piles of yes, no, urgent, for later, to sign, for the boyo to read and closed deals.

Tucked amidst all that was a thick bundle tied with twine, protected by brown grease paper.

A bit heavier than the usual letters but… She cut the twine, opening it, reading.

It was a list of names.

First all were feminine. Then they started to mix with male names. At the end of the long list, of the dozens of pages penned by a familiar hand there was a note.

These you remember.
Annoyed Mouser stared at the names, her nail sliding over the letters. She placed them aside. They were better off dead. She turned the pages to the blank side. There was a tiny number of five digits scribbled on the bottom of the white page that closed the named deaths.

*These you didn’t even bother.*

That however dragged a small chuckle out of the thief. If anyone knew it would be him, wouldn’t it…

But if the Undertaker limited his contacts to paper and memories it would be easier to deal with.

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Mouser stretched, finishing the house duties. Locking doors and windows, checking if everyone had everything needed for the night and next day, making sure the boyo was still bundled, warm, asleep and fever-free. There had been a bit of a fuss with the bath but when made fun of the boyo had forgotten embarrassment in favour of “proving her wrong”.

Snake had spent the day with his little friends. Thanks to the backpack they had all survived the ship. It was rather funny to think that she had let people die without a blink of anything but had been quick to find a way for Snake to be able to save everyone in his illegal cargo.

Sebastian should still be in bed.

The thief hesitated, staring at the door of their room. Had he truly taken her offer or had he just been stewing and biding time, waiting to punish her with Math… or French… or German… or Latin. Shuddering in dread she gripped the doorknob, twisting, pushing it open, peeking.

Still in bed, red eyes following her movements as she walked in and locked the door. Not looking pleased or displeased. The thief stopped, looking a bit more attentive. No. He was pleased. There was an underlying layer of smugness in that look that made her even more wary than being greeted by a mountain of geography books. Silently she began to undress, nonchalantly, plucking the bandages when she walked by them, placing the second comb, an intricate work of silver twisted into the Phantomhive crest. Her pattern was still in place. He hadn’t squirmed out of it? His red eyes were still following, changing, no longer bothering to hide the desire.

It had been her deal, her promise.

Bare and embarrassed Mouser chuckled, climbing on the bed, leaning down, body warm and close, nuzzling his neck, lips angling toward his jaw. Her hands made no more move towards the binds, ghosting over his hips, towards the pants, undoing buttons as she straddled him once more.

Feather light because of the wounds, slow feeding because of exhaustion, taking, giving, balancing. Sensation, heath… The thief moved her hands slowly, shivering when every movement made his body twitch under hers, a strain to remain bound, within the deal, a struggle not to break free and claim what he wanted. Their fingers clasped intimately for a moment, their eyes locking. A longing whisper escaped his lips as a smile showed fangs.

*Bound for the night. Those were the words of the bargain struck.*

Mouser found his lips, unhurriedly. Sebastian parted his, in anticipation, letting her set the pace.
The slow kiss turned hungry, tongue and teeth twining, lips abandoned to brush down his neck, leaving bites peppered the skin red without breaking it for blood, hands brushing down his torso open and greedy in lingering caresses until the gripped the pants. With a wicked smirk answering the groan of satisfaction she pulled, shredding the fabric easily.

Her action was welcomed by a dark laugh, a lustful movement of his hips.

His arousal was rather evident and Mouser was not thinking of giving him any reprieve for a while longer. Her lips brushed along his thigh, biting down on the hollow, freed hair brushing against his skin. She ran her hands down his legs, pinching his ankle playfully, ignoring need, spending time stroking him, showing her longing, her affection, his face, all of him just to hear a groan, her name on his lips, leaving a kiss here and there, glancing up to see his eyes, just to listen to his voice so close to pleading that made her pride soar.

Mouser moved, kissing the centre of his chest, over the bandages, knowing, giving, her inner thighs brushing his sides as she settled on him, hands guiding him into her wet heath, feeling that the teasing was no longer tasting the same, was no longer what she needed to take, claiming him in a swift motion, hands on his stomach, taking a deep breath with a sigh, eyes closed.

Sebastian groaned in approval, legs moving a bit, tilting her forward, unbalancing her just so she fell on his chest, looking up with hazy eyes, flushed cheeks and parted smiling lips. Still struggling not to rip the binds, patience on edge. He wanted…

The thief answered to his frustration, kissing here she could reach, body flexing and undulating, seeking release, voicing it, shattering as he liked, falling on his chest with a mewl, panting hard, eyes closed, as he followed, pulling, taking and giving, sighing her name again as his own released brought not only satisfaction but a soft pull that undid the knots.

Mouser smiled, snuggling into his chest, hands over the wound, protectively as she slid into sleep.

A covenant was a convenient balm at times like that, he had to admit. Strength was coming back faster as she had predicted when striking the terms. Sebastian kissed the crown of her head, pulling the covers over them, trapping her small form in his arms. Faith was a foreign thing. But trust was part of a covenant.
Chapter 94

The newspapers were having days filled with fanciful tales of terror at the expense of the Campania. It had barely docked and the paper-boys were shouting catchy phrases to entice buyers. The papers that had arrived that morning were no different. The accident, the deaths, the survival, the monsters, the sheer amount of speculation, just brushing the truth or going completely off the rails. Sensation press had now latched on Druitt’s *miraculous* return complete with pictures, pose, panache and an obvious pandering to the masses. And judging by the overwrought tone of the reporter it was indeed working.

“Persistent isn’t he...” Ciel grumbled, putting the paper aside, expression sour.

“It was a rather terrible maiden voyage, was it not.” Sebastian picked up the conversation, noticing the papers and their unrelenting fascination with the murky events that had befallen the Campania. “Illness and weakness upon return.” He placed the perfectly poured morning tea in its place at the table. “But it seems that life finally returned to normal.”

“Normal is it?” The Young Master commented in a dry tone looking up. His expression was a mixture of a sever lack of amusement and the usual frown as he picked up the tea. “Now that you mention it Sebastian...” He paused after a careful sip. “Exactly what about that is normal?” The Young Master finished his though, placing the cup down, staring at the headband that graced Sebastian’s head, adding yet another foot to his height in the shape of two perky white rabbit ears.

“Since today is Easter we were all ordered to wear these by Lady Elizabeth.” Sebastian supplied the information, chuckling playing with the ears, seemingly amused. “Quite the visual assault isn’t it?”

“Indeed things have been noisy since morning.” The Young Master stated, discarding his comment.

Outside Lizzy screamed.

Mouser laughed.

There was a momentary pause in the sound of weapons clashing right under the window of the sunroom. Sebastian glanced outside. Mouser was pulling the training gear clad lady to her feat, showing her the movement before stepping back. A cigarette was idly secured on her lips. She was working with a single dagger. Lady Elizabeth was looking a bit winded.

“Again girlie. You will not go inside and change into the pretty dress until you manage to at least lock me.” Mouser teased loudly, mostly for show. They had at least another hour until the Young Master deigned to show up.

“What is she planning to do today...” Said young Master was mumbling, starting at the breakfast the Demon had finished displaying. Sebastian left that unanswered, leaving the sunroom to attend to the duties that were being forgotten in Lady Elizabeth’s wake.

“Well then if you have finished breakfast I was told to take you to the second floor.” Upon Sebastian’s return the papers were down and the Young Master’s appetite seemed to have returned. The question was thusly mostly rhetorical. There was no response as the Young Master stood and
followed. Either he was wary of keeping the lady waiting or was genuinely eager to have a
diversion. Sick days were extremely dull.

Finally. It was the expression being thrown around as the door opened to the brightly decorated
room filled by friends, family, servants and acquaintances. Lizzy clapped her hands, excited, her
rabbit ears decorated with a bright flower on a silky bow

“You are late Ciel.” Agni and Soma greeted them with smiling faces, already bunny-eared.

Meyrin was trying to escape Nina’s attentions. The other servants were ignoring that particular
detail. It was something that always happened and sorted itself out either by a runaway Meyrin or
by Nina falling prey to a distraction or another.

Mouser was standing by the window, her white rabbit ears lopping with the weight of several
silver earrings. Sebastian counted at least ten different pairs. None were hers. Payment? Gifts?
Maybe the Young Lady and the Marchioness were repaying Mouser’s tutorship.

“Why are they here?” The boyo was complaining, looking around, startled and confused by the
movement and noise, the fact that the cutesy pair of ears had been placed on his head flying way
over the top of the perked up white tips. Mostly he was just trying to find a way to work around the
invasion.

“I though we could celebrate Easter together.” Lizzy explained, stepping back to admire her
handiwork. “Although my big brother came of his own accord.” She mentioned as Edward bristled
on the background, complaining about the nearness of the young couple.

“We have a different faith but we can celebrate with you.” Agni said, always conciliatory, smiling,
hands together.

“So what is this Easter holiday?” Soma asked, looking as excited as most of the group.

“It’s a holiday where the resurrection of Jesus Christ three days after he was crucified is
celebrated.” Sebastian supplied the information with barely a pause. “On his day tables are lined
with food made with plenty of eggs, milk and butter.” Food that he had been cooking and keeping
Bard away from. “There are games that have been traditionally played with coloured Easter eggs
such as egg hunting and egg tapping.” Which should be used to keep that gathering entertained and
the damage to the manor kept to the minimum, hopefully. “It has also become popular to exchange
cards that have Easter bunnies on them.” And those had been selling well judging by the latest
reports that had reached Mouser’s hands.

“And Easter is also a time when everyone gets dressed up in new clothes and hats.” Girlie, always
the voice for society’s concerns, mentioned cheerfully. As expected her bright dress was suitably
luxurious and decorated.

“What? I had no idea so I came in my regular clothes...” Soma, also part of the idle nobility took
immediate concern on that matter. His regular clothes would impress most. But fashion was fickle.

“That must be my cue.” Nina Hopkins, fashion maker, trend setter and dramatic artiste took
immediate advantage of the situation, ushering the men to the next room, assigning trunks.
Sebastian was dragged along, taking Snake with him. Nobles and buttons... “Let’s unveil the new
spring collection of Nina Hopkins, the tailor that makes the season.”

It took a bit more time for the gentlemen to emerge, each in a new outfit, colour, texture and
patterns unique in every ensemble. As requested months ago the boyo’s outfit matched Lizzy’s.
“Excellent.” Nina approved, full of pride after a few touch ups and rechecking, preening. “Gentlemen should be extravagant as well. A gentleman should not be plain looking.” Again she repeated her beliefs. Sebastian walked out of the room, closing the door behind him, face closed. It seemed he was slightly put upon.

“Awww. Everyone looks so cute.” Lizzy gave her final appraisal, hugging the boyo again. “But wear this, all right?” The flower-decorated top hat was knocked off the boyo’s head to give way to the bunny ears. As that celebration statement accessory of choice it would not be ignored. And so the headbands made their way back to the heads of the redressed. “Then let’s start the egg hunt right away.” Lizzy announced, placing a basket full of painted eggs, placing it on the table amidst the snacks displayed. “Today I brought father’s special Easter eggs.” She picked one with a giggle. “Look Ciel! Isn’t this flower pattern nostalgic?”

“Huh…” The boyo, caught by surprise hesitated, staring

“Huh?” Lizzy’s merriment faded a bit, noticing the lack of response.

“Ah, indeed it is.” The boyo backtracked his words into a shaky recover, looking around, slightly uneasy. “We’ll have the servants go and hide those.”

The look of silent shock did not leave girlie’s face for a few seconds more before she clapped, claiming attention.

“I know. I just had a great idea!” From the basket she produced another egg, a bit more elaborately crafted, a touch more feminine. “I made this one. Isn’t it cute?” Smiling proudly Lizzy placed the basket on Sebastian’s hands so the remaining eggs could be scattered and hidden. “Let’s have the person who finds this egg hidden amongst all the others in the mansion be the winner.” A challenge was the thing that would be most hard to resist for the game-minded boyo.

Mouser moved away from the window, stalking the pudding, smiling in approval of her strategy. Still something was not fully clicking in there. Memory though was a fickle thing. Would it still taste of sweet? Or should she just give up any attempt at eating anything that looked good and end up disappointed?

“Oh... so that is how the egg hunt works?” Soma was also enticed by the prospect of a new game. “Does something good happen to the one who find it first?” If it was tied to a religious holiday it seemed the most logical thing in his mind. A blessing upon the winner.

“Well it wasn’t meant to be a competition but...” The boyo mumbled an answer, still trying to process the crowd and the tightness of the ruffles around his neck.

“You would always find my Easter egg first wouldn’t you Ciel?” Lizzy announced proudly, hugging him, rubbing cheeks, squeezing the boyo till he was at the limit. “So you have to make sure to be first this year too.” She added, stepping back, curls bouncing.

“Yes, of course...” The boyo agreed meekly, chuckling nervously.

Sebastian’s expression turned serious. Mouser glance up. What was missing? She noticed before her attention was diverted by an angry tirade, courtesy of Edward.

“Wait a minute! I will not allow you to have my sister’s egg! Ciel this is a challenge!” The big brother with his protective instinct showing in every way announced, stepping forth, chest puffing, red colouring his face as he expressed his rage.

“I am not saying...” Ciel tried to correct him hastily and get the tension out of the way. However
before he could form any kind of persuasive argument the window was shattered by a grinning flash of white swinging into the hall with the aid of a rope, feet first, sending glass everywhere, much to the boyo’s shock and Sebastian’s surprise.

“That does sound interesting.” Charles Grey announced, standing, letting the rope go, straightening his clothes with a flourish before facing the crowd.

“Earl Grey?” The boyo squeaked out.

Mouser sneered, tensing.

“Long time no see.” The second, level headed half of the Double Charles entered through the broken window and stood there, greeting the people present politely, carrying his own wicker basket filled with decorated eggs and gifts.

“Even master Phipps?” The boyo asked, trying to make sense of the events. “What are the Queen’s butlers doing here?” Their presence heralded nothing good.

“The window...” Sebastian whispered, staring at the damage in dismay.

“A delivery from her majesty.” Phipps went ahead, showing his basket.

“How cute.” Lizzy commented, approaching, taking over that end of the new arrivals with the grace a lady should have towards visitors. “As expected from the Queen.” Girlie praised, smiling.

“No. I painted these.” Phipps corrected serenely.

“How amazing...” she changed the direction of her compliments but not their content.

“Yours as well.” The Queen’s butler returned the courtesy immediately.

“I overheard that you have to get your fiancées egg first, don’t you earl.” Grey on the other hand seemed to have all sorts of ulterior motives for the visit and lost no momentum in pursuing those, barely waiting for the boyo’s stunned nod before continuing. “Great. I’m participating too.” The boyo sputtered, shock after shock affecting his demeanour. Sebastian looked away from the window he would have to clean and replace later, staring with an unimpressed boredom as Grey smiled and preened. “There’s no rule other that “who gets the egg first wins” right?” He asked, pointing at the egg Lizzy was still holding, grinning. “This will be fun.” Eager to start and eager to cause mischief.

“Please wait a second.” Sebastian saw it as well, loosing no time in containing any possible damage.

Grey turned, eyes darkening, staring him down for a brief moment before adopting a dismissive tone.

“Indeed.” Sebastian answered as he should. “Thank you again for that time.” The slight formal bow was a mockery only for those who knew. When the smile was added it was as open as he could make it. Still the Demon would breathe a litter easier if Mouser was not looking at Grey while flexing her claws on the side table, having dug through the white fabric of the table cloth and the flat surface of the marble top. Most likely imagining doing the same on whatever part of the man she could grab. Knowing her it would be wherever the pain would be harsher, lingering and more intense.
“What does the butler who cheated death have to say?” Grey asked without a motive to lash out. His interest was still mostly set in the game.

“I’d expect there would be injuries if we did not set some rules between these members and that is why I thought... why don’t we establish some rules involving these.” Carefully he went around the table, pulling Mouser’s wrist, taking her hand away from maiming the marble while ignoring the glare and retrieving some raw eggs. The suggestion was met by some doubtful blank looks. “We’ll divide everyone into teams of two and have one of them carry a raw egg in a ladle during the egg hunt. One can freely exchange the egg using those ladles. A team is disqualified if, for whatever reason, the raw egg breaks.”

“I see.” Phipps nodded in agreement. “You added the rules of egg tapping to the egg hunt.” It was a way to make the game a bit more formal, a bit more challenging, less individual.

“To make it easier we will be using raw eggs.” Sebastian said, placing silver ladles on the table, two for each egg. “As egg tapping is also a traditional Easter game there is really no harm in mixing it up.”

“Boring.” Grey complained, no longer allowed to play as he pleased.

“Well then. Let us decide the teams.” Sebastian spoke up.

“The Lady and I will go hide the eggs meanwhile.” Mouser said, nicking the decorated egg baskets, walking out of the room, quickly followed by Lizzy.

“What is on your mind girlie?” The thief asked as she placed one egg inside of a drawer, closing it, making sure it looked untouched. Her rabbit ears swayed as she turned, silver brushing her cheeks.

“Ciel...” Lizzy said, her sugary disposition fading for a moment, holding her egg, looking around for a place to hide it. Whatever was bothering her was enough to break the happy demeanour she usually carried around.

“You’ll need to be a bit more specific.” Mouser closed the door and placed another egg amidst the flowers of a decorative vase, moving down the corridor. Two more and the baskets were done. Then the main event had to be hidden somewhere girlie approved.

“We have celebrated Easter together many times...” She continued, steps measured and careful. Still not wearing the high heels but the dress was cute enough to make up for it. “He didn’t recognize the pattern. And...” Lizzy paused again, as if pained. “Despite what I said... this year was the first time that I made my own egg.”

“Oh... you caught him. Well done.” Mouser chuckled. Interesting titbit. Girlie had lied and trapped the boyo by simply being simple. It was almost too cute. Memory... having them or not. Needing them or not. A happy memory in a bad moment was sometimes more hurtful than the situation. Especially if one believed they would never feel that again. The mind was very careful about self-preservation. “but may I ask why are having faith in a man?”

“Excuse me?” Lizzy gave the startled statement as Mouser crouched, placing an egg under the armoire. “Is this because Sebastian forgot your birthday?”

Mouser snorted before laughing.
“I keep telling you that it is not my birthday. I have no clue where the Marchioness got that information but I assure you that I am a summer child. June fifteenth to be exact. Still I am going to take the earrings.” She playfully picked up the bunny ears, parading before coughing and turning serious. Lizzy raised her hands in surrender. “In my experience what you expected the boyo to remember and feel nostalgia about is exactly the kind of things gentlemen rarely bother to recall.” Mouser explained, standing, dropping the baskets behind a fern. Oh he could latch on details of games and schemes but woe to the world if he remembered the colour of that morning’s waistcoat.

“Ciel wouldn’t...” Lizzy stopped. How many times had big brother forgotten the name of a pattern he liked? Or the name of the flowers she had asked him to get? Father sometimes did the same even when he enjoyed art, especially his egg painting. Even with her efforts Ciel could not tell an eldredge knot from a novotny. “I... But even so could it be because of whatever happened in that month?”

“Maybe.” Mouser shrugged and opened the door to the rarely used ballroom. Lizzy looked up, smiling. “Were you planning on making this easy?” The thief asked, amused.

“No, this time” Lizzy giggled, adjusting her skirts.

So today’s Lizzy came in the spice variant of the girl’s trilogy.
“The game is set.” Mouser announced, returning to the room with Lizzy, allowing girlie in first, looking around, appraising the mood, verifying if no one was dead or injured. The mood was slightly bitter but no one had acted on any resentment so the masquerade was still in place. It seemed indeed that the teams had been decided. The boyo and Sebastian were a given, ladle in hand. The boyo had his arms crossed, still grumpy. But he had perked up a bit with the prospect of competition.

“We’ll definitely find it first.” He announced in a small challenge towards the other participants.

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian acknowledged, a small smile crossing his lips.

Phipps and Grey stood together, as expected.

“Well... whose egg am I going to break first.” Grey taunted, smirking.

“I would like to use that egg as a model.” Phipps mentioned solemnly, standing ready. Girlie looked a bit flattered by the compliment.

Soma and Agni were also a predictable pair.

“Agni! Let’s win in the name of Kali!” Soma announced proudly, ladle raised like a sword.

“Jo agya.” Agni nodded with a smile, taking his orders proudly.

The servants had also joined in the game mostly for challenge and for a request of the Young Lady to make the holiday feel more homely and for a livelier game. Bard and Meyrin had teamed up. It was also a common thing and their teamwork had been honed through the plans for manor protection. Sniper and strategist. While they would not go directly after the boyo they could be considered an edge for his advance.

“I’m pro at finding food-stuffs.” Bard declared, getting into the taunting mood as well, cigarette on mouth, ladle tapping his own shoulder.

“I know many places they could be hidden in.” Meyrin adjusted her glasses, balancing the raw egg.

“Let’s do our best.” Finny all but shouted, showing nothing but innocent enthusiasm.

Finny had grabbed and drafted Snake into being his partner in crime.

“It will be an easy victory with our sense of smell. Says Wordsworth.” Snake voiced his snake’s boast, eyes darting around shyly. While happy to be included he was still a nervous man and the presence of the Queen’s envoys was no something he quite knew how to deal with.

“Why am I with a man!?” Nina lost no time in placing her complain on the open air, pointing a finger, trembling with outrage, singling out Edward who just looked doubtful, slightly confused about the outburst.

“As a general rule you are not allowed to aim for something other than the raw eggs.” Sebastian completed the briefing of the game’s new rules. Tanaka, sipped his tea calmly, excused from the activity because of his age. “To win you must find Lady Elizabeth’s egg first.”

“Let’s get started.” Lizzy clapped, standing in front of the teams. “Ready, set...” Lizzy raised her
hand, smiling. “Bang!” She shouted, mimicking a gunshot.

Most of the players darted off with purpose.

“Let’s go!” Edward stated, impatient, glancing at his partner. “We shouldn’t be delayed.”

“Then I have no other choice but to...” Nina stated, popping a few buttons loose, pulling the skirt free, showing shorts, thigh high boots and thick suspenders keeping dark stockings in place. Edward made a little choked sound before his eyes cracked open and he performed a backward scuttle to evade the female.

“What are you wearing!” He shouted when his voice returned, breaking. “Know some shame as a woman...” Edward continued ignoring Nina’s glare.

“You are basically saying that girls have to follow stereotypes.” She approached, moving with purpose, hands on hips, leaning with a growl. “Inexcusable.” Each step made Edward back away and blush harder

“Don’t come any closer!” He was also losing his voice to embarrassment.

Mouser smiled. Lizzy pressed her lips together, containing an actual chuckle.

“As a future marquis don’t you think you should be a bit more open minded?” Nina demanded, leaning in scolding, her décolletage showing.

“Fine, yes! Just cover your legs!” Edward whimpered, curling over himself, ladle raised defensively.

In the suspended of conflict moment the raw egg exploded, white and yolk splattering around.

“Hehe...” Bard chuckled, leaning against the door, half hidden. Meyrin smiled, crouched, lowering the slingshot, slinking away. “You lose if you let your guard down once the starting sign has been given.” The cook teased as he and his team moved out after eliminating the team.

“And here I was thinking of making her wear this and that when I had won...” Nina lamented, falling dramatically over the tiles, fists clenched.

“Elizabeth!” Edward howled, as broken by the loss as his partner.

Mouser chuckled, turning to Lizzy.

“Shall we go to the garden?” She asked, turning away from the mess. “We’ll set the celebration there.”

“Easy win.” Sebastian heard Bard’s voice drifting through the corridor, glancing up was the Young Master mumbled under his breath in frustration as he moved through the house, searching for his fiancées egg.

“There is an egg under that chest.” Meyrin answered, skirts rustling as she moved.

What words they exchanged after were drowned by a loud explosion that filled the corridor with smoke. Sebastian grimaced, startled turning on his heel and rushing towards the source of the sound.
“I forgot I hid some specially made eggs...” Bard was mumbling amidst the remains of an armoire and a big hole on the wall. Meyrin sat still in a stunned silence, blackened and in a disheveled state. Pieces of the bomb were scattered about. Black stained the edges of the hole and streaked the wall.

“I’m not sure I want to know but I’ll ask anyway...” Sebastian finally said after a long pause, staring at the help sternly. “why did you make them explode?” It was another eliminated team but the cost would be added to the ledger.

“The smell of eggs is coming from over there. Says Wilde.” Snake relayed the information after a quick conference with the snake, as the gardener boy guided them through the outside of the manor, scavenging for the colorful things, keeping the raw egg on the ladle balanced and protected.

“Okay! I’ll get them.” Finny chuckled and ran off towards the direction the snake had given.

Snake shuffled his feet shyly, waiting. Wilde hissed, growing restless.

“Who is it? Says Wilde.” The young man relayed his snake’s words, looking around, tensing. One of those men in white turned the corner. He was a threat, not only for the game... they felt it. Black and Silk also acted off when he was near.

“So you found me.” Earl Gray. Snake remembered he had been introduced as such. Wilde straightened on his shoulder and hissed, tasting the air. “I thought it would be more efficient if I just stole the eggs others already found.” That was cheating. Snake thought, eyes narrowing. Maybe not cheating the rules but definitely skirting and shredding their spirit. In any event as everyone told him he was a Phantomhive servant and he should do what was best for the Young Master.

“I won’t give you the eggs, says Wilde.” Snake shouted for his snake. And doing that meant making the competition go away. Everybody slithered out of their hiding places, their resting holes, their sunbathing spots, the weather that turned more and more pleasant by the day having drawn them outside.

“What is this!” For someone who had shown only arrogance the level of fear and disgust he was displaying while seeing the small army of brightly scaled snakes was rather amusing. “Gross!” Gray squeaked out, backing away.

“Since you picked a fight with us, we’ll have your egg. Says Wilde.” Snake voiced Wilde’s challenge, stomping his foot, the others hissing in agreement and hoisting themselves up to look even more threatening.

“I’m so not good with these!” The Earl was backing away as fast, not even caring about dignity.

Snake attempted to press his advantage only to be stopped by a strange sound, a sharp continuous whistle inside of his hand. His friends were also acting up even if their hearing was bad, looking around, confused, tongues slipping in and out of their mouths, tasting the air in an attempt to know what was happening around them.

“What... what is this sound?” Snake whispered, looking up, finding the second man in white, eyes narrowing, dizzied, pained. “That flute... says Oscar.” Snake whispered as the man playing that thing hopped down from the roof, still playing, approaching, forcing them to back away,
“A first rate butler should be able to play a snake-manipulating flute.” Phipps stated, before continuing, serenading Snake and his friend into a state of unconsciousness, the egg falling from the ladle and breaking on the gravely path.

“Mr. Snake!” Finny came running, full of enthusiasm, arms filled with colourful eggs, hair in disarray, soot staining his reddened cheeks. “I found a lot of them... although one exploded on me for some reason.” He was saying, undaunted, just slightly confused, stopping on his tracks. “Mr. Snake?!” Finny shouted, dropping the eggs, running to Snake’s side, poking him and the group of knocked out serpents, cobras and constrictors peppering the way.

“How is it looking?” The Young Master’s voice came out muffled by the wooden structure of the half opened door and dimmed by the fair distance between him and the drawer Sebastian was currently opening, finding only a simple painted egg instead of the prize that was being faithfully sought.

“It is not the right one.” Sebastian answered, putting it back down as there was no need to encumber themselves. The Demon turned, showing no expression as he gauged the distance between himself and the doorway. “By the way young Master... why are you so far away?”

“What if one was Bard’s eggs?” The Young Master shouted back, peeking. “I do not want to get caught up on that.” He spat out acerbically, fidgeting with the ladle.

“I was severely hurt just a few days ago though... Well. No matter.” Sebastian mentioned, slightly amused by the whole glossing over his previously bedridden state.

“Then let’s go.” The Young master demanded.

A shadow moved on the edges of perception.

Metal stopped metal in a parry that prevented the breaking of the egg. Agni smiled. Sebastian answered in kind. The Young Master stepped back, to a safer area, the suddenness of the clash startling him.

“For you to notice my presence when I am completely focused... Impressive.” Agni praised, keeping the pressure as they had once done while fencing.

“To thing you would be able to hide your presence to such an extent. Well done.” Sebastian retorted, doing the same. A challenge once in a while was no doubt enjoyable.

“Haha!” Soma burst into the scene, charging straight for the boyo while the butlers were tangled, keeping his movements on Sebastian’s turned back. “You fell for it! I’ll be taking that egg!” He dove to ladle, intended on knocking it down, stopping on his tracks when the Young Master started to cough behind a closed fist, wheezing between hacking raspy sounds. “Ciel!” Concern curtained over the prince’s face immediately, demeanour changing from playfully attacking to an attempt to take care of the boy. “Are you all right?! Are you having another attack?”

Close and vulnerable. It was as easy as reaching out. Soma’s egg was tossed into the floor, cracking with a splat in the stunned silence.

“What idiot would fall for that?” The Young Master stood, victorious, laughing darkly, clearly gloating. Soma stared at the egg, mumbling the Young Master’s name in dismay. “I’ll take any measure to win.” The moment of smug, self-satisfied pride was cut short by a crowding hug.
Soma and Agni rushed and threw arms around his short, scrawny frame, choking the life out of him in affection while bawling their relief. Sebastian stayed well away, amused, disguising a laugh amidst the monologues of worry.

“That is great! I thought you were sick again!” Soma announced to the corridors, shaking the Young Master.

“Master Ciel you’re in good health!” Agni joined his master’s voicing of concerns.

It took quite a bit of struggling and shouting at the two Indians to let go for the Young Master. Sebastian dutifully hid his amusement as he followed through the corridors once more. Encouragements were shouted and followed them for a while more, echoing.

“Young Master how do you feel after such a reaction to your sneaky attack?” Sebastian poked fun, opening the door of the next room to search, hiding a smile behind his hand, purposely making it conspicuous,

“Shut up!” The Young Master barked in embarrassment, walking into the ballroom, looking around, slightly flustered. Sebastian scanned the room as well. Mouser had performed well, hiding everything with very few hints. It was a good challenge. He looked up, pressing his lips together, amused as he spotted their prize. “We are talking about Lizzy.” The Young Master was ranting, hiding his embarrassment. “She would not have put it in a very challenging place.”

“Young Master.” Sebastian called, shifting his attention to the heavy crystal chandelier that graced the ballroom. “It seems you are wrong about that.”

“Do you think Ciel will get my egg with his own skills?” Lizzy asked suddenly, adjusting her skirts, sitting down on the covered chairs as Mouser, Tanaka, recently joined by Bard, Meyrin and Finny, were finishing the table setting. In the warmth of the sun the garden bloomed, cheery and warm. The decorations had been brought and adapted into the new setting. The food was once more gorgeously displayed.

Nina was sketching, mumbling to herself, legs crossed, still in the trouser-cut shorts. Edward was sitting as far away as possible from her and in a way that placed the centrepiece of flowers and petit-fours blocking his line of sight. Snake was sitting under a tree, in the shade, holding a soothing cup of tea. Pluto snoozed in the shadows of the bushes, his white fur rippling in the wind and moving smoothly as he snored.

“Or will he just order Sebastian to do it?”

“I’m sure Sebastian is going to play with his pride.” Mouser shrugged, lighting a cigarette, leaning against the table, rubbing her shoulder with a grimace. She had indeed just said one night. Turning tables however had not been excluded from the deal.

“You sometimes word things very oddly.” Lizzy mentioned.

“I can assure you, girlie, it’s entirely intentional.” The thief winked. “Now, you were saying you wanted a sabre...”

“Yes... but a spadroon should be perfect as well. It’s light and both suited for cutting and thrusting which blend well with Mother’s teachings and your lessons...”
“What!” The exclamation was layered with pure shock. “How did she get it over there?!” The Young Master asked no one in particular, staring at the egg daintily sitting on an empty candle socket above the glittering marble floor, amidst the crystal, patterns of rainbow and light created by the sun shimmering over its glossy surface.

“Well thinking about the young lady...” Sebastian mused, glancing around. there were some feasible ways to do it if one relied on speed and agility using the momentum and right pressure points to bounce to the height needed.

“Anyway, go get it!” Ciel ordered, groaning, already defeated, opting for the least troublesome option.

“Are you sure?” Sebastian asked in a doubtful tone, adopting a thoughtful, pitying look, using significance. “Would it not mean more if you got it yourself?” He asked, as if the answer was unclear.

“That’s...” The Young Master made a sour expression, hesitating before holding a deep mournful sigh of annoyance. “Get a step letter.”

“Of course.” Sebastian said, bowing formally before leaving, chortling as soon as he was out of earshot.
“Keep it straight.” The Young Master gave that order every two steps of the ladder, moving rather slowly and cautiously. Overly so in fact.

“Yes.” Sebastian acknowledged the request without making any actual movement to fulfil it. The ballroom floor was polished but had been constructed so it would be perfectly flat. And if Meyrin was able to use that ladder to reach whatever she required and keep herself from falling it was a good guarantee of sturdiness and quality.

“It’s unsteady.” Sebastian contained a chuckle. The one unsteadied was the Young Master, wobbling, one foot on the penultimate step, knee on the end platform, reaching out with grasping fingers towards the egg placed daintily on the chandelier. “Just a bit more...” he growled to himself, reaching out, straining. Much more of that aimless grasping would result in a broken egg, something that Sebastian was dutifully going to point out before he felt the threat and sprang into action.

The thrown ladle had been targeting the Young Master’s back. Speed and angle would by itself leave and ugly bruise in the frail human body. When adding the height of the inevitable fall such an attack would provoke the bruise area would be augmented. And if the fall’s angle was awkward enough there was a distinct possibility for broken bones and teeth.

Sebastian’s intervention deflected the projectile, the fast movement and ye sound of metal hitting metal startling the Young Master, his jump unsettling the ladder, dislodging him from the wooden surface. The chandelier trembled, the egg shivering and tipping, precarious. With a shout the Young Master managed to stretch both arms, one hand gripping the curved metal of the chandelier arm, crystals chiming dissonantly as his weight unbalanced the structure, the other hand managing to save Lady Elizabeth’s Easter Egg.

The ladder fell with a loud smack, closing leaving the Young Master dangling like one of the many crystals that decorated the chandelier.

The Demon landed, one ladle for the defence, the other carrying the egg needing to be defended, facing the next part of the challenge. And the rules had already been broken. Aiming for the Young Master so blatantly even if one was fairly sure he would intervene was beyond rude.

“Double Charles.” Sebastian acknowledged, straightening. Charles Grey had gripped the ladle in the rebound, holding it much like the rapier he favoured. Phipps just looked stoic while going along with the whims of his partner, being the one carrying the egg.

“Sorry but we’re taking the victory.” Grey attacked without any ado, the soup-serving utensils clashing as blades in a fencing match. Grey’s expression darkened, his grin turning wider, more of a baring of teeth, a so-called smile. “I thought I had killed you for sure.” He mellifluously snarled, keeping the pressure “How did you do it?”

“How?” Sebastian retorted, the corner of his mouth tilting in amusement. The key word in that statement was killed. That was not true, now was it? “I don’t know what you are talking about.” In all honesty it was a truth. Of course it only served to aggravate the rather irritable servant of the Queen.

The whistle of a flute being used as weapon triggered a dodge while still keeping his adversary locked. Phipps attacked on the outside, dutifully keeping the egg protected. It would not be long
“A mere servant shouldn’t be thinking about attacking us nobles, should he?” Grey taunted, flaunting his status to get the upper hand. Sebastian stiffened, a tick working on his jaw. “Because a servant cannot.” It created a conflict on aesthetics, true...

“In a game your status isn’t worth anything.” The Young Master shouted. Interesting to know that he had both remembered and noticed the heart of the matter and where the demon he had bound to him placed certain limits in accordance to the role he chose to play. “I’ll allow it. Break the egg.” Quite generous of the Young Master to permit it but it was quite unneeded.

“I can’t.” Sebastian answered, backing away from an incoming attack, Phipps stayed behind, on the defence. Gray pressed on. “That would shame the name of the House of Phantomhive.” That was what he was willing to give as an excuse. “Please wait ten more seconds.” The Demons whispered, fast and discreet as another dodge made his path cross under the chandelier and it new earl-shaped decoration,

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a game or not.” Gray was still focused in an unrelenting offence, barely relenting long enough for a flaw to show on his form as Sebastian readjusted his, keeping the egg safely out of reach. “I just hate losing.” Gray continued his attack, talking as metal struck. Sebastian made sure he kept his defences both up and light enough to not bend the ladle and tip anyone about his actual abilities. “And besides I love toying with an opponent that can’t fight back.” So he was taking his measured steps backwards and sideways as hasty retreats instead on simple use of the terrain to fit the situation. That was suitable as well.

“My arm...” the Young Master was complaining as Sebastian’s movements took him close enough to make Phipps’s attack. He avoided it with an effortless somersault, stunning both men, even if for the briefest moment.

“It ends here.” Grey attacked, actually aiming for the egg as the rules demands as soon as Sebastian as his feet returned to the polished floor.

The dry sound of a shell cracking filled the room, bringing it to a deep silence upset by the spidery lines radiating from the shattered shell surface.

Grey stopped his attack in shock, mouth agape. Phipps looked down at the egg he had been carrying and protecting, startled. The Young Master’s reaction was very similar to Earl Grey’s. Sebastian smiled slightly, pleased that the plan.

“What is this!?” Grey shrieked, staring at the moist chick chirping in the ladle.

“Oh my. It seems there was a fertilized egg mixed in...” Sebastian piped in helpfully, containing his amusement. Barely. “I am very sorry but the rule is game was “no matter what the reason if the egg breaks you are disqualified” which means...” The little chick had cost them the game.

“We lost...” Phipps acknowledged the truth, nodding. “The shell broke.”

No way... Grey bemoaned, turning away, crestfallen.

“Cute.” Phipps added under his breath as Sebastian placed the ladder upright and retrieved the Young Master.

As soon as he was on solid ground the Earl of Phantomhive began to complain under his breath, shaking the numb hand. But the goals set had been achieved. The game had been won and the Easter Egg retrieved.
“Good work as well young master.” Sebastian gave the praise expected of a servant, receiving a rather pointed look as the Young Master motioned him to follow, going through the house, headed for the gardens.

“You set this up at the start didn’t you?” The Young Master accused when they were out of earshot, standing on the edge of unimpressed, unsurprised. “Now who is the deceitful one?”

As insults went the truth was rarely effective. Sebastian took the words, tone and sentiment behind it in stride.

“I can’t have my master embarrassed in front of his fiancée now can I?” Sebastian answered with an amused wink of mischief. Ciel huffed and moved on.

Sebastian glanced around, making sure the garden was in order. Roses, decorations, food, from the trifle to the nest cakes, the cross buns, the roasted ham... all was placed in balance on the side table. The main table had the seats needed for the guests and the appropriate silverware and china for the occasion.

Nina was across from prince Soma, sketching on a leather bound booklet, glancing around from time to time. Either looking for models or forms to place on paper. Soma was carrying an amicable conversation with Edward who sat next to the Young Lady. Even though there was an extra chair in place for Agni as a guest the Indian man had chosen to keep performing his duties towards the Prince. The Double Charles were following the Young Master sullenly. The servants were waiting for any order that might be given. Mouser had just handed Tanaka a chair and his usual tea, circling about, hiding a snake under its bush, doing the little practical things needed for a smooth event.

Lizzy stood up as soon as she saw them, approaching, practically bouncing, smiling and bright.

“Here you go.” The Young Master extended the decorated egg, slightly uncomfortable, blushing and flinching when engulfed in a hug.

“You did it! You got it first after all!” Lizzy exclaimed it, laughing, twirling him a bit before letting go.

“Yes. As always.” Ciel continued, actually smiling. It was just that kind of warm moment.

“May this Easter egg bring you lots of happiness.” Lizzy whished, offering the egg once again, holding his wrists warmly as he accepted it.

“Thank you Lizzy.” The boyo answered, his face freed from the frown. At least for the moment.

“I’m sick of this. Let’s eat.” Grey complained, breaking the moment.

“Of course my best friend would win!” Soma announced, giving the Young Master a one-armed hug.

“I’ll kill you if you break that egg!” Edward shouted, aggressively. “My sister is wasted on you!” He continued as the boys targeted the table and its food.

Girlie kept smiling for a moment. Then she reached up, taking out the bunny ears, staring at them, staring at the boyo’s back, looking grim, sadder.
“Was it enough to keep your lie?” Mouser asked, approaching.

“I believe so.” Girlie answered, breaking away from her darkened mood, ears going back to their place, perky and sweet. “Eventually right?”

Mouser shrugged in a non-answer. Whatever she chose to believe was best for them both.

“Oh right...” Earl Grey was saying as they approached, extending a letter as he wolfed down the several plates of food he had taken out of the table. “We didn’t come just to play. Here you go.” Ciel took the letter, staring at it. “A love letter.” The Ear teased before returning to his meal.

Sebastian and Mouser exchanged a grimace. What now?
To my cute boy

What misfortune you experienced on the Campania. I do hope that you have fully recovered and are enjoying a quiet and blissful Easter.

As for myself, I am enjoying a few days, cleared for the holiday celebration.

The World Fair is about to start and I will have to attend, as many other dignitaries, royals and rulers. It seems they really are trying to match the boasts of progress and diversity. We shall see.

Are you considering putting on an appearance?

I await your answer eagerly.

Victoria

It was a rather short missive and it did not have a true mission request. A polite inquiry that left him uncertain about what was the answer the Queen desired of him. Ciel looked up, away from the letter, towards the flickering light of a candle. He had chosen to stay up a little later than usual in an attempt to catch up with the company’s paperwork.

The World Fair would be taking place in Paris, starting in the 6th of May.

“Mouser.” He called, sighing, stretching, tired. It had been an exhausting day.

“Aye?” The thief answered, peeking over the back of the chair placed in front of the dead fireplace, draping herself over the upholstered back. A few balance sheets were being dangled in her hands, carelessly.

“Did I receive anything concerning the World Fair?” The Earl asked.

If there were more reasons to go other than a nebulous reference from the Queen he could chance a trip.

Mouser made a little sound, a hum, sliding back down, out of sight, standing up after a moment, stretching, surveying the letters on the table, singling out the Funtom pile, picking out nine envelopes.

“Other than the confirmations of the machinery given for the display and the support for some other companies that you have acquired, correct?” Five letters were placed back down. That had been decided a long time ago, before she had taken over that section of Sebastian’s duties. “There is a requests made by the Funton Parisian representative, Monsieur Moreau, for you to be there. He believes it will make more people willing to invest.” She placed the letter that contained that request down. “This one is from the Marchioness. She will not be going but the Marquis is. It is a bit of an encouragement for you to embrace your lineage’s other duties.” The letter was placed next to the other bit of paper. “Those who organized the event have sent an invitation as well.”

“Why? The purpose of these fairs is that anyone can attend.”
“True. But there are events for a more restrictive circle and those do need invitations such as this.” She plucked the next missive. “This is from Rose Company. They have been a bit downtrodden and discredited but with Woolsey out of the way they are steadily making a return even without the deceased. They ask you to review the possibility of a joint project and ask for your appraisal on the machines they chose to show.”

“Anything else?”

“I could dig around but there are the ones that fit your question.”

“It seems a bit unavoidable then.”

“Finny carry this down!” Bard shouted, dragging a couple of closed and locked trunks out of the boyo’s dressing room, looking around, slightly winded.

“Right!” Finny answered, skipping through the carpet, picking up the heavy load, tipping it against his shoulder, moving on with ease.

“Where are the Young Master’s undergarments?” Meyrin mumbled to herself, searching the drawers to fill the travel case, carrying the travelling toiletries, looking around, leaving her armful on the bed before aiming for the drawer that held the needed items.

“Young Master.” Sebastian entered the room, glancing around, satisfied that all was being done according to his instructions. “The hotel has been booked and the passage secured.” And Mouser, after having done so through a solid two hours of speaking, shouting and cajoling in French on the phone, was hiding somewhere in the manor, having ransacked all the booze she could get her hands on, cursing loudly and colourfully on her way up.

“By the way young Master... where are you heading?” Finny stopped, turning before crossing the threshold.

“You helped with the packing and don’t even know that?” Bard shouted, half shocked, half annoyed. Sebastian had told them while distributing tasks.

“Paris.” Despite that the Young Master answered without making a great deal of such a trip.

“Her Majesty should have arrived to Paris about three days ago.” Sebastian mentioned as the Young Master enjoyed his tea, looking a bit warily at the water of the English channel. They had had no desire to set foot on a ship so soon after the disaster but duty seemed to demand it very strongly. Although there was an agreement about the fact that if that boat sank they would be near enough a shore to make Sebastian swim for it. The Queen would be meeting with dignitaries. “We will arrive in time for the opening ceremonies, as requested.” The Young Master nodded, eyes narrowed, thinking. “The hotels are heavily guarded. But the nature of her majesty’s suggestion this time was more aligned with your status and company than any work related with the Watchdog.” A single grunt of annoyance was all the answer the Earl offered.
With the Eiffel tower as its entrance gate the Champ-de-Mars park was bristling with art galleries and exhibition pavilions from diverse countries. Comprised of lavish amounts of glass and steel the Gallerie des Machines contains the finest technology the world had to offer. An agricultural exposition could be seen in Palais du Trocadéro. A colonial exhibition had been opened at the Hôtel des Invalides, the second fair site. It contained a reproduction of the Angkor Wat ruins. Folk dances, village nègre and, peculiarly, visiting from America the “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show”.

The ceremonies had been performed and the people were finally free to roam around and appreciate the plethora of activities that the Fair offered to the masses.

“It really is an excellent World Fair.” Sebastian commented offhandedly as they walked the well groomed paths. The day was clear, sunny, the weather turning fairer. There was a significant amount of wealthy people surrounding them, sightseeing. “Let us walk around a little longer to meet the required appearance quota.” He suggested to the Young Master who walked two steps ahead of him and Mouser, the rhythm of the fashionable cane slightly off due to annoyance. Still he seemed to be warming up to some of the possibilities of the event.

“If we find new product development ideas it would also be good.” The boyo complained, glancing around. “So this isn’t such a monumental waste of my time.”

“You’ll have to make an appearance in the Gallerie des Machines at four.” Mouser reminded him. “Tomorrow you’ll meet with the Rose representatives and Monsieur Monroe. And no doubt handle a mob of requests seeing the exposition is going to drag out of hiding with greedy grabby fingers…”

“Yes, looks like there is a stuffed angel in the Hall of Wonders.” That phrase, casually spoken by a passerby caught their attention sharply.

“Stuffed angel?” The boyo asked, turning, heading towards the aforementioned place.

“Someone beat us to the punch?” Mouser asked with a chuckle, adjusting the little hat.

“I doubt it. But taxidermy?” Sebastian answered as they manoeuvred through the excited crowds.

“Rather tacky although we have to admire a certain poetic justice if true.” The Dollhouse events hug a bit in the following silence as they walked through displays of the odd, claims of supernatural, and brightly dressed nobles, businessmen, women, children and conmen. “Although... I have a hazy memory of wanting to pluck feathers to make a dress...”

The item that had attacked their attention was kept within a clear glass case. A small monkey covered in snowy white fur, arranged in a way that looked like it was flying, using a metal pole as the basis of the structure, arms and legs spread, mouth open to show the teeth, big wings fully opened, tilted upwards.

“I do see the resemblance.” Sebastian remarked rather seriously. Mouser snorted, covering her mouth.

“What? It’s just a monkey with sewed on swan wings.” The boyo summarized, disappointed.

No one would have minded to seeing its head on a pike.

“Someone could be trying to create an army of flying monkeys.” Mouser teased, looking around before rechecking the time.

“How tasteless.”

“Boring. Let’s go to the next hall.”
“I will be going now.” While the boyo only had to be on the Gallerie at the specified time she was supposed to be there to guarantee a smooth presentation, Monsieur Monroe having been an eager opportunist, tossing his duties at her, and take note of the names and interest of the audience and those that stepped forward with requests.

Whatever commotion had been started it was creating chaos in the Fair grounds. Mouser was barely at the door of the Gallerie when people started buzzing, spreading rumours of a blackout in the hall of wonders and of the ghoulish vision of a stuffed monkey attacking. It had started a cascading panic. Police was starting to show. A few wounded had to be carried away, having suffered due to the stampeding of their peers.

Mouser turned around and moved towards the source, stopping for a moment when she spotted Angel Threads crisscrossing the air. So it had indeed moved out of the country after the debacle its last plan had been. And if its ideal was still raze the world to take it for itself the World Fair and its gathered people of note was indeed a good place to strike. But if it had spotted the boyo, pride arrogance and hatred might have twisted its vision of the ultimate goal and precipitated events.

It really did not like them by then.

Metal and fighting.

A groaning tower.

The thief looked up, unsurprised to find the blurred winged form of the bitch bastard and Sebastian, locked in a struggle. A quick search for the boyo told her he was right above her and bellow them, most likely in the Eiffel tower. Although why she would have to inquire later.

Pieces of chopped beams were falling. People ran, people were caught. Blood-stained white feathers fluttered down softly. And amidst the chaos as calm as the thief was another woman in a fashionable gown was looking up, distaste clear under the brim of a silver-and-periwinkle hat sitting on top of rust-coloured hair.

“Fallen angel.” She whispered, full of venom. Mouser turned her head to stare, startled, forgetting her own thoughts of joining the fight or waiting for Sebastian to be done. If she knew was it a new enemy? An ally of Ash-Angela? A demon? A Reaper? Neutral at best. Hostile at worse. “We go to Paris, she said, It’s fashionable, safe and full of beauties, she said.” She groaned, the tirade flicking between an Eastern European accent and a rather thick Scottish brogue. “Well, my thanks Lizvetta… if I get my tail fried by a…” She stopped her ranting, turning green eyes towards Mouser, noticing the attention. Her freckled features turned into a mask of shock, shedding the animosity they first had been schooled into, mirroring Mouser’s as both took note of the very distinct white spot resting on the hollow of their throats. “Baby Sister!” She shouted amidst the chaos, ignored by the panicked humans, ignoring the falling steel, face turning into a happy grin, picking up her skirts and dashing towards a stunned thief, tackling her down and dragging her away, chirping merrily.
Chapter 98

The hotel was not far from the one where they were staying. Where a lot of visiting nobles and diplomats were staying. Fancy, frilly and filled with earthly comforts. Sneaking away before the police arrived to restore order to the commotion that had raged beneath the world fair entrance was easier than it should have been but the men were distracted by the falling metal.

The red-head moved gracefully, Mouser’s arm still trapped in a lace-gloved grip, blending in with the elite, crossing the glittering hall without addressing anyone, aiming for the third floor suites. That veneer of sophistication disappeared as soon as she closed the door and released the thief, starting by the hat, tossed in the general direction of a sofa, hair falling from its prim roll, pins either dropping on the carpet, floorboards or staying tangled in the rusty locks. What followed was a maelstrom of clothing and accessories intertwined by burst of curses and a half explanation.

“My name is Muireall MacCormaig.” She mentioned, booted foot propped up against the fabric of the armrest, unlacing it, promptly shaking the boot loose and repeating. One of the pair slid under the sofa. The other stayed upright in front of the tall window that lead to a balcony. “Good grief they make fashion more uncomfortable with each passing season” she continued her rant while getting rid of the outer layer and unbuttoning the front of the periwinkle dress that matched the hat. “And I am from the time where they would put you in steel underpants if they though your legs were opening for more than walking.” The dress fell on a heap as she continued to walk, left behind. “I do like the hats.” She mentioned while pulling the gloves. “Better than those baskets…” Socks followed. “I was not expecting to find our baby sister.” She threw herself on the sofa with a guttural groan, stretching. “I’m afraid I’m ill prepared for what should be done.” Then her lips parted in a smile, freckles shifting. “That is the easily corrected though. Just a call Blondie…” the demoness in her petticoat sighed, eyes locked with Mouser’s. “Do you eat?”

“Less and less.” The thief answered softly, sitting down as well. Might as well treat the situation with a similar disposition. “What is this abduction about?”

“Spur of the moment mostly.” Muireall slouched, laughing. “But now that you are here might as well deal with the formalities of the coven induction.”

“Coven.” Like witchery? “Meaning?”

“Caith Sìth sprout from one place in the world and until you entered a Covenant we were sure our kind had been driven to extinction in the witch hunts. Meaning you are our baby and our sister. Meaning you are proof that there can be more.” She clicked her tongue. “Coven because there are not that many of us, by demons standards anyway, even with centuries of deals and we work best if the group is kept closely knit, sharing experience. Blondie can tell you more if you asked but she is old as dirt so book a few days for the explanations.” Muireall frowned. “Actually I’m sure she once said there is dirt younger than her…”

“Why?” Mouser asked cautiously, head tilting.

“Suspicion?” The female retorted, smiling widely, showing a hint of fang.

“Kept me alive.” The thief mentioned airily.

“Indeed.” Muireall admitted with a nod, sharing a look that mirrored much. She had been born in a time where magic was mistrusted and her kind was starting to lose their position within the clans. A time where a skill was no longer seen as a useful tool but a sin. And not trusting, doubting every
smile, every move, every word… it was something Muireall was altogether familiar with.

And then thirty years later the hunts had started. And they had gambled all, making deals with free demons, searching for their sisters. Those who could have been turned had been offered. Several had died, unfit, unable to withstand power and the change itself. Others were too old, volunteering themselves as decoys for the humans to burn in displays of power. Their sacrificed allowed the ones that were too young to escape. In the span of a single human lifetime, as the hunts peaked, sixty Caith Sith had entered covenants. Seventeen of those had been lost. And after that nothing. Three hundred years of nothing.

“Most people call me Mouer.” The thief supplied, relaxing a fraction.

“Just a few question if you don’t mind… do you have no magical knowledge?”

“Nowadays that is all considered superstition.”

“Alchemy?”

“Old cracked-pot gramps of science.”

“Demonology?”

“What I have been taught so far by Sebastian.”

“I’ll send you the books after.” In Muireall’s mind dwelled a simple thought. The sacrifices of the past, the forgetting of who they were had been worth it because their blood survived and in surviving it could learn, grow. “Seeing you have a fallen after your demon every edge you can get should be sharpened.” The demoness said, standing, motioning her to follow. “In any event before we do the quick summoning of our old lady I should introduce you to my current mistress.” The door to the main room was opened. “May I present you to Erzsébet Báthory.”

Mouser stared, curious despite the oddness of the situation. Muireall had not threatened nor demanded much. And was offering knowledge. She had called it edges, weapons. With the boyo’s misfortune-bringing would it be so bad to tip the scales?

There were two women resting in the king-sized hotel bed, both unconscious, wearing silky nightgowns. Both beautiful. One blooming, the other withering. Muireall was checking their pulses and observing their features.

“As her handmaiden she named me Anna Darvulia.” Muireall tossed her contracted name winking. “That will be the name you’ll see in the packages I’ll send your way.”

“There is only one soul.” Mouser said softly, observing the bodies. The other female beamed with pride.

“You are already sensitive to souls. What has your covenant put you through I wonder…” Muireall chuckled, shaking her head afterwards, touching the loose black hair of the youngest woman. “Young and beautiful she said. Always. I showed her a few blood tricks to make it so. But she wanted more. Went from blood trick to bloodbath fast. Then she was caught and imprisoned. She had her choice there, at the moment where her so prized beauty faded and her life started to gutter out. Continue the contract or relent and give me her soul to pay for those years of unblemished perfection. Lizvetta wanted to go on, continue. I took her soul from the decaying body entombed in her own room and placed it on a new, young and beautiful shell.”

“I have recently seen something similar with dead bodies. A renegade Grim Reaper.” Mouser
mentioned. Might as well try to pry some answers from someone who knew.

“Interesting… Did not work too well, did it?” The demoness smiled, gathering supplies from the traveling trunks.

“They mimicked life but ripped the living apart, looking for a real one.” Mouser elaborated.

“A soul is a soul. They are unique and stubborn. Lizvetta’s soul has to take over that body, melding memories and making it her own. It’s a soulless husk but it still remembers its past. Then, if successful, it bonds with her soul, becoming true living again.”

“And the other?”

“There is a bit of trick in this. She is alive. But she will never wake up. When her body fails there will be no Reapers coming. No soul to take.” Muireall smiled slightly. “Or I could make her go on living, empty of soul, under my command. A simple geas. «Live».” And the body would do it, using its memories as a guide. “Ultimately it will be what Lizvetta asks.”

“From what he said the techniques used and what I felt was something more akin to stitching memories he had made himself. They were loud, hurting me. I felt compelled to shred them.”

“So you are untrained… and yet instinct still rings true…” Muireall observed her with appraisal. “There will come a day where she will lose that battle and I get her soul at last. I’m fed every twenty years or so and each time I look forward to the moment where she wants to change bodies. For that chance that her soul will falter in the struggle, drowned by the memories of the original inhabitant of that flesh, pushed out like a parasite. These 275 years of contract will be over when she fails.”

“So… a body can’t take a soul but a soul can take a body?”

“We can make it do so, yes.”

“Why not speed it along?” Mouser asked.

“Create a flaw in the merge? How underhanded.” Muireall whispered in fake shock.

“True.” Mouser smiled.

“It has been fun.” The demoness admitted her motives, shrugging.

“Do you miss your covenant?” Mouser changed the subject as they left the room.

That little demonstration had been interesting, doubling as a test of sorts. She felt fairly sure she had passed it. And had another inkling about what the Undertaker might have been after with the Aurora Society.

“I have seen him 50 years ago during one of these switches…” Muireall made a disgruntled face. “At this rate I will end up like that poor bunny.” Muireall gestured, the furniture of the room suddenly pushed away, freeing the centre. “Simple telekinesis, Mouser.” She informed the surprised thief. “Never seen much magic being performed, have you?”

“Hellfire once. Sebastian has a few orders to maintain his actions close to human standards.” Mouser paused for an instant, watching as the demoness started to use the chalk to create summoning symbols. “Bunny?”
“Most males are not big on magic. It’s a tool that can be very flexible but few bother beyond the practical basics. Raw strength is their preferred course.” Muireall sighed dramatically, stepping back, piercing the pad of thumb with the claw of the index finger. Her claws were pale, pearly with pink undertones. “A succubus. Her covenant, an incubus as you might have guessed, was out on a contract for 80 years, give or take. You can imagine the reunion.” She tossed the fat droplet of blood at the core of the drawings, grinning with mischief. “Long story short they gorged on each other and it was the first time I saw demons spewing their guts out. Cautionary tale as it was. do not overeat.”

“Don’t you need sacrifices to make a summons?” Mouser asked when she was fairly certain her laugh had died.

“That is the human way.” Muireall observed the runes for a moment before nodding. “Let me start your lessons by saying this. «It is taught by the demons, it teaches about the demons, and it leads to the demons.» That is the truth about demonology. For a demon to summon another is no different than a human sending a letter. Blondie should be here in a few minutes. An hour if she runs late.”
Blondie was tall.

That might have been a simplistic first impression but the demoness that was the first, and by virtue of that and experience the Coven’s boss, was truly tall. Towering over Mouser was not a hard thing. Everyone did so fairly regularly. Muireall was already tall for a woman, having stood proudly in her height and heels before disposing of the boots. And still Blondie would be the one looking from above even if she had not appeared in demonic form with her feline feet peeking beneath the hem of her loose purple gown. Her markings were jagged, lilac, contrasting with the sun-kissed skin, making her narrow red eyes look more striking. The hair whose colour she was called after was tied in a long thick braid.

In the short amount of time that had passed from summons to arrival Muireall had mentioned that is was a bit of a joke for the Caith Sìth, a moniker she had given herself because the young ones after a century or two stopped being able to pronounce her actual name.

“Ah... the baby.” Her voice was soft, calm, the words coming out only after thoroughly surveying the area. Mouser bristled a little, having snuggled into the armchair next to the window, between the coffee table and chest of drawers. “I see why you asked for the memories Muireall.” The demoness seated on the sofa that had been pressed against the wall saluted, smiling. Blondie hand moved softly, pulling a crystal flask from thin air, golden claws gleaming. “Have you explained?” She asked, a simple finger curl bringing the second armchair to her, sitting down, adjusting the gown.

“Nay. Haven’t even asked much yet.” Muireall answered.

“I see. Very well. What can you tell me of your situation? No need for details, just a broad picture.”

Mouser frowned, thinking before clicking her tongue, nestling deeper into the armchair.

“Grew up in an orphanage, did work for the underworld. Recruited by the contracted in the end of August. Entered the covenant in October. So far we have faced hell hounds, fallen angels, reapers, renegade reapers, a rude demon with an entourage of four, animated dolls made from corpses, animated corpses that actually looked like it and a whole menagerie of standard human depravity and craziness.”

“Not a very regular contractual situation...” Muireall mentioned, blinking slowly.

“You have been with your current mistress for more than one lifetime.” Blondie said with quiet mirth, a smile tugging her lips. The red-head shrugged, covering a chuckle. “Who are they targeting specifically?”

“The one bearing the seal, mostly.”

“Any concerns you’d like to get addressed in detail?”

“A collar locked with unearthly power.”

Blondie nodded.

“Let us start then. As a coven we share knowledge and experience. This is our blood.” She shook the flask. “We use it as a guide-book of sorts. When you need it you’ll have the any knowledge any
of us possesses readily available, adding to your own, as if you had always known. But as any skill or know-how it can only go as far as you are willing to take it.” Blondie explained.

“In other words you can read a book about swimming but you won’t be able to use that knowledge if you never get in the water and put it to work.” Muireall simplified it, stretching. “I should be doing it too by now, no?”

“Each of us adds a new drop of blood every ten years to keep our knowledge current.” Blondie continued, expanding the explanation. “In that we may have a bit of a leg up on some demons. There is usually one or two of us around, learning or contracted that a new arrival can ask for updates. But let us return to the point. Mouser, is it?” The thief nodded, observing. That kind of knowledge seemed practical. And if it worked the same way with languages she could be looking at a bid for freedom now that Sebastian was making plans to start German. “Sharpen a claw. Dig it deep enough into the white spot, just enough to gather some blood. Muireall?”

“Right.” The demoness reacted, straightening, claw of her pinkie elongated and she sunk it to the tip of the finger like instructed, pulling out quickly, allowing the drop to fall and join the rest. It sizzled a bit as Blondie swirled it. The trifling wound closed instantly.

Mouser did the same when Blondie turned the flask her way, repeating the gestures cautiously, the pain no worse than a small stab. Her blood reacted the same way as Muireall’s as it mixed with the others. Blondie smiled, observing, waiting for a moment longer, swirling before showing what should be done next, dipping her claw into the mix and piercing her own mark, lingering. A Mouser imitated the gesture there was slight burn when the bloods touched within her chest, nothing more, gone in an instant. Underwhelmed but satisfied that there had been no painful shock, realization or sudden epiphany the thief settled back, cleaning her claws. Muireall went next.

“Combat oriented, underworld knowledge, survivalist and a keen understanding of how corruption works within, without and throughout.” Blondie appraised. “Quite wonderful.” She nodded, the flask vanishing.

“Why do this with blood?” Mouser asked softly, touching the healing spot, eyes widening when the answer just came. Blood was a perfect carrier. It touched body, soul and mind. It carried strength, memories, identity. But unlike the cinematic record it did not show the memory itself but its core of information and experience, grasped instinctively. Much the same as the covenant’s change worked, mixing with what she already was, turning, twisting, growing. Yet all of that stiff-sounding textbook spiel could be condensed in a simple old adage. “The blood knows.” The thief whispered, clearing her head.

“It’s just wonky when the theories start to crop up and you need to sift through.” Muireall smiled, noticing the pause from question to self-answer and the surprise in her demeanour. “It gets easier with practice as well. Quicker, sharper, more accurate.”

“Now about seals of unearthly power.” Blondie addressed Mouser’s request calmly. “Either you have a creature able to break them like a Hell Hound or you use the blood of the one who created the seal or the blood of said creature. Or you get a celestial or demonic weapon but those are tools that treat a minor problem like severe threat.”

“You just slap the right release runes written in their blood in the right sequence and it breaks.”

“Muireall…” Blondie scolded. “The seal must be active beforehand. Is it?”

“Dormant for the most part.” Mouser answer, shaking her head. “The collar can’t be released or cut but the seal doesn’t react too aggressively…” She paused, instinct guiding her through new
knowledge, giving a firmer shape to an old suspicion. “Is it possible to have more uses for a seal?”

“Divine Submission.” Blondie answered after a pause. “Angels tend to be…”

“Dictatorial about their wants?” Muireall supplied, scoffing.

“Not very permissive of individual freedoms.” Blondie corrected. “Still if the seal is hiding a Divine Submission geas, as the origin is the same, the runes would still break it, even if they need a slight correction. It still needs to be active.”

“Which means I will have to wait for an attack through the dog.” Not ideal but a way to counteract was better than no way at all. “Now… what are these explosive runes that keep coming to mind and can they blast hard enough to replace dynamite.”

Blondie and Muireall smiled. One conjured paper and charcoal. The other stood up and fished out a book from the trunk in the countess’s room. They placed the table at the centre of their triangle and started the basic instruction.
There was some satisfaction in being such an upsetting presence to an enemy that they launched an impromptu surprise attack as soon as they noticed the antagonistic company. Even if such an attack had been started with the use of an indirect, ineffective approach and the rather ugly puppet that perfectly represented its own nature.

The Young Master had had a moment of logic and good sense, doing as he was told, leaving the darkened hall and its panicking masses, running to the gardens and then joining one of the noble gaggle that had gathered for the Eiffel Tower guided visits, blending in with the wealthy and idle.

The angel’s targeting however was not off. Manipulating something through threads did not leave it blind to the surroundings or unaware of its chief target. Nor was the distraction used hard to dispose off.

So they had fought as soon as they had come into each other’s sight, damaging the structure of the tower making the ascender tremble, and altogether gathering too much attention. But the event had been perceived by those within and those fleeing debris as some sort of terrorist attack and the humans had reacted accordingly. Finding itself trapped between Sebastian and a discovery that would undoubtedly shatter whatever was left of his plans Ash had chosen to flee before any lasting damage could be exchanged.

In the end Sebastian had to do little to cover up the truth of the event. The humans had been expecting unrest and threats due to the presence of rulers, nobles, diplomats and the wealthy. Something had been put into motion as soon as the first noble had shrieked.

They had sheltered and coddled those that met the wealth and status requirements, interrogated the rest, protected the area and attempted to give whatever explanations would make the people feel more at ease and away from the ongoing investigation. Then those that had suffered through the ordeal had been escorted to the secure locations that were the hotels.

However Mouser was not amidst the crowds, either the one contained and kept away from the commotion, bleating for answers, the ones that had been unfortunate enough to be nearby when the debris had started to fall or the ones that had remained blissfully unaware.

It was slightly worrying, especially when remembering what had happen the last time she had vanished when the angel had been involved. Reaching out for the covenant was giving him very little. A sense of focus, no pain, no fear, nearby.

So Sebastian went through the routines until the matters were settled, pausing midway through a discussion as he felt her return before resuming the needed actions until the Young Master was asleep.

Returning to the room booked form them revealed an unscathed Mouser sitting on the bed, cross-legged, smoking, casually leaving ash all over the covers, focused on a floating silver lighter, still and steady at eye level. Her attention split when he entered, a natural flicker in focus, the object following it, fast and still steady.

Sebastian sidestepped the projectile, catching the lighter before it damaged the walls, keeping from
breaking it as well. Shaking his head with a smile he approached as she hid a snicker, standing, noticing the ash, patting it out of the fabric, tossing the butt into the metal decorative ashtray.

It was clear what she intended to do with that new skill and the surfacing of controlled magic could only mean she had been in contact with the Coven. Likely why she had disappeared for all those hours. It would be courteous to make an offering as thank you for them. They had, in the end, given a very versatile weapon to an extremely dangerous creature that was on his side, free of any request of human-acting.

“Keep practicing.” He took her hand, placing the lighter on the open palm, pulling the thief closer, kissing her forehead, whispering the words in amusement. Mixed with her scent and the tobacco he could recognise traces of the other females.

Mouser laughed, scanning him sharply beneath the expression. Wound searching. So she very much knew what had happened in the Tower that marked the World Fair’s entrance. That deduction was quickly confirmed by her following words.

“What is the plan now?” the thief asked after a pause, stepping back, sitting back on the bed, pulling her feet up, showing the blue-and-black fabric of her socks, leaning forward.

“We have not changed our purpose or schedule.” Sebastian answered, standing near the edge of the structure, undressing, folding the tailcoat. “It will make of that whatever it wants to see.” Whatever the angel’s perceptions were. What had been proved true was that a threat still existed. “It seemed sluggish, weaker, however.” He took off his shoes and sat down on the covers as well.

“Did it now...” a little suspicious smirk appeared on her lips, her hand opening, the lighter floating up once more. Back to back, leaning against each other Sebastian relaxed a fraction. “I had no information about it leaving England.” The lighter wavered slightly as she spoke. Frowning Mouser adjusted it. They had been a bit out of touch, catching up with all the events that had unfolded while in the Campania. And for the most part dealing with the aftermath of that voyage still took a big chunk of their time. But with so many facets to uncover...

“Do you have any contacts?” Mouser grabbed the lighter and placed it on the nightstand, tilting her head to search his face.

“Smugglers. Booze mostly.” The thief closed her eyes, resting her head on his back, sighing. “Can’t say if they are still there, or were captured or are dead. Also I’m unsure... Why would it repeat a plot that failed once?”

“All of its plots have had submission at its core.” Sebastian retorted turning slightly. Bereft of support Mouser fell on her back, looking up, into his eyes. “Shall we hunt?”

It was clear that the Angel had been on the defensive, attempting to rebuild what was lost and grab whatever power it could. But without followers, without a cult, without its drugs there was simply no way for it to do so in such a short amount of time. Which clearly meant it had been rooted in England for longer than they had though. At least two generations, three, for the village to forget its origins and see only what it had been woven. The other plots had been recent, created after the spectacular failure and loss of minions. And none of the attempts seemed to be taking root in Paris. More. It seemed that it was not fully recovered from being mauled by Mouser, having a church dropped on its head and then mauled some more by Claude.
The underworld, when asked, remembered either the male or the female attempting to regain some measure of power and control, barred from it by all the ones he considered unclean, unworthy, lower than dirt. It was amusing. Angel prostitute. Angel drug dealer. Angel cultist. Angel beggar. Angel nothing

“You look pleased.” Mouser said as they walked by the Seine, returning to the hotel, comfortable away from the stiffer roles, his arm around her shoulders. There was no way to know where the angel had flown off to but in its current state of affairs it could be far, near or completely away.

“I far prefer a dead enemy but a crippled, humiliated one is fine as well.” Sebastian answered, smiling slightly. “Have you extracted all your wishes satisfactorily from the Young Master?”

“I’m midway through my list.” Mouser admitted with a toothy grin, turning her head towards the feverish light and sound of a nearby cabaret. “Come. Let me try getting us drunk again.” Sebastian allowed a short laugh out as she gripped his hand and dragged him along.
The boyo glanced back with some dismay at the load of boxes that were being taken from the carriage’s roof before turning away and entering the manor, greeted by the servant’s smiling faces, readily going about their duties and the tasks needed to welcome a tired master to his home. A warm bath was already prepared, they had said.

Paris was a playground of shopping for nobility. And Mouser had been let loose amidst them. Not that she seemed particularly inclined to shop like Lizzy or Madam Red but she had a long list of things he had to replace or compensate her for because of the Campania events. Her focus was on jewellery and weaponry and she made sure he got a good long look at the prices that the merchants were setting. In the few times he had gone through that deal with her he had found ways to lower prices, haggle for the best deal and keep his dignity at the same time. It was a skill he then applied to suppliers and associates. While Ciel loathed to admit it he did not dislike her surreptitious lessons. He did however find the extra pocketed items a bit disconcerting.

Although a suspiciously pink dress had been thrown in the mix with a matching hat, gloves and heels. But that she had told him later was part of her duty as a secretary because she didn’t want her earnings cut short by Ciel’s sudden death at the hands of a gift-less Lizzy. The outrage of having a doting fiancée go to Paris and return without a shred of the latest fashion? The scandal!

The thief closed the door after the unloading was done and the coach was on the way to the stables, cooing at her boxes before turning to the mail table. Sebastian would be busy for the next few hours but minding her own duties should be enough. No disaster seemed to have befallen the manor in those few days of absence. A few packages from Anna Darvulia hid under it. The books she had promised. A little pile of invitations waited on the silver platter. Spring was making the nobles merry, throwing party after party, planning gleefully to preen. The season would be starting in the summer but spring inspired salons and tea parties in preparation and anticipation. Notes of gratitude with several bank notes had been forwarded from France and from secondary businesses. The presentations had gone well despite the attack. Reports waited appraisal, both financial and performance. A couple of plain letters were marked as urgent. A crisis or another in a factory was not such an odd occurrence. Could even be just the need to approve the buying of that or another part for a machine that had broke down. Little, normal things.

“Bard” the thief called while walking by the chef on her way upstairs as he returned hurriedly. “Careful with the big wooden crate. I smuggled in some cognac for you. The good stuff too.”

Bard laughed, nodding in half salute, disappearing into the side door, picking up some of the boxes. Moments before she walked into the study the thief heard Finny’s footsteps to retrieve the rest of the luggage.

It was rather unfortunate that the peaceful return and the calm routine of the next day were shattered at dusk by the appearance of yet another letter from the Queen and another request for the Queen’s Watchdog.

To my cute boy;

I’m afraid our return to England will not allow us any rest. Something has been troubling my mind for quite some time but I had hoped the Easter holidays would have solved this matter. As it has
I am worried about Derek, the son of my cousin, the Duke Clemens. Derek is a fifth year at Weston College but for some reason he has not been returning home since his departure to the new school year, at the end of last summer. He used to send letters everyday but even those stopped coming. Even after his mother contacted his dormitory he won’t return home.

At first we though he was simply at that rebellious age or too engrossed in his studies but now we doubt. More students seem to be doing the same, much to their families’ distress.

What on earth has happened to them I wonder.

Because of this odd behaviour my cousin’s concern grows, as does mine.

I just wish for the people that are important to me to happily return to their homes at the end of this school year and be together once more.

Victoria

“So «investigate why the students of Weston college aren’t returning to their homes on the holidays or contacting their families.» Is what she is saying.” The boyo said calmly, staring at the paper before glancing at the pictures, groaning. Sebastian placed a mild evening tea, a green jasmine blend, deeply golden and fragrant, stepping back, waiting. Mouser was studying a rather big volume written in Scottish Gaelic, with a modified runic alphabet. That she understood any of that at all was rather strange but as far as outsiders and males knew that was simply the gift of the coven. “Public schools are independent institutions that refuse government intervention. It’s hard to get involved... though it is more likely that they will not want make matters worse by allowing anyone to pry into their private affairs.” Ciel continued, picking up his tea, leaning against the plush material of his chair, dismayed.

“Thinking about appearances even at a time like this.” Sebastian appraised. It was a foolish notion to care more about the outside than the crumbling foundations. “This is why I dislike humans.” Such a structure had no purpose.

“I would prefer to have someone infiltrate but Weston is a school made entirely of nobility.” The boyo continued, taking his tea with measured sips, growing grouchier by the minute. Mouser placed the book down and rubbed her eyes, seeing runes perform merry jigs like trees in the wind, shifting her attention to the new mission after scribbling yet another confounding turn of phrase to research later. “Only a few hold a title and most of them are familiar with each other. It would be too dangerous to send an agent or use a disguise.”

Not only that but the fact it was a school severely limited those who could be used as spies in terms of age if masquerading as a student, knowledge for a professor and menial skills for part of the house staff. And each of those rings came with a very specific set of unique limitations within the school grounds. Even so some details were needed to further a lie. Recommendation letters for one...

“Then you will go in person?” Sebastian finally asked after a short, resigned silence.

“There really is no choice on this matter.” The young master answered with a deep sigh. “Well... it would not be too bad to have the Queen further indebted to me.” He immediately sough the greatest advantage he could gather from solving that issue. “The problem, however, is whether
there is a spot available at Weston.”

“Such a thing poses a problem Young Master?” Sebastian smiled slightly, amused by the simplistic obstacle. “If there is none it will simply have to be created.” He was at the regular age of entry. If the boyo had intended to enter Weston College, because of his birth month he should be able to enrol the next year. Because of his status there should be a way to get him in right at that moment if the proper strings were pulled. A letter should suffice to put things into motion. Then there was the search for someone easy to either kick out or call away.

The boyo chuckled slightly, grasping the meaning as well.

“It will be better if I investigate from inside of the school.” It was the only choice that could give them the desired results. Pretending to be a student would be less worrying for whoever was in power than have the Queen’s hound sniffing about with nary a hint of polite façade. “You will support me inconspicuously.” The boyo instructed further. “I will allow you to figure out how on your own devices.” Which meant he had no actual idea what would be the most advantageous role to play.

“Yes, My Lord.” Nevertheless Sebastian agreed.

As the boyo continued to enjoy the rest of his day Mouser started to gather the materials to formalize the first step. Although a public school sat a bit outside her areas of expertise it should not be too hard to breach using the usual methods of the nobles, meaning a healthy mix of bribery, coercion, flattery, lies and connections. Also Charlotte could have some knowledge on who to knock away from the school grounds to make way for the boyo. It was a suggestion Mouser would give to Sebastian as soon as his duties for the day were done and they sat down to discuss how exactly they should provide an opening and support. But for the least amount of suspicion the applications should be filled and sent by courier. If all went well in less than four days the boyo would be in.

It was a long flowery letter, detailing the Phantomhive lineage, fortune and the subjects the boyo had been exposed to so far in the gentlemanly scholar doctrine and the varying degrees of capability he showed in them. It gave whoever would read it the letters of reference and assurance of the tutors that had taught said subject.

Mouser stared at the paper and her handwriting, absently cleaning her stained fingers to keep the thick expensive paper free of any accidental blots. It was overwrought prose but it placed the boyo in the best light possible. Made him look like the sort of overachieving genius the locked world of the noble school would be searching. Although there were bound to be some inside those walls that had been dispatched and locked away from society because they were either impediments to a parent’s status or a spare of a spare.

“Sebastian.” Mouser greeted as the demon entered the study, closing the door softly. She folded and slid the papers inside the envelope, sealing it with the boyo’s crest, placing it neatly on the desk, ready to be handed to a messenger. “I may have the means to deal with this request.”

“Do tell.” Sebastian sat down at her usual spot, glancing at the papers, notes, question marks and theories she had left next to the book. “Invocation?”

“I’m trying to increase the amount of weapons I can have at my disposal without having to have them on my person.” Mouser stood and walked away from the deskwork, sitting the armrest,
leaning against him. “A few words with a friend should suffice to put everything into motion. We just need to go to London.”

“Would she be awake at this hour?” Sebastian asked, pulling Mouser softly, watching as she allowed herself to fall on his lap, she stretched before curling restfully against him, nodding. “This request is a bit on the odd side… It would have taken me some time to research and pinpoint the way in.” He had not bothered to know some things.

A public school of prestige had always been out of the question for the Young Master who was making himself a target to whoever was responsible for the Phantomhive murder. So locking himself away for an education that could be given just as well and with as much prestige attached to it through the use of renowned tutors would delay or prevent the execution of his revenge. Purposeless.

Mouser kissed his cheek affectionately, making him take notice, pausing the slight caress his hand had been lavishing on her thigh while lost in thought about the Victorian world they had to navigate and manipulate for the Young Master’s purpose.

“Let’s go. I’m going to introduce you to my friend.”
Chapter 102

“Miss Evee seems to have brought a gentleman with her tonight.” Mrs. Loren was the third governess Charlotte had hired in those first two years after leaving the orphanage. She had remained loyally with her after that. Not a disapproving biddy nor an untrustworthy wench. Efficient and rather good at turning a blind eye at most of the dealing going on around the house. As long as no blood touched the carpets as Arthur had found out once. For a middle-aged lady with a bad leg she packed a mean frying pan strike.

“The usual would be fine Mrs. Loren.” Charlotte placed down her lists.

“Yes Miss.” Mrs Loren walked out of the drawing room calmly.

Charlotte sighed and stretched. Any work Mouser carried out these days would be related to the Phantomhive network and could go unsaid that it was a good thing to stay in the household’s good graces. With the Undertaker gone, for some reason, some of the information brokers were preening and sharpening their claws, hoping for a shred of attention. But while they wanted money she had other motives to want a direct connection. Evee.

It was rather hardwired in either to worry. It stretched beyond the orphanage. When the thief had joined the Phantomhive Charlotte had used all of her network to dig around, finding every shred of information she could. When Evee appeared at her door, confused she had comforted her, giving as much advice as she could. When she had returned smiling and blushing, of all things, she had called off the pending order for the butler’s hide. Likewise Evee answered every time she called, listened to concerns, gave her information and offered her services in breaking any body part of every living thing that had tried to do her harm.

Carefully, with the insight bred from hardship she surveyed them as they entered the room. Sebastian Michaelis had no past. That was not surprising. Either he went to great pains to hide it or his roots were somewhere beyond England. Whatever it was in the end mattered little. What she wanted to know should be right there.

After crossing the threshold Evee relaxed immediately, greeting her as usual, seeking the comfortable armchair she had long favoured in Charlotte’s house. The butler kept the appearances. Entering, looking around carefully. Standing to Evee’s left, at her back. Just a smidge to close to be fully formal. Not close enough to hint at any scandalous relation to a casual onlooker. But for those who preyed on the lonely for money that was a very clear stance of a claimed rake. As for Evee the single most telling thing was the fact that there was absolutely no tension, no knives, no blood, no rage, no fear, no panic at him being at her back. She usually had a short and sweet answer to that event that translated rather elegantly into “knife in the crotch”.

“I assume this is very much about work, seeing your... N.N. is here as well.”

Mouser chuckled. Sebastian lowered his head slightly, giving the woman a slight smile. Necessary Nuisance was a rather lady-like way to remark upon other female’s husbands. In this particular context it lacked its usual derision. It could be seen as an acknowledgement of sorts. Only he was not too sure of which one of the pair had started to address him as such. Worryingly he had a suspicion the application of the term had its origins on his covenant.

“You either have or can procure the information we need, yes.” Evee started. “We must enter the boyo in Weston. He is indeed at that age and digging through whatever registers I could find he was registered at birth by the former head of the house. But what we want from the school is not an
education. There is something inside the queen wants sorted out. So the only way to get him in on this short notice is to force someone out.”

“So you went through the steps and created the ideal entry candidacy with some loopholes for fast admission.” Charlotte nodded, leaning back, thinking of what she knew of the school. “They decide the Houses but there is no issue in just plucking someone out. What matters is the final numbers…” She opened a drawer and placed some blank paper in front of her. “There is a land-rich baronet whose son is in the school’s first year. Exactly the spot you would need.” She smiled and jotted down what she needed while remembering and talking. “Baronet Acker, Samson Colet has been at death’s door for some time and is being aided in his passing by his rather youthful Baronetess and her lover. His only son and heir would be morally required and rather hard pressed by tradition and law to return home to the depths of Derbyshire if his demise was slightly hastened. The school would allow it and seeing your boyo’s candidacy would immediately replace the vacancy of such a minor boy with someone with such a shiny title and eager disposition…” Charlotte finished her letter. “Ah, Mrs. Loren. Thank you for the tea. Would you give this to Jonah? I need these instructions carried out by... Evee?”

“Tomorrow evening would be perfect.” Mouser answered, taking the tea, smiling at the governess. Efficient. Sebastian decided. As a good information broker should be. But that one also came with a healthy dose of problem solving proficiency. The governess that had brewed a rather good pot left with the note, closing the door silently. “We also need a way for Sebastian to be allowed in. Preferably in a position that allows him as much manoeuvrability as possible. And if possible before the events that lead to the admission of the new boy.”

“You will not go?” The woman asked. Sebastian appraised his covenant as well. The young Master’s order could be a bit flexible but seeing she had been in the room with him as it was given there was an undercurrent in it that seemed to include the thief.

“What would I do in a boy-only public school? Show my ankles and wait for them to blurt out their secrets? Plus I really do not want to.”

“It works very well I’ll have you know. Do it in a sheer embroidered sock and bejewelled slippers and you’ll be needing mops. Do it without the sock and you might kill those sheltered sods.” Charlotte held the angry face for a moment longer as Mouser grimaced at her, both acting as childishly as they pleased. “What are your skills?” the change was abrupt, from playful to fully professional. Sebastian made a short list of the most advantageous one for the current needs as Mouser placed the tea down and started to browse the shelves on the window side of the room. “I see…” Charlotte said after a short pause, starting another letter. “You’ll be receiving your way in by this afternoon. Evee can retrieve it from the usual spot.”

“Thank you. What do you want in exchange?” Mouser asked, smiling easily, picking a book from the shelf, opening it. “And can I borrow this one if you’re done?”

“Which one is it? Ah, Beaumont’s serial.” Charlotte looked past Sebastian at the book Evee held. “Of course.” She returned to her letters. “I have nothing you can do at the moment and I’m pleased enough with the gifts from France. I’ll send you a note if any need arises.”

“We’ll be taking our leave then.” Mouser said, nodding. “Good night Charlotte.”

“Take care Evee.” Charlotte answered as they crossed the threshold.
“You should consider marking her.” Sebastian mentioned as they made their way back to the manor. Running through the dark in the cool night was no longer such an exhausting experience. She stopped a bit, balancing on a branch. They had already entered Phantomhive lands. Pluto had howled as they ran by and then curled up in the shelter of the trees to continue his slumber.

“Isn’t that a male’s job?” She retorted, amused. In her head though there were whispers of something else, giving her the meaning. A female had to be found, convinced and turned. A female marked by a male already in a covenant was regarded as a good bet. A female marked by a demoness was seen as the highest praise and recommendation. It also ensured that the hunt was made very carefully and respectfully to avoid the anger of the marker. It had been what the Cait Sith had done long ago, marking their kin for survival. A flash of a memory, a hint of an identity… Muireall standing amidst the bloodied remains of men in clerical outfits freeing a girl with broken limbs and terror in her eyes, while accompanying a male demon with white eyes and tattooed hands, blackening his forearms. He had taken the girl. She had survived. She had changed. The thief clicked her tongue against her hidden fangs. “I don’t think Charlotte would thank me for a pilgrimage of demons at her door.”

“As she is indeed your friend I understand the concern.” Sebastian walked back, jumping, standing on the same branch as her, approaching as the thief stared ahead, thinking. “Though I loathe to waste such a resource.”

Mouser sighed, nodding.

“Losing the Undertaker was a rather noticeable setback in the nets, wasn’t it… I noticed that even though it was only a few days ago there has been a decrease in the quality of the information received.”

“But yours is up to date.” Sebastian continued.

“Yes. Charlotte and I…” She paused. No need to elaborate on that. It was obvious why. “If demons find things like us so desirable why didn’t anyone decide to visit before?”

“It is a matter of mentality in a way.” The demon answered, caressing her cheek, leaning down to press his forehead against hers. Mouser turned towards him, inquisitive. “Have either of you ever pleaded to the empty air to be saved, supplicating and desperate? Or have you always gritted your teeth, clenched your hands and moved on, forcing your way through with whichever means necessary when despair nipped your heels?”

“No one will come for us.” Mouser whispered. A simple and true gathering of words every orphan had soon carved in their hearts and minds. If it was a matter of belief then believing in not begging for help created a different situation from the boyo who had, as far as she knew pleaded with every entity that could exist for a way out. “I see.” She chuckled. “Power… I’ll… think about it. Charlotte might… could…”

The documents needed to slip Sebastian into the school were indeed in the usual drop spot, pristine and legible. She opened them to check what Charlotte had been able to scavenge out of Weston in such a short notice. As she read her eyes widened in shock and horror and then narrowed in distrust, showing her miffed state of mind.

“That conniving trollop… that’s it. Pilgrimage it is.” Mouser growled, shoving the letters back into their envelopes and stomping away in a huff. Thinking they were “cute together” was no reason to
drag her along in a stupid mission where she’d be worse than useless. The gall of penning those words down was… Mouser groaned and moved on. Time was ticking now if they wanted to arrive without suspicion.
Chapter 103

Both demons had gone missing shortly before Ciel received the admittance letter. It was to be expected. Nothing raised suspicions more than several people arriving at the same place, at the same time even when such a thing occurred naturally.

Sebastian had left the bags prepared along with the uniforms, books and school paraphernalia along with the more mundane necessities for the manor to run well without his presence. Mouser had left reports on the company and a note saying that a friend was responsible of sending the letters she had penned and supervising any unexpected events if she found time in-between beating demons away with a stick. She had also left the public knowledge of the College and what he should know of his own candidacy and place in the school hierarchy.

Those facts were the ones he was browsing as the coach took him away from the comforts of home towards the place where the closed off world that tolerated no interference from nobility nor government. His bags should have arrived already... he looked down and began to read as the vehicle moved steadily forward.

Weston College. The school was established near the Thames and it is regarded as Britain’s finest public school. It should bloody well be. You’ll see why when the fees arrive. Let us say that it was less costly to launch the Summer toy-line. Mentioning that the colourful balls with the bells inside are selling out fast.

The vast premises contain several school buildings, including a gothic chapel and four historical student dormitories along with a library, a sports field, some gardens, greenhouse... It’s a palace fused with a church that parades as a school. Let us say it like that. The students, ages thirteen to nineteen, give or take due to the fact not everyone is born in the month when the school year starts, are under strict discipline, valuing tradition above all and are raised to be the new generation of English gentlemen through a boy’s only dorm life and their individual high level educational curriculum. The nobles send their sons to the school without regard for the extremely high fees just to obtain that glimmering status. I did mention the fees. We might need to consider a secondary product line to bolster profits.

“Damnit! I’ll be late!” Ciel grumbled out through the biscuit hastily stuffed into his mouth as he hopped out of the coach and tried to shove spindly, disobeying arms through the sleeves of the school’s uniform jacket, racing towards the gates, feeling close to having his lungs pop out due to effort. Why there had been no many carriages out that day was beyond him. The result was there to see though, he thought as the books bundled by a belt bruised his bottom. The gates were almost closing. “Please wait!” She shouted again, nearly choking on the biscuit that, seconds after, fell on the pavement as he hunched down, having crossed the border into the school, the gates closing with nary a creak behind his back. “Made it.” He wheezed, mildly pleased by the situation.

So after a few moments trying to make himself breathe normally the Earl straightened, looking around. As expected. Massive buildings, elegantly manicured greenery and grounds. People that all looked the same wandering around, carrying books, talking in small groups, mostly ignoring each other. Determined Ciel adjusted his uniform and placed the hat that had been knocked askew on his head. Classes would start soon.

No matter what first impressions are vital. I have to keep it together. His thoughts supplied rigidly.
The classes were held on the building to his left, right across the lawn. As the grass crunched beneath his sole as he was taking the fastest route the whispers started. It was a gradual thing after a heavy, shocked silence.

*Look!*

*I can’t believe!*

*Definitely a Y.*

*He stepped on the lawn...*

*That bloke... he isn’t even one of the P4.*

*Sheesh...*

*What do you...*

Voices and words tainted by derision and mocking glee. Some in outrage. As if something unholy was happening. Calculating murmurs and stares of condemnation. Confused Ciel looked back. What on earth could he be doing that was so wrong as to warrant those reactions. Worse. It was seriously throwing off his attempt as focusing on the good impression needed to investigate unimpeded.

“Look!” A voice rose from the bubbling of mutters, pointing towards the four people whose uniforms differed from the mass of black. Two blondes. Two brunettes. Three walking tall. One slouching within the school’s winter cape despite the slightly warmer spring weather. Whoever they were it was clear that they held a measure of power, control and fascination over the others as the nature of the voices surrounding Ciel in accusation changed.

*Here they are!*

*The P4!*

*The Prefects are here!*

The blonde that seemed to have been thriving in the attention given to his entrance stopped abruptly, staring at Ciel, moving fast towards him with a sullen, grim expression.

*He’s in trouble!*

*Serves him right.*

Some looked shocked, spooked. Others looked smug, self-righteous.

*Is he going to hit me?* Ciel though for a moment, flinching, eye closing when the older boy’s reached for him, gripping his tie firmly. A firm tug however was all he felt. Opening his eyes showed that the young man was simply looking down at him appraisingly while adjusting the uniform’s blue tie.

“Your tie is crooked.” He mentioned casually, finishing the task with an amicable pat on Ciel’s chest, stepping back, ignoring the shocked silence permeating the air around the green lawn. “What is your name?” He asked after a moment of further appraisal, head tilting gracefully.

“It’s Phantomhive.” Ciel answered, trying not to fumble. If the reactions of those around meant anything they should be at least respected. No need to make any further spectacle of himself.
“Never hear it before...” The prefect murmured a bit afterwards, seemingly searching his memory.

“That must be the new student the principal informed us that would be coming into the Blue House.” The second blond man voiced his opinion in a sharp, steady tone that matched his obviously trained physique, arms crossed, cricket bat tucked downwards. “That is you, correct?”

“Yes.” Ciel answered concisely, nodding, glancing around at the expectant ambience. It was like they were all watching some kind of long awaited play or opera.

“Weston College rule number 48 states: «the only ones allowed to cross the lawn are the prefects or those granted permission by them.»” The dark haired, bespectacled young man stated, closing the book he carried in one hand with a snap, his serious expression focused on Ciel, slightly disappointed but not as disapproving as the whispers before had made the action seem. “At least review the school rules before you enter.” He scolded stiffly.

“I’m very sorry...” Ciel started. The best way to mend that blunder was simply play the part of the one in the wrong although he could hardly tell why a lawn deserved to have a restrictive rule placed upon it.”

“Hurry up and get inside. The sun is too bright in here.” The fourth member of the group grumbled, having no interest in the scolding or identification of the perpetrator, moving on as it was evident the moment was at an end.

“Do pay attention from now on Phantomhive.” The blonde that had straightened his tie teased, poking his forehead before moving along with the group, disappearing into the school building.

“Aren’t you lucky!” From the crowd someone emerged, slapping his back forcefully, gleefully, almost sending Ciel to the ground. Turning his head around showed a young freckled boy, around his age laughed, eyes bright behind his round glasses. His tie was blue as well. “You stepped on the lawn and didn’t even get punished.” He said that like it was the most odd thing that had ever occurred. “I’m McMillan. Here you go.” He introduced himself after calming down reddish brown hair falling over his face as he returned Ciel’s uniform top hat. “I’m a first year from the blue house as well.” He finished up his introduction with a nod, waiting.

“Yes...” Ciel whispered, taken a bit aback by the flood of information. But he was talking to someone that had been in the school for a while so clearing up a few points was a good way to start. “by the way what do all those P4 and Ys mean?”

“Y’s are penalty points. If you get one Y you have to write a Latin poem 100 times.” McMillan answered promptly. It was a normal question for newcomers, was it not...

“And P4...” Ciel prodded further.

“Prefects.” There the young boy started to grow excited once more. “The Four House Prefects. Dormitory Leaders if you prefer.” So there was more to the year one was in to determine social position within those walls. How irritating. “Those you just now were wearing different coloured waistcoats, right?” Ciel had barely noticed or though the fact relevant but he nodded along with the story. “At this school only prefects can wear those with whichever patterns they like.” Another status mark then. Empty. “The one in the red waistcoat is the prefect of the Scarlet Fox Dormitory, where students of exceptionally high birth gather, Edgar Redmond. The one in the blue waistcoat is the prefect of the Sapphire Owl Dormitory, our dorm, for those who excel in their studies and knowledge, Lawrence Bluer. The one in the green waistcoat is the prefect of the Green Lion Dormitory, taking in those who are physically strong, excelling in martial arts or sports, Herman Greenhill. And the one in the purple waistcoat is the prefect of the Purple Wolf Dormitory, taking
in students that are accomplished in the arts, Gregory Violet.” Rank, place, name and a quick summary of the house characteristics. It seemed that boy was actually a good bet as an informant. Ciel brightened up a bit at the though. “The four prefects from the four traditional houses of Weston. P4 for short.”

“I see...” It still mattered very little to him. His goal was in finishing that damned information immediately. If not sooner. All that was shaping up to be an extremely annoying experience.

“Ah, I really admire them. I’ll be prefect one day... kidding. If only it were possible...” McMillan was lost in whatever world his mind was conjuring, looking up, towards the chapel’s tower.

“But not being allowed to cross the lawn? A rather inefficient rule.” Ciel mentioned, grumbling against his misstep.

“Well it is tradition, you know...” McMillan shrugged his complaint away with a rather nonsensical argument. Just then the sound of the bell filled the grounds. Students started to move, dutifully. “Ah! The bells!” McMillan reacted with a jolt, grabbing Ciel’s arm and running around the lawn, dragging him along. “Let’s hurry to class. We don’t want to get Ys because of tardiness.”

“Right.” Ciel mumbled, thinking on what he had found and what was still missing, managing to look appropriately worried about scolding and what not.
“It’s really weird that Colet left the school so suddenly.” The whispers going around after the geography lesson concluded were centred on the oddest event of the week. Others cared not for such things, discussing school, schedules and plans instead. Some were already fretting about the exams. Some hoped the new teacher was easier to understand than old professor Ratchet. A few added rumours that it was indeed true and that there were some works about that showcased well his style. There were a handful of them whispering eagerly about helping the guest working on the library. Three groups, all made of several boys with differently coloured ties were making plans to lurk about the place.

McMillan stood from his seat and walked towards the back of the room where Ciel had chosen a desk, more or less ignoring the buzz of voices.

“You came at a rather strange time too.” The young boy mentioned, leaning against the wooden top. The others’ talk was loud enough to be heard so he was sure Phantomhive would get what he was saying. “Wasn’t it hard?” Most people took all summer just to get ready for the start of the school year. To have to go into the school on such a short notice… It could be very hard. That’s why he should try hard to be friend. It was the gentlemanly thing to do.

“Well… I have been waiting for a spot since I have been of age, as my predecessor had me enrolled in Weston as he should.” Ciel flipped the book’s page absently, skimming over the words. It was painfully obvious what he had to say to gain approval. So he would, with little shame, making his face do what it should, moulded into a pleasant expression, showing a little smile. “To be honest I was only expecting to enter next school year but I was happy and ready to move in as soon as the offer was made.” It was a good lie with a sound foundation. And he should sound just a bit humbled as well. After all that one seemed to regard the school as something great.

“Boy up!” Someone shouted, slamming the classroom’s door open, stepping inside with a grim expression. The first years jumped, heads turning before moving, fast, almost tripping over each other.

“Huh?” Ciel uttered a confused sound, looking away from the book. McMillan looked back, concerned.

“At that command the last in line has to do whatever the upper years tell them to.” He informed, concerned, running, huffing, trying to dodge desk to reach the line the others had started to form.

“What?!” Ciel shouted as well, standing, hurrying. However surprise worked against him.

“The last is… the new one.” The upperclassman with a gentian on his tailcoat stated, looking stern behind his glasses, hair stiffly slicked and kept in place.

“Yes.” Ciel acquiesced softly, just staring. What in the world could it be now...

“Well then.” The older student picked a piece of paper from his pocket, giving it to him. Opening the folded page revealed a set of instructions. “Return to the dorm once you have polished all the Prefect’s shoes.” Odd… if that request came attached to this menial chore why did he call to every student… the ones in blue ties were looking fidgety, glancing away. The others simply stood at attention. “We’ll then have your welcoming party.”

So what would have he done if Ciel had been aware of what that particular call was for and had not
arrived last? The Earl mused as he left the schoolroom to find wherever the shoes were being kept.

Ciel’s fingers felt sore and stiff. They were also blackened by the shoe polish and a couple of bruises he was not quite sure how he had gotten. His back was creaking from leaning and his mood had not improved. How many uniform shoes did four prefects have anyhow and how was it possible for some of them to be that big and that dirty?

Also shouldn’t that kind of menial service be left to servants who actually knew what they were doing? Even irritated and burdened with class mentality it should be fairly obvious that a task should be given to those that knew what they were doing. Or at least supervised by such and individual until the task could be performed independently.

The Earl shook his head, groaning as he reached the gates of the Blue Dormitory. Following that kind of policy ensured that his factories were staffed by the best and that little to no accidents with crippling results occurred. Each dorm seemed to be isolated from the others and function like its own little country with peculiarly aligned people. Hence the metal fence surrounding the stone entry. Apparently those gates closed at night and there were strict policies against wandering about.

Every detail of that place just grew more and more cumbersome and increasingly inconvenient. He had yet to see most of the grounds, had no information on anyone’s whereabouts, hadn’t even been introduced to those who held real power within the school, had had no time to find vulnerabilities and seen nor head nor tail of those tasked with supporting him in his endeavours.

“They don’t have to throw me a welcome party...” Ciel mumbled sourly as his tired fingers tried to open the door that lead to the entry hall. He was barely inside, closing the doors after his passage when he was captured, budding scream quelled by a hand pressed against his mouth and nose, arms pinning him into place.

“Congratulations Phantomhive.” The upper year that had requested the task spoke up as a group of other boys about the same age gathered, coming out of hiding. So all of that had been indeed planned Ciel though, glancing around fast, worried before losing his balance, gaining the ability to breathe freely once more as he was pushed forward. “We are holding this welcome party just for you.” Between floor and his body was a piece of cloth that was suddenly snapped taught by the other boys. Ciel looked around, confused as the senior kept talking. “I hope you will enjoy it to the fullest. Heave ho!” at those words the fabric was hoisted upwards and the Earl with it.

It was impossible for Ciel to contain a shriek as he was tossed into the air, watching the fast approach of the ceiling. And continue shrieking as the floor did the same. His voice was cut off by the impact in the fabric that, while softer than being flattened against a solid wooden floor was still a rather painful event for his flaying arms and legs.

“How do you like our dorm’s traditional welcome party?” the mastermind of the event asked loudly, almost formally, watching the procedure as another toss made Ciel fly with the same vocally distressed results. “I’ll expect you to work hard on your studies from now on as a member of the Sapphire Owl Dormitory.” He stated firmly before nodding to his aides. “Next one will be higher.”

“Stop!” Ciel managed to groan, rolling on the fabric’s surface.

“One, two...” The others were counting, preparing the impulse.
“What is that racket! I’ll give you all a Y!” The booming voice of a supremely annoyed adult echoed through the hall coming from one of the side corridors, heavy steps approaching.

“Oh no!” the students whispered.

“The dorm supervisor!” Others added.

All dropped the fabric and Ciel as if they burned, scrambling, attempting to… do something. It was half a retreat, half an attempt to look contrite. Oddly enough, despite the clear fear and worry none of them left the premises. That being said Ciel saw little of that activity he was busy flattening himself against the ground to stop it from spinning and struggling to keep a suspicious nauseous feeling on the back of his throat down.

“Clayton.” The new arrival spoke sternly, addressing the one whose message had triggered the event. “Why are you, as an upperclassmen, participating in this?”

“That... that is one of our dorm’s traditions sir...” Clayton spoke up, hesitating at first, his voice gaining some strength from the perfectly legitimate reason he was presenting to the man in charge of the dormitory.

“I see.” There was less annoyance in the voice now. “But goodness, there is tradition and there is overdoing it.” Steps approached. Confident that he had all the nausea under control Ciel looked up when addressed. “You are the new student correct?” The Earl’s eye widened slightly and then twitched in annoyance. “Well then Phantomhive. Welcome to the Sapphire Owl Dormitory. I’m the dormitory supervisor, housemaster if you prefer, Mr. Michaelis.” Sebastian introduced himself and his current role with a kindly smile. Flawlessly dressed into the role, from the spectacles to the professor’s uniform, black solid and unassuming. The crucifix seemed to be a bit of sarcasm on his part.

If he was that close why had he not interfered sooner?

“Dearie?” Mouser’s voice rose softly as she entered the hall followed by three boys, all of them wobbling under the weight of several leather-bound tomes. She adjusted the silver frames of her oval glasses, the bishop sleeves of the black overdress fluttering, exposing her wrists. The high front exposed the sapphire under-dress, giving some interest to the otherwise rather conservative gown. If one was not looking at the keyhole neckline disguised by black lace.

But her appearance turned the boys from students to an odd mix of eager puppies and pageboys. It was odd to say the least. Especially when the sweet smile she was wearing was absently was an almost perfect copy of Lizzy’s which contrasted wickedly with the mischief in her eyes. Nobody seemed to be seeing that.

“Ah, there you are.” Barely glancing at anyone as she walked the thief snapped her fingers. One of the burdened boys hopped, startled, smiling in joy, following eagerly, receiving dirty looks from all others. That he was receiving attention from a female seemed enough. “Mr. Fenton asked me to give you these.” She touched the books lightly and then petted the boy’s head. “Thank you for your help sweetie. If you would be so kind as to deliver these to the housemaster’s office...”

“Of course Ma’am!” The boy huffed in effort and took off, followed by the glares.

Mouser snapped her fingers again. The two remaining boys approached, as eager as the other had been. She opened one of the tomes, using the one holding it as a bookstand, giving him the saccharine smile before proceeding.
“See here?” She was pointing at something in the scrip. Sebastian approached, leaning, reading. “The phrasing seems too overwrought... I think I may need your ciphers.”

“Is this Classical Latin?”

“Hard to say.” Mouser answered. “But I believe it is a more recent transcript from a volume originally written in Vulgar Latin. Some things do not seem to read right in Renascence Latin. Or...”

“You suspect encryption.”

“It is a rather normal occurrence in these occultist tomes, yes...”

“Who...” Ciel whispered to play his part. And a bit of genuine curiosity as to the part she had embodied within that school.

“Mrs. Michaelis.” Clayton answered, keeping his voice low as the two demons seemed to pay no mind to anyone, much less the now two bookstands as they compared text. “Word of warning Phantomhive. Never touch Mrs. Michaelis books. You either will get a romance too detailed to be decent or one of her demonology and witchcraft research materials. Either way those that were not from the Purple House looking for monsters to draw have been having frightful nightmares.”
“So these are your roles.” Ciel stated as Sebastian closed the office’s door and the boyo flopped on the leather armchair, seemingly exhausted. “What have you found?” He demanded, turning business-like after a few deep breaths, pushing away the events while clenching overworked his hands.

“We have not begun.” Sebastian answered casually, closing the door, preparing some tea with practised movements.

“Are you ignoring my orders?” the boyo asked grimly.

Mouser sat on the desk, crossing her legs under the dress, lighting a cigarette, staring at him through the lenses, watching the revealed play of nightmares and desires, letting the smoke out softly, smiling, leaning forward, elbow resting on her knee.

“Are you forgetting the place?” She whispered, amused.

“I see…” Ciel answered after a long pause with a weary sigh. “Walk me through it then.”

“We have been here for four days.” Sebastian reported, pouring the tea, handing the cup and saucer to the boyo. “In a couple of days it will seem natural for me to ask about Derrick simply because he is on the student roster and has not attended any of my classes.”

“This time was spent blending in, so our presence created the least ripple and suspicion.” Mouser continued. It helped the former housemaster was old, thinking of retirement and fond of young harlots, all of them under the employ of Charlotte. “This is a closed community. In here you have nothing boyo. Your title is meaningless. Your contacts are null. Your reputation is empty. Your word is valueless. Your money is of no help.”

“So I have to build myself up once more.” Ciel groaned.

“Of course the Young Master has always had the drive to do so.” Sebastian fulfilled the butler obligation flattery, taking out the heavier coat of the teacher uniform, placing it on the coat rack. Ciel chose to ignored the undertone of mockery and focused on what would be needed to accomplish his goals.

“Not only that. In this school you are under constant scrutiny.” Mouser pulled her glasses slightly down, breaking the Teller. The boyo was a heavy subject. “If you made a mistake outside you could make people forget it and use another approach. Here any misstep piles up, never forgotten, rarely forgiven. So chose each move carefully.”

“And you are here to support me.” The boyo stated, gauging their reactions.

“While it is true that I can make things easier for the Young Master…” Sebastian stated thoughtfully. “There is not that much I can contribute to your daily endeavours. It would seem strange for me to take too much interest in a single student, much less a new arrival.”

“I can bolster your reputation through rumours. Kids are gossipy, more so when so strictly coiled.” Mouser shrugged, pressing the cigarette against her palm, snuffing it out, using the lighter to set the butt on fire. “A word here, a praise there, a favour answered, a favour asked…” she whispered, walking to the window and blowing the ashes away.
“Yes… what was happening in the hall anyway?” the boyo asked pointedly.

“What would that be?” Mouser pursed her lips innocently, head tilting.

“All of them seemed very eager to do your bidding.”

“Ah. That.” She smiled. “It was ridiculously easy to get them that way. Older ones may see a woman. Young ones might want their mommy. All want approval and admiration. A little smile and they fall. A little lie and they follow.” Mouser sniggered, her grin going from Lizzy-like to her twisted self, fangs and all. “The Blue House sees a scholar woman. Either to learn or «help» they flock to me. Books, brains, tits. Some try to get close because of my link to the housemaster. Maybe I can ask my husband for a little influence, a little betterment of their Dormitory lives. A bit more warm water? A treat at lunch?” Sebastian smiled slightly, pleased as Mouser circled him, caressing his arm, pecking his cheek, tiptoeing, pulling him down. Ciel watched, frowning. “The Red House… they see me as all Lady. A target to practice the flattery and gentlemanly ways their house is known for. Whoever gets my approval is the winner. I swear… if I sneeze near them I will get buried in frilly handkerchiefs. To get anything from the lot I just have to look pretty, chose a winner of lower standing and let the jealous ones try harder to please my whims to prove themselves superior.” She sat down again, pushing her glasses up. “The Green House.” Mouser laughed. “When my friend told me to show ankles I did not think it would really be that simple. They are a very, very prudish, driven bunch that does not know how to deal with a female of ripe age and bonny features. Like Edward. But what makes them jump into my palm is playing the damsel. Show distress and helplessness and they revive chivalry.” Mouser then leaned forward. “The Purple House was a bit harder to get a hold of. But then they saw my books. My monsters. My research. In the end they are no different. They just prefer a darker shade, a stranger twist. But the same sweet words and kind gestures get results. Just need to make them a bit sultry.” Mouser sighed, chin resting on the back of her hand, wiggling her claws playfully. “Give it a try boyo. Pretty faces here can get followers and advantages by appearances and smiles alone. It is the easiest stepping stone for you to use to gain clout in this boring place.”

“You are bored?” Ciel asked. After that explanation he though she was amusing herself thoroughly.

“So… very… much…” Mouser groaned, rolling her eyes, flopping down, forehead on her knees. “All I can do is study and while that’s productive…” She continued in a muffled voice. Sebastian patted her back chuckling.

“You are not nearly as bored or as angry as you were on arrival.” Mouser answered Sebastian with a moody harrumph before straightening. “Now then Mr. Phantomhive.” The demon slipped out of the butler role into the one he was currently representing. “The Dormitory functions as following…”

The blades appeared without an incantation, invocation or conjuration gesture. No voice, no movement but simples will to manifest and guide them towards the blade-scarred target that had once been a blackboard. They vanished once imbibed into the target and redid their flight, seeking other location to strike.

Mouser sighed, turning the page of the book, rolling on the bed to rest on her back, arms outstretched as she frowned to keep the page in focus, kicking her legs up, groaning before crossing them. The blades did not waver despite being given no active attention. Splitting her focus between magic and mundane tasks was a way to prepare for a fight. Split focus was something that would
happen and any skill had to be practiced to be woven into something useful and practical.

“Feeling any better?” Sebastian asked, returning from the rounds the housemaster performed to lock the dormitory and catch any hoodlums out of bed, taking off the heavy cloth of the coat, looking around the room before joining her on the bed. Mouser groaned and rolled again, sitting down, snapping her fingers to stop the blade’s motion and their blunt sounds against the board.

“A bit. It’s fleeting.” The thief answered, opening her palm. The throwing blades gathered above it and fell, metal clacking against itself. They disappeared back into the warehouse when she closed her hand around them. While not having mastered the storing spaces beyond the physical world Mouser had found a way to have more at her disposal through displacement summoning while in the current realm. “And it does not feel right but it is not as harsh as the Campania.”

“What did you try?” Sebastian patted her head softly while asking. Mouser leaned in slightly, allowing his hands to relieve some of her tension, answering carefully.

“I can’t look around for souls like I did on the Campania. One, because I don’t know how many people there are in school. And two, because if I widen my senses and my range there is a city just out of the gates. It would be impossible to count or sieve through it. Could be in here, could have been just walking by, could be underground, could even not be a Doll because it rather felt like a complete geas… but it also felt like fragmented memory…” Mouser shook her head and blew a raspberry. “It gave me a headache but it was not as painful as a screech…” She closed her book. “Tracking spells.” She mentioned as Sebastian’s hands moved down her back, glancing at the volume. “What is next?”

“The Young Master is going to start his inquires. When I left him he was giving his attention to the rule book.”

“Know the rules to bend the rules.” Mouser whispered. “I love loopholes.”

“Understandable.” Sebastian answered, chuckling. “We should start as well.”

“What do you want to do tonight?” Mouser asked after nodding, paling when he adjusted his tutor glasses.

“Let’s see how your brethren’s gift affected your language skills.” He asked with a widening grin.

“Taigh nam gasta ort!” Mouser shouted, hopping off the bed, caught by the waist, grimacing, struggling to keep to her feet, resorting to claws that left a clear trail on the wooden floor and bounced right back into it with a shriek and a self-satisfied, smug dark laugh behind her back. “gòrach daemhan.” The thief whispered, slapping his chest in annoyance as Sebastian pinned her down, looking through the glasses with burning red eyes, before his lips found hers, deliberately, unhurried, a long kiss, pampering her with warmth, before parting and starting her misery.
The plethora of rules that guided the school ranged from the sensible to the outdated to the simply ridiculous. And they stretched its letters and footnotes to every aspect of life, conduct and activity. And to understand at least some of it for the current needs of the investigation Ciel had poured his night into the book that detailed all of it. Progress had been made in understanding the inner workings of the place but it did not make made all of that less frustrating. Likewise sharing a room with a bunch of snoring kids was also a nuisance. The only thing that could be said in favour of the place was that the furnishings were of adequate quality for the noble-born that attended the school.

Ciel walked the path that lead to the entrance, his steps taking him in an opposite direction of the other students. They were heading to the morning classes. He, as a new arrival, had been summoned for the traditional principal’s greeting, excused from attendance. Despite that purpose his eye scanned each student that passed by, looking for the faces that had only so far appeared in photographs.

“Oops...” He stopped, closing the notebook that hid the images, looking down at the lawn. To reach the office it would be more efficient to move on a straight line, crossing that patch of green... however... “Only prefects may cross the lawn, was it...” He whispered bitterly the first rule he had broken, glancing around before resignedly walking around the grass, on the neat stone path. The bell had not sounded yet but there was no way he was going to perform a feat as uncouth as being late to a meeting.

The Headmaster’s Office was set within the church, in the organ loft, in-between the towers, beneath the clock. It was nothing short of impressively located, the enormous pendulum moving steadily behind the desk, its rhythm cutting the light that poured from the tall quadruple lancet topped by a colourful stained glass rose window. The organ’s pipes rose high on either side of the raised platform where the solid oak desk and imposing chair were placed.

When Ciel was called in the four prefects were already inside, two on either side of the carpet that covered the tile floor, flanking the obvious path to the man that was presiding the meeting. The mood was solemn, verging on the edges of intimidation. Despite that the prefects seemed perfectly calm and amicable. Perhaps it was simply a feeling induced by the location and its architecture. Churches were, after all, made to show power and pacify the masses inspiring awe, reminding them of their own insignificance amidst the silent stones.

“It has been a day since your arrival.” Greenhill spoke up first, standing stiffly. “How are you faring Phantomhive?”

“Feel free to come to the Red House if you can’t get used to the Blue House.” Redmond’s smiled charmingly as he made the offer. “We’d welcome someone of your status.”

“Only the principal can decide one’s dormitory. No exceptions.” Bluer answered stiffly, adjusting his glasses, hiding behind his fringe even as he chastised.

“The dormitories are all the same though...” Violet on the other hand shrugged, looking down listlessly.

A small cough made them stand at attention once more, formality regained as the man on the chair
wearing the formal clothing of a school official spoke up.

“This is a high class public school, protected by tradition and discipline. From the moment you enter you have to obey its rules faithfully.” He gave the speech calmly. Then his hand touched the leather-bound book where the students pledged their loyalty to the institution. “Normally the principal would give you the welcome speech but since he is terribly busy I will be representing him.” Not the principal? Ciel’s eye narrowed, thinking. That did not bode well. If he could not reach a place to contact the higher tier of the ruling elite of that school his investigation could quickly become stagnant. “I am the vice-principal, Johan Agares.” The pale, black haired man introduced himself calmly, almost monotone, as if terribly tired. It would make sense as he was shouldering the responsibilities of both the vice and the principal.

“The principal decides all matters at school. His word is final.” Greenhill stated, straightening, continuing the speech.

“His decisions are absolute.” Redmond nodded, voice clear and modulated.

“And we, the Prefects, have been chosen by the principal to govern the matters that directly concern the students of this school.” Bluer explained, tone bookish and formal.

“A rather unpleasant job in which we have to deal with all kinds of tiresome matters.” Violet’s voice was clear despite not rising above a grumbling complaint even as he concluded the description of the prefect’s functions.

“This has been our tradition since the school’s founding.” Vice-Principal Agares nodded solemnly, hands interlocking, elbows on the desk. “And...”

“Tradition is absolute.” The Prefects echoed in perfect tandem.

Mr. Agares nodded, staring down at Ciel, embodying all the grave significance of that moment.

“Do you swear to keep the rules of our school and obey our traditions and discipline?” he asked formally, staring sharply.

“I do.” Ciel gave the only possible answer, spine stiff, staring ahead.

The Vice-Principal stood, picking up the leather bound book where the students signed their pledge and an old-fashioned quill pen, opening it on the right page, at the end of a long list of signatures, approaching the edge of the steps.

“Then sign here.” He asked, starting to descend. His footing failed, and he tumbled headfirst down the steps, startling Ciel, creating a fretful reaction in the prefects.

“Mr. Agares!” the P4 shouted, torn between moving to help and keeping their positions as the ceremony demanded. It was a spectacular fall accompanied by much noise.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry...” Agares muttered, upside down, arse over teakettle, tangled in the professor’s coat, staying still as a broken doll as he apologised before slowly adjusting and standing, picking up the book with a calm demeanour, coughing to cover the mishap, reopening the tome on its right page and approaching. “Sign here.” He asked, oblivious to the blood that spurted from the crown of his head and streaked his face. Ciel accepted the quill a bit nervously, staring for a moment. The Prefects seemed rather worried as well. But the welcoming proceeded without any further trouble as he jotted down his name. “Welcome to Weston College Phantomhive.” Mr. Agares stated, closing the book, securing it under his arm, extending his hand for a shake. “We welcome you.” He stated as the agreement was completed by accepting the handshake.
“Well then. May you have a pleasant life here at school.” Redmond said, the stiffer ambience vanishing. The prefects turned to leave. Mr. Agares seemed intended on doing the same. Ciel frowned. He had hoped that meeting would put him face to face with the one that was in the best position to know all about the school but…

“Excuse me…” the Earl called out, steeling himself, waiting for the group to give him their attention once more. “When can I meet the principal?” he asked softly. It was not such an odd request, surely. Especially if one remembered that he was the head of his own household, meaning decisions about his situation had to be decided by him. Officially he had no legal guardian… unless they decided that Aunt Frances was… he suppressed a shiver of dread. No. As the Queen had recognized him as the head of the household that fear was, thankfully, baseless.

“The principal is very busy and does not meet with regular students.” Mr. Agares answered calmly before leaving. The prefects exchanged a look. Ciel’s brow knit in concern. That did not bode well…

The prefects waited a moment longer, looking at him. Bluer sighed with a nod.

“The only ones who can meet with the principal are us prefects.” He informed Ciel as they left, as if there was nothing strange about that arrangement.

Regular students can’t meet the principal? Ciel walked down the stairs, towards the sunny cloister. So he acts like an absolute monarch here. He sighed, annoyed.

Complication after complication… he turned, looking up, checking the time. Next class should start in about thirty minutes. The Prefects disappeared in the corridor, turning right. And he spotted Mouser watching them go, sitting on one of the stone benches in the sun with a book. As she was the only piece readily available Ciel approached.

“Never seen someone so afraid of death.” She muttered, adjusting her glasses, pulling her legs under her, scooting over a bit for him to sit down. Ciel did so with a groan.

“Isn’t it a rather common fear?” He asked, eyes closing, mulling over the events.

“It is primal, true. Fear and Desire are theorized as predating all other emotions.” The thief shrugged. “But usually death remains an intuitive fear, never truly present until it is either pointed out or happening. Like darkness. Unless when one fears death on a specific, personal level.” But the Teller did not go deeper than impressions. It was a spell made to grasp usable weaknesses at a glance not give her a report on the personal history of the stared one. For that common means of sleuthing, stalking, bribing and asking were more efficient.

“Huh?” Ciel opened his eye and stared at her, confused.

“Just seeing bits and pieces.” Mouser shrugged, dismissing the issue as irrelevant. They seemed close. For all she knew one of them had someone he cared about on the deathbed and had shared the concern, creating a ripple in the most immediate fear, hence a weakness shared through concern. “I take it did not go well.”

“That locks a lot of the easiest paths.” Mouser sighed. “What are you going to do?”

“Ask.” Ciel stated, looking ahead. “Someone is bound to know.”

“What if it isn’t enough?” Ciel huffed, arms crossed. Mouser smiled. “Anyhow I have something
for you as it seems we will have to stay for a while and it would look bad if you did not live up to
the academic standards so…” From under her book she produced a bundle of papers held together
by twine, dumping them on his lap with a heavy thud. “These are the notes for all the classes from
the start of the year to roughly yesterday.”

“How…” Ciel stared, leafing through the papers.

“Yesterday there was a test.” She smiled. “Kids looked worried, all groaning and fretting around
the library, making noise. I asked nicely why, they cried their woes.” Mouser chuckled. “It took
me two hours and seventeen kids to gather it all. A few head rubs, a lot of smiles.”

Ciel stared and worked through the twist of words, finding something he had not been expecting
when combined with the manipulation she had thoroughly described the day before.

“You helped the first years study?”

Mouser chuckled.

“They have to feel that giving me what I want does them a favour twice over. Makes everyone
more pliable.” Mouser shrugged, stretching. “Go to class boyo and start plotting.” The thief
advised, picking up the book. Perhaps it was time to meet the Vice-Principal to give formal thanks
on behalf of the Arcane Society for allowing the use of the libraries. See if something could be
stirred, if the whereabouts of the big boss could be gently pried out of the man by the outsider who
had had a special permission on behalf of her marriage, allowing her to stay within the walls, and a
regular research authorization on behalf of her studies.
Student’s lives are controlled by the ringing of the bell. Ciel mused as the day started with that harsh metallic clang echoing through the school grounds. To wake up at an ungodly hour, to time our eating times. And then after having to bathe and dress they had to endure classes with little more than tea and biscuits to break the night’s fasting. And the same sound signalled the start and end of classes. Then it was finally time for a decent breakfast.

“Fwag?” Ciel asked in confusion, mid-chew, staring at McMillan with a growing frown to mask confusion. The other boy seemed to have taken upon himself the task guiding him through the finer points of school life. As it spared him the hassle of asking things and find whoever knew it was a convenient arrangement. Even if he had to endure pointless chatter.

“Fag.” The freckled boy answered, tucking into his breakfast with gusto, knife and fork working in a subdued display of polished manners. “When breakfast is over it is fag time. It’s one of Weston’s more characteristic traditions. The lower years have to help the upper years.” He explained in all seriousness.

“Help?” Ciel asked, not seeing any reason to interrupt breakfast.

“Like clean their rooms, iron their uniforms, polish shoes... preparing hot water bottles at night.” McMillan elaborated a list of menial household tasks.

Another annoying tradition. Ciel through, avoiding a visible grumble.

“In other words... acting like a butler.” He stated, disgruntled. “Do the prefects have fags too?” Ciel dug a bit further into that. After all there could be something of use within those rules.

“Of course.” McMillan nodded, growing a bit excited as the words spilled out. “Bluer, our house’s prefect, has Clayton as his fag.” Claylon... Ciel frowned, thinking. that guy. The one that had prepared the «greeting». “And a fag is a little different from a butler.” The other boy tried to put a more flattering spin on the job. “The upper year will also help the fag. It’s more like a brotherly relationship. A brother in the school.”

“Brother...” Ciel murmured, his frown deepening.

“Ah and the prefect fags are a bit special.” McMillan grew excited, eyes bright behind the glasses, talking fast. “They can wear the dorm traditional flower on their chest like the P4 and, if they get permission, cross the lawn... and I’ve heard that they can even attend the special midnight tea party organized by the principal with the P4.” Midnight tea party... organized by the principal. If I can attend I can meet the man... But access is granted only to P4 and their fags. That bit of information got Ciel’s attention, seeing an opportunity presenting itself. It could be troublesome to try but... “I’d love to attend one day...”

Let’s see if asking about the students that haven’t got home gives me anything. Ciel decided. That should be his focus. If information could be gathered that way there would be no need to seek out the Principal. Carefully he placed the silverware down.

“This is a change of topic but do you know the son of Duke Clemens, Derrick Arden?” Ciel asked. A murmur started to grow around them. Undeterred he continued. “I believe he is a student of the Scarlet Fox Dormitory...” Now the whispers were heavier, the ambience around them growing harsher. “What is it?” The Earl asked after a moment, annoyed.
“Phantomhive!” McMillan whispered in an urgent, shocked tone. “It doesn’t look good if you’re too friendly with people from other dorms.”

“What?” Ciel groaned, shaking his head. “That sounds like the trivial rivalry of women... ouch” The walnut that had hit him squarely on the forehead had come from the balcony. Mouser grinned rolling another hard-shelled nut between her fingers. Ciel paled a bit before returning a glare. She chuckled leaning towards one of the boys buzzing around her, whispering some words and giving him a piece of paper. He hastily left the balcony like he was in the most important mission of his life.

“That is a rather aggressive response to such a trivial question.” Mouser stated softly to one of the boys, turning away from the balcony, approaching the shelves. Even the dining hall was lined with books although they had a more practical, school-oriented nature than the volumes available in the School Library and in the Sapphire Owl’s Library.

“Well... you see Ma’am...” One of the boys dared to make his voice heard. The ones around looked at him, expecting and jealous. Mouser turned to him, taking the tea cup from a blonde senior, taking a sip. What the liquid no longer tasted like the scent made up for. “The Dormitories were made to keep the students challenging each other…”

“I see... but if so how can your prefects work together harmoniously if animosity has been brewed like this for five years?” Mouser took another sip of the tea, placing it back on the proffered saucer, planting the doubt, turning, pulling a book free, opening it, taking a quick glance at the words, giving it to a boy with outstretched arms.

“They are the Prefects Ma’am.” Another boy adjusted his glasses, eyes filled with blind admiration. “It’s tradition.”

“I see... Mayhap it is a male thing.” Mouser smiled and leaned towards a brave first year that had breached the wall of seniors. “Sweet pea do you need something?” the boy blushed to the root of his hair, giving her a package. Darvulia. Another book. The thief smiled, patting his head. “Thank you.” The first year scampered off. “So who is this Mr. Arden?”

“Why would you want to know Ma’am?” Another boy whispered cautiously.

“It is a researchers’ habit.” Mouser chuckled, making light of her question to avoid the heavy demeanour that still lingered downstairs as the aftermath of the boyo’s inquiries. “Curiosity that just can’t be helped.” The boy hesitated. A few looked like they knew something. The thief just glanced around, memorizing faces before changing the subject. “Speaking of tradition I have not been able to see the Principal to give him the Arcane Society formal greetings and appreciation.” The thief adjusted her glasses looking rueful, staring at them as if pleading for help.

“Well... Mr Agares or the Prefects should be able to contact the Principal...” the one under her gaze blushed, fidgeted and his words tumbled out in an eager attempt to be helpful.

“I would be thankful... you see... I’m afraid that this delay in meeting him can be seen as very rude of me.” Mouser whispered bashfully, opening the package, leafing through the book. A couple of snooping boys paled when they stared at the twisting picture of a bulezau etched carefully in the pages of the encyclopaedia.

“Dormitories are always competing over something.” McMillan’s voice called Ciel back to the matters at hand, forcing his focus. It was as if he thought those words explained it all. “However I do believe that that student was transferred from the Red House to the Purple on exception.” Ciel breathed out a sigh. That was news but any news about his job at that point was a good thing, even
if it brought on an over-complication of the task.

“Transferred?” He prodded, trying to keep his interest from showing too sharply.

“I don’t know the details but the rumour is that the principal ordered it.” McMillan stuffed more food, chewing before continuing in a whisper. “Anyway... it’s best not to stick our noses in other dorm’s businesses. Especially Violet Wolf.” His voice trembled slightly as he added the last part.

“What do you mean...” Ciel tried to go further when a shout interrupted.

“Mcmillan! It’s fag time.” An upper year approached. McMillan quite literally hopped to it.

“Yes.” He answered eagerly, rushing, turning around for a moment. “This is my upper year.” The boy informed Ciel hastily. “See you later Phantomhive.” He saluted, cheerily, leaving.

“What’s with that pose...” Ciel mumbled, blanching in dismay. Then he turned to the plate, staring at it, thinking. *Derrick’s dormitory change... there is definitely something behind that.*

“Phantomhive... Mrs. Michaelis asked me to give you this.” The same boy that had rushed away from Mouser approached, giving him the folded scrap of paper before leaving the hall, in a hurry.

Ciel frowned. Had she found something else... *I will be reporting that bit of snide comment to the Marchioness.* It said. The boy looked up. Mouser waved, grinning sardonically.

“Phantomhive!” an authoritative shout echoed in the almost empty hall, making him jump from the bench.

“Yes, Clayton?” Ciel answered, standing straight, facing the Prefect’s fag.

“Until you have been assigned to an upper year you are on cleaning duty of the dining hall.” Clayton told him, not a hint of mockery in his voice.

“The dining hall...” Ciel parroted blankly, looking around at the mess of plates, food and books that peppered the tables and floor. Hall including the upper level... “all of this?” He retorted in a small voice, dismayed.”

“That is right. Don’t cut corners either.” Clayton ordered, walking away and slamming the doors shut.

Ciel sighed, his shoulder slumping before pushing the eyepatch away with his thumb.

“Sebastian. Come here.” The boyo called grumpily.

As if stepping out of thin air Sebastian appeared, adjusting his coat with a flourish, holding a clipboard, making sure his glasses were in place as he looked down, towards the boyo. Mouser leaned on the railing, waiting.

“It seems Derrick was indeed transferred.” Sebastian started his report. “When I checked his name on the registries it was indeed in the Violet Wolf Dorm.” The papers he had on hand were the class roll. He was both marked as absent and as belonging to the Purple House.

“People know something.” Mouser spoke up, head tilted. “But as soon as the Principal gives a command or acknowledges the situation as regular everyone shrugs and moves on without further thought into the matter.” Mr. Agares had also given her no assurances as to when she could meet the principal when confronted but had obsequiously agreed to make an appointment, as he should,
apologising for the delay. Before promptly falling of a three step set of baby stairs. As the outsider asking Mouser felt her chances for a face-to-face were better than the boyo’s as a student as Sebastian’s as a subordinate. After all there existed an Arcane Society and they had the money the schools craved when allowing researchers into their gates.

“He should be in the dorm now.” The boyo stated, taking a deep breath, turning around. “I’ll check it out so you can clean up here.” The Young Master ordered as he left the dining hall.

“Certainly.” Sebastian answered with a formal bow. “Well then. Let’s do this.” He spoke almost to himself, clapping hands, taking the bulky coat off, looking around to see what needed to be done.

“Do you want help?” Mouser asked softly, walking down the spiral stairs.

“No need to trouble yourself.” Sebastian turned slightly. “What are your plans?”

“I’m going to poke the Prefects for a while.” Just to exhaust the venues for the elusive meeting. And to see how susceptible they were to any kind of applied cunning. “Say… Mr. Agares name…”

“No. It’s not him.” Sebastian smiled, having noticed the similar nomenclature and having taking the care to inquire, taking the dirty dishes off the tables, piling them up on the crook of his arm.

“Then I’m at a loss as to why I found him so distasteful. He feels strange.” Mouser answered, eyes narrowing, standing still at the end of the stairs, a few steps away from the door.

“Strange?” Sebastian prodded, placing the plates on the cart that would later be taken to the kitchens.

“Stagnant.” The thief answered after a moment of thought, shrugging. “Maybe he is just ambitionless. Or maudlin.”
Chapter 108

While the Sapphire Owl Dormitory had been adjusted to the times without losing its vaunted traditional claims and looks there was no such solid classic harmony to the Purple House. The facade was a mix of styles, new, old, Gothic, Victorian, Georgian. Brick work. Wood panels. Stone arches. A single, unbalanced spire tower on the left wing of the building. The dormitory stood amidst a clichéd terror novel ambience of naked trees, gravestones enclosed within a fence of twisting cast iron spears. Twin pillars topped by statuary of crouched wolves supported a cast iron arch with a wavy motif, supporting the crest. Not even the cawing ravens were missing from the picture. Indeed some clouds chose their timing carefully to obscure the area as Ciel arrived at the bottom of the winding stairs that lead to the dorm.

*What a place.* He thought, staring blankly, slightly wary. *As expected from a dormitory for eccentrics.* But there was nothing to do but move forward and see if that endeavour would bear more fruit than his previous enquires. Should be simple enough... go in the dormitory, find someone, introduce himself as Derricks’ friend... common courtesy should be enough to get a positive answer and a meeting or a negative answer and further information.

Ciel was barely midway through the stairway when the whispering and rustling started around him. Startled he looked around, the words becoming noticeable as a group of cloaked students seemingly appeared from nowhere, surrounding him.

“An outsider.”

“The crest of the blue house.”

The whispers and the phrases carried threat, anger and displeasure.

*When did they all...* Ciel thought, trying to think of something to say, a plan to appease that situation and walk out of it unscathed.

“Hey, hey what business does a bookworm from the blue house have with us?” Someone shouted boisterously, stepping on the stone stairs. As weirdly dressed as the ones that surrounded him, grinning madly under shadowed eyes, rooster hair in disarray. “This isn’t a place for those who can’t do anything but study.” He called out with a showmanship's flair. The others answered to it, moving, angered. Stones started to fly.

“Get out.”

“That's right!”

“Get out!”

“People from other dorms should get out.”

“Out of the purple house!”

Faced with pain and the risk of injury Ciel saw no other choice but to run and leave the scene.

“Why don’t you bring a big fat dictionary to protect your head bookworm!” the other boy cackled, boasting as the purple house students watched him leave their turf.

“What on earth is this? Why are you making such a fuss?” the Prefect of the Purple house asked
softly, walking out of the dorm, attracted by the commotion, looking around listlessly.

“Violet...” the ring-leader glanced back, standing straight, reporting. “Some bookworm came over.” He mentioned with a shrug.

“Hm? The new kid?” Violet whispered as he watched the retreating figure of a boy with an eyepatch, his voice showing some concern.

“What’s so odd about that?” Mouser asked softly, standing behind the Prefect, noticing the twitchy apprehension that crossed his droopy eyes. One of the domesticated ravens, as decorative as peacocks in a park, cawed and flew to her shoulder. It was a flourish the boys seemed to like as much as her pierced ears and black nails. Discreetly she gave him a bit of smuggled bacon, the reason why the opportunistic dear had taken a liking to her.

“Ma’am! When did you...” Cheslock was startled, turning, stiffening further.

“Just now. As appointed.” The thief checked the dainty clock pinned by a ribbon to one of the buttons of the dress. She had authorization to access the Dorm Libraries during the day. Authorization that became null after five pm. Not that it did much good to find missing students of an upper year seeing that in that time frame they would either be in class or enjoying free time while the lower years fagged away. “He might have a friend in the Purple House.” Time to ease some of that thick layer of mistrust the snooping boyo had left behind.

“No one here recognized him though.” Cheslock mentioned, looking around.

The others nodded, supporting his words.

“And where are the younger boys?” Mouser smiled, looking around. Sure enough all of the present lads were from the upper years. “It is fag time. His friend could be inside the house doing his appointed chores.”

“It is possible.” Violet agreed, his word serving to close the issue, the group returning to the dormitory.

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*That was horrible... there is too much hostility between the houses.* Ciel sulked while returning to the dorm, grumbling in annoyance, trying to think beyond that new setback. *More than I expected.* He had had some warning about the inner workings of the school but... *I can’t even meet Derrick.* *Much less the principal.* Groaning and rubbing a sore spot on his head he closed the door as silently as possible, heading towards the dining hall to avoid suspicion. *Status and money are worthless here. As long as I’m a regular student I have little to barter.* Seeking information will only generate trouble. In sight of that all paths were closed but one. *Which mean getting to the core of the issue means getting the favour of the P4. But how?*

Ciel froze as he tuned the last corner, finding a troublesome crowd in front of the place he had hoped to sneak discreetly in to. Behaving as casually as he could he approached, peeking.

“Phantomhive!” Clayton’s forceful shout when spotting him made the Earl jump into attention, stiffening when gripped by the arms, almost shook like a rag doll.

“Yes!” he answered, almost automatically while his mind ran with the possibilities, focusing on the worst event possible for his current situation. *This is bad! Did he notice I snuck out?*
Clayton let go, clearing his throat, looking around, staring at the faces of the awed group, face grim and serious, in no way easing his concern.

“I don’t easily praise anyone.” He started, signalling him to follow. “But just for today I’ll grant you some praise.” Ciel mouthed a puzzled question as he looked inside the dining hall, eye widening in surprise when he saw the pristine state of the freshly cleaned and decorated room that had just a passing resemblance with the hall where he had previously eaten. From waxed floor, to polished wood, to tablecloths and candles. And folded napkins. “Our old... I mean... traditional dining hall looks completely new.” Clayton beamed his approval, accompanying it with a hard pat on Ciel’s back. “Well done Phantomhive.”

Those words created a ripple of awed gasps around them. Ciel frowned, looking around. The group was reacting like that was some kind of coveted prize.

“No, it wasn’t... hum... ah...” Trying to find a way to explain something that could not possibly have been done in that time frame was something he saw as an annoyance. He over did it... his bitter thoughts supplied.

“Mr. Michaelis.” Clayton called to the demon that was surveying Ciel’s reaction to the clearly overwrought completion of the given chore. “Look at our dining hall. Phantomhive cleaned it up.” He kept heaping the praise with a straight, pleased face that so far Ciel had not seen.

“My, my. Thank you for your hard work then, Phantomhive.” Sebastian responded to the prompt with a smug smile. Ciel glared. Doing unnecessary things... he grumbled, adding that moment to the ongoing misery, unable to voice his real thoughts, allowing out a generic and meaningless thanks.

“No, thank you Mr. Michaelis.” But as Clayton babbled away with Sebastian he noticed the links. Isn’t he Bluer’s fag... I can use him. To get close to the prefects... I’ll start by working on him. Grinning slightly, finding the facilitated path Ciel adopted a bubbly tone, turning to Clayton. “I’m glad you are pleased! Actually I’m really good at this kind of work. So if there is anything you need just ask, Clayton.” He finished paving the way by striking the same overly boyish pose McMillan had thrown his way while scampering off with his senior, noting with some satisfaction that it seemed to be having positive results.
Chapter 109

“The dorm supervisor is a teacher who lives in the dorm houses with his students, as a guiding presence.” Sebastian lectured, steps echoing on the stone-floored hallway. No students crowded the area, most of them attending the first class, away from the dorms in the main school building. Mouser looked upwards, appraising the rant. “The dormitories employ other workers beside the supervisor such as the cook, the cleaning lady, the footman who serves the tables. But the only one to have another job, teaching, is the supervisor. During the day he goes to the school building to teach his subject. At night, upon returning to the dorm, and during his free time he helps students who ask with their homework.”

The demon itemized his position and work calmly before changing tones, slightly acidic.

“In other words it is a demanding job that requires dedicating the day to the students…” they stopped in front one of the single’s room for the upper year students. Pushing the door open revealed a filthy, messy space, crowded by books and rumpled clothes. Sebastian groaned, entering, closing the door. “Yet the young master just accepts every task because he knows I will do it...” After a quick appraisal he turned to Mouser who held the itemized list of requests. A long sigh escaped him. “even though...” the thief stepped aside and glanced around, focusing, making all the items loitering the floor float upwards, facilitating the sudden speedy wave of organization that swept through the room. "I am pretty busy myself.” Sebastian grumbled, plucking each book from the air, returning it to their proper place on the shelf before vanishing. Mouser blinked a few times, staring at the organization, the fixed and properly hung uniforms. The hem of her dress fluttered at each crossing of cleanliness, settling when he returned once more, stopping.

“I believe this will do.” The demon stated sullenly, placing the tray with the freshly baked golden syrup pudding and tea pot within its cosy, stepping back, clapping his hands, shaking the dust, still grumbling.

“Have you considered making the boyo do what is requested of him on the grounds of… I don’t know… character building or promise keeping.” Mouser suggested as he grumbled.

“I have considered it.” Sebastian picked up his professor’s coat floating next to him. “Unfortunately the orders were quite direct.” He admitted as they walked away. “And now to teach the first’ year’s class. Ahh... I’m so busy...”

Mouser chuckled as he went in a huff. Convincing the boys she had on her palm to do the boyo’s work could ease some of Sebastian’s burdens. But then it would be easier to see through the boyo’s fake shining persona of obliging student and perfectionist as there would be witnesses to the deception. Also the high standards set would drop dramatically in the hands of inept nobility. It would be a waste of a resource.

“It must be hard for you to take in so many requests.” McMillan whispered as they took their seats, waiting for class to start. In a couple of days his reputation had been firmly cemented and it was as solid as he could make it in that time frame. “For me it takes all the fag time to fix a button.” He confessed in an almost distressed whisper. “Clayton is asking too much with the excuse of not having chosen a fag.” McMillan took a semi-stand of the current situation with a grim face. He was not exactly badmouthing the system or the person but was simply reporting the abuse of an underlying spirit.
“It’s not that bad.” Ciel answered in all seriousness, smiling in dainty deceit. “I have a trick to do everything quickly.” Sebastian groaned as he entered the classroom, headed towards the blackboard, paling as the words reached him. His efficient reputation was all undeservedly polished due to his efforts and as a noble the Young Master had no qualm in claiming the results of other when it suited him.

“Ehh?” But, unaware of the true meaning of the Young Master’s words. “I definitely want to know about that!” Sebastian groaned low and discreetly again, hoping that the Young Master would not start lending helping hands around the other fags. “You're really amazing though. You even got a great score in the last test.” Ciel soaked up the praise, tilting his head, satisfied by the progress.

“I just happened to be prepared.” He answered with a veneer of modesty. While it was true the education he had received so far was good, if a bit unorthodox and old-fashioned, there was no denying that having been able to both keep up and excel. And having a customized review and a peek of previous tests had not hurt either.

“Everyone is wondering which senior is going to choose you as his fag.” McMillan continued, smiling. “Someone is bound to make the request.” He leaned in, whispering. “I personally think it will be Clayton.”

“I’d be honoured.” Ciel smiled, trying to hide the smug, calculated look beneath a bashful answer. It has to be him. *I have to become his fag to advance.* All that should be done was being done.

“The lesson is about to start.” Sebastian called out as the bell rang, signalling that anyone arriving afterwards would be tardy and a target for Y’s.

“Hence, Mr. Garland’s research focuses on the anthropological view of Magic.” Mouser answered Bluer’s inquiry softly, placing a knight on the board. “As in it was akin to our time’s science for those of a more primitive era.”

“I see. But when one hears names like Arcane Society it can’t be helped but to think that it’s a group of crackpots and oddities trying to perform bogus rituals.” He moved a pawn and surveyed the board.

“You have described a fair part of the group I am afraid.” The thief lied easily, smiling. “There is a division within the society. Those who believe in the arcane and those who study the arcane as a way to understand bygone times and discredit today’s charlatans. Like that Mesmerism nonsense that was in fashion not so long ago. But there is still a strong tradition found in the Cunning Folk, for instance. Superstition endures easily. And even today you can search the law and find out remnants of those olden witch hunt times.”

“Why are you interested in demons and magic? A young woman…” he stopped without continuing, scrunching his face as if waiting for some sort of a rebuke. Mouser watched for a moment before finding her answer. He had sisters, likely older who certainly would have verbally skinned and lambasted him if those words slipped out with that amount of condescendence.

“They say a lady’s imagination is easily sparked, do they not…” Mouser moved her bishop, claiming the rook. Even if she hated the constrains of chess being forced to play with the boyo was beneficial to that particular disguise. “I believe it might have something to do with this craze about the gothic horror novel.”
“You must find your husband’s name immensely amusing then.” Bluer mentioned solemnly.

“Inquisitor Sébastien Michaëlis… his work is a good source material although his classification of demons is a bit…” steeped in machismo as most other human authors. The penned notes of several Cait Sith poked endless fun at the missing ladies of hell. Especially the fact that Belial was presented as male. And Paimon was even described as a man with a woman’s face. The Book of Lilith written in a strange language that was both crystal clear to her eyes and insufferably vague to her mind was an attempt by the first one to illuminate newcomers. “skewed by patriarchal church views.” Also it was penned in bloody old French.

“Bluer.” Clayton entered the common room of the Blue House, greeting the prefect. “Ma’am.” He added when he noticed her. “It’s almost 11 o’clock.”

“Prefect’s meeting?” Mouser asked softly, claws playing with a pawn. “How efficient of you, Clayton, keeping the schedule like that.” A simple compliment made him blush. Mouser grinned, toppling the piece gently, plying with another. “But being an upper year and prefect’s fag must be exhausting… especially seeing you have no fag of your own to ease the burden.”

“Well I…” He stammered, barely noticing that Bluer had left. “I should choose someone soon.” He stated firmly, as if doing so was bestowing a grand favour. “Someone efficient like that Phantomhive.”

“Is he that reliable? How novel.” Mouser smiled, pleased to see the scheme advancing and the time where they could leg away from the place approach. “I saw him reviewing in the library the other day. He works so hard, fulfilling every request and still has time to keep his grades at the very top. It really sounds like the perfect fag for those who have to set the example in this school.” The thief smiled, toppling another pawn with a little clack, seeing Clayton flustered with the approval of his choice being praised. “Now run along before you make Bluer late.”

He did run.

Mouser leaned back on the armchair and sighed, adjusting her glasses, glancing outside towards the green lawns. Should she spy on them or enjoy her researcher’s freedom and go into London to stretch her legs… and maybe hit a pub or two.
Chapter 110

The swan gazebo was regarded by students and by the prefects themselves as a sort of hallowed grounds. Despite its reputation it was only comfortable and usable during the warmer days of spring, early summer and late summer. That, however, did not keep it from being a symbol of the Prefectural tradition. It was a secluded, exclusive place built near an artificial lake, surrounded by rose-and-ivy covered walls. As soon as the weather had improved the furniture had been brought out and arranged, always ready for their use. So the meetings, even if they had no business to discuss, were held by the usual standards of a polite affair, a setting familiar to all of those present. Even if the servants shared or outclassed the titles of those they waited on.

“Redmond would you like another cup of tea?” Maurice Cole asked softly, in a soft voice, picking up the decorated pot from the teacart, offering with a gentle smile.

“Yes, why not.” The prefect of the Scarlet Fox smiled, looking up from the perfectly arranged tea set and cakes in front of him where the porcelain cup was indeed empty. “Your tea is the very best Maurice.” He praised his fag as he poured the steaming golden liquid and sweetened it to his taste with a few droplets of honey.

“Thank you.” Cole answered to his praise bashfully, playing with a loose blonde curl.

“By the way... I have heard that the new student is rather capable.” Greenhill mentioned as he worked with some weights, focusing on the arms that time. Individual hobbies and interests were often pursued when no business or need to study pressed on them.

“Ah yes, that cutie in Lawrence’s dorm. I’m curious too.” Redmond teased, turning to the prefect of the Sapphire Owl who did not even deign to look up from his book.

“Stop calling me by my fist name. It’s against the rules.” He finally answered with a frown and a side-glance, feathers ruffled.

“You’re so strict Blu.” Redmond teased, smiling. “Only prefects can come here. No one is going to punish us.” Blu looked unimpressed. Violet barely reacted, playing with the beverages that had been prepared. So Redmond turned his inquiry to the other member of the blue house. “Clayton.” He called. Blu’s fag glanced at him, slightly startled. “What do you think of that boy?”

Clayton pressed his lips together, thinking before giving his opinion to the prefect.

“He’s extremely skilled.” Clayton said after a moment. “Works fast and carefully. Actually the tea and snacks he prepares look and taste like something made by a French chef.”

There was a murmur of surprise. Cole looked surprised, hiding concern behind a soft hand.

“Wasn’t he an Earl?” Greenhill asked, brows furrowing in confusion. “How come he can do that?”

“He said it’s some sort of hobby.” Clayton gave him the only answer he had been provided.

“An Earl that works like a butler...” Cheslock muttered.

“Quite a weirdo.” Violet picked up the feeling, pouring a thick mixture into the tea. He hummed, taking a straw, “Maybe that’s why he came to my dorm that time.” The prefect continued in a mumble.
“What?” Bluer asked brusquely.

“Some time ago he came to the violet house during fag time. Alone.” He blew bubbles into the mixed tea.

“Are you sure it was him?” Clayton asked, head tilting curiously. “I don’t believe he has time to go out with all the work he has to do.”

“I believe so. He had an eyepatch.” Violet mentioned, shrugging, still bubbling. “Why did he go to the violet dorm... a friend maybe...”

The prefects exchanged a glance of concern before Redmond made a wide gesture, smiling, returning to the subject at hand, smugly.

“Well if he is that good I wish he would have come to my dorm. His rank is high enough. He is the head a famous household at such a young age after all.” Redmond said smugly, taking the tea, tasting it.

“Eh?” Greenhill’s fag spoke up, seemingly surprised.

“What?” The greenhouse prefect glanced at the young man.

“Greenhill, may I speak?”

“I can’t hear you! Say it louder!” Greenhill shouted in a militaristic tone. Unsurprisingly seeing most of the green house students had knightly roots and families with strong militaristic ties.

“Yessir! Would you allow me to speak!” in a kneejerk reflex the order was answered in a sharper, louder tone.

“Annoying loudmouths...” Bluer whispered, his attention having drifted back to the textbook.

“Allowed. I allow you to speak Edward Midford.” Greenhill retorted with a commanding voice.

“Thank you very much.” Edward answered with a half-salute and a stiff spine, stepping forward, glancing around before lowering his voice to address the other prefects. “This new student you are talking about... is his name Ciel Phantomhive by any chance?”

“What? Do you know him?” Redmond asked, looking surprised.

“Indeed I do. He is my cousin and Lizzy’s, my little sister, fiancée.” His face scrunched into a frown. “I had no idea he had entered this school.” The heir of the Midford Marquisate continued quietly, almost to himself.

“Rich and noble boys of all England come here. It’s not that surprising.” Cheslock answered, shrugging before grinning and mocking. “Maybe he didn’t send word because he doesn’t like you.”

As expected the jab went utterly unheeded.

“He was also with me in the Campania, the ship that had that accident not too long ago.” Edward continued, forwarding what he knew of his cousin and could be considered both harmless and of interest.

“Oh, the luxury liner that sank? I’d really like to invite him here to tell us about that event.” Redmond perked up, smiling.
“Eh?” Cole whispered, surprised.

“You are taking that too lightly, Redmond. A lot of people lost their lives.” Greenhill.

“I just want that cute boy to tell me about his trip.” The red house prefect dodged the issue with a shrug and a dramatic statement, unaware of the weight his words carried. “I’m tired of seeing the same dull faces every day.” He groaned, stretching on the sofa. “The most exciting thing that has happened in a while was Mrs. Michaelis making Percy faint. And I am sure you are curious as well about all this rumours of delicious snacks and teas.”

“I didn’t know about him.” Cole said softly, supporting his prefect wants. “He sounds interesting. But I think a new student would be uneasy to suddenly be thrown amidst the upperclassmen.”

“I think it would be all right.” Edward disagreed. “I am rather strict with him because he is my relative but for the way he has been able to manage his household at such a young age I respect him as a man.”

“If you vouch for him then I agree.” Greenhill smiled slightly, nodding in encouragement.

“Greenhill.” Edward grinned too, taking the praise shyly.

“What about you Violet?” Redmond pursued his objective.

“Sounds interesting.” Violet started to slurp his concoction through a straw. “Go ahead.” He deigned, nodding.

“Then it’s decided.” Redmond clapped before turning his attention to Bluer with a smug grin. “Right Lawrence?” he dragged the blue prefect’s given name.

“As long as you quit that.” Bluer retorted in a clipped tone.

“When should we call him?” Greenhill asked.

“Tomorrow should be fine?” Violet said lazily.

“All right. Tomorrow at 2 pm, then.” Redmond stated.

“Well then. Good news should be delivered quickly.” Cole stated with a bright smile. “I’ll go tell him myself. 2 PM, tomorrow, correct?” He ascertained before leaving to carry out the request.

Class was out and lunch would be served as soon as they arrived at the dorm’s dining hall. So far the day had followed its predetermined pattern with little deviation or surprises. Ciel stood from his seat, immediately joined by the chatterbox that was McMillan when a flustered blonde, the tie clearly placing him in the first year of the red house, burst into the classroom, stumbling through the wooden desks until he reached them, panting, huffing, short of breath.

“Phantomhive!!!!” he stuttered with a red face, stopping. “Cole wants to talk to you!” he blurted out, gesturing wildly, eyes close to bulging.

“What! Cole!? Wahh...” McMillan seemed to have been infected by the babbling fever.

The clamour suddenly started around those that were still in the classroom.
“I spoke to him for the first time...” the boy was still babbling, shaking.

“Cole?” Ciel asked, befuddled, eyes narrowing.

“Don’t you know?” McMillan turned to Ciel, sputtering in shock and indignation, lecturing. “Maurice Cole is a senior, the fag of the prefect of the Scarlet Fox Dorm. He is the most handsome boy at school!” Jittery McMillan almost hopped around, gripping Ciel’s coat. “Where did you meet him?” He demanded, shaking him hard.

“Actually I have never met him.” Ciel deadpanned, eyes narrowing. “Aren’t you getting too excited just because he’s supposedly handsome?” the Earl muttered, confused.

“Whatever, just go!” McMillan shouted, pushing him along with the boy that had burst into the room to announce the request. As he was pushed into the corridor Ciel was faced with a slender blonde standing in the corridor under the light of one of the wide windows. It was a rather deliberate placing. Other students of all years were peeking, lurking around.

“Are you Phantomhive?” Cole asked softly, smiling pleasantly. “Pleased to meet you. I am Maurice Cole, Redmond’s Fag.” A slender hand was placed on his chest as he nodded introducing himself pleasantly and methodically.

“Yes, I’m Ciel Phantomhive.” Ciel answered with the expected formula, looking at him, a slight suspicion breeding in his mind when the other boy’s stare was fixed, analysing him carefully from head to toe with a mild, pensive expression. “How can I help you?” he asked after that slightly too long lull in the conversation, quite aware of the many eyes that were fixed on the exchange.

“Ah, right.” Cole clapped his hands together, smiling deliberately. “You know the Prefects and their fags often meet together at the Swan Gazebo. And they were talking about this amazing student. Everyone agreed they would like to have a chat with you.” Cole announced pleasantly, as if offering a great gift. “So, Phantomhive, you are invited to the Swan Gazebo, tomorrow.”

Ciel heard the words and when they clicked he felt a sly smile spread on his mouth. *This is a chance to get near the P4*. He changed his smile to an excited innocent grin.

“I would be glad to.” Ciel answered lightly, copying McMillan’s tone.

“How wonderful.” Cole smiled too, hands together. “Be there at 4 PM tomorrow then. We will be waiting.” He relayed the remaining information before turning away with wave and a smile.

And as soon as he turned the corner Ciel was swarmed by the snooping students, all gripping, pulling and talking.

*That is wonderful Phantomhive!*

*Awww... I wanna go too!*

*Only P4 can enter the gazebo!*

*Tell us all about it!*

*Let’s be friends!*

The words mixed together. It was a breakthrough Ciel thought, trying to answer to those around him in a way befitting the reputation he needed to build.
Sebastian walked by, having heard the whole situation, heading to his next class, leaving it in the Young Master’s hands. He should do his part when requested.

Mouser adjusted her glasses, breaking her gaze away from the retreating Maurice Cole. Irrelevance was not a strange fear for a noble and his position as a prefects’ fag was a way to cement his own importance and value, keeping that lurking fear at bay. The thief sighed. All seemed to be proceeding according to plan. She stopped in her way to the library, noticing a red house student sneaking away with a teary face after having witnessed the commotion with wide eyes.
Chapter 111

“You should translate this as «at first» not «from the beginning».” Sebastian pointed out the text section the student was struggling with, smiling slightly as the young man nodded, thankful and flustered, taking notes and correcting his work. “It is a little difference that can be easily misinterpreted so do be careful.” Sebastian smiled encouragingly. “Is everything else going smoothly?”

“Yes.” The student answered eagerly. “The way you explain is so easy to understand professor Michaelis, thank you.” He headed towards the door with his books and in a better mood. “Good night.”

“Good night.” Sebastian reclined on the armchair, relaxing for a bit, not even glancing at the paperwork and requests waiting on the other side of the desk.

Mouser chuckled behind her book as the boy closed the door, almost skipping away down the corridor that lead to the rooms.

“Anything to say my dear?” Sebastian teased.

The bottled laugh came out in an unflattering snort before clearing, spilling freely.

“No dearie.” Mouser answered in kind, managing to pry a smile out of him.

A soft knock interrupted. The boyo’s voice came from the other side, convincingly bubbly.

“Professor Michaelis, there is something I don’t understand. Could you help me?”

“He is improving isn’t he?” Mouser whispered.

“...come in.” Sebastian answered after a wry pause.

The door’s mechanism clicked, allowing the boyo to open the door, slipping in, closing it quietly, leaning against it with a mischievous expression, making sure it was shut.

“You seem to be popular, professor.” The boyo tossed his words mockingly, walking into the room unhurriedly, carrying the books needed for the supposed tutoring session. Even when no event had befallen him Ciel always came for a briefing and for a bit of outside work. The Funtom Company could be solid but its head had to peek at it even if other matters were pressing.

“Indeed.” Sebastian stood, switching roles, approaching the boyo who tossed his books on the desk. “Everyone praises my easy explanations and kindness.” He mentioned with a bit of pride as he helped the Young Master out of his coat.

“I wonder how they would react if they knew how your real training methods work.” He sniggered bitterly, falling into the armchair, loosening the tie.

“Boyo, mine or yours?” Mouser piped, winking as Sebastian walked by to prepare one of the blends they had smuggled in. Ciel glanced at her as he relaxed, able to stop the pretence of pleasant disposition. “Because you do not want to know he went about in French. Or the bite marks in geography. Or the several days limping I got because of the finer points of current politics. And the fact that I could not sit for hours after...” Mouser paused and tilted her head, tapping fingernails against her lips, pouting. “what was it?”
“Etiquette.” Sebastian supplied, pouring the tea, smiling slyly.

“Improper use of silverware will be met by a sudden stabbing with the proper… tool.” Mouser relayed.

Ciel frowned deeply before brushing the conversation away, focusing on the day’s events.

“I was invited to meet the P4 tomorrow at 4.” The boyo gave them the details, smugly.

“I have heard.” Sebastian answered, giving him the tea. Mouser just nodded along, waiting.

“It’s a golden chance.” Ciel sighed, taking a sip leisurely. “I must make sure the P4 and their followers are suitably impressed. I guess I’ll need some teacakes first of all.”

“Very well, sir.” Sebastian answered neutrally as the boyo started to bristle.

“Ach... why do I have to prepare snacks for children...” He grumbled into his tea.

“But isn’t this rather adorable?” Sebastian chuckled, standing next to Mouser, back straight, waiting for orders, tone dripping with amusement. “Bribing people with actual sweets.”

“You did get me cake for French...” Mouser answered, smiling softly, remembering the decadent taste, leaning against the plush back of the armchair.

“And chocolate chip cookies after etiquette.” Sebastian elaborated, watching the smile spread.

“I rather miss it.” The thief sighed after a moment, lowering her head, eyes closing.

“Food?”

“It’s gone.”

“I see.” Sebastian patted her head gently, reacting to the morose tone, before turning back to the matter at hand. “However tomorrow at 4 I will be coaching the cricket class for the blue house.” He hummed, thinking, making an exaggerated expression of hesitation. “What should I give priority to? If you order me I will be waiting nearby.”

“I am not going there to fight. I’ll be well on my own.” The boyo grumbled, placing the tea down.

“I don’t have any particular schedule.” Mouser mentioned. “I’ll be nearby if the babies need a hide tanning.”

The boyo just nodded. Even if there was no need for either of them past experiences had shown that it was indeed best to have a triumph ready for action.

“It’s an order Sebastian. Prepare the best teacakes to amaze the P4.” Ciel stated, knowing that the standards he had so far claimed should be kept at all times.

“Yes My Lord.” Sebastian bowed, acknowledging the request.

A knock on the door broke the moment and prompted a quick reversal of roles as a student’s voice came through.

“Professor Michaelis... there is something I would like to ask your help with.”

“Come in.” Sebastian answered, once more on the armchair as Ciel picked up the study materials.
“Excuse me.” yet another bespectacled blue house student entered the room.

“Thank you very much.” The boyo said, nodding, placing his bright mask on, smiling. “Well then Professor Michaelis. Good night.”

“Good night Phantomhive.” The demon answered before his attention turned back to the new arrival.

“What do you think of this invitation?” Sebastian asked as he placed another batch of citrusy madeleines in the oven, examining the quality of the tray of shortcakes he had just taken out of the heat.

Mouser blew a bit of smoke into the air, appreciating the moment when she could freely do so again.

“If it goes well it will be good.”

“If?” Sebastian picked the word, joining her by the door that lead to a small garden filled with herbs and vegetables. The cook liked to have a more personal supply.

“Focusing on the top makes people forget the bottom.”

“Elaborate.”

“Well…”

Met with a deep mood of disapproval and aggravation was not what Ciel had been expecting when he reached the Swan Gazeebo at precisely 4 pm carrying a basket full of treats.

“How could you be 2 hours late Phantomhive?” Clayton broke the heavy silence with a scolding shout, approaching until he was reproaching face-to-face.

“What? I was told it was at 4…” Ciel stammered, blindsided, glancing around at the faces.

“Ehh?” Cole turned slowly with an innocently hurt expression. “No I said it right. At 2 PM.”

Ah. Ciel schooled his expression into staying perfectly blank despite the sudden onset of annoyance. I see. It was him. His mouth twisted into a brief grimace as his mind tried to find a way out of the situation.

“It is disgraceful to lie now.” Yet another angry voice cut in.

“Edward.” It was both a bit of a surprise and an increase in his annoyance level. Ciel turned to face his cousin. I knew he was attending this school but I had no idea he was a prefect’s fag. Unfortunately nothing could ameliorate that moment, especially when he was showing that grim face.

“I was an idiot for trusting you. You disappointed me and the seniors.” He clenched his teeth before growling the words out. “Get out!”
Mouser chuckled as she watched the drama unfold through the opera glasses.

From the stormy faces to the body language and the humiliating defeat ongoing.

Five students from different houses, with any green representation glaringly missing, were also keeping watch on the gazebo while technically not breaking the exclusivity rules around the prefect’s haunt. They seemed to be the first source of gossip concerning prefectural matters. And they were buzzing with helpfulness around her while taking turns on their own binoculars to keep up with the events.

«Bird watching» was what they were all doing there.

The thief lowered her opera glasses and returned to spectacles to their perch, staring at the thick blanket the boys used to keep a semi-comfortable watch. It was a clear reputation-wrecking setup placed by someone who had had extensive experience in doing so. Not that it was a hard move to make in society. Precious little was needed to destroy a newcomer to any closed gathering.

Rumour would spread fast carried by those boys and certainly aided by the source of the problem.

The boyo was leaving, sulkily, anger brewing beneath the mask.

Mouser stood and adjusted her skirts, bidding the boys good day. There was only one place where the boyo could be heading to and cricket practice would end in precisely twenty minutes. Might as well cajole him into working a bit on the Company papers and requests to vent some of the pressure before they could regroup and re-plan.

“Damn! He tricked me!” The boyo growled bitterly when he finished his report glaring at Sebastian’s back, flopping on the armchair. Mouser looked up from the drafts that would allow production to start on the new toy-line for the fall and the requests of the planning of the new Christmas line, unimpressed. He had worked wile grumbling, a process she used to gauge how vast his cussing repertoire was. As it turned out it was quite modest. Almost pitifully small. “This is why I have verbal agreements! Give me written proof.” His glare sharpened as he noticed the demon’s shaking shoulders and muffled snigger as he placed the finishing touches on a strawberry tart. “Stop laughing!”

“Aww so the young Master got complacent because he was just a student?” Sebastian teased, prodding the wounded pride. “Underestimating another boy just because of his situation...” Sebastian shook his head, showing his disapproval clearly, letting the boyo know that the situation was clearly created by his own short-sightedness and underestimation of the surroundings. “People envy those who excel.” Sebastian picked up the platter and approached, proffering the tea and cake to ease the annoyance. “It is surely not the first time this sort of events have befallen you.”

“Maybe it is not the event that is creating that sour look but the fact that he was outwitted by a peer?” Mouser supplied, papers aside, noticing the tightening of the stormy expression as the boyo picked the sweets. On the mark. Ciel rarely interacted with people with an age that was closer to his, barring Lizzy and her brother. Perhaps Prince Soma could be included but the boyo did his best to avoid the Indian noble. Finny was a servant. Doll had been part of the job. Mouser was edging on twice his age. Sebastian was... Mouser glanced at him for a moment as the though moved through her mind. Older. She conceded to his dislike of being called old man.
“Did you give Lord Edward an explanation?” Sebastian asked, stepping back, waiting.

“No.” Ciel stabbed a strawberry, tone clipped. “Trying to explain events based on deceit to a person like that is useless.” He sighed, scooping a swirl of cream with the fork. “And in the end the truth of the matter is I showed up late.”

“Still it is rather idiotic of a future lord to believe in someone’s word just because of the status they enjoy near the ones he likely admires. It’s not like there are no sycophantic leeches in his world...” Mouser mentioned. “You might want to inform the Marchioness.”

“Of what? That Edward follows the school’s traditions like a true gentleman?” The boyo snippily, bitter as vinegar.

“That Edward...” Mouser frowned and groaned. “Yes. There is no way to say this without going through the words «gullible» and «blind», skirt ing «dim» with some luck, innit?” And the retribution was not worth the trouble. He was just a rare breed, the good and trusting sort.

“Are you going to cry yourself to sleep?” Sebastian mocked in a gentle tone.

“As if.” Another strawberry was viciously stabbed to ooze red over cream. “I will gain the prefect’s favour no matter what. And get him back.” Ciel took a deep breath, calming and thinking clearly once more, having worked through the rage and outrage. “I’ll make you regret ruining my hard work, Maurice Cole.” The boyo said softly, grin spreading slowly, biting down on the fork. “He is probably an expert and frequent liar.”

“Why would you think that?” Sebastian encouraged him to share why he had come to such conclusion.

“Have you seen his hands?” Ciel asked softly, thinking.

“His hands?” The demon looked thoughtful for a moment, eyes narrowing, before nodding, allowing him to continue with his theory.

“Those who are fags in this school have rough hands from doing chores. But his hands are immaculate, unblemished. In other words...” Ciel’s explanation was sound. Mouser smiled. There were other signs but she would disclose them when needed.

“He is using some dirty methods like the young Master.” Sebastian cut through the explanation.

“Exactly.” Ciel pointed with the fork. Then he grumbled, staring at the cake. “Though the part about me was uncalled for.” The boyo groaned and stretched. “Besides there is no doubt about it with his unhesitating, relaxed attitude.”

“You know the smell of your own kind then.” Sebastian smiled as the Young Master concluded his tirade on the suspicions that he had overlooked before meeting the prefects and being faced with deceit.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t need to do much to prove him wrong.” The boyo stated, placing the empty plate down. “But I won’t let it end so easily.” Retribution was required to assuage his wounded pride. “Sebastian seek out people that have been deceived by him. Also thoroughly investigate Maurice’s pattern of activities.”

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian acquiesced with a short bow.

“What’s with the scissors?” The boyo asked as he noticed Mouser sliding a whetstone on the
parted edges.

“I could just sneak in and deprive him of the blondie locks. Then start a rumour about lice. Call him dirty baldy.” The thief suggested the easy way to humiliate the fag, depriving him of his main tool of propaganda, manipulation and disguise.

“Rather petty.” Ciel nit-picked.

“Would work. It’s a school full of kids.” Mouser answered with a grin, snapping the scissors shut.
Chapter 112

As expected the rumours took hold fast. Some were carried innocently, just the awful tale of an interesting incident in that garden of boredom and stale knowledge and tradition. Others had a purpose, created and spread carefully, meant to break and discredit Ciel further and further.

Sitting in his usual spot at the back of the room, the day after the event, alone and clearly shunned Ciel listened to the murmurs that the other boys didn’t even attempt to keep discreet. At that moment eavesdropping into what was being said about his situation was what he could do in an attempt to mitigate the error while Sebastian and Mouser dug about.

Did you hear?

He just neglected an invitation of the P4.

No way.

How is he still in the school...

He’s lucky nothing has happened.

Disbelief and reproach. Some calls for retribution and punishment. Ciel glanced around, appraising, meeting glares without a flinch. Acting shy or skittish would only make people think he had something to be ashamed of. Still what was happening was truly surprising,

So this is the kind of influence the P4 have. Never though it would go this far. It was clear he was marked to be shunned and avoided. I let my guard down and I’m instantly swept. In any event this will make it hard to gather testimonies... maybe Mouser was on to something about the importance of appearances and rumours. Strip the gilded coat away and...

“Class is starting.” The teacher’s voice instantly made all the noise die down as the students took their seats and prepared for yet another day filled with lectures and work.

As the bell rang it was once more evident he was being actively shunned and slightly targeted by some embittered individuals. Childish pranks with little to no effect. Ciel ignored them, whispers and all as he made his way to the library. A dutiful student should study. It was part of keeping his innocent and unjustly accused act.

“Hi Boyo.” Mouser greeted him as he approached the table where several sheets of paper were spread out amidst the old-looking tomes, an aberrant pattern scrawled through them in charcoal, surrounding a plain round mirror. It made his eye hurt and his head feel dizzy.

“What are you doing?” the boyo demanded, placing his books down, looking around. A few students wandered about. Not a very sought after place in-between classes it seemed.

“Summoning demonic cockroaches to crawl into your rival’s bed.” Mouser smiled, putting the papers away, breaking the uneasy feeling.

“Is that something you can do?” the boyo asked, crumbling on a chair.
“It’s easier to summon regular cockroaches if that is what you are asking.” The thief chuckled, sitting back down, playing with the mirror. “speaking of vermin...” Her eyes narrowed slightly and the posture changed. “Hello Maurice” Mouser’s sugary tone sent chill of revulsion down Ciel’s spine.

The table she had chosen to occupy gave an unimpeded view of all that came into the library.

“Mrs. Michaelis.” Cole answered just as saccharinely edged. “Should you not consider your reputation?” he stated that in a seemingly concerned tone for all that were listening, staring pointedly at the boyo. Some boys around took the bait, peeking from the corridors, glancing furtively from their tables, peeking over shoulders as they pretended to browse the shelves.

Ciel bristled but kept his head down, buried in the study materials.

“Ah what harm can there be in talking to you sweetie?” Mouser retorted, patting Ciel’s head. If it was to be a game of influences that was a vouch. When they were done Mouser would seem wiser for never having doubted, meaning that she could harvest even more secrets out of the dorms.

“Indeed.” Cole bit the answer down, barely avoiding making it too sharp.

“My, what a frosty tone.” Mouser giggled, smiling. The reproach created a shuffle and a slightly harsher scrutiny on the scene. Cole’s smile seemed frozen on his face, the usual softness in his eyes gone. “Are looking for cute library mice?” A couple boys jumped and shrank back into their seats, eyes darting around nervously.

“I am simply here for a book Mrs. Michaelis.” Cole answered charmingly, making his way to the shelves, his eyes pausing for a second on the red house students that were wagging their tails in excitement, both leaving the library carrying a well-organized stack of papers.

“What was that?” Ciel asked when he was fairly sure Cole could not hear them.

“He does not like me.” Mouser answered with a shrug. “Mostly because I have an easier time doing what he does and I don’t need to hide it. Also there is the gender thing but let’s not go there.”

“I see…” Ciel deadpanned, scoffing.

“He would like you even less if you had actively used that face of yours.” Mouser poked his nose gently. “Smile for the public.” Ciel did so, noticing the audience taking peeks at the aftermath of the conversation. A guilty person maybe would have fled or crumbled under the gazes... Mouser ruffled his hair in a show of comfort. “You see... Taking down rivals while keeping up a mascarade is his main concern. Still that means a lot of work has to be done in the appearances and reputation. Meaning that maybe one rumour could not take him down but if they pile along with some misfortune in the visage...”

“You are not using the scissors.” Ciel groaned. Mouser showed him the tip of her tongue.

The first period recess was close to its end when the two students Mouser had reported as being at Cole’s back and call caught Sebastian’s attention, sneaking around into one of the music rooms. Following was easy. And he did not have to wait long for the target to make his entrance with a smile and a dazzling presence.

“Cole! We finished that thing you asked for.” One of the boys stammered, giving him the papers.
The other nodded with a bright smile, taken in the trick. So the Young Master was correct in his suspicions about Cole being an expert liar. To conceal all in that act was certainly a trained feat that required effort and dedication to his purpose.

“Thank you. You have really helped me out.” As Mouser often did a kind lie was the best way to take what they wanted with minimal fuss, something the Young Master was attempting to mimic recently, having seen the effectiveness of such methods. There was no other explanation for their acquisition of Snake. Yet Cole seemed prone to say too much. “Being a prefect’s fag is such a busy job...” He stated with a grand sigh, the words born from vanity. “But keep this a secret, right?

“Yes. We are so glad you let us help out!” the one that had been nodding along spoke up, inching closer.

“I should decide on a fag soon. Someone competent like you two.” Cole mentioned with a smile as he left. It was all that was needed to create a little conflict of worthiness between the two boys. Uninterested Sebastian followed Cole into the prefect study rooms.

Cole was knocking softly on the door. Though the window Sebastian watched as the notes were passed and the effort claimed as his own without any hesitation or qualm.

“Excuse me. I have gathered the data you asked me Redmond.” It was a routine event, barely creating flinch or doubt in his demeanour.

“How fast.” The Red House Prefect seemed surprised, leafing through the research, apparently not noticing that there were two sets of handwriting. “Neatly done as always. This is a great help.” Redmond praised and Cole smiled, achieving what he had been preying on, bowing his head, slightly bashful now.

“Not at all...” Perking up the fag smiled. “ah, that’s right. Do you have any requests for this afternoon’s tea?” he asked softly, eager to please.

“It has been a while since I’ve had that lemon myrtle soufflé glace. I would like that.” Redmond asked with a bright face.

“Will do.” Cole acquiesced before leaving with a slight pleased skip on his step.

At fag time Ciel took over the tailing duties while Sebastian was left to work in the sudden work increase that the senior had requested of him out of spite. But if Sebastian cleared those tasks it would still look like he truly had nothing to either hide or be ashamed of. All for the goal of getting to those bothersome prefects and finally leave that place.

However it was unfortunate that Cole headed towards the Red House.

“Thank you for your work.” he greeted the guards stationed in front of the grand, palatial dorm, heading inside as they saluted.

What is this, Buckingham palace?! Why in the world would they have guards in a dorm? Hiding behind the shrubbery Ciel groaned, annoyed. The sound of heels in the road made him glance up.

Mouser winked as she walked by, greeting the guards cheerily, petting one of the hounds that stood alongside them, going into the red house after their target, getting one of the men to leave their post to carry her books.
Cole was looking slightly ruffled as he left the house alongside with the Prefect as Fag time ended and the classes were about to resume.

The water was still cold. Sebastian considered as he stood beneath the wooden pier, listening the prattle of the prefect’s meeting in the swan gazebo. There was no change in the target’s behaviour. It seemed he still had no inkling he was being investigated.

“Redmond, your requested soufflé glace.” The desert’s name caught the demon’s attention once more. There was no way an amateur could do that in the timespan between the witnessed request and the meeting that was occurring. Also a noble born would not be that dextrous in the kitchen. “And an uva milk tea.” How ignorant the peers were to overlook such a glaring detail of foul play both in the Young Master as in the leech they were waiting to crush.

“How do you even make such time-consuming things every day?” Cheslock of the purple house spoke up, sounding dismayed.

“This is the least I can do for Redmond.” The smile in the voice was unmistakeably smug and yet it could seem rather modest as well. “Please have some too if you wish.” And that was simply showing off.

Cricket practice was being uneventful, Ciel though while hiding behind a tree and watching Cole cheer for the prefect. Boring moment. Maybe it would have been more productive to be in his own dorm studying for next day’s test

Mouser played with her mirror, tapping the surface with one long nail, watching it shimmer. The book said it should react like mercury when the items were placed on it so…

“Any of them in here?” Sebastian asked, standing next to her, leaning to look her in the eye, his lips upturned into a grin. Mouser smiled, letting go of her experiment, tilting her head to the left.

“Philosophy section. The same boy that ran away in tears when Cole invited the boyo.” She supplied. “He has been trying to approach me as soon as he noticed that I don’t shun.” She poked Sebastian’s ribs playfully. “Dazzle him.”

Said boy was tiptoeing, trying to reach the top shelf. Sebastian reached out and pulled the book out of its place, smiling, looking down kindly.

“You do like to read some difficult books.” Sebastian praised, smiling. “What year are you in?”

“Ah, I’m Harcourt from the 2nd year.” The boy answered in a soft voice, startled, eyes darting around for a way to politely escape. He looked like a terrified rabbit.

“A second year?” the demon smiled kindly. “Quite amazing to be reading the original version of Hegel’s Science of Logic at your age.” Praise made him blush. “You must be quite popular in your class.” Taking it further made his eyes water. Sebastian grinned. Good. They had the right target.
“Not at all. I can’t do anything but read so...” the tear choked voice gave the demon the opening needed.

“That face...” Sebastian leaned him, taking his chin, tilting his face up, observing the moist eyes. “Is something bothering you?” the prodding made him look away, lips trembling. “Why don’t you come to the chapel?” Sebastian asked, guiding the distraught child to the chapel. Confession was a good tool to pry truths out of the humans.

In a hushed, teary tone Harcourt started to speak, curling into himself.

“Cole said he gave me the invitation to the swan gazebo. But... I have never received it.” He paused for a moment, sobbing, feeling free to do so in the dark. “Even so the invitation showed up later in my desk. I’m really not lying. But everyone calls me so even though...”

“You must have been sad, hurt... It surely has been so hard on you. With no one believing in your words. But I don’t think you are a liar.” Sebastian marked up the name, smiling, speaking up to secure his cooperation.

“Mr. Michaelis...” the watery voice on the other side of the confessional

“Pray. This misunderstanding will surely be dispelled soon.” Sebastian said encouragingly. This meant they had found all of the discarded ones that still lingered in school. The next step should be discussed soon.
Chapter 113

“So with that, presently there are four students that have fallen victim to Cole, as you have.” Sebastian went through the list once again, explaining the investigation thoroughly.

“Meaning bothersome and quickly discarded and discredited.” Mouser added. “Other three were unable to handle the pressure and have abandoned the school.” It was not as suspicious as it sounded. The school was demanding, the fees were high and the paternal fortunes could be lost during a bad night of gambling or a dodgy investment.

“I knew it.” The boyo gritted out, having his suspicious confirmed.

“Not just that but it is clear that he leaves his fag work to this other silent and unaware group.” Sebastian placed the papers down, stepping back. “For example it takes several hours for a soufflé glacé to cool. It would be impossible for him to make it using only his fag time and no help from others, namely a skilled chef.”

“I want to know his movements inside the red house but you have to do my work during fag time, I cannot enter and Mouser can’t more freely in other dorms outside some time frames.” It gave them a rather fragmentary idea. Better than nothing but still not good enough. “I’d like another pawn inside the red house since Maurice is there. It was Derrick’s dormitory too.”

“I don’t think it is wise to force a vacancy once more. It would be rather suspicious for it to happen too often.” Especially if it coincided again with an entry request.

“Also there might be a line of boys with lesser pedigree that got stomped by your glitter waiting to enter before you can smuggle an ally in.” Mouser shrugged as she spoke up.

“Also even if you get someone into the school you cannot choose the dormitory. That is influenced by your status and personality.” Sebastian pointed out the flaws in the idea as they tried to work out some feasible

“I know.” The boyo groaned, rubbing his face, slumping down. “We need someone with enough status and wealth to be admitted without question into the Scarlet Fox, seeing they only take in the exceptionally wealthy and high-born.” The boyo stretched and stared at the window. “And they even need to be someone that would be admitted in special circumstance even without a vacancy in existence...” A long sigh escaped the boyo. “There is no way we can find such... an... individual...” The words slowed down to a trickle as the description clicked for the group. “I just thought of someone but I definitely do not want to call him.”

“But he is quite the special case.” Sebastian said, looking up, seemingly thinking through it. “Meets all of our demands.”

“Can’t even question his loyalty.” Mouser piled on the reasons, chortling behind her hand.

The boyo began producing a whirring, groaning sound, arms tightly crossed, squirming in the armchair, jaw clenched. It rather looked like he was having a bout of stomach issues.

“Damn it all...” The boyo growled with a defeated look, staring ahead with a grimace. “I guess necessity abides by no law. I will use everything I got to get ahead even...” his face soured again as Sebastian gathered the material needed to pen the letter.
The attitudes within the dorm had turned cold as well. So it was indeed a bit of a surprise when McMillan broke the night’s silence. It was after lights out, quiet and careful so he would not attack the attention of the other boys or the scolding of the dorm supervisor.

“Phantomhive... are you asleep?” He whispered from his bed, two desks away from his, the sheets rustling as he moved. Ciel opened his eyes, slightly startled, glancing over his shoulder.

“No.” What was that about… and could it be used in some way…

“Hey... can I come over to talk?” the other boy continued, sitting up.

“Sure.” Ciel answered back after a short pause, placing the eyepatch over his marked eye as the freckled student hopped from his bed and sneaked into his, sitting down, looking at his own hands sadly, fingers twisting the fabric.

“I’m sorry I can’t support you at school.” The whisper was regretful and contrite.

“It’s quite all right.” So he still had an ally, even if he was one that could not speak up. Reassured McMillan plopped down next to him, waiting, taking a bit of the offered room on the pillow. “We have to go through six years... it’s only normal.”

“But why did you do that?” He whispered softly, his tone sad and slightly reproachful. Even with his impression of him shattered by the rumours the other boy was still trying to be nice, even if he did so in secret. So there was a very solid chance the rest of the school would default, if not utterly change, their view of him as soon as the situation was reversed.

“I didn’t mean to but I was told to come at 4 when it was really at 2.” Ciel decided to see how well the truth worked when paired with a sad face.

“What!” McMillan screeched, arms springing his upper body from the bed, shocked.

“Shush!” Ciel pulled him down by the nightshirt, finger against his lips, demanding quiet. McMillan covered his mouth, startled by his own outburst.

“But we heard it was at 4 too.” He whispered after a tense moment of waiting and listening, trying to see if they had alerted anyone in the dorm.

“Right.” Ciel smiled slightly, softly. “But it cannot be helped anymore.” He shook his head, looking away slightly.

“I know!” McMillan smiled, encouragingly, relieved now that that had been no true fowl play or treachery on Ciel’s part. “I’ll testify for you. And if I’m not credible enough by myself I’ll ask the others too. We were all listening in. We now know that it is not your fault.” The Blue house traditionalist first year students… well… if anything else was needed in the plan to dethrone Maurice Cole an extra had just fallen on his palm without any extra effort.

“I see... that could help.” Ciel answered to the other boy’s wide smile. “Thanks McMillan.”

“Not a problem.” McMillan chuckled, unaware of the smug smile spreading on Ciel’s face.
and the stars at Charlotte’s door, depicting her friend’s frustration in the increasingly creative threats penned down had started to change, one of the demons mentioned more and more often until the others were not even hinted at. And of course now she was relenting on her position and asking for an investigation.

Mouser nestled deeper against the gargoyle’s wings and snuffed out the cigarette against an outstretched clawed paw. It probably would be best to meet them in person as well to access if their mutual pranks weren’t getting too sharp-edged.

Sebastian approached, returning from the urgent delivery, leaning against the wings that sheltered her, looking down, patting her head wordlessly, letting her become aware of his presence before turning his attention to the windows of the Red Dorm. Mouser folded the letter and turned, crossed arms resting on the gargoyle’s paws, looking the same way.

“Are you not guiding him through the longest path?” She asked softly, discerning a quick shadow in pale night clothes moving through the corridor. Sebastian chuckled. “Either of us could have easily sneaked in and gather what needs to be found. Actually we could have prevented this series of ridiculousness.”

“True. But the Young Master did not ask.” The demon answered after a pause.

“So here we work on a plain request base?” Mouser whispered, chin resting on her arms, glancing back.

“The Young Master did demand for us to be in a «support» role.” Sebastian pointed out.

“Any excuse to be lazy, I guess.” Then she clicked her tongue. “Are you doing this for him to refine his skills or because you are unsure of how effective information gathered by more underhanded and inhuman means would work as proof?”

“A bit of the three I can admit. Also it will strengthen the Young Master’s position if he can plainly point out and offer testimony from witnesses and victims, as well as take credit for every step of the investigation to clear his own name.”

“And we are still not being that bothered for the time being.” She pulled out another cigarette. “I like it.”
They were expecting some pomp. Maybe some sort of drama and panache. Some fuss on the staff’s part- They were not expecting a small parade of colour and sound, fluttering banners, bells, dancers, and horns surrounding a decorated elephant carrying a fancy howdah. The spectacle occurred right after breakfast and fag time, as the students headed for the morning classes. Which mean most of the student body was there to witness the moment, uttering appropriate words of awe, shock, confusion and calling the peers to see the odd show.

Prince Soma peeked from the decorated howdah, leaning out for a better view, showing the uniform for all to see, increasing the din of voices, squinting at first. Then his usual enthusiasm caught up, easing his expression into a grin.

“Oh! So this is a school! It’s pretty big. About as big as my palace in India.” His excited words were loud enough to be heard over the jingle of the bells, the elephant’s steps and the general commotion. That finally made the students around associate the spectacle with the new student announced the day before.

“So that’s an Indian prince...” some said.

“It’s the first time I’ve seen an elephant.” Most agreed on that point specifically and with much more interest that the royal presence.

“He got into the Red House without a hitch...” the boyo’s smile was a bit strained but still he was pleased by the unfolding of those events triggered by his need of an ally. “I guess the kind of breeding and wealth of the Indian royalty is nothing short of impressive.”

“Be that as it may I did not expect him to come to school on an elephant.” Sebastian answered, divided between dismay, satisfaction and simple strained thoughts of hopelessness.

“Where did he get the elephant?” Mouser asked, befuddled, looking up, one gloved hand waving away a sudden shower of brightly coloured petals.

“Is that your main concern?” Sebastian grinned, looking down. A deliberate smile took over the thief’s lips, tugging them slyly apart.

“If he bought it from that circus it might have a grudge against the boyo too.” She teased, turning away. “Call me in the event of a stampede.”

Sebastian chuckled, covering his mouth.

“Ciel!!” Soma spotted him amidst the crowd, shouting his name cheerfully, waving frantically, leaning over the decorated edge of the elephant carried box. “I’m here! I was so surprised when you sent that letter.”

That idiot. Ciel huffed, stomping away, trying to keep the pretence that he had originally planned. I clearly told him to act as if he did not know me.

Uninterested or uncaring Soma continued his pestering. Loudly.

“I would have come if you just had told me you were lonely by yourself.” Even as he hurried away Ciel had to combat the sudden urge to counter that statement as snippily as possible. “Cieeeeel hey! Are you listening?” Soma pouted and snapped his fingers. The servant tapped the elephant’s head,
prompting it to extend its trunk, seizing his mark. “I came all this way so let’s go together.” The prince announced, smiling openly as Ciel squirmed, half spooked, mostly angered.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” He shouted, torn between keeping his hands on the trunk for stability or pushing it away, be free and fall down from a considerable height and most likely break something because demons were laughing nearby. “You bastard! Put me down immediately! If not sooner!” And they were also walking away without acknowledgement or intent to get into the scene. “I knew I shouldn’t have called you here!” Ciel shouted in complaint before being dropped into the howdah, immediately gripping the wooden edges of the box, steadying himself.

“You look better than I though.” Soma settled back into the plush interior, legs crossed, unaffected by the swaying and the commotion that still rang around the elephant. “It was hard because Agni wanted to come with me but apparently, according to the rules, servants are not allowed.”

“Yes, normally you can’t... it’s just common sense...” Ciel mumbled back in a semi-polite response to that particular inquire. “In any case I called you here for a reason.” If there was no other choice but to publicly acknowledge a prior connection then so be it. What he needed was to get the informant in place with a story that would not be doubted and in a way that would keep his loyalty to him firm. “I had a quarrel with a senior from the Red House, the dormitory where you are going to.” Even with all the rumours and harassing that was the simplest explanation and the hardest to disprove. “As you know I don’t have many friends so I don’t really know how to make peace with someone.” Ciel looked away, taking care to show a vulnerable, sorrowful face to trigger Soma’s natural gullible state. “So I’d like your help with this.” It worked to the point where the Indian prince was moved to tears.

“I understand.” The prince stated happily, hands on Ciel’s shoulders in a firm grip of solidarity and earnestness. “And I’ll lend you a hand seeing you are so gloomy and meek.” It was a bit hard to keep his face from defaulting into a lemony frown but Ciel managed to just grumble his annoyance as Soma continued to prattle cheerily. “I’m so glad you realized it...” Soma sat back and thought for a moment before starting the suggestions. “How about eating some curry together?”

“No, I can’t.” Ciel shook his head. Maybe saying become friends or make peace was the wrong thing but how else could he make Soma spy without his knowledge...?

“Yes?” Soma tilted his head, a hint of suspicion showing.

“It seems he got so angry he doesn’t even want to see me.” Ciel shrugged. “I want to get to know him better before I try to smooth thing over again.” Then he moved on to the instructions. “Observe Maurice Cole carefully and tell me all about him. I’m especially interested in knowing what he does inside the red house since I cannot go in there myself. I want to know anything and everything, understand? And this is to be kept secret.” Ciel jabbed his index finger at him, almost scolding.

“Right. A secret. As your best friend you can leave this to me.” Soma smiled proudly, poking fingers in a promise, playing around.

“I am counting on you...” Ciel gurgled, the swaying still getting to him.

And so Soma started operation «pester». Not that the prince saw his interference as such as he marched into the study hall of the Red House, sights set on Maurice Cole.
“Hey, you. Be friendlier to Ciel.” Regally he demanded.

“Huh?” Caught by surprise it took Cole a few moments to react. “He disrespected the prefects. As a fag I can’t forgive something like that.” The statement was haughty and accompanied by a masterful use of the hair flick.

Irked Soma watched the other student leave.

He would not be deterred by that.

“Hey do you really not want to?” Soma persisted, approaching. Cole lengthened his stride. “He has got some good points as well.” The prince insisted, speeding up as well. “You should talk to him.” He pressed the issue as dinner was served. “Hey.” Soma followed into the room. “Hi.” First thing in the morning. “Hello.” While on the loo. “God morrow.” In the classroom. “Oi.” In the busy dorm corridors, all in hopes of getting a positive response.

“Ah! What is your problem! Stay away from me!” The target snapped, stormed off, slamming his room’s door on the prince’s face.

All in all it took Soma one day and a half to make Cole break his polished façade in front of two other students with a loud shout, a face distorted by rage, mussing hair with desperate, irate hands and an unflattering retreat. Soma stood in the corridor, his approach cut off by the wooden door. Puzzled the prince looked around before sighing.

“He rather reminds me of Ciel...” The prince appraised, slightly discouraged before perking up. “Well... I do have some free time so I’ll go for a visit.” With that course of action in mind Soma headed towards the stables where his elephant was being kept. Nimbly, used to the animal, he hopped onto its back, patting the big head. “Let’s go elephant. The blue house is a bit far.” The elephant huffed, shuffling as if it was agreeing, turning slowly. Then a sudden rustle in the nearby bushes startled man and beast. “What was that!” Soma shouted, looking around. Being from India meant that both believed that a sound in the bush meant tiger. So the panicked elephant trumpeted, panicking, stomping in the wrong direction in a hurry. “Ahhh! Don’t go that way! Stop!” Soma shouted, grabbing the animal, trying to stay on.

“Ah it’s finally quiet...” Maurice Cole complained, leaning against the window of the corridor, conversing with two other students, unaware of the fast approaching elephant. “what...” That calm did not last long, the rumble of the fast approaching animal making the ground shake, noise echoing in the night as the Prince clung on to the beast’s ears for dear life. “No way!” Cole shouted, eyes widening as the scene unfolded in front of him, the crash rattling the whole building.

The aftermath were several wrecked senior’s rooms collapsed walls, precarious ceilings and destroyed furniture and a weeping elephant cowering under the trees. Redmond sighed, covering his face to hide a grimace.

“You get 5 Ys Kadar. And I’ll petition to forbid elephants in the school grounds.” The prefect announced his decision, trying to keep his judgement clear.

“Sorry about that...” Soma said with a small chuckle and an expression of pure innocence.
“You should be asking for forgiveness!” Cole shrieked, beyond incensed. However his disapproval had no effect on the Prince’s outlook.

“This is a problem though.” Dejected the Prefect turned to more practical matters, such as relocating the handful of students that no longer had a place to sleep. “We don’t have any extra rooms at the moment…” He turned to his fag. “do you want to stay in mine for a while?”

Cole’s expression lit up. And then broke into disappointment as Soma interfered.

“No. You can use my bed.” The responsible prince offered.

“What are you saying?” Cole tuned into a badly disguised rage. “Why should I use your bed when…”

“I’m a man that takes his responsibilities seriously.” Soma continued, oblivious to the other boys growing tempestuous mood.

“That sounds fair Kadar.” Redmond behaved likewise, approving the prince’s behavioural code with a nod, bidding his fag goodnight as Cole shrieked the prefect’s name in dismay as Soma dragged him towards the common rooms.

“Good. I’ll show you the place. Use this bed.” As Indian hospitality dictated the prince offered his own bed, making a makeshift bundle of covers and pillows on the floor. His sleep was interrupted when the guy he was supposed to find things about shifted and got out of bed quietly. “Hun?” sleepily but keeping his mission in mind Soma followed, as quietly as possible. What? Where is he going in the middle of the night. The wooden flooring was cold and all was quiet. The letter boxes? He... Soma watched, his attention sharpening, the drowsiness fading, taking note of the pretty cards left on the wooden and labelled openings meant for correspondence.

“Welcome Lord Soma.” When the door of the chapel’s side room was opened Soma froze, staring at Ciel’s butler, feeling a rising panic. “The young master is waiting for you inside.” The man informed him, smiling, making way. Fidgeting the prince entered, finding Ciel waiting by the window.

“I thought we couldn’t bring servants in here!” he squeaked out as the door was closed.

“I had no choice.” Ciel stated grimly.

Soma froze when he noticed the butler standing near his back, smiling, a menacing presence approaching.

“Lord Soma please keep the fact that I am the Young Master’s butler a secret. Otherwise I’ll have to...”

“No. I’ll keep a secret…” his voice came out fast high and panicked.

The door creaked open again.

“I saw the stampede damage.” Mouser walked in chirply. Soma jumped again, startled. “Good Morning Prince Soma.”

Ciel groaned.
“So did you find anything.” The boyo demanded. That meeting had been made to Soma’s request. He had been a bit sceptical but it would do him no good to ignore what he had asked for.

“Yes, actually.” Soma took a breath, calming down. “At night he secretly sends flower-shaped cards to students of his dormitory.” His hands moved, making a slightly circular shape. “About this big. Lots and lots of them.”

“Cards?” Sebastian whispered. The boyo frowned. Mouser clicked her tongue. Easy to dispose of although ideally someone doing something on the sly should make sure they left as little trail as possible.

“He must be shy.” Soma shrugged. “Why else wouldn’t he just talk to them?” Innocent suggestion but it was not like the prince knew what was happening.

“We might finally get some evidence.” Sebastian suggested, smiling.

“Now all we have to think how to make up...” the boyo said with a black expression.

“Oh... about that. Also he...” Soma perked up and divulged another piece of information, leaving a shocked boyo, a black faced Sebastian and a Mouser in stitches.

“Young Master...” Sebastian muttered in a faint voice.

“It seems we have all the pieces.” Ciel nodded with a grin, smiling softly towards Soma, returning to the good student demeanour. “Thank you. You were a great help.” He told Soma who glowed happily with the praise.

“See you. Call me anytime you hear!” the Prince laughed and walked away.

“Let’s plan our strategy then...” the boyo said quietly, arms crossed, his voice slowing down. “Drop the scissors.” Mouser boooed sadly, pouting, hiding the item in the dress. Sebastian nodded in acknowledgement. “We will settle this matter tomorrow.”

Which meant they would have a long work day and night ahead.
Chapter 115

The 3rd art room was the place chosen for the confrontation.

The rooms dedicated to the arts and music shared a wing, slightly apart from the main building, from the classrooms, the study areas and the library. It was meant to be an area where the ones that were adept at arts could practice undisturbed and without perturbing the other parts of school life. As most of those were from the purple house it also served to further mark them as oddities. Most of the windows of that area had a view to the greenery that lead to the artificial lake within the grounds. To calm the mind and inspire, so to speak.

Maurice Cole did come. His ego and caution would permit no less.

“So, what do you want?” he asked, head tilting looking perfectly composed, his expression sardonic. “Why did you call me here? I have to go to the swan gazebo.” It was an unsubtle remark regarding their hierarchical difference within the school. For those who cared about such trite nonsense it would be a devastating comment.

“I won’t take much of your time.” With deliberate politeness Ciel sidestepped the quip without further comment. “I just wanted to make sure of something.” Cole’s eyes narrowed slightly, annoyed at being ignored, mistrustful of his intent. “Cole.” Addressing him by name created a bit of aggression without crossing the boundaries of etiquette. “I am rather sure the message to me was incorrect the other day.” The words were out, sharp, crisp and without any way to be misunderstood.

“Why do you say so?” Cole adopted a confused expression, masking. “You shouldn’t blame other people.” Then he tried to flip the blame, trying to shatter his confidence through the guilt created by the implication of weakness. Ciel simply continued, letting him know such petty intimidation only worked on those who gave a damn.

“My friend asked the other classmates who were listening.” That made Cole hesitate, eyes widening behind the bored façade. A small smug smile tugged at his lips as he continued. The flow of the story had to be kept thought and flowing. “You know of your own popularity as the prettiest boy in school. There were a good amount of bystanders basking in the appearance of such a person.” Cornered by his own reputation. But someone like Cole would be used to avoid such allegations. So he had to truly trap him. “And, by the way, 18 people testified that you mistakenly said 4 o’clock.” Another net, another layer to pressure the fag. “Well...” Ciel made a slight pause for effect, watching his opponent’s agitation. “It is not exactly accurate to say mistakenly is it? It was quite purposeful, after all.”

“You are just blatantly accusing me.” It seemed Cole was actually unused to a confrontation where is opponent did not back down after a few cutting remarks. His retort was rather weak.

“That so?” derision was a good way to exploit his clear unease. Time to continue. “Then how about Johan Harcourt and other four people?”

“What?” A name and a number made Cole’s expression harden. He was starting to see the true threat.

“Students who were invited to the gazebo. All failed to show or appeared at the wrong time. All of them saying you gave them the wrong information.” The implication could not be clearer. Cole was angry but uncaring. “You are a prefect’s fag. Yet you look down on those who are unable to
protect themselves from accusations. That is cruel and unfair, the actions of a cowardly liar.” Now came the key point of the confrontation. “And not only that. You use other people to do your job as a fag.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.” Cole stated with a huff and a frown, looking away in disdain.

“The data Redmond asked for. Polishing the shoes. Making deserts. None of that is your doing. All the skills you boast about are fake.” Ciel pressed the issue with the recent findings. He needed a bit more of denial to make the final blow all the more devastating.

“That is some imagination. You don’t even have evidence.” Cole dismissing the claims with a hand wave, eyes empty.

“I do.” Ciel stated simply, pulling out a restored rose card from his jacket, showing it clearly.

“That... that is...” Cole shrieked suddenly, losing his calm, stepping back in shock.

“Do you recognize this?” Phantomhive asked softly, his voice sweet as poison. “You should. After all these are the cards you use to request the tasks you need done.” One boy one he produced more roses, listing the contents penned in the back. “This is data request. This is ironing. Polishing. For the red house chef to prepare the soufflé.” He paused with a sigh before retrieving the whole bundle. “And many, many more. They even come with dates, times, deadlines... all in your handwriting.” As he stated that the notes fell on the floor with soft thuds, spreading at their feet.

“I told them to dispose of those.” Cole hissed, cornered, frantic

“They did.” Ciel nodded, smiling. “Luckily they had not been collected them. I had a hard time to collect all these tiny pieces of paper amidst the school’s garbage and it took a long time to piece them up together again.”

All that was wasted in the school ended up in a barren, hidden terrain near an artificial pier so the garbage barge could slip in and carry the trash away so the heath and the wind did not bother the wealthy. It was a very familiar scent although it lacked some of the east end touches like a rotting cadaver or two.

What they needed to find in the darkness were shredded pieces of paper that were no doubt further damaged in those conditions. But as the barge only came once a week the requests they had witnessed until Soma's arrival and his useful reveal of the asking method should still be scattered about.

Sebastian stared grimly at the job they were facing, changing his gloves for a thicker ones, having left the jacket behind, rolling the sleeves slowly, half determined, mostly resigned.

"May I try something?" Mouser asked as they surveyed the task once more, reluctance mounting.

"Of course." Sebastian nodded, accepting the offer.

The thief pulled the mirror she had been working on. A tool for sleuthing, for tracking and hunting. It was a combination of spells, ideas and concepts, an experiment. Along with it she retrieved a piece of one of the card, stuffed into a waste bin in the red house library. After Soma had described its shape and it had been easy to find before it left the house in her most recent visit.
It was unfortunate that the request for procuring high quality tea would be unusable afterwards
but if the spells worked as they should the sacrifice of a piece would be worth it. The surface
shimmered like mercury, engulfing the red-and-white paper. The mirror glowed, held firmly in her
palm, claws folded over the glass. The reaction was almost immediate. Throughout the dark
mountain of trash there were flickers of response pinpointing other cards within her request. The
mirror had been her focus ever since coming into Weston, pouring tracking spells of every kind
into it, fusing several theories and ideas.

Maurice Cole’s handwriting, a single uniting thread in all the week’s requests they were searching.
The ink could be different and the paper thinner or thicker but the hand that had penned the words
was always the same, hence recognizable. Not all those clusters would be cards but it would spare
Sebastian from a time consuming mining work.

Time was important if they wanted to be ready by the time the boyo had set.

“I can try to pluck them out.” Mouser suggested, smugly. The thief moved, extending her free arm,
claws pointing upward, startled when Sebastian took her hand into his, curling his finger around
hers, pulling it down gently.

“No need. It’s enough to be able to pinpoint them at a glance.” Sebastian moved, starting the
gathering of evidence.

“Worrywart.” Mouser teased, watching as the papers piled within the basket, keeping the focus
steady in the mirror and their goals. “I will not bleed out every time I practice a new skill.”

Sebastian returned to his office with the loot. Mouser made a small detour to gather the repair
supplies, namely glue. They had managed to complete the task in a fraction of the time.

The restoration process was a bit simpler even if involved tweezers and a small brush. The boyo
snored quietly in the chair, his presence under the pretence of tutoring making sure they would not
be disturbed.

Matching the notes as a puzzle was something Sebastian was doing quickly and with little difficulty
despite his heavy frown. If their bets were correct there should be around 100 or so requests unless
he had regulars for some of the cyclical tasks. It was taking him five minutes per card so it should
be done in time.

Mouse checked the clock, poking the boyo. Curfew was about to start so all the boys should be
getting ready to bed.

“What would Redmond think of this?” Ciel pressed the issue, staring to raise his voice. “As a
student of a prestigious school aren’t you ashamed?!” His tone softened, as if calming down,
looking straight ahead, ignoring the tempestuous look brewing on Cole’s face. “I will forget that
you deceived us but you have to be honest with Redmond. Fags should be trustworthy brothers,
right?” he offered a way out, appealing to the idealistic traditions that ruled the place.

“Yes, I’ll tell him….” Cole began to whisper, hands fistng, trembling, looking up with an ugly
expression of rage and contempt. “The fuck. I’ll tell him absolutely nothing! No way anyone
bloody would.” Cole snapped his fingers. The door burst open, three upper years entering, two
grabbing and subduing Ciel. The other one gathered the cards, offering them to Cole along with a
box of matches. “You did not think I would have come unprepared. Are you stupid?” Cole spoke
up smugly, lighting a match with a dry dragging sound, burning the cards, tossing the burning pieces to the floor. “And like so there is no more evidence. Too bad for your efforts.” Cole yanked the immobilized Ciel by his tie, teeth gritting, glaring. “Your attitude pisses me off. You are getting uppity simply because the seniors have taken a shine to you.” He pushed him back, standing tall, smugly, preening. “Making use of other people is a talent too. I am simply skilled at making use of otherwise average people. And it is rather easy seeing I am the most beautiful in school.” His expression turned determined and grim. “Your life changes greatly if you are able to become a prefect in this school. It will assure your future.” His lips parted in a grimace, tsking in annoyance. “Do you know how much I worked and flattered them to be where I am now?” The gruge spilled out easily. The other three boys seemed unaffected, either agreeing or in too deep themselves, behaviours excused by Cole’s influence. “You are already a winner. You can never understand the feelings of a younger son who will never inherit a title.”

“I believe that winning by cheating has no value.” Ciel lied calmly, deliberately feeding the rancour.

“That good boy act is getting on my nerves!” Cole shouted pulling out a pair of scissors from his coat. A tic snapped in Ciel’s jaw, holding back the need to tell him to drop the scissors in a kneejerk reaction. “I’ll become the next prefect of the red house and Redmond will like me more than anyone else! I am, after all the most beautiful in this school.” Maurice Cole shouted his ambition scissor cutting through Ciel’s shirt.

“What are you...” Ciel began before his words were cut short by a kick on his stomach, the impact choking him, bringing pained tears to his eye.

“It was rather stupid to call me to such a deserted place.” Maurice continued, engrossed in his rant, waiting as his aides set up a camera. “No one will come to save you.” His smug tone grew as Ciel wheezed and coughed, trying to breathe once more. “Now then, time to take some pictures.” The closed blades stroked his chest, an unpleasant cold feeling that made the boy twitch “The kind of pictures that will make you want to die of shame. Go on.” Cole stepped back, snapping his fingers again, signalling the other students. “Do it.”

Laughing, still pinning him down the other boys started to rip the uniform away from his body, silencing him.

“No! Please stop!” freed amidst the struggle Ciel managed to scream, twisting, panicking.

Wood cracked and the door was slammed open, banging against the wall hard enough to indent both the doorknob and the plaster. Dripping with avenging righteousness Greenhill and Edward burst through, ready to defend, announcing their presence with almost perfect synchronicity.

“What the hell is this!?”

It took just one glance around to understand exactly what was happening within the art room. The three blokes froze, confused. Cole’s expression became panicked. Greenhill advanced grimly, wielding his cricket bat as a weapon, striking the miscreants down. Cole went limp, frightened as the Green house Prefect stood, glaring, approaching.

“I swore to never again use violence. You made me break my vow, Cole.” Greenhill stated that truth in anger and indignation, stopping, waiting.

“Please, Greenhill don’t tell Redmond!” true to his nature and desires Cole turned to pleading when facing an individual he could not bribe, intimidate or sweep away.
“Shouldn’t you be asking the same from us?” Another voice came from the gaping entrance.

“Bluer... Violet...” Cole whispered, watching as his situation degenerated staring to despair, confused. “Why are you here?” he whispered, voice cracking.

“After hearing that the skilled and brilliant Maurice Cole was about to commit an act of violence anyone would come running.” Ciel answered, aided by Edward, standing and closing his shirt as best he could.

“But the swan gazebo is far from here. There is no way my voice would be loud enough...” Cole muttered, unravelling, looking around in confusion.

“Well, sound isn’t transmitted by its volume but by vibrations. As long as you can transmit those vibrations in theory the sound will travel as far as you need it to. For example taking a perfectly tense thread and connecting it to a flat surface... like so.” Ciel explained the science carefully before pulling a picture out of its easel, turning it, revealing a thin, taut thread, a smile spreading on his features now that was his time to turn the tables.

"Kneel down, wag your tail and beg.” Mouser said dryly.

The boyo looked up, quizzically, as they discussed the best way to make an engineered confession reach those who needed to hear it. The trick was in getting the prefects, who did not want to see or hear what Ciel had to say after his reputation had been shattered, to agree to his presence and request.

The technical aspect was simple and resolved. Sebastian had left to prepare the room, the threads and the horns.

"Ask Edward." Mouser elaborated. "Play the family card, use Lizzy to get his attention, mention the rumours and the other wronged boys. Make them doubt by adding up every misstep Cole made."

"Should I look teary?” Ciel mocked, knowing that those trumps would wield the best result in the current situation, standing and going to them. The sooner he had permission the better it would look.

“No way!” Cole’s voice trembled, the words clearly heard in the Swan Gazebo through the use of gramofone brass horns. Redmond lowered his head with a small sigh, resigned, eyes closing in sadness before straightening, steeling his will. A decision had to be made.

“I listened to everything.” Redmond stated, his voice formal and cold, adopting the noble bearing his house was known for, ready to do what he should. “Even you betrayed me. I am ashamed at my inability to judge people.” Coldly he ignored the pleas being transmitted, echoing around him. “No excuses. You disappointed me. I hereby cancel our brotherly relationship.”

Cole broke down, shouting and weeping.

Ciel took the moment to cement a nice reputation while striking the next blow, taking out his handkerchief, approaching the sobbing boy, crouching down.
“Cole if you start behaving honestly I’m sure you will be able to win everyone’s respect and trust.” He advised sweetly, extending an helping hand while prefects and Edward left.

“Phantomhive...” for a bewildered moment Cole took it at face value before noticing the decidedly tricky smile.

“So I though...” Ciel continued, parting the edged of the handkerchief slightly, showing the shiny surface of a picture. “I’d start by showing everyone your real face.”

Sebastian heard the signal and began to let the pictures fall from the tall bell tower, smiling slightly as the shock started to spread. It should be almost done.

In a low shocked screech Cole was left behind, shocked, secrets laid bare, finally understanding he had tried to outplay someone who should not be messed with.

“You should be proud. You definitively have skills with make-up.” Ciel mocked with deserved praise as he left.

“Night routine.” Mouser set the freshly developed pile on the desk. “Morning routine.” She placed the second batch next to the first. Ambushing a boy through a window to take compromising pictures had been ridiculously easy. It was made funnier by the double effect of ugly provided by the mirror. While normal people would have been deterred by locks and rules such things became meaningless to some. Sebastian smiled, amused by what he saw. The boyo stared, torn between feeling amused and confused. “Choose which one looks worse.” the thief encouraged.

As Ciel stepped out Edward was the first to assume his blame out of the group that had rushed to his rescue.

“Ciel... I’m sorry for blaming you unjustly. Please forgive me.” A bow and an apology. Time to look magnanimous and humble.

“No.” Ciel shook his head. “No matter the reason I was indeed late. You don’t have to apologise Edward.” So he took a fault that was not his in order to advance. The smiles of the prefects told him it was the right course to advance.

“I really didn’t think you were such an active person.” Greenhill praised with a stiff nod, expression softer than he had ever seen. He exchanged an approving nod with Edward. “I can see why Midford would acknowledge you.”

“You are really interesting.” Violet murmured, relieved of his usual ennui.

“You were brave Phantomhive.” Bluer was the strangest smile present, ruffling Ciel’s hair in brotherly approval.
“Thank you.” Ciel answered, grabbing his chance with both hands, reiterating the lie that had enabled him to set the trap. “I couldn’t really stand the thought of other people being deceived and suffering…” Smiling widely Ciel faced the group. “I’ve always been against injustice.” He drove the lie deeper.

“You follow the traditions, you don’t lie and are pure and noble. A model student of this school.” Greenhill approved as they walked away to clear Ciel’s name.

Sebastian groaned, bored, covering Mouser’s mouth as she laughed, keeping their position on the rooftop from being discovered.
Chapter 116

With such emphasis in tradition and ceremony it was no wonder that the church grounds were the place chosen to request and swear allegiance to keep the fag practice going. Clayton’s voice echoed solemnly in the stone as he recited the pledge, belief feeding them, pausing, waiting for Ciel to copy the statements dutifully.

“You will never betray me and always be moderate. Let us swear to St. George that we will maintain a brotherly relationship that benefits each other until the day we leave this school. I request that you become my fag, Ciel Phantomhive.” Clayton concluded the request, offering the dorm flower, exclusive to the prefects and those that they chose to have a bond with.

“I humbly accept.” Ciel bowed formally, taking the flower that crowned his efforts, placing it in his breast pocket, smiling slightly as the bells rung and the birds that had taken shelter in the tower flew away, perturbed.

Sebastian smiled, watching, listening to the progress, satisfied. Mouser bobbed her legs off the parapet, looking down, watching the lawns.

“He should get that written in blood, with the Phantomhive crest, the Queen’s approval and maybe ransom Lizzy.” She considered, clicking her tongue.

“No soul on the line?” Sebastian teased.

“I am giving you exclusivity in that area.” She teased back.

Cheers and chatter filled the patio as the boyo emerged from the church bearing a new status, classmates from the blue house swarming and congratulating him.

“There he is!” someone yelled as they approached.

“So wonderful Phantomhive! It’s incredible, just incredible!” McMillan shouted, too close.

“Congratulations!” another said.

“You really got the dorm flower!” Someone poked his sided as they patted his back and stared at the status symbol. Stammering in the middle of the crowd Ciel tried to move only to be followed by chattering students.

“Oh!” A muffled voice from the inside.

“Hum?” Soma answered, attention caught.

“That’s the guy that entered the P4 circle right after coming to this school. He’s got a nice following.” The senior student mentioned with some surprise and admiration, staring.

And amidst the commotion one of the classroom windows was shoved open and Soma’s head popped out, his voice joining the storm.

“You got quite popular! I’m so happy a gloomy guy like you could make friends!” the prince called out cheerfully, furthering the boyo’s embarrassment.
“I suddenly feel like some opera singer.” The boyo complained, plopping down on the armchair with a groan, looking utterly spent, deflating in a long sigh. Books and study materials were scattered on the desk, forgotten. Now they could focus on the true task at hand. If only he didn’t feel too tired to actually do something about it right away.

“It’s because your performance was quite remarkable lately, Young Master.” Sebastian answered with a chuckle, picking up the discarded tailcoat, dusting, straightening and hanging it, smiling brightly, turning.” How about pursuing a career in acting?” He suggested with a sparkling look, mockery beneath the words.

“That was sarcasm wasn’t it?” The boyo groaned, sour-faced, gnashing his teeth, prickled into attention.

“Of course not.” Sebastian continued chirpily. “I am sincerely praising you.” He assured the boyo. Mouser huffed from her corner, laughing quietly while inscribing tin circles, no bigger than her pinkie’s nail, with a penknife.

“You are only making it worse!” Ciel bristled, annoyance taking the place of slothfulness as he sat up straighter.

“Also you’d need a few more lovers to get the status.” The thief mentioned, placing another finished whatever on the growing piles. They seemed to be divided into categories for some reason.

Sebastian chucked as the Young Master produced a disgusted noise

“At the same time you were able to get rid of a nuisance like Maurice Cole and reach the position you were aiming for. I believe your plan is going well.” Sebastian diverted the matters now that the young master had been prodded away from his laziness.

“But the final goal is still far away.” The boyo drifted into a serious tone, staring ahead. “The queen’s orders were to find the reason as to why Derrick and other students stopped contacting their families and going home for holidays.” He paused, grimacing. “However...”

“We haven’t even seen them yet. Not one of them. Which is definitively suspicious.” Sebastian completed with a nod. Even with their attentions diverted it should not be that difficult to catch a glimpse of someone in a closed community.

“We took on these roles as a way to maximize the probabilities of seeing them.” Mouser placed her small blade down. “And not even when loitering in the purple house have I caught any hint of those that supposedly are there. Not even when I make sure to arrive just before breakfast is served and stay through the meal.” She frowned again. Were they not eating or were just abusing their fags and having breakfast brought to them? If they were still there... the thief opened a drawer and retrieved writing materials, making a note to contact the garbage barge, see if there had been any young rotting corpses moved from the refuse lately.

“I even though about forcing their return but the Queen asked to investigate the reasons.” Once more the words of the request were the point of the mission and the boyo was not feeling too keen in disregarding them once more. “She probably... no. She definitively thinks they are not being rebellious. She must believe something serious is going on in this school.” And that was why they were moving at such a slow, cautious, bothersome, respectful pace. “But this place is bound by its rules. I can’t even investigate normally. It’s like being a prisoner.” The boyo complained once again, arms thrown up in a stretch.
“Isn’t that the very reason why you are attempting to get closer to the ones that make the rules?” Sebastian said, pouring the tea that had been steeping. “In a much more peaceful way than usual I must say.”

“Yes.” Ciel groaned, taking the cup, staring grimly at the tea before sipping. “But I’m still just the fag of a prefect’s fag.” As status went it was above than regular but below their needs. “I can’t take part in the midnight tea party organized by the principal.”

“And if you can’t meet the man there are other ways of getting proof.” Mouser mentioned.

“I believe the Young Master has not reached that level of frustration yet.” Sebastian smiled, leaning against the desk. “But it seems there is still a long way to go.”

“I want to go home and have a long warm bath.” The boyo complained, glaring. “Here I always have to go last and hurry because of the brand on my back...” with a sigh he returned to the task at hand, knowing they should at least have the next few steps planned out. “Anyway I was finally able to get into the P4 circle. Now is the time to search for information about Derrick.”

“Yes.” Sebastian agreed. “The person who is most likely to know anything is the one in charge of the dormitory he was transferred to.” The demon supplied his opinion objectively.

Ciel nodded in agreement, getting up when the bell rang for curfew, leaving.

Mouser grinned, returning to her rune crafting.

“I’ll give him two setbacks and three days.” She placed the bet while inscribing a low grade explosive design.

“Four setbacks and two weeks.” Sebastian countered.
“Violet!” Greenhill grunted in a strained, wheezing voice, as he tried to keep an overly tangled bridge pose weighted down by his own cricket bat. “How long do I have to maintain this pose!”

Looking up slowly from the drawing board and papers balanced against his bent knees violet looked up slowly, blankly, blinking a few times as if refocusing.

“Don’t move until I have finished drawing.” He finally answered, head bobbing down once more.

“But when is that!” Greenhill shrieked in desperation.

Take away all the rumours and awe that surrounded the swan gazebo and the P4 and it became rather obvious that there was no difference in the essence of what transpired from any other social event or tea party. The ones with higher status sat down and talked about whatever captured their interests, the subjects there having ties with school events and responsibilities, while sampling tea and cakes. The fags stood about, ready to serve and talk on request. And while Redmond laughed Ciel was having a bit of trouble keeping his expression from showing mirth. The fags were expected to behave. And he had gone through too much trouble to just destroy his chances before truly investigating.

“Well in the end that is a kind of training, no?” Redmond poked fun at the scene, smiling. “Every year when we get close to June 4th the students of the green house start to get restless. It will be good for you to stay quiet for a while.”

“Same for the red house.” Greenhill wobbled, groaning, struggling to keep his balance.

“Every time we get close to June 4th students’ notes get worse because they’re anxious.” Bluer stated matter-of-factly, grimly, looking up from his book.

“Um... what happens on June 4th?” as they kept bringing up the date like some sort of major moment so Ciel felt the need to ask before his lack of knowledge interfered further with his goals.

“There’s the Dormitories Cricket Tournament.” Harcourt answered. As one of the wronged by Cole he had been asked to become Redmond’s fag and showed signs of kinship and gratitude towards Ciel. His disposition was also easy to deal with and having grateful allies was always a plus.

“It’s our school traditional tournament. It has been held for over a century. At least try to remember the school events.” Bluer scolded stiffly. No one else seemed to care that much. After all he was indeed a new student, falling in the school right on exam season. And as school demanded grades would be more important than knowing frivolous events. Even if they were part of that grand tradition they so often bragged about.

“I apologise.” Ciel said softly and politely. I had not planned to stay this long. His thoughts continued to whirr in dismay.

“It’s a grand event that happens once a year. Even the queen watches the boat parade of the winning dormitory from the Windsor palace.” Clayton took on a guidance role, starting the explanation.

“The dormitories have always been very competitive.” Edward added to it, explaining what the
casual remarks being traded about were. “So of course everyone gets tense about this time of the year.”

“Well... I could not care less.” Violet murmured into his paper, slouching deeper into the couch.

“I hate the students of the other dorms. I can’t wait to crush them all.” On the other hand his fag’s combative nature flared in challenge.

“I also dislike that a lot of people come to the school.” Unaffected Violet continued his complaints, charcoal etching scribbles.

“I thought outsiders were not allowed.” Ciel answered, waiting.

“There are two events to celebrate the eve and the end of the tournament. On these two days students are allowed to invite their families and important acquaintances to the school’s dining hall.” Clayton continued.

“On those days women can come too.” Redmond smiled, gesturing dramatically. “Escorting a beautiful lady also shows off your status.”

“Although I have never seen you escort a woman Redmond.” Violet shrugged, appraising his drawing, raising it to get a better light.

“It’s because I don’t like having a fixed partner.” Redmond shrugged, dismissing the claim.

Ciel caught a glance of the picture. It was Redmond, leaning against the wall, disgruntled and bored, while faceless ladies waltzed around him, heedless. It took him a moment before reacting, eyes hopping from picture to Greenhill. He’s making him keep that pose but he is not drawing it at all...

“Are you finished?” Greenhill said through clenched teeth.

“Not yet.” Violet answered, taking the paper out of the clipboard, placing it face down on the tea table, starting another, frowning.

“I always see you walking around with flock of women every year Lawrence.” Redmond was midway through redirecting the conversation.

“Those are not that sort of women!” Bluer closed his book, immediately leaping on the defence.

“I heard that you have a lot of sisters Bluer. Is it so?” Harcourt revealed easily the origin of the reaction, smiling. “I, myself, have two older sisters. How many siblings do you have?”

Bluer paused for a moment, looking grim, answering with a long sigh.

“Three elder sisters and four younger. I am the only male, incidentally.” The prefect finally revealed, sending shivers of dread through Ciel and Harcourt.

“The one sister I have is annoying enough already.” Cheslock groaned.

“My little sister is graceful and sensible. She is never a bother.” Edward stated proudly.

Who is this you are talking about? Ciel grumbled in his head with a disgruntled side-glance towards his cousin before catching sight of Violet’s piece as the artist grumbled that something was lacking in the image of Bluer surrounded by ladies.
“I don’t want them to come but they always insist.” Bluer was complaining as Ciel tried to keep himself from laughing as the unpainted subject once more voiced his strain.

“Violet I can’t keep this up much longer!”

“I’m almost done. Don’t move.” Violet answerer phlegmatically as he discarded the drawing and started on a white page once more.

“By the way Midford’s little sister is your fiancée right?” Redmond changed targets once again, focusing on Ciel, startling him. “Will you invite her?”

Edward immediately cut into the conversation, blocking that line of questioning with a loud denial.

“She is coming but she will be here to cheer for me, not him!” Edward’s highly flustered state only served to further egg Redmond into teasing.

“Well then it will be interesting to see, now won’t it...” he exchanged an amused look with Harcourt, leaning in, leering. “So do tell, how are things progressing between you two? Did you at least kiss?”

“What?” Ciel froze in shock.

“Redmond!” Edward stammered in outrage.

“You are a guy. You can’t just tell us nothing has happened.” Cheslock joined in, pinpointing Ciel’s growing blush.

“Cheslock!” Edward charged in outrage, gripping the other boy by the cloak’s collar, shaking him with tearful eyes. “Lizzy is an angel! She would never do that!” His tone grew steadily shriller. “Do not dare to insult my sister!”

“Don’t bloody cry!” Cheslock shouted back in shock, trying to slip away from the rattling.

*How pointless...* Ignored, Ciel sighed, eyes narrowing. *Closed worlds are all the same.* Empty talk.

“You are getting complacent!” With a commanding roar Greenhill stood up to break the small squabble, startling Ciel into paying attention the surroundings once again. “The events were made to cultivate the spirit of the tournament! Not dance with women! And furthermore...” His spirited competition speech was interrupted by a loaf of French bread to the head.

“I said don’t move.” Violet grumbled.

“What are you doing?” Greenhill turned after recovering from the unbalance.

“It was getting good...” the Purple house prefect sighed. “you have ruined my masterpiece.”

“Sorry.” Quickly the Green Lion House prefect apologised for his mistake.

A quick glance from Ciel’s privileged position revealed a geometric labyrinth construct.

*In the end he didn't even drew the model.* Ciel appraised, bottling a sudden laugh. It would be hard not to see the humour in that as Violet continued to look dismayed and sulky. *As an artist he really is skilled but in terms of personality there is no getting around the fact that he is an odd one.* His laughter died as his mind snapped back into his task. *Normally I’d steer clear of someone such as this but... if he has the information needed I have to act friendly to gather what I can.*
So with a smile and sweet disposition Ciel started to work, grabbing the former conversation to weasel his way into asking about Derrick.

“Violet are you going to dance too?” Seemed a natural inquiry.

“I hate it. Makes my head spin.” Violet chopped the conversational line neatly, biting into the eraser

_End of talk then... I see... Ciel frowned sourly. So I’ll have to change my approach. It’s a bit rough but...

“I’m really looking forward to the 4th,” he smiled brightly, as if influenced by the mood and the event. “but it’s hard to fight against the other houses when you are friends with them.”

“A real friend would not go easy on another in a serious match.” Gentlemanly code of sportsmanship ruled over Greenhill’s responses.

“That is true but I would feel awkward going against Phantomhive.” Harcourt’s answer supported his words with a smile, innocently creating the mood he needed to have to continue.

“Same here Harcourt.” Ciel answered, smiling, readying the stab. “Fighting against the purple house will also be hard since I have a friend there.”

“Was that why you came by that one time?” Cheslock had not forgotten but his suspicion had been drowned. But now with a clear answer in hand he was able to completely let go of it.

“Yes. His name is Derrick Arden.” Casually said. It should be...

Violet was the first to react, charcoal snapping in half. The eyes of the prefects widened, their expressions changing, growing still and frigid, shocked.

“Did you say Derrick?” Violet whispered hoarsely, his hand slipping on the paper,

“The atmosphere between the P4 changed...” they were all focusing on him, the tension

“I believe Derrick Arden is the son of Lord Clemens, isn’t he?” Edward cut in, ignoring the heavy ambience.

“Yes.” Ciel confirmed, glancing around.

“I’d never expect you to be of his acquaintance.” Edward

“I have played him a number of times when I was little.” Entering the easygoing mood, lessening suspicion on his person Ciel nodded, appraising the prefects. The fags are unaffected. But the p4 were immediately startled as soon as I mentioned him... at that point he should at least gage their reaction to the prepared lie. “Derrick wrote to me saying he was in the red house so I was surprised to find out he had been transferred.” Let’s try to press a bit further...

“That was because it took us some time to see his true personality.” Bluer took a deep breath before adjusting his glasses and answering as simply as possible.

“He was even my fag for a while. He was excellent.” Redmond said with little emotion, looking down with hooded eyes.

“Yes, he certainly was talented but...” Greenhill continued, haltingly, looking blank, like a statue.
“He was peculiar.” Violet closed the issue calmly, summing the nature of the subject.

*Peculiar? There was no mention to that in the queen’s letter.*

“I see.” Ciel nodded, waiting for a moment. “The purple house has the reputation of having the students who are wei... who excel at arts. What was his speciality?”

“It is hard to say in detail but most likely...” Bluer was the one who started to supply the answer, closing his book

Four divergent skills came from each Prefect.

“Anyhow it was the principal’s decision to change his house.” Redmond glossed over the event, overlooking Ciel’s confused expression, sprawling on the double sofa.

“There are no mistakes in the principal’s orders.” Greenhill stated, firm in his belief.

Violet’s coloured lips pressed tightly together, hesitation crossing his veiled eyes for a moment, under the shadows of the hood, returning to his drawing.

“The principal’s decisions are absolute.” Bluer stated once again, changing the subject. “By the way about the ceremony on the 4th...”

*This is strange. It may be tradition and all but if even the prefects don’t know the reason... but I can tell just by their behaviour that they are hiding something. No mistake to be made about that. But asking more questions at this moment would be detrimental. I’ll pursue this no further. For now. And a sneaked glance at the paper showed a creature reaching threateningly for his own profile. The Jabberwocky?*
A small sinless community nurturing the minds of the future elite in a traditional, tightly controlled way, presented as idyllic. Not one of them had believed it while preparing and had been proven right by the string of events they had been experiencing.

Vices were unavoidable, whether small and harmless ones or greater and damaging, and every single one of those boys had money and had been bred with arrogance and a latent predisposition to indulge. It was simply a matter of opportunity, availability and maybe a bit or peer pressure here and there.

So where were the weaknesses?

From without they could acquire booze, drugs and whores. Either partaking while sneaking outside of the building, London being just a short walk or a cab hail away, or bringing them in through bribes. There were so many rooms between dorms, classrooms and old buildings that there should be a handful of places that were nests for pampering, kept well hidden and secretive.

From within there was bullying, theft and deception. Cole had been a good example of how to work and conceal a web of influence, taking advantage of all three. So chances were high there could be others piggybacking and twisting the fag system into slave work. Personally Mouser saw no difference. Most likely they had a sort of gentleman’s agreement to either aid and keep a respectful distance. Or a traditional blind eye would suffice. Once back inside maybe she could hunt down both the dens and the victims.

“You look like a lady, little monster.” Baxter said with a laugh, plopping down next to Mouser, pouring two glasses of claret. The pub at daytime was slow and easy. And because it was in the posh part of town in close proximity from the Weston there would be no disturbances or problems. Although the students from the purple house that had sneaked out and had been downing ales in the corner looked a bit concerned about Mouser’s presence.

“And you are the picture of the honest proprietor, old con.” She retorted, downing the good red wine before lighting a cigarette, winking at the students with a grin. They fidgeted and left in a hurry, leaving money behind. Regulars most likely. Maybe if they saw her indulging they could invite her next time. Loosened tongues by alcohol were always good sources of information.

Anthony Baxter was an old smuggler, once part of Jack’s group, allowed to leave after a fight had mangled his left leg. Using the money earned through years of service and keeping in touch he had built a new life as a pub owner for a posh clientele. Now in the relatively calmer information trade he reported to Charlotte’s people. Still looked like a kindly old dog with droopy jowls and kind brown eyes. And, apart from a few executions, he really was a kind old man with pockets full of lemon and honey candies. And booze, a great deal of good booze.

“We get a few.” Baxter shook his head, noticing where she had focused her attention. “Trying a bit of freedom, of mischief. Also the staff tends to come here when not in service. Mostly.” He snorted, shaking his head, tasting the wine. “Then there are the students trying to see how far they can stretch. Some of the older and richer have special permits to leave the school though. Mostly they use the little ones to make the buys” Mouser hummed, eyes narrowing. “I can still spot bruises they don’t want to show.”

Mouser placed the pictures that had been supplied for the case down on the round table, making sure each face was visible. Moving that along…
“Thought these had been caught and punished somehow.” Baxter answered after a long stare, rubbing his lame leg. “They stopped appearing suddenly about half a year ago. Good customers too. Money upfront. Drank themselves stupid. Sometimes called a bint. Took supplies into the building as well, making a few of the other kids carry them. My guess they had their own little operation inside for those who wanted to unwind but were too cowardly to break the curfews.” He plucked Derrick Arden’s picture. “Never seen this one.”

“Or were too self-important to bother with doing their own work. Or kept up a flawless façade.” Mouser continued his line of thought, unsurprised that their mark had not been seen yet again. “Really? Harlots?”

“Rich boys. They start throwing money away early.”

“No... I know. Been using that in my favour for almost a month. Any for these?”

“Always the same girl. Young one. Not too damaged yet. Dead for two months now.”

“Silenced?”

“Pregnant.”

“Ah.” Mouser clicked her tongue. It happened. Possibly she had gone hopeful and opted for blackmail. And got killed. Or desperate and did the deed herself. Perhaps she knew something. “Has anyone stopped coming lately?”

“Mr. Agares. Maybe he got scolded.” Baxter shrugged, pouring. “The man liked his booze.” So he was bribe-sensible and for the easy price of a few pints.

“Seeing he keeps falling down any flight of stairs he finds I don’t think that has stopped.” Mouser agreed. It could be that he got another supplier, someone easier to keep silent. A cook within the school, a subordinate would be the safest bet. “Any scandals, deaths, accidents or... anything really?”

“You’d think but...” Baxter groaned. “Nothing comes out of there.”

The missing boys, but not Derrick, had connections with the clandestine activities that would be against the tradition the prefects kept imposing as standard. Yet there had been that little twist and catch in Redmond’s words when they had exposed Cole. Even you betrayed me. I am ashamed at my inability to judge people. That had made her rethink some details, especially after talking it over with Baxter, voicing her thoughts.

Duke Clemens was related to the Queen. His son would inherit the title and had been bred to behave as such. Meaning that the school system where the benefits he enjoyed at home were treated as meaningless would make him prickly unless he stood at the top, showered with attention and adulation, getting things done for him as usual. Meaning that, while his reasons might have differed, he could have been doing exactly the same as Maurice Cole. And that made her more and more sure he had been dealt with somehow. And to add to the suspicions Charlotte had sent the results of the barge inquiries. When the letters had stopped coming for the family there had been a bit of servant changes at Weston. Maids in charge of cleaning the main buildings, classrooms, common rooms. And when interviewed they looked away and said little. When pushed farther they admitted bribes and cleaning a great deal of blood. So what she could do to speed things along was to find the victims, the ones who got uncomfortable instead of puzzled when asked about Derrick.
Arden. If things moved along the natural chain of events one of them might have been pushed too far and turned on the bullying entity with entirely more force than needed.

And while she was growing more and more convinced about the simple fact that the person they were searching for was dead Mouser also had no intentions to tell the boyo that as Sebastian was still intended on making him sleuth for it. All that could have been avoided if they gathered the people in the school, made a few threats, showed a few bribes and broke a few bones. Fear, greed or pain would make them talk readily enough. That farce was rather pointless all in all unless it was all for the seasoning.

A little walled garden within the walled school was another stop in her wanderings. The only access was a heavy wooden door. Or doing as she did and hop over the towering ivy-covered walls. Mouser looked around, hips sawing her dress as she walked slowly. Flowers, stone slabs for a flat, dirt-free area... Typical private tea garden. But it would not be a den for students. No bottles, no butts. Boys were messy and she had found remnants of vices in the other areas visited. Shoving cigarettes in a vase did not make them or the smell vanish. Shards of glass pushed under carpets or wooden boards did not make them less crunchy underfoot or invisible to the eye.

Oddly enough there was a lingering smell of embalming fluids under the sweetness of the flowers.

With a slight frown the thief tossed a tin circle into the rosebushes. A ward would react within the mirror, letting her know if anyone entered the area. She had been trapping every isolated room thusly. Music rooms, science rooms, cupboards, back of the buildings, classrooms. Fourteen warded rooms so far. In the end it was mimicking how the boyo had trapped Cole in a less flashy and cumbersome way. If anyone entered she would know and, hopefully, would be free to come and take a peek.

Mouser turned away and perched on the wall, startled when the bell started to ring sombrely, signalling that her time of freedom was done. It was time for interrogations.

“Derrick Arden Ma’am?” The first boy she targeted stopped, asked, confused but not spooked. Seemed to want to know how she could possibly be familiar with such a person. The thief smiled, her Teller accusing nothing but a pressing fear of failing the incoming tests, applying the lie, casually showing a letter Sebastian had forged while opening her books and taking notes. Either they knew something or they could reveal themselves as victims.

“Yes. His uncle is in the Society and sent me a letter inquiring about him after I submitted my fist research drafts.” Like the man had just found out she was at Weston and called for a favour. She smiled, head tilting, looking up from the overwrought text. It seemed the Teller could be expanded to pinpoint physical weaknesses as well. But as that implied fighting through glasses she was not sure if she should attempt it or just keep relying on what she knew. Mouser was sure they would just fly out of her nose as soon as she leapt. “It seems he has not come home for Easter and seeing I’m here he wanted me to try to talk some sense into him.”

Stammering, trying to be good and aid the lady, the boy answered with the most unhelpful phrase one could utter in Weston.

“The principal decided…”
Chapter 119

“I thought you wanted to ask something unusual seeing you brought me all the way out here.” Behind the school building, framed by a windowless brick wall and the open windows of an empty classroom on the left and a demon-occupied laboratory to the right. Mouser peeked from the window for a brief moment, undetected, attracted by the ward’s call before leaving. It was good it was working but that was not the kind of meetings she wanted to see. Even though that seeing the boyo doing some of his own inquiry work was a good change of pace. Edward spoke up, swinging his cricket bat, doing warmups. It was almost time for his year’s practice time and with the 4th approaching he should set an example of diligence. Ciel stared at his preparations without any particular interest. “But it’s about Arden again? I didn’t think you were the type to be concerned about other people.”

“I just can’t understand.” Ciel began in a freer voice than he had been using at the gazebo, a bit more comfortable with someone he knew and whose reactions were a bit easier to predict. “The dorms are so hostile towards each other and so for someone to just transfer it seems odd.”

“You may say that but it wasn’t just Derrick who transferred.” Edward said it casually, bat swinging, shrugging.

“What?” They had been searching for missing students, knowing there were others but transferred as well… it was… it made a significant difference. They had been focusing on Derrick because that was the target the queen requested… what if it was easier to reach him using the other boys?

“I don’t know much about other dorms.” Edward stopped his training for a moment, taking a deep breath, readjusting his weight. “But I’m pretty sure that some other students from the red house were transferred to the purple house at the same time.”

“What are their names?” Ciel pounced on that information, demanding fast.

“I just said I don’t know much about them.” Edward was startled into raising his voice slightly.

“Why were they all transferred at once?” attempting to calm down and pry something, anything more from Edward, Ciel lowered his tone and tried to appear sombre. “Did they cause some sort of trouble?” And if they did how easy was it to find the trails…

“I haven’t heard anything like that.” Edward shook his head, focusing once more on the bat. “But the principal decided on it.” He closed the matter as everyone else in that school did.

“I see.” So even Edward is like that. Taking things at face-value, trusting those with authority. For someone who would become the leader of the British knights it was slightly worrisome. But then again Ciel Phantomhive also rarely questioned the motives of the Queen that ordered him to act. Not that he was one to notice his own flaws. “Sorry to trouble you then. Thanks.” He turned to leave.

“Ciel...” Edward called, gripping his hand, approaching, lowering his voice to a secretive whisper. “What did you come to this school for? Could it be that, as the Queen’s...”

Instinctively Ciel’s eyes widened, surprised. But then he controlled his reactions and slapped Edward’s hand away, smiling smugly, turning away.

“It’s none of your concern. See you.”
“Yes, Gleason, Hardy, Isaac and Thewlis.” The starry-eyed and prefect obsessed McMillan always seemed to just know what he needed. It was disconcerting to the point Ciel believed he should have just asked him in the first place and pried deeper sooner without concerning himself with the petty traditions and rivalries and the discomfort of not fitting in that had been pinning him since arrival. “They were also transferred to the purple house almost half a year ago.” Same time. Same circumstances. It had been a mistake to disregard gossip in a small community but that was a personal peeve of his. So maybe it was actually time to pay attention to it and to those that whispered at parties as yet another kind of informant instead of annoyances to be avoided. “Say, why do you care so much about the other dorms?” McMillan asked, head tilting, eyes wide.

“Why don’t you care?” Ciel stated grumpily, planting doubt. Recess would soon be over and as he had stayed in the classroom so had others, hovering about, waiting for a chance to talk, to ask about his shiny new position. But harsh words, a blunt question were not enough to even make the other boy’s belief shiver.

“Ah, well...” An hesitation as he thought it over but nothing else before he continued the conversation. “but anyhow the principal decided on it, you know.”

The principal’s decisions quelling doubt once again. The almighty headmaster was turning into quite a wall.

“Didn’t they do it just to even the numbers?” he attempted to extract an answer by presenting a mundane option.

“Could be.” McMillan nodded. “Purple house has so many weird people that apparently a lot drop out.” It was not a full answer but it kept some possibilities open. Even if the dropout angle did not answer the not returning home or contacting issue. “Moreover... do tell how did it go?” Done waiting McMillan started to latch onto the subject that he cared about. The Meeting at the Swan Gazebo and Ciel’s new role as a fag.

That new line of inquiry attracted his classmates immediately, swarming his corner desk with excited faces and eager, empty questions.

*What did the P4 talk about?*

*I want to know!*

*Me too!*

The words and voices mixed, blending together. Ciel grimaced and stood. They quieted, surprised.

“Forgive me. I have an errand to run for Bluer.” Phantomhive gave the quickest excuse that would allow him to leave and look good, retreating from the classroom, chased by well wishes and encouragements.

*I can’t become friends with them. Waste of time...* he mused while heading towards the library for an update.

After classes there was a brief window of time where the students were not heading for the dorms
but were free to roam around in the common rooms, the gardens and main building. Ciel targeted a few. Just a few questions under the guise of concern for a friend. Or an inquiry to see what skills could have merited a house transfer.

“Excuse me, there is something I would like to ask.” Politeness, poise and etiquette seemed to be the skills he was developing in that endeavour, enveloping them in a practised smile and harmless words. This time his questions were not met with whispers and suspicion. This time the P4 status created some sort of immunity to whispers and doubt. It was a stark difference from his first attempt at bringing up the topic.

“Derrick Arden? I do believe he was a really fast runner.” One said.

“The expert dancer?” Another answered.

“I heard he won a prize for his artworks.” Someone mentioned in passing.

“Wasn’t famous for his neat manuscripts and flawless penmanship?” An upper year considered after some thought.

Nothing in Derrick Arden skills was set. Each skill was different. Each skill was praised as excellent. Exactly like the Prefects had hesitated and failed to give an unified ability.

“Why did he get transferred?” However that one line of inquiry was met with variations of a single absolute answer that shut it down neatly before whoever he was talking to wandered off, the conversation finished.

The principal decided on it.

Sitting on a bench in the cloister Ciel grimaced, considering the long string on non-answers or contradictions information, ignoring his environs.

No matter who I ask about Derrick I keep getting different answers. Just what kind of guy was he inside this school? Nothing had been said on that. No one questions why he changed dorms. The principal’s decision seems to justify all. Deep within thought Ciel failed to notice a cheerful Soma, approaching, plopping down next to him, chatting and laughing. I’ve come to a stop. Elite college... don’t make me laugh. Grimacing Ciel was not even aware of the hand being waved in front of his eye. People here are no better than sheep at a farm.

“Did I do something to make you angry?” Soma shouted suddenly, his face appearing right in front of his nose, eliciting a shriek.

Violet watched the new body from the window, lips pressed grimly. Why was he asking so many questions about that particular individual? Even if they had been once friends as Phantomhive claimed the prefects word would have been enough to...

“Derrick Arden?” Vice-principal Agares voice and steps came down the corridor, accompanied by Professor Michaelis, the name he uttered making Violet fidget as he kept staring outside, seemingly unaffected.

“Yes. I was wondering since he has not attended classes in some time.” The professor answered, as they walked by him. Violet sighed, nodding. It was nothing then. Just a new professor asking about the students that were not in attendance. Quite normal he believed as he walked away, quietly.
“Quite attentive of you Mr. Michaelis. Especially seeing he is a student from another dorm.”
Agares stated stoically but without any particular derision. The professors taught all students but
the house division made them a bit partial towards their own charges. It was, if not a tradition,
normal, to say the least.

“It does not matter.” Sebastian answered kindly, smiling, unassuming and unthreatening. “He is a
student at this school and as such it is my job as a professor to be aware.” Responsible and sensible
like a good professor should be. Feigning kindness attracted those who believed and those who
tried to take advantage of it.

“He was an excellent student you know.” Agares stated with a sharp nod. Any professor would
also be more concerned about those that showed more potential.

“I see. Why then was he transferred?” Sebastian asked after a short pause.

“Who knows.” No reason known even to the one that was in charge of the day to day operations?
Odd was not saying enough. “The principal decided on it.” While the demon knew a shutdown
when he heard it a smile and a nod often knocked over those, while feigning ignorance and interest
made one able to continue asking without seeming rude or too prying.

“Could he have stopped attending because of the shock of relocation?” Sebastian continued with
the farce of concern.

“Who knows. The principal decided on it.” This time the answer was mechanic as the Vice-
principal turned a corner and promptly missed his step, plummeting down head first and rolling
down the stairs, stopping face-flat on the wooden floor.

“Mr Agares?! Are you quite all right?” Sebastian asked, dashing down the stairs, extending his
hand.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry...” The man grumbled, sitting down before taking his offer.

“I’ll take you to the infirmary.” Sebastian stated, noting the profuse bleeding that seeped and
spurted beneath the vice-principle’s hat. The hand in his as he pulled him up seemed limp, oddly
soft.

“Thank you, but no need.” Mr Agares said as he walked away, dabbing at the blood with a small
handkerchief.

Sebastian frowned, flexing his fingers. Then he clicked his tongue, turning away, returning to the
classroom. They had ran out of options and the Young Master needed to be informed that drastic
measures would be needed if he wanted to finish the case in a timely fashion. He also needed to
inform his covenant that she had won their current wager and could demand whatever price she
fancied.
“What’s with him, asking me to come to the library at night... Ciel was grumbling in his head as he made his way to the Sapphire Owl Dormitory library, his path aided by a lantern, keeping his steps as quiet as possible, fully clothed and ready to push ahead in his investigations. There had to be some findings or something new for such a move to be done. Updates could be given rather simply in the housemaster’s office.

“Seb...” his call upon seeing his butler in a corridor of shelves was cut short by a blunt tug, a painful smash against a bookcase, a gloved hand muffling his voice, followed by a sudden manhandling and darkness.

“My, what could it be at this hour?” Those next muffled words were all that was needed for Ciel to keep still, understanding the situation. “Are you looking for something?” The Blue House prefect jumped, a bit startled, his lamp shivering, casting light and shadows in zigzagging patterns. He had not been expecting Sebastian to be there or for such an abrupt disappearance of the person he had been chasing.

“No, Mr. Michaelis. Excuse me, good night.” And no matter how unassuming and unthreatening the interjection had been it would not be good if he blatantly questioned the dorm supervisor’s presence. Even if he was sure there was a student breaking curfew. So Bluer meekly left after a quick look around.

Sebastian waited until he was certain they were alone before letting the Young Master out of his coat.

“Terribly sorry for being rough but it seems you were being tailed.” Sebastian stated as Ciel coughed a bit, the lingering scent of tobacco that clung to Sebastian enough to make his asthma itch.

“I might have been a little too obvious.” Ciel admitted gruffly, looking around.

“I was certain Mouser had been tutoring you in the ways of a thief and I was quite sure she has already imparted to you the knowledge that a successful sneaking effort involved the absence of personal light sources.” Sebastian adopted a pensive air, taunting.

“However sniffing about got me nowhere.” Ciel bristled but ignored the jab after a few seconds proved the thief was not within earshot to mock his overconfidence. “Also it made me noted for doing odd things. No matter. Whatever I asked the answers changed and all boil down to the principal decided on it.”

“The staff is the same.” Sebastian answered, waiting to see if his encouragement of bolder action had taken hold. “And some of it was not even here on the time-frame we have for our missing people.” He added Mouser’s findings on the staff rotation and new arrivals.

“So we are indeed getting nowhere. Since we are stuck all we can do is use every means at our disposal to come into direct contact with Derrick.” Indeed having been pushed beyond the reasonable action the Young Master opened the window, glancing out. “Come Sebastian.”

“Young Master you’ll receive 2 Ys for sneaking out of the dorm at night.” Sebastian reminded him, approaching.

“Only teachers can punish students. Right Mr. Michaelis?” the Young Master glanced back with a
light grin of mischief.

“Ah. Correct.” Sebastian acquiesced before aiding the Young Master as the phrase outlined the role required of him that night.

“It’s even more impressive at night.” Ciel considered on arrival, watching the purple house. A lamp hung above the closed gates blended the light Sebastian carried while the stone pillars that kept the metal structure in place would keep anyone from within from noticing them. Most windows were dark. Some, likely common and study areas, were still blinking with lights and presences.

“So how do you intend to meet with Derrick?” Sebastian asked, waiting for the Young Master to further elaborate whatever plan he had been devising. “Students are not allowed into another dorm. It will be a great problem if you are caught sneaking in.” a slow smile started to spread as the Young Master stayed quiet, staring ahead. It seemed further prodding was needed for an action to be taken. “Or will you be relying on my powers?”

“Stop grinning. I won’t need to rely on you.” Properly aggravated the Young Master snatched the lantern, turning towards the house. “If I can’t enter...” Using his anger he threw the lamp over the fence, towards one of the dark windows, grinning slightly as the glass shattered and a small plume of flame started dancing beyond the wall. “I’ll just have to make them come out.” Smugly he watched. “Do you know Weston’s college 87th rule Mr. Michaelis?”

“Thou shalt not wear thy unmentionables on thy head?” Mouser whispered playfully, lying on top of the twisted branches, grinning.

“What are you doing there?” Ciel looked up, eyes narrowing.

“Keeping watch.” Mouser answered, hiding the weekly chapter of Widow’s Price.

“Let me see...” Sebastian ignored them, finding the rule required, quoting. “In case of an alarm such as a fire in the school or dormitories all students should rapidly seek refuge in the gardens and have the prefects perform a roll call.” Sebastian smiled slightly, amused by the measures taken. “If this is found out you will be expelled Phantomhive.” The demon adopted a scolding, professorial tone before chuckling and changing to a more casual enunciation of flat praise. “However as the Queen’s dog this is exactly what is expected of the Young Master.”

“As Bluer said it is important to know the school’s rules.” The boyo smiled, smug, staring at the building where the fire had just been discovered, triggering screams. “I look forward to see what kind of guy he is. We will finally meet Derrick Arden.”

“They will be coming out soon Young Master.” Ignoring the boyo’s self-satisfied monologue Sebastian grabbed him by the waist, creating much struggling and protests, and hopped onto the tree’s upper branches.

“Everyone outside! Now! Hurry!” Cheslock shout steered a stampede of students of several ages and in several states of dress, undress and panic. Some carried whatever they perceived as important. Some fell. Some stopped to help. Others just ran, ignoring all but themselves.

“Sebastian find Derrick!” The boyo ordered, observing as well.

“Understood.” Sebastian answered, pulling his glasses off, eyes reddening, pupils narrowing
further as he watched the crowd, checking each fearful face.

“Did he come out?” Ciel asked after a moment of search.

“Not yet.” Sebastian answered.

The number of students coming out dwindled to none. The fire and smoke spread and started to look much more threatening. The old building eased the process.

*Why is he delaying? Hurry up and come.* Ciel gritted his teeth behind a frown.

Mouser examined the house, eyes narrowed, glancing up, towards Sebastian who nodded in response. Those outside seemed to be relaxing under Cheslock’s instructions.

“Room leaders, do a roll call and then report to the prefect.” And while the prefect’s fag shouted and oriented his house the Prefect Violet was just staring at the flaming building, eyes empty.

“Still nothing?” The boyo asked as the windows started to shatter.

“Nothing.” Sebastian answered calmly.

“No choice then.” The boyo sighed harshly, changing his position carefully on the branches. “Sebastian go get them.” He ordered. The time for the tiptoeing and delicate touch seemed to be long gone.

“Hold a moment....” Sebastian answered, in apparent disregard of the boyo’s words. “I see. As I though no one else is in the house. There are no human souls inside.” He paused for a moment. The Young Master was staring a bit blankly. “As a demon I can pick signs of human life by sensing their souls at short range. But there is nothing there.”

“There is a ghost in the tower but he is unlikely to care. Feels very old.” Mouser mentioned, settling, staring at the Dormitory as well. “But yes, I agree.

“Mouser’s range is broader.” Sebastian acquiesced.

“Everyone has left the building?” The boyo said slowly, eye narrowing, making sure.

“Yes. The five students that have been transferred to the purple house are not present.” Sebastian answered.

“In other words Derrick was never inside the Purple house.” Ciel stated, annoyed.

“At this point it can’t be that much of a surprise.” Mouser retorted, turning as more voices joined the commotion below their branches. The other P4 and the upper years of their houses were running towards the Purple dorm, looking concerned.

“Violet! Is everyone alright?” Redmond asked.

“Yes. Everyone is present.” Violet whispered, pulling his hood, head lowering.

Ciel showed shock. Sebastian’s expression clouded. Mouser searched for a different group of three. They seemed to have re-joined the other purple house students amidst the commotion. No one would know they had been boozing in the 1st music room.

“This has become a rather strange affair.” The boyo whispered.
“Indeed.” Sebastian agreed mildly.

“The P4 are hiding something regarding Derrick and the others. There is no use in taking this investigation any further. Put out the fire.”

“As you wish.” Sebastian took the order and disappeared.

“That means you’ll need a new approach once again.” Mouser stated as the houses were trying to organize a coherent effort to put out the fire. Get water, calling the professors and staff, shouting at each other, trying to make the teamwork actually work. Her only answer was a sullen grunt.

“Everyone!” Sebastian stampeded into the scene on an elephant carrying a massive amount of water buckets on the trunk, on its backs and in two wooden rowboats. “If there is need for water here it is!” he called out, garnering attention.

“Professor Michaelis?” Bluer muttered in shock. The expressions around him were no different.

“My elephant?” Soma whispered, blinking a few times.

“Put out the fire quickly before it spreads.” Sebastian instructed the stunned students as Soma praised the wheezing elephant, patting its head cheerfully.

Unscrambled by the presence of an authority figure the students started acting more effectively.

“Green house follow me!” Edward led his military-like brats into a flawless formation, approaching the water.

“Blue house we are going too!” Clayton shouted at the many glasses that reflected the flames fearfully.

“Do not go into the purple house!” Violet shouted suddenly, bringing all activity to a sudden, stark halt.

“ Tradition is very hindering isn’t it?” Ciel commented. Mouser nodded along. “So restrictive that he would rather see it all burn than move an inch.”

“Or maybe he just does not want people to see what he hides.” She answered. “A refusal hidden in tradition for the practical reason of concealing a truth.”

Ciel grunted. Either way it was stupid.

“But...” Clayton hesitated, answering, aware of the rules, torn between helping like a good gentleman and obeying.

“This isn’t the time to say such things you fool!” Soma’s voice cut through the still, stale air, the prince crossing the space between the elephant and the prefect, carrying water already. “You. You are the head of the purple house, are you not?” He shouted, accusing, trying to rally him into his senses, into action. “You can’t protect your people with your worthless pride!” Soma preached, slightly on edge, slightly angered by incitation. “What is a leader that cannot protect his people?”

“My, my...” Sebastian whispered, noticing the whispers of agreement, the nods from the students.

Cheslock however was not ready to hear such progressive thoughts ranting and demeaning his prefect’s actions and attitude.

“You bastard! Just who do you think you are mouthing off to?” the young man was shouting,
gripping Soma’s shirt. Although surprised the prince showed no signs of backing down or fear. Water sloshed within the buckets but few splashes fell.

“Cheslock.” Violet called, head lowering, resigned. “It’s fine.” The Prefect continued in a whisper before turning to the people of his house and calling them to action. “Let’s help.”

“Soma seems to be growing.” Mouser mentioned. The boyo harrumphed. “You can say you are feeling a bit of pride.” Another sound of dismay. “Or are you jealous he can make a stand without needing two demons to run around collecting favours and evidence?” this time the boyo groaned and glared. Mouser chuckled. “Fine, fine boyo. I’ll give you credit for being the one taking the kicks and shouldering the rumours. Also for not being your usual sponger self… and…” She went on with a list of his flaws in a thin layer of compliments to make him squirm on the branches, unable to yell back due to the threat of discovery.

“Be sure to cover your mouth with a cloth before you enter! Don’t inhale the smoke.” Edward shared practical knowledge in his leadership, heading towards the house, making sure everyone had a clothe they could dampen and use.

“Don’t carelessly open doors. That might reignite fires.” Clayton used theory and science to direct the mass of students towards the best points of entrance, circumventing the fire, using the open hallways to move around.

“The wounded should come this way please!” Harcourt stood by the gate, shouting, waving arms, trying to sort through the crowd of scared young ones.

Cheslock had his fists tightly closed.

“I’ll remember this you bastards.” He growled, voice halting, “This debt... I’ll definitely make it up to you.” The other prefect fags and soma smiled, satisfied with the attitude as he shouted to those of the purple house that could still work towards saving their dorms.

Violet made no movement, just staring.

Four books were floating around Mouser, two keeping to the same page, the third flipping from index to whatever concept she was researching and the fourth was that week’s chapter of yet another penny dreadful serial. Her focus seemed to be on that one at the moment, glassless, boots on the desk.

The fire had been put out, the Young Master returned to the Dormitory without suspicion and his tasks were done for now. Unless he was willing to count the need for a new route to be uncovered.

Sebastian observed for a moment, approaching, had touching her ankle gently, the light touch sliding upwards, ushering the blue fabric of the skirt away, avoiding the dagger near her knee. The thief cocked one eyebrow, peeking from the book, smiling. He felt a soft tug on his coat moving with the pull, allowing it to be stripped off. He leaned into her, a soft kiss placed one her lips before pulling her out of the chair.

Focus broken the books fell with a thump and the coat crumpled before reaching the rack.

The demon slumped into the armchair, Mouser now on his lap, finding that placing his legs on the desk was indeed a rather comfortable position to be in.
“You look weary.” Mouser mentioned, adjusting to the new placement, deciding to simply use him as some sort of oversized pillow, calling her books once more, opening it on his chest, along with a bottle of good port and a pair of glasses. As it turned out booze was somehow able to keep its flavour. Sebastian’s arm curled around her waist, the pads of his fingers tapping against her in a soothing rhythm.

“I am slightly worn.” Sebastian admitted, accepting the port glass. “It does seem you were correct and thus the winner of our wager.” Mouser hummed, uninterested, flipping the page, head on his shoulder. It seemed she had decided to collect later. “Suggestions?”

“The only thing you can do to continue this masquerade for the boyo is focus on June 4th.” She mentioned, looking up for a second.

“The tournament?” Sebastian frowned.

“You heard rumours too, haven’t you... It seems there is always an extra place at that tea party.”

“I’ll see what can be done.”
Derrick and the others disappeared. The P4 are keeping secrets. Ciel recapped the events in his head as he and the other blue house students abandoned classes to head for lunch. It was a tangle of concealment and misinformation but he still held on to the conviction Derrick was alive albeit hidden. Mouser disagreed but then again she usually pronounced everyone involved in sketchy events dead before having any concrete proof. Sebastian acted as if he had no opinion but Ciel felt he was more likely to agree to Mouser’s cynicism than his duty forged beliefs. The only lead left is the principal himself. But the only ones with access are the P4 and their fags. Which for the ridiculous reason of tradition was a grand status. Maybe I should have Clayton killed to replace... No, no... that line of thought would only brew suspicion. Even if Clayton was out of the way the fact that he was a first year still placed him very low in the order of the school, despite the slight boost of being the fag of a prefect’s fag and his actions to expose Cole and the invitations to the Gazebo. There was simply no solid guarantee of him being chosen. Also taking down a rival under the pretence of “justice and goodness” only worked if the other was actively doing something bad.

Another falling away to clear his advancement would be nothing if not suspicious.

Such a thought was just the product of his current state of lack of options. It placed him in a point with only two paths: rely of the demons to dig up a way forward or to report his failure to the Queen. The second was not feasible. It was almost better to uproot the whole school system, disregarding its separation from State matters, than to admit defeat in such a way.

So, without much he could do to further his thoughts, the conversations around started to break into his ears, the words making themselves understood.

“It’s good they managed to put out the fire last night.” No one but the upper years of the other houses had participated in the effort. But the Purple house students of his year had been keen to share their experience and spread all the stories and rumours they could. Bennet was the one stating that, looking relieved behind his freckles.

“But there are rumours going around that it was arson.” Like that one. Ciel grimaced, walking along. He had made sure there would be no proof of any of that in the aftermath. Still someone had to spread that theory. Jones adjusted his hat, looking serious, gripping his books harder.

“That’s scary.” McMillan whispered, shaking his head.

“I wonder if they will cancel the tournament.” And finally the conversation turned to where they were aiming, courtesy of Hall.

“The tournament is a tradition. There is no way they will cancel it.” Jones retorted with a chuckle.

“The blue house doesn’t stand a chance though.” Bennet laughed easily too.

“But the principal will be present.” McMillan stated, looking ready to take action. “So we should not slack off in the cheering.” His idea was ridiculous but the contents caught Ciel’s attention. What? The principal will be at the tournament? He stopped before speeding his step, trotting along to catch up with MacMillan who kept giving away valuable information like it did not matter. “Even though they say Blue House is always last but I believe everyone has an equal chance of being invited to the midnight tea party.”

“Wait! Is that true?” Ciel gripped the other boy, turning him. There was another way, finally
another way…

“About the blue house always being the last?” McMillan tilted his head innocently.

“No, after that.” He asked trying to look calm.

“The principal is usually very busy but he will definitely attend the tournament on June 4th,“ Excitement was plainly visible as he explained. ”And it seems every year he invites one player that did particularly well in the tournament to the midnight party.”

So there is another way to attend… and this time it seemed a bit more straightforward than working on the social hierarchy.

“Doing well means what? Excelling at cricket and winning?” Ciel tried to narrow down the options to gain access.

“The criteria is different every year.” He almost groaned when McMillan said it. “The one who gets more points. The one who shows fair play.” He mentioned some of the previous selection standards.

“It’s the player who behaves like a gentleman should.” Bennet shared his knowledge.

What the hell is that… This time he did not bother hiding the grimace. Getting chosen is even harder than just winning?

“Last year it was player who sacrificed himself for a member of the audience.” McMillan added, nodding at Bennet.

“It was Clayton, wasn’t it?” Jones murmured, thinking.

None of that was helping.

“Befitting a gentleman is it…” Ciel managed to ask, grimly.

“But there are eleven people in a team. And it is really hard to make the cut. Impossible for us first years.” McMillan chuckled.

I loathe to admit it but sports are not my strong suit. It would be hard… what should I… It was a way in that was clearly outlined. But it was also a path with a major obstacle in it. And annoyingly that crinkle that prevented him from moving forward was himself. Even if he was chosen for the team… what can be done…

“Phantomhive.” His name called in a sharp tone caused his tangled thoughts to shatter. Ciel turned around finding Clayton waiting stiffly. “I’d like to get a word please.” The Prefect’s fag asked, gesturing him to follow as the other boys stared excitedly as they walked away towards the school building walls. “Congratulations.” Clayton stated as soon as they were relatively alone, causing confusion. “You have been chosen to be a player in the tournament.”

“Really?” while timing of the announcement was suspect it rather was what he needed to proceed. Still it came as some shock to have an advantage so promptly delivered even factoring demon help.

“Yes.” Clayton nodded, satisfied, taking his surprise as a display of proper modesty.

“That is an honour but why me?” Ciel picked up on the mood and tried to ascertain what chain of events had given him what he needed.
“Our dorm is different from those muscle heads at the others.” Clayton adjusted his glasses as he started his explanation of what playing for the Sapphire Owl entailed. “We specialize in strategic play.” He stared at him for a moment before sighing. “Your physique isn’t ideal but the brain and guts you showed in uncovering Maurice Cole’s injustice will certainly be of use to the team. Professor Michaelis recommended you on these arguments.”

“He did...” I don’t want to praise him but there is little that can best this kind of support. Ciel considered, struggling to keep his glee under control.

“Make sure to thank him.” Clayton suggested as Ciel dashed away as any excited boy should.

“Yes. I’ll go see him right away.” Sebastian shouldn’t be hard to find, especially given the time. Ciel found him traversing the covered arches that surrounded one of the cloisters of the main school building. Mouser walked next to him. They appeared to be discussing a book. Very innocuous looking, very mundane. Ciel paused for a moment, assessing the area.

There are people around... I will have to do that.

“Mr. Michaelis!” The boyo called in a bubbly tone hopping into a cutesy hug. “Thank you for recommending me for the team.” He continued in that sweet voice. Mouser made a little choked sound, suppressing a grimace.

“Phantomhive you should not run in the halls.” Sebastian took it in stride, answering in a gentle reprimand.

“I’m sorry I just wanted to thank you right away.” The boyo stepped back, smiling and beaming.

“No thanks are necessary. I do believe you will play wonderfully.” Sebastian continued in the part much more naturally. Mouser pressed her lips together, glancing down, keeping from laughing.

“Yes.” Earnestly for the crowd Ciel nodded. “I should make preparations for the tournament.”

“Very well. If I can be of assistance just ask.” As the Dorm Supervisor it was part of his responsibilities to supervise activities within the Blue House. So it was in no way as generous an offer as it sounded.

“Really?” But of course the boyo could not give away that he was fully aware of that.

“Of course.” Sebastian smiled. “But I will also verify if you are able to keep up with your studies. Because after all I am one hell of a teacher.”

Ciel’s smile changed, turning cunning. Win or lose. Personal score. Play in ways that befit a gentleman. Which trait will play a role depends solely on the principal’s mood. Those were the variables he had to play with. Without any sort of clear standard it is nearly impossible to ensure that I am chosen. However... if I make points, bring victory and move everyone to tears it will be perfect. I will secure my place at that midnight tea party no matter what. So this time he would not constrain himself with something as petty as rules, keeping that ideal held above him as a shield as trickery worked beneath.

“I am very much looking forward to the 4th of June.” Sebastian mentioned as the boyo walked away.

“Looking forward to whipping him into shape?” Mouser chuckled, allowing herself to mock the moment.

“Do you own a whip?”
A long pause followed. Sebastian glanced down at her thinking glare.

“‘The mechanism in the parasol’s chain is broken so… no. I don’t have whips,’” Mouser shrugged. “‘Always felt they would be rather useless unless you were just capturing someone.’”

“‘Took you a moment…’” the demon adjusted her glasses, pulling a messy tress out of the frames, slipping it behind her ear.

“‘Have you been to my toy box recently?’” Mouser smiled. Sebastian sighed. He had not. Mostly because he suspected he would have to organize it if he did went. “‘Creepy moment that last smile.’”

“I thought it rather favoured yours.”

“Flatterer.”

“Personally I do thing the cuteness at the beginning was both spot on and mildly eerie.”

“‘Feeling rather proud aren’t you?’” Mouser chortled, glancing around as they walked away, into the blue dorm. “‘Now about this list... I can get it all in a couple of days.’”
In June 3rd the Grand Dining Hall of the main school building was brightly lit, its chandeliers diluting its otherwise stern appearance. Tables were set in buffet-style dining, surrounded by tall candelabra, aiding the lighting, surrounding a central massive ceremonial bronze cup. Red carpets, originating from four doors over which hung the house emblems, lead and surrounded it for the formal and theatrical part of the tradition. The clamour of conversations filled the space. Students, families and guests exchanged pleasantries, memories and concerns. There were some snippets of scolding coming through, most of them grade-related.

“I do beg your pardon for interrupting you conversations but, Ladies and Gentleman, if I could have your attention…” Vice-Principal Agares’ voice cut through the noise as he climbed on to the pulpit, taking his place as master of ceremonies in the headmaster’s absence. The sounds died down, people turning to watch. “I welcome you to the opening ceremony of the traditional 4th of June Cricket tournament.” Polite clapping followed. “I am glad we are able to open the tournament safely one more year.” Students puffed out their chests in pride. “Please enjoy the festivities.” Guests murmured in pleased fashion. “Well then.” Mr Agares paused glancing around, clearing his throat before raising his voice to start the celebration proper. “Will the Players representing the Dormitories come forward!” he called, gesturing dramatically, turning.

Cue given the ground started to shake, startling the guests.

“What?” A man shouted as he almost lost balance.

“The ground is trembling?” A lady shrieked, wide eyed.

“Here they are!” The students murmured, catching on quickly.

They knew the teams representing each House presented themselves in the last tournament’s ranking order, victor to defeated. While the theme and styles changed the formality of the event was recognizable by those within.

“They never let any other of the dormitories overtake them using overwhelming strength and team effort!” someone of the green house announced, adding to the moment, as the doors slammed open and the team marched out, favouring the knightly theme, blending medieval and renaissance, torch carried by Greenhill, flag held aloft by Edward, the rest of the players presenting the classical knightly longsword. “The Absolute champions, The Green Lions!” the title echoed though the hall as they made their way to the pedestal, strictly within the carpeted path.

“Big brother you look so handsome!” Lizzy’s voice and cheer made Edward smile as he marched near his family, sounding slightly louder than the cheers, claps and clamour of the crowd. All sound died down as they reached the edge of the circle surrounding the pillar, as petals started to drift through the air, drawing the attention to the second door as it opened with a gliding motion and a gentle whoosh.

“Look the Dorm that placed second!” a Green House student murmured, shrugging.

The reaction was not a thunderous cheer but a quiet, dignified awe as Scarlet Fox made their entrance garbed in elaborate Elizabethan ensembles, accompanied by a flutter of flowers and a softer atmosphere of grace and sophistication, opposing the brute force and dominance of the previous display. Redmond and his rose glided down the path, carrying the flame though the candles of an elaborate silver candelabra. His fag carried the House flag proudly. The players
charmed the crowd in their wake.

“They drove the Green house into a corner last year…” a red house upper year mentioned proudly, smiling.

“They charm visitors with their beautiful play…” the Red House’s chosen announcer clamoured as they paraded. “The brilliant Eden, the Scarlet Foxes!” Ladies swooned, ladies shrieked, ladies squealed and a few fainted.

And, answering to the same cue as before as soon as Redmond reached the pillar, standing to Greenhill’s left the lights went out, dipping the world in deep darkness. The high pitch rumble of a creaky door opening echoed in the Dining hall as purple lights flared to life, illuminating the empty path.

“Could this be…” a couple of spooked students whispered, holding on to each other.

“They confuse their opponents with unforeseen tricky play…” the chosen announcer’s voice was an eerie whisper, accompanying nothing. People screamed and a sudden void opened between the guests, showing the purple house players, shrouded in cloaks, druidic in style. “The swarming spectres, the Violet Wolves!”

“Tricky all right…” a gentleman huffed as the group made their way in silence towards the pedestal.

“They didn’t even use the door.” One of the blue house students whispered, adjusting his glasses, looking up, staring at a feathery flutter filled the room, Owls soaring through the ceiling as the lights returned. “Those birds…”

“It’s that house.” Someone said, the whisper almost derisive.

“Their physical ability isn’t as good but they aim for an opening to win the game with their strategies.” Their announcer seemed less than enthused but he still tried to defend the House pride. Somewhat. Somehow. “The attack of the cornered rats, the Sapphire Owls!”

Academic themed. As expected. A group, solemn, stiff, silent entry, met with a lukewarm reaction. Not even the act of claiming the birds for their own, calling them down from their flight elicited more than a few polite claps and murmurs.

This is awkward. Our entrance style and the visitor’s reaction… Ciel reasoned, looking downwards, grimacing in annoyance.

“Ciel you look so cute!” Lizzy’s voice cut through the crowd with clarity, sweetness and enthusiasm. “Do your best!” Ciel blushed from head to toe. She had turned a few heads from his own team, his own included. Edward was displaying on the other side of the room.

Mouser pressed her forehead against Sebastian’s arm, muffling her laughter. The demon himself was covering an amused chuckle as they watched the ceremony near the other members of the faculty, slightly away from the outsider invasion.

Through the tepid reaction they reached their place around the pedestal, Bluer carrying the flame in a lantern, raising it along the others, the extra-ceremonial part of the charade starting with recitation of oaths included. Four prefects standing around the cup, each with a flame in hand.

“Light the flame of St. George.” Vice-Principal Agares ordered, gesturing solemnly.
“We, the players in accordance with the great tradition of Weston College shall fight fair and square until the very end. This we do solemnly swear.” The oath was said by four voices in solemn unison as they tipped the flame into the bronze receptacle, the flame sprouting to life in a dazzling whoosh, the moment drowned in cheers.

“And with this I declare the 1889 school year dormitory cricket tournament open!” Agares continued, addressing the crowd, making way for the more light-hearted merriment to start. “I’m sure there will be some fierce competition tomorrow. So please enjoy tonight’s festivities to your heart’s content.” He turned away to join the crowd, promptly tripping and landing face down on the marble.

“Vice-principal!” as usual someone shouted and tried to help as he sat back up and apologised.

The hired staff started to circulate, placing food on the tables, offering drinks.

The green house players gathered around the table of roasts,

“If you don’t eat you won’t last through the battle. Eat plenty!” Greenhill encouraged his players. The Purple house players were doing the same in silence, gathered in a circle. The red house players preferred to mingle about, dazzling the young ladies. Students that were not playing took advantage of the time to talk to family and friends.

“What a carefree bunch.” Bluer huffed, adjusting his glasses, turning to the team. “We will be holding a meeting in order to perfect our strategy. We can’t waste a moment.” The Prefect announced stiffly, turning,

“Don’t be so boring.” A female voice cut his orders, one gloved hand bearing down on his shoulder. “You should enjoy yourself as well.” It was the prelude to a deluge of women falling on Bluer, hugging and engulfing him in colourful frills.

“Sister!” He stammered to one of the eldest, the one that had spoken up.

“Enjoy, enjoy!” the younger girls clung to his legs, speaking in synchrony, effectively pinning him place.

“Look at you all important.” Another one teased, laughing light and bright behind a gloved wrist. “So different from back home.”

“So surprised that the boy that played house with me is now the prefect.” Yet another one added, waving her fan daintily, adding to Bluer’s crescent distress as his teammates stared in a daze.

“Please! Just stop saying unnecessary things and go stand over there!” he pleaded, embarrassed and panicked.

“Everyone thank you for taking care of our brother.” The one with the fan turned away from the confusion, addressing the rest of the blue house cricket team with a kindly smile.

“Hew Lawrie what do you mean «unnecessary»! How dare you?!” the first one bristled and attacked, pinching his arm viciously, making him squirm between the young ones still clinging to him as another girl with flowers in her hair started to tug his sleeve insistently.

“Brother where is Master Edgar.” She was asking, bright-eyed,

*It’s just like Violet’s drawing. But even so this is madness.* Ciel considered, gulping.
“Oh my...” the one whose teasing had set the first one in a pinching spree noticed him, eyes turning cunning, approaching. “You are Phantomhive, correct? My brother wrote about this amazingly talented first year.”

“Thank you.” Ciel whispered, feeling cornered.

“Well aren’t you cute.” Bluer was abandoned as the other sister turned to him as well.

“Brains, looks and lineage are all good.” The appraisal continued, sharp-eyed and business-like. “He is rather ideal wouldn’t you say?” She paused for a moment. “A bit short though.” Was added after further consideration.

“Boys do tend to grow late.” The other sister answered, undaunted, puling yet another girl, the bespectacled one along. “Would you take our sister to be your wife?”

“What? Sister, stop it!” the girls dragged into the conversation seemed to be about his age as well, timid and blushing, protesting.

“Why are you growing so red?” the target of teasing changed.

“That’s unbecoming Adela.” But they were no less close nor less pressuring than before.

“Well, no, you see...” throughout the exchange Ciel tried to back away or decline, having no luck in either, flustered and close to a panic.

“Ciel.” It was almost with relief that he heard Lizzy’s voice cutting sharp and sweetly through the commotion, dashing through the hall in her military inspired gown. “Pleased to meet you everyone. I’m Ciel’s fiancée, Elizabeth.” The emphasis put on the status attached to the word was the only thing that made Bluer’s sisters back away, murmuring their disappointment. Capturing an Earl was after all a very good marital investment for any family.

“Ciel youcad!” Although such social truths and the fact that he had been the one pursued seemed to escape Edward’s grasp as he shrieked and flew to his sister’s defense. “When you have someone like Lizzy…” the rest of his words faded into angry muttering as he shook Ciel about.

“Brother stop it!” once more Lizzy rescued him, punching her brother out of embarrassment, loosening his grip on Ciel’s overcoat, claiming him back in a tight, protective hug.

“So odd for the blue house to be the loud ones.” Redmond glided towards them, smiling, attracted to the lively spotlight.

“Ciel that silly hat looks good on you.” Soma approached with a laugh, slapping Ciel’s back, amused.

“So this is the rumoured fiancée... and the sisters...” Harcourt whispered shyly, smiling.

“I can’t believe you were chosen for the team.” Ciel grumbled, freeing himself, turning towards the newcomers.

“Well of course.” Soma declared proudly, straightening. “In India cricket is really popular since the English brought it over. I made a team at the palace and all.”

“Kadar is really good at cricket.” Harcourt nodded along, offering his praise.

“Ah! Master Edgar. When are you going to give me a dance.” The young sister with flowers in her
hair bounced about, approaching Redmond with starry eyes.

“Perhaps when you no longer stomp on my feet.” The prefect dismissed the request with a light chuckle and an uninterested glance, looking away, ignoring her as the admiration turned to a teary accusation.

“That’s so mean.” Tiny fists hitting his arm as she complained.

“That is no way to talk to a lady, Edgar.” Once again an interloper weaved himself into the gathering, and now Ciel’s blood was running cold and his skin in danger of breaking into hives. Druitt glided dramatically, approaching, stealing the girl’s attention. “Have you forgotten what I have taught you my dear nephew?”

“Uncle Aleister.” Redmond greeted him with a smile, turning.

“Non. Do not call me uncle.” Druitt rejected the title with a scoff, looking around. Ahhh, how nostalgic. My alma mater. I feel like my youth here, fresh as the morning dew on roses, was just yesterday.”

I thought Redmond looked like someone but… him? Ciel pricked and made himself smaller, trying to sling away, seeking shelter by his aunt as Druitt prattled on. To think he graduated from here...

“Aunt Frances was displaying a disapproving glare, arms crossed.

“I don’t like flashy men like that.” The marchioness commented to herself, taking in the room, watching the festivities for any impropriety that should not be allowed in such a prestigious school.

“My, my... there are some troubling faces here. It would be best if we did not get close.” Sebastian whispered, surveying the situation around the Young Master. Family, society and annoyances.

“Indeed…” Mouser answered, arms locked with his, standing close as a couple should. “The gardens should still be empty. It isn’t unbearably hot inside yet.”

They turned, making their way to somewhere else.

The thief froze abruptly, eyes widening, letting go of his arm hastily, bowing, gripping her skirts and bunching them up, dashing away, vanishing into the crowd in seconds. Sebastian stared, dumbfounded only to break out in a cold sweat when a daintily gloved hand gripped his shoulder in a steel vice and the atmosphere grew heavy and threatening.

“You indecent butler… what are you doing here?”

“Ah, marchioness.” Sebastian answered, keeping his voice level. “I am quite amazed you managed to catch me.” He mentioned. Yet a fraction of a second before his covenant had escaped. Mayhap training Lady Elizabeth and being near the Marchioness was making her more aware of where not to be when the woman was about.

In that train of thought an incensed Marchioness gripped his fringe and began to discipline him.

“What kind of House Master or even a professor sports such a slovenly look?” The demon hesitated to answer, waiting uneasily until he was released. “No matter.” The marchioness looked away, bitterly. “If you are here that means that Ciel’s entrance is part of something more.”
“It’s as you presume my lady.” Sebastian took his escape, bowing slightly, acknowledging the statement.

“And that goes for you as well?” Marchioness Midford turned slightly, staring sharply.

“Yes Ma’am” Mouser answered meekly, approaching cautiously. Her hair was pinned back into its twist more firmly and the loose tresses had been rearranged and slightly tamed. She glanced at Sebastian, approaching as the Marchioness appraised her family’s actions. “I panicked.”

“I agree.” Sebastian nodded slowly, solemnly.

“Huh? Sebas...” Lizzy’s eyes narrowed for a second as she saw through the flimsy disguise. Mouser smiled, waving. Sebastian pressed his finger to his lips in a playful shushing gesture. Lizzy covered her mouth, startled, understanding the demand.

“Oh? Frances who is that?” The Marquis came closer, Edward trailing next to him and the boyo sulking about, following, lacking any other socially acceptable movement option. And he would do well not to upset his aunt.

“Sir, are you an acquaintance of my mother?” Edward asked, genuinely puzzled.

“Frankly now, you two... that professor is...” Lizzy shook her head and beckoned them to come closed, whispering the identity that was confounding the two men.

“It has been some time gentlemen.” Sebastian aided the reveal by lowering his glasses. Mouser chuckled but did nothing. Her stockings were plain blue that day, not good for memory jogging.

It took them a moment before the revelations sunk.

“Oh, I had not noticed at all.” The Marquis kept his easy-going expression as he admitted his oversight.

“Me neither.” Edward did much the same although some of inherited sternness came though. And yet such admission angered the boyo.

“Edward! I thought you were simply keeping it secret!” he shouted, shocked to the core, disbeliefing. Such inattentiveness to what surrounded him was... unacceptable.

“When Lizzy is around everything else fades into the background.” Edward stated with a nod.

“Don’t say it like it’s some kind of proven fact!” Ciel grumbled, trying to move past that, shaking his head.

“Is tomorrow’s tournament involved in your work?” Edward asked, turning slightly more serious.

“I cannot say it is not but there is no need for you to have any concern.” Ciel gave a rather evasive answer but its contents were easily accepted.

“I see. Then I will not hold back.” Edward announced, smugly, ready for the competition.

“I’m cheering for you so be sure to win, Ciel!” Lizzy said chirpily, hugging the boyo, rubbing cheeks until he was thoroughly embarrassed.

“Yes... right.” Ciel murmured.

“As if the eternal losers of the Blue house could ever have any hope of winning!” Edward
screeched, taking the offence of losing sisterly support.

“Oh, but they do.” The Marquis answered, cutting the biased rant. “In the past the Blue house has won. Once.”

“Are you perhaps talking about the Blue Miracle!?” McMillan cut in, popping out of nowhere, excited to hear a bit of his house’s history.

“What?” Ciel whispered flatly, stepping back.

“I’m McMillan, Phantomhive’s best friend.” The young boy advanced, shaking the Marquis hand vigorously, polite but still humming with energy.

“Best friend?” the boyo mumbled still in a flat tone, unsure as to why some people kept self-proclaiming as such without previous approval or confirmation on his part.

“Won’t you tell us the story Marquis?” Starry eyed his room-mate asked as if the event was being the best thing that had happened in his school life so far.

“Very well, young man.” Unfortunately the Marquis shared such a bubbly and easy personality so he acquiesced to the request and took but a moment to gather his thoughts and start the narration. “It was back when I was a resident in the Green Lion and the prefect’s fag, just like Edward is today…”
The Marquis story began two weeks before July 4th, years ago when anger and house rivalry prompted a wager.

The Prefect of the Green Lion stormed out of the Swan Gazebo in an aggravated mood, thundering through the school. Midford tried to calm the Prefect’s mood, trotting after him.

As expected a small crowd was gathering, following the spectacle.

“That guy... I will not forgive him this time!” Prefect Diedrich shouted, his annoyance growing.

“Please calm down...” Midford tried once more, jumping, startled when the Prefect turned.

“I will not stay calm Midford!” The German snarled, his face twitching in an attempt to still be in control. “What kind of prefect neglects the 4th of June preparations?” Irritably he stated, crossing the entrance gardens, stopping, groaning when he noticed the murmuring students surrounded the lawn. “What’s more he is...” Again...Diedrich gripped his cricket bat harder, glaring until the students stepped out of his way, intimidated as he stormed towards the object of his rage, the blue house prefect loitering about on the lawn face covered by a book, attracting murmurs and his own crowd of onlookers. “Wake up! Mole!” Diedrich shouted. “A prefect is allowed to cross the lawn. Not nap on it!” always strict about the rules and adding the

“Aw... three more minutes and I would have finished reading.” Indolently the answer came, fuelling the green house prefect’s anger further. Midford finally caught up with the prefect, staring, seeing a bad situation turning worse as the blue house prefect sat up, closing his book, yawning a bit. “Don’t be so uptight Diedrich.” He continued, ignoring the signs of building frustration. “And my name is not mole. It’s Vincent Phantomhive.” The smug, unintimidated manner seemed to diffuse the tension into the simple anger.

“Incidentally... do not call me by my first name. It’s against the rules.” Diedrich bit down his annoyance, trying to have a conversation, trying to be the mature one. If he was going to have a compelling argument to make that lazy prefect do any of the work he should.

“From the people to the bread everything German seems so tough to handle.” Vincent murmured as he stood, disgruntled, tossing the coat over his shoulders.

The simple comment was a snide jest too far for the already enraged prefect.

“Why you...” Snapping Diedrich charged, raising his bat. “I will not such an insult pass!” He shouted while striking. The crowd looked on in awe.

“Don’t!” Midford tried to stop his house’s prefect. Such aggression and use of force against another student was strictly forbidden. It could result in not only in being expelled but also a prosecution.

Phantomhive dodged, the heavy strike crumpling the fallen book on the lawn.
“That is a rather large bookmarker, isn’t it…” Vincent snickered, stepping back, donning his coat.

“You bastard why didn’t you come to the preparations? You lazy, listless…” Diedrich continued to rant, the clubbing of a book enough to vent some of his anger.

Midford sighed, relieved that coming to actual blows had been avoided. The gathered crowd returned to their murmurings, half admiration, half curiosity. Some called others. But the shouting showdowns between the blue and green prefect were nothing new. Well… Diedrich shouted. Vincent usually shrugged, bubbly, and walked away, bouncing the insults with little damage.

“Huh... those were today?” He finally answered, smiling pleasantly.

“Stop playing dumb!” Diedrich roared, annoyed, ignoring the laughed apology. “Thanks to you I had to do it all myself.” That brought them straight back to the point that had made him storm out of the gazebo.

“How reliable of you.” Phantomhive answered, tilting his head, appraisingly for a moment, sitting on the fountain’s edge.

“Why is someone like you prefect…” the Green house prefect grumbled, glaring.

“What is a prefect like you speaks volumes of his house’s residents.” The German young man finished his tirade scathingly, derision filling his words.

“I don’t care about what you say or think of me.” The comment aimed towards others was enough to change Vincent’s demeanour. His expression turned serious as he spoke. “But would you please not talk badly of the blue house’s students?”

“The leader represents the ones he commands.” Caring little for the change of mood Diedrich continued. “If they obey you that means they are of no better ilk.” He finished his judgement.

Vincent Phantomhive grunted, annoyed, standing, glaring blankly.

“If you want to go that far why don’t we make a game of it?” he asked softly, loud enough to be heard. Met by curiosity Vincent continued his proposal. “Whichever dorm wins the tournament on June 4th… the loser will have to perform a request from the winner.” Simple terms. Betting was not out of bounds nor discouraged as long it did not involve money. “How about it?”

“Fine.” Diedrich tsk before attacking once more, pride tainting his words, startling Midford. “As if the green house would be defeated by the eternal losers. If I win I will make you step down as prefect.” Spelling out his revenge the prefect felt vindicated.

“Is that all?” Vincent smiled, standing, challenging. “You really have no other desires? Well then… I’ll have to think of something.”

“Don’t break your promise.”

“Same to you.”
“Of course things would not be that easy…” The marquis chuckled, patting Ciel’s back. “Vincent could take insults to himself but he took it very badly when those under his command were targeted.” Mouser shivered at that casual mention of the former Phantomhive’s personality. Sterling’s gang had been the one stepping all over that trigger. It had made it quite clear why the rule was to run and hide. “so when the game came…”

“No way... I...” Greenhill panted, exhausted, his players scattered around him in a similar condition. “The green house lost... how could we lose to the blue house?” He groaned as their adversaries cheered, celebrating.

“We did it! For the first time in Weston history we won!” Cheers and joy erupted all over as the celebrations dragged and Phantomhive was hailed as a hero.

“Phantomhive.” With the next day came the time to settle the wager. As usual Phantomhive was lazing about in the shade of the Swan Gazebo, reading. He glance over the paper of a letter and smiled.

“So you finally remember my name?” sitting up he poked fun at him. “Diedrich.”

Ignoring the jab Diedrich turned to formality.

“We lost.” Statement of truth. What was done was done and he had to abide by the rules. “As promised I will perform one request.”

“I did say that...” Phantomhive stood and approached, staring him in the eye. “Well I do have one. Become my fag.” He requested.

“What?” The ridiculousness of the request took a moment to sink in. “What are you saying? I’m from the green house, you are from the blue. Furthermore I am a prefect.”

“Tradition is tradition. A promise is a promise.” Phantomhive shrugged, not backing down before reason. “I won, correct?” Diedrich grunted, annoyed. That was true, it was also part of Weston’s traditions. “From now on when I call you will have to come, no questions asked.”

“Just how many months do you think there are left until graduation?” Diedrich shrieked, annoyed.

“Oh dear. Who said it was just until graduation?” Phantomhive answered with a carefree laugh, hopping on the moored boat.

“What do you... hey!” Diedrich gave chase as the small wooden sloop started to drift into the lake. “I am not done talking!”

“But I am!”

“Damn you Phantomhive!”
I finally got one. *Vincent chuckled as angry shouts followed, lying back on the boat, staring at the sky.* I’ve wanted one for the longest time. A faithful German hound.

*A sloshing in the water made him sit up, finding his new hound giving chase.*

“**Come back here this instant!**” he shouted.

“**Dieee you are ruining the mood...**” Vincent mocked.

“They were so friendly towards each other...” the Marquis finished his story. While most of audience was in shock, Macmillan was ecstatic and the marchioness was hiding a slightly odd expression behind her fan. Sebastian noticed it. Mouser tilted her head, pulling him down, whispering her suspicion. The demon nodded. It seemed very likely that that story was on a familial loop.

“My predecessor was in the blue house?” Ciel mumbled. It made a bit of sense in hindsight, seeing that the form for Ciel Phantomhive to attend Weston had been already prepared when they were digging through documents and loopholes to enter the school.

“To think that your daddy was the central figure in the Miracle!” McMillan exclaimed, shaking the boyo excitedly.

“I see... Ciel didn’t even know.” The marquis said with a soft expression.

“Father was a fag?” Lizzy whispered, shocked.

“So he is actually younger than Uncle Vincent...” Edward tried to place the pieces together.

“It was truly a brilliant game.” The Marquis encouraged Ciel, placing his hands on his shoulders. “I was such a hard thing to admit but we were utterly clobbered. You have the blood of a genius game strategist. Have faith in yourself and give it your best.”

“Something is starting!” Soma turned toward the platform where the Vice-Principal was trying to get the crowd’s attention once more for the next part of the ceremony.

Sebastian left the group to join the other teachers on the stage.

“I apologise for this slight delay.” He began in regards of his fall and temporary absence to deal with the bloodied head. “We will now decide the competition’s matches.” Wooden rectangles engraved and inlaid were shown to the audience. He turned to Clayton in the first row, nodding. “Please lend me your hat.”

*Keeping with the traditions, and for Fairness’ sake, the opponents are selected by drawing lots.* Ciel observed the moment, keeping his expression serious, glancing around, making sure no one noticed anything out of the ordinary. *But our opponents have already been decided.* It had taken some discussion to work out what was best but the final arrangement seemed to be the one that made it look more credible and gave the crowds a show. Fooling the audience was needed to look impressive and eligible for the Midnight Tea.

“The house masters step forward to draw.” The ceremony continued. Ciel smiled. Everyone’s
attention was on the stage. If I leave it to Sebastian there will be no doubt... The festivities, preparations? Don’t be foolish. The games have already begun. Fate, hope and luck? Miracles? Ridiculous. “I will now present the matches for the first round.” Agares announced. *I don’t believe in miracles. Victory will be snatched by force.* Ciel vowed to himself as the crowd reacted to the unfolding of events.
Chapter 124

They had had a few discussions as the event approached on how to distribute challenge in a way that maximized the show for the audience and the chances of Ciel being chosen for the tea party.

There was no doubt that the Green house had to be the ones to beat in the final. After all as the usual champions their defeat would be seen as a feat worthy of praise. That left them with two option. On one hand the one they had more chances of contending with by more mundane means, the Purple House. On the other the house that more often than not carved its way to the finals and faced the Green Lion. Because of that the result of a match between the Green and Red was less certain and thusly a less desirable pairing. But if the Blue house started the 4th of June with a victory against the Scarlet Fox it would make their final bid against the Green house all the more credible.

In normal circumstances it would be a big, uncertain and doomed to fail gamble even if the initial matching was created by simple odds and luck of the draw.

So there they were in an increasingly warm and oppressing day marching towards the field to play sports in front of a large crowd that, judging from last night’s reaction was largely dismissive of the blue house as a contender.

“First match of the cricket tournament will be between the Scarlet Fox and the Sapphire Owl!” The umpire announced to the crowd as the players gathered, standing face to face in the field’s centre. “We are ready to begin!”

The roar of the crowd was echoing already, reaching deafening pitches.

“How unlucky you ended up against us right away Lawrence.” Redmond teased, cocky smile, sure of the red house’s victory. To his dignity’s credit Bluer didn’t answer, masking a flinch under a grumpy glare.

“I might lose in chess but not in cricket.” Soma smiled widely, targeting Ciel, gleeful that he could showcase his talents.

“We shall see.” Ciel shrugged but kept a look of good sportsmanship in the challenging words.

The umpire tossed the coin, giving the field a moment of tension before he stepped back and went on with the announcements.

“The Scarlet Fox House fields first. Sapphire Owl House change into your vests.” As the players turned to do just that the man turned to the audience to clarify the rules and times. “In this tournament each match comprises of 2 innings of 20 overs.” As a glance showed him the students ready and in place he gave the sign. “Play!”

Immediately the cheer erupted as Soma stepped up, ball being tossed from hand to hand warming up.

_The elephant king vs a prefect!_

_Go Prefect!_

_Blue House! Blue House!_
“Ouch... this is bad.” Bard whispered, scratching his head under the floppy hat as three outs occurred in a row. The crowd was divided into laments, mocking and real cheer. Students sat on bleachers. The noble relatives and servants were seated around the field, under wide parasols, by round garden tables, on chairs or recliners, or on thick picnic blankets under the sun and under their hats.

“Why are the people of the blue house leaving the field so fast?” Finny asked, big eyes watching the field, pulling on his sleeve. Under the parasol McMillan and Lady Elizabeth looked on horrified, as was Meyrin. Paula looked a bit more determined. Tanaka sipped his tea with no concerns.

“When someone knocks over the wickets behind the batter is called bowled. They are out on the spot.” Bard explained, not looking away from the poor excuse of a game being played a few metres away. “Also out if the ball is caught without bouncing. And out if the wicked is knocked over when the batter is out of the crease.”

“So this was a complete disaster.” Finny whispered sadly.

“The blue house is really rubbish at sports. Such a pathetic bunch of weaklings…” Meyrin nodded dejectedly.

“That is very mean miss!” McMillan whined, truly hurt and attempting to defend the tattered remnants of his house’s honour.

“We must cheer for them!” Lizzy proclaimed proudly if a bit frazzled. “Ciel! Do your best!” She cheered, cupping her hands next to her cheeks, trying to make the sound move forward.

“The Young Master is not even playing yet...” Bard mentioned, a bit embarrassed.

“Now that you mention it Bard…” Meyrin adjusted her glasses, peeking under the frame. “Why are there only two players from the blue house?”

“We came all the way here to cheer on the Young Master.” Finny agreed, pouting.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know the rules at all...” when met by a pair of guilty giggled Bard tskd and started to explain. And of course, as a good American should he had to mention baseball despite its lack of popularity. It was not until he delved into an inning’s length that the pair interrupted in shock.

“So Long?!” Finny exclaimed, eyes widening.

“Five days for a match?” Meyrin almost choked on shock, stammering.
“You think?” Bard chuckled, grinning as the crowd cheered around them. “That is why they are not switching based on how many times the players are dismissed but on bowls. It’s a somewhat new rule. One match has 2 innings and one inning is made of 10 overs, about sixty bowls or so, for a total of 20 overs…” Bard lit another cigarette and chuckled. “They’ll get to the finals today, don’t worry.”

“And since cricket is a long game we have tea breaks every two hours.” McMillan piped into the conversation, assuring the pair with a smile.

“How refined.” Meyrin answered, looking dreamy and charmed.

“And as the Phantomhive chef I made a special meat pie.” Bard announced, pulling the picnic basket from behind his back, opening it to showcase a misshapen, overcooked and somehow charred pie, oozing darkish sauce and topped with things there were surely not meat, all the while sporting a proud look and an easy chuckle. “Here!”

“That is...” Finny hesitated, shuddering.

“If Lady Elizabeth eats this...” Meyrin whispered, fearful. poisoning... the newspapers, the Midfords! The Yard! “What do we do...”

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*What is going on over there with that lot I wonder...* Sebastian considered, glancing at the group, frowning slightly. *Ah. Switching already... and they only scored 21 points.* It was going as poorly as predicted. The Red house was no pushover and Soma had added an advantage the Young Master had refused to admit. To that was added the fact that the Red team kept Soma playing, creating further misfortune for the Blue House.

“My turn.” Redmond stated, stepping forward calling forth a wave of giggles and female cries of excitement. “I’m ready.” He stated dramatically as he stepped up, bat ready.

“Redmond...” Bluer groaned, turning to player bowling. “Get ready Howard!” the other player nodded, throwing the ball, groaning with effort, glasses falling askew.

*Slow...*

*What’s up with that meek ball!*

*Smash it back!*

*No...* Redmond’s eyes narrowed. *This was on purpose. Fast balls are hard to hit but if you do they become long balls. Slow balls are the opposite. He bowled slow to prevent a long ball. However...* It was sound strategy and he had noticed from the start that the blue house was putting more effort into their play. He adjusted his stance, ready to undo their strategy. *The speed of a ball makes no difference to me.*

*Look! That stance!*

*The Crimson Tornado.*

*Woah! It’s a boundary six!*
Nice Redmond!

It’s like he is dancing!

The crowd went wild as Redmond’s spun, hitting the ball, turning the slow into a long shot.

“He really is my nephew...” Druitt’s voice cut proudly through the crowd.

*By spinning around he uses centrifugal force to hit like a slog shot. Quite remarkable that he can keep the meet point despite the spin. It shows skill. And that meant the blue house had even less chance because they were hiding their strategies in hope of advancing further. Which meant second part had to be resolved just as plotted by his meddling. The young Master’s grim expression confirmed it as Bluer attempted to rally the players to continue that one-sided struggle of a match.*

Oh... it is a pretty much one-sided match...” Lau considered, watching the field through a narrow path that lead behind the stands where the crowd watched. RanMao leaned against him for a moment before stepping back towards the carriage, helping the other girls set up. “but you still have a card up your sleeve, don’t you Earl?”

No sooner than the boards were in place a small crowd of gentleman approached.

“You... give me a red card.” One demanded.

“A safe bet I see.” Lau dived into his cheery speech, encouraging the bets, the boards showing odds.

“Red for me too.” Another demanded as they gathered, waving money and papers with promises.

“Yes, yes.” His girls distributed the pieces of numbered red paper that confirmed the bed as he announced his purpose, drawing more people to lose their money. “It only happens once a year! Are there no brave men willing to bet blue?”

“Blue Lau.” Mouser asked, breaking the man’s voices, creating a murmur of patronizing and soothing comments. She looked around with a smile at all the people whose money would soon belong to her... and Lau. “One should support her husband’s team, no?” She said softly, receiving some polite remarks of good wifely duty and attracting a few of the ladies that had been reproachfully glaring at their husbands to bet just a bit, just a bit more money trickling into the pool.

“Uphm... gambling in this holly grounds...” An elderly lady complained from the stands, loud enough to be met with socially correct support. Support that then sneaked away to place their own bets.

“He has not changed at all...” Sebastian sighed, shaking his head.

Mouser returned to her spot, a parasol that was being held by a red house student instead of its inanimate support, a cushioned divan she had somehow sneaked out of the resting salons, a blue house student rushing to serve refreshments. Another student with green colours that should be watching his house’s game was gripping a blue summer lace fan, blushing. She waved the blue paper happily, motioning an all’s well, before sitting and slouching with her books.
Chapter 125

Predictably the half time came with a crushing and humiliating score for the Blue team so the
doom and gloom feeling around the meal was only understandable as the team discussed strategy in
an attempt to salvage what they could. The sympathetic looks of fags and students that were
helping the staff with the food only added to the hopelessness. The first years were exceptionally
bad, every year, without fail, disappointed by their own house.

“I’ll be the bowler in the second half.” Bluer stated, determined.

“Were we not saving that for the finals?” Ciel intervened, concerned for the smooth running of his
plan.

“But if we lose here there will be no final.” The Prefect countered, already showing some despair.

“We still have half a game. There is still a chance.” There was no way he was going to allow all his
efforts to be wasted by a sudden onslaught of self-doubt, as correct as it may be.

“In any event we can’t let them score more points.” Bluer relented a bit, turning. “Don’t you agree
coach?” he paled when confronted by an outer coat, glasses and beads draped over a chair.
“Coach?” the confused shriek made everyone look and join in on the panic. “Where is professor
Michaelis?” Bluer voiced the question, looking around frantically.

“Maybe he went to the lavatory.” Using the mundane excuse was a good way to settle the team
despite Clayton’s timing protests. Ciel waited for a moment longer for the murmurs to die down
before continuing. “In any event we should not change our strategy without the coach’s approval.”
Once again the blind obedience bred into those students was serving is purpose. He cut further
protests by completing his thoughts, giving his voice a demanding veneer. “I will be the next
player. Please leave it to me.”

“Do you have a plan?” such certainty in his tone calmed and convinced Bluer, the Prefect leaning
back, settling down on his chair, picking up his tea.

“Yes.” Ciel nodded. “I’ll secure the first steps of our counterattack.”

In contrast the spirits were high, reflected in the chatter of the Red house students as they aided
their team. Such distraction made it easier to walk in amidst the flurry of similarly dressed that
carried food, plates, cups and trays. Not a single glance was wasted on the aid unless they had a
clear message to convey. It was a simple matter. As Mouser had said lordlings were bred to ignore
those that served them and the usually high amount of serving people in one house with no loyalty
to them made it easier to sneak and blend. So placing down a domed tray and absconding with a
lone pie was easy.

“We are going to win. It’s so obvious.” Pouring the tea was underway as the boy nodded,
completing the looping conversation and comment of his team’s performance.

“Well, no surprise there.” Another laughed as he sorted the china, readying cup after cup for his
companion’s task.
“Stop talking. We have to prepare...” a third one arrived, a bit annoyed, picking up a platter of neatly cut sandwiches, glancing around. “Where is the meat pie?” he asked after a short pause and a brisk look about.

“Did they forget to put it there?” cups and pouring paused, ready to help.

“Isn’t it this here?” A new arrival lifted a silver dome, revealing the missing savoury dish.

“Who moved it there?” the one who had noticed the absence shook his head.

“Let’s cut it and take it to the players.” The new arrival shrugged and began to work.

“Are you done with the tea?” yet another boy arrived with a tray, starting to place poured cups on it, counting.

“This is being as easy as taking a stroll.” Redmond commented, stretching leisurely.

“The real adversary is the green house.” Sutton from his year answered with a chuckle, sitting up as the food arrived. As a senior he had years of experience in the field and an extra one of watching the blue house’s defeat.

“Sorry for making you wait.” Harcourt announced, leading the helping group with a wide smile, carrying one of the trays laden with dainty plates and slices of pie.

“Looks delicious.” Soma perked up, eying the treat. “Is it beef? My religion forbids me from eating beef.”

“No. It’s chicken.” Harcourt answered with a smile, having noticed the lighter colour of the meat in the filling while another of the boys looked thoughtful, trying to remember what the kitchen staff had labelled the pie as.

“That is very considerate of the cooks. Give me the biggest piece then.” Soma demanded cheerfully.

“I’ll let Harcourt bowl on the second half.” Redmond then turned to strategy, smiling to his fag.

“With those skinny arms?” Soma sounded doubtful, checking his teammate. Even in practice he had not seen Harcourt play that much.

“As a gentleman I’m giving the blue house a bit of a courtesy edge.” Redmond answered with a mischievous chuckle.

The call to return to the field was issued when Sebastian returned from his scheduled detour, finding a team that was mostly buzzing with the dread of the predicted incoming defeat.

“Coach! Where were you?” Clayton shouted, the group crowding him almost immediately, barely allowing him room to don the outer coat.

“My apologies I went to the lavatory.” Which he had indeed walked through just to be able to say it within the contract.
“For how long!” Another panicked student protested only to be silenced by the second call and the return to the field.

“Bottom half. Second inning.” The Umpire announced, the crowd back on their seats, staring at the field. The players took their places, tensing. “Start.” The shout was sudden as he back away. Cheering re-started in earnest.

“Let’s do our best Phantomhive.” Harcourt smiled, offering a gentlemanly encouragement.

“Of course, Harcourt.” Playing along Ciel prepared the bat to strike.

Mouser checked the clock inside her sleeve. Jules had said fifteen to thirty minutes, stretching as long as forty to account for the different natures. An eager first year scampered away when Sebastian approached, sitting on an empty chair next to her, under the shade, with a good view of the game. The boy that held her parasol looked away and the one with the fan excused himself, darting away to join the spectators.

“Impatient my dear?” Sebastian teased, taking her hand, exposing the wrist, brushing his lips lightly against it. Beneath the skin that still retained the tan from the streets and the scars from the orphanage her pulse quickened. Her claws brushed his cheek before she pulled her hand out of his grip. The roles allowed a little but society did not let much more.

“You are a fine one to talk dearie.” She hissed, staring at the spot he had kissed before allowing a smile to spread, vanishing next as she scanned the crowd. “That man is not deigning to make an appearance. I have spotted Agares a couple of times, doing the polite rounds.”

“You are wondering if our efforts are not being wasted?” Sebastian inquired in a lower tone. Mouser grimaced and stared at the game.

“Ooh. What a lovely match.” Druitt announced loudly to those around him, receiving the expected murmurs of agreement. “But I think I’ve seen the boy in the eyepatch somewhere before...” While the Viscount’s memory did not serve him Mouser frowned. She glanced upwards for a moment, wondering.

Harcourt’s throw was flawlessly executed, creating a spin effect. The boyo was able to defend, looking both surprised and winded. Simply put one of the boys knew how to use his scrawny arms. The other was just standing with a stick and flapping like a silly goose.

“That was a nice one.” Soma nodded, surprised.

“Well he is my fag, after all.” Redmond stated proudly.

“He is just defending.” Clayton whispered in disappointment. Still to Ciel’s credit he was managing a rather solid defence.

“No, wait...” Bluer hesitated for a moment, watching. *His eye... he hasn’t given up yet.*

*He is completely unable to guess the course. So he cannot strike back.* Redmond examined the game. They could win the match fast if the counteract started at once.
“Deliver the final blow Harcourt.” The Prefect instructed, receiving a serious nod from his fag.

*Sorry Phantomhive. This is the end.* Harcourt readied the ball. The debt he owed Phantomhive meant nothing in the field. As a gentleman they should do their best. And as a gentleman he would also not take advantage of Phantomhive’s injured eye and obvious blind spot. He began the wind up when a sharp pain brought him to his knees.

The crowd’s sound died down before growing into whispers, speculation, worry as the boy curled over himself on the field.

“What happened Harcourt?!” Redmond’s shout was laced with concern, his expression growing more and more worried and confused as the other players started to fall as well, clutching their stomachs.

“What... what’s going on?” Soma looked around, at a loss.

“My stomach...” Soon enough the Prefect understood what was ailing his teammates. A sharp pain, twisting bowels. Impending doom.

*It seems their time has run out.* Ciel lowered the bat, grinning slightly, glancing towards Sebastian, acknowledging the task’s completion. Sebastian’s expression did not change. Mouser was sporting the same proud, wide, goofy grin she had shown when Ciel had started to lay out several cheats that needed outside assistance for future use. *Battling is not the only way to counterattack. Did you enjoy the meat pie filled with super strong laxatives?*

*We can’t disgrace ourselves here!*

*Let’s withdraw!* 

A dash for dignity started amidst the Red House players as they left the field. And then...

*Wait someone was left behind!*

“I’m coming!” Despite his own state Redmond attempted to go back.

“Don’t be rash! You’re the prefect...” Jones stopped him, keeping him from rushing to his prone un-moving fag, displayed on the centre of the field, a pained expression on his face clutching the grass.

It was unfortunate that Harcourt’s force of was overcome and will shattered into a squeaked moan that deepened the shocked silence of the crowd cut by the Red team cries for their fallen friend, followed by further cries as they scampered away and Soma, unaffected went to the younger student’s aid, dragging his limp body out of the field, trying to ascertain if he needed more help.

*Quel tragedy! What a thing to happen to such a fine boy...* Druitt had to add his comment to the unfolding of the unfortunate event.

After yet another moment of empty shock the umpire cleared his throat and declared the match’s result.

“Due to the inability of the Scarlet Fox Cricket Team to continue the match it will be considered a forfeit. The winner of the first match is the Sapphire Owl Cricket Team.”

It took a moment but then the sound of shock and celebration echoed.
“You placed a bet on the green vs. purple as well?” Sebastian asked as they walked behind the bleachers, away from the confusion to fulfil the remaining tasks, carrying a picnic basket. A quick investigation had given him what he needed to know about what had agitated Meyrin and Finny early on. Yet another blunder to fix.

“It is almost as sure a bet as the Blue house winning all.” Mouser shrugged, counting the gains she had just claimed for Lau. The demons just chuckled and commented no further.

“Mr. Tanaka.” Sebastian greeted the former Phantomhive butler.

“Professor Michaelis.” Tanaka answered, entering the masquerade. “Mrs. Michaelis.” The old man teased.

“What a perfect timing. Take this for lunch.” He offered the basket and the nicked savoury dish inside. Tanaka took it, peeking inside.

“Oh, thank you. Minced beef pie.” Then the old man stared at them shrewdly, smiling. “But let me make sure... can you confirm that we will not become sick after eating it?” Sebastian’s face went blank for a moment before containing a laugh, coughing into a gloved fist to regain his usual composed demeanour.

“Of course.” He assured Tanaka with a nod.

“I’m looking forward to the next blue miracle.” The old man said in lieu of goodbye, walking away to rejoin his group.

“Certainly.” Sebastian answered quietly. “It seems to be hereditary.”

“His father was about as saintly as I am.” Mouser whispered, noticing as well that the old man knew full well what had once been. Chances were the marchioness knew as well if she had interpreted her face correctly when the Marquis had started his recollections. “But he had a sense of humour.”

“Hmmm... so good. You never disappoint Bard.” Lizzy praised the chef as she dug into a slice of the pie. McMillan nodded, taking a sandwich. Soma had joined the group as his team had to be dealing with the sickness. Lau and RanMao had also claimed a spot on the covers.

“Naww, it’s nothing.” Bard statement was proud, a slight blush spreading. Then he looked down, frowning a bit. “Although I think it looks rather different from the one I baked... oh well” Suspicion aside and Bard happily went about eating.

“Where did Bard’s pie go to?” Finny whispered, concerned.

“Does it matter? We should just be glad it is gone.” Meyrin took the practical approach to the issue as Tanaka chuckled.
“By the way is your stomach all right prince?” Lau turned towards the Prince who was happily polishing sandwich after sandwich.

“It seems the Red team’s stomach aches were caused by the food served at teatime.” McMillan added the bit of gossip he had learnt moments ago, looking concerned.

Caught a bit by surprise it took Prince Soma a moment to answer.

“No need to worry.” He smiled proudly. “I have got my health due to Shiva’s protection.”

“That is very convenient.” Lau bobbed his head, his expression unchanging. “Maybe I should convert.” Lau mumbled.

Sebastian sighed in relief, seeing the Phantomhive party seemed to be well taken care of.

However a slight frown creased his brow.

“I heard that people from India have very strong stomach.” The demons mentioned, calculating. Mouser lowered the opera glasses with which she had been once again sifting through the crowd, looking for their main target. If they could just speed all that along without the random nonsense of the tea party... “I did not think they would be that strong.”

“Jules swore by the formula.” The thief mentioned. “Maybe it’s the spices combined in Agni’s curries. Some sort of undocumented reactions.” Sebastian shook his head, dismissing the issue. Whatever it had been it was no longer of any use.

Cheers echoed, coming from the other field.

“It seems the other match is picking up pace as well.” The demon noted.

“Can we peek?”

Fancy moves, powerhouses and an absent-minded Prefect doing whatever he wanted artistically with the lawn. A flawless victory for the Green Lions as expected. Once more Greenhill was being ignored for the sake of Violet’s artwork. And once again the Marquis enthusiasm about that apparent second coming of a rare miracle was met by the Marchioness’s hidden and somewhat embarrassed and suspicious expression.

Unfortunately their target had not favoured that game either.
Chapter 126

The pre-game jitters were the dominant mood in the green team’s waiting room. Of course the victory, irregular as it was, had left them with a faint idea that there was a small fading chance to redeem the house’s reputation. Yet the reality of who they were up against was threatening to crush what little spirit they had managed to gather. The same old doubt was corroding their will. And all of that was highly counter-productive for the plan Ciel needed to see executed. So he attempted to be encouraging. Or manipulative. It rather depended on where one was standing.

“Let’s win.” Ciel stated, making sure his voice carried the correct amount of belief and persuasion. “For the Scarlet Fox as well, who were regretfully withdrawn.” Just a little addition of gentlemanly sportsmanship and respect for a fallen adversary. It should be enough to wring a decent performance out of those particular pawns. Watching the murmurs that grew and the faces that looked a smidge more determined it had been.

The newly found resolve did not falter even when facing the orderly line of war-ready meatheads. To their credit flinching was kept at a minimum as the crowd buzzed with excitement and the umpire approached.

“We will now commence the deciding match. Sapphire Owl versus Green Lion.” The man announced as the preparations for the game came to an end.

Lizzy fidgeted and slid closer to the edge of her seat.

“It’s like the adults versus the children.” The gentlemanly half f a nearby couple commented in derision.

“I wonder if it will even be worth watching.” The lady chuckled behind her fan, moods matching.

“Ciel! Do your best!” The young lady shouted, drowning her annoyance into heartfelt encouragement. Unfortunately Edward had no temperament to share attention, sputtering in outrage interrupting the exchange, half turning with a horrified shout, slightly breaking formation.

“Midford that’s unsightly.” Greenhill scolded calmly.

“... we will wipe the floor with you!” An angry Edward gritting his teeth hard enough to be audible turned to Ciel.

“Please do go easy on us.” Ciel hesitated answering to the threat while trying to smile. It came out as an odd combination of fearful and nauseated.

“Start!” The umpire gave the go-ahead.

“I will not hold back.” Greenhill nodded solemnly.

“I’m honoured.” Bluer answered in the same fashion as the teams took their places.

“Well then, as their coach let me put my all into cheering.” Sebastian turned away from the playfield, facing the Blue house members recruited because they had a modicum of talent with an instrument. Of course they had been enthusiastic to join as soon as the Prefect had explained their purpose. “Everyone get ready.”

“Music as cheering?” The green dorm Housemaster was no different than his students. “How boorish. What is Mr. Michaelis thinking?” the complaint was accompanied by a scowl.

“I see the green house cannot even enjoy a bit of music.” Undeterred Sebastian raised the baton, nodding to the students. “The Radetzky march.” Announcing the first piece overlapped the notes with the start of the game.

The first throw left the crowd in shock as the Blue team player was truly able to hit and score. Elation and shock, loud cheers and encouragements. Some booing and dismissal as a fluke, a freak chance. Surprised scrambling and a bit to regain focus on the Green team that had been expecting little resistance or challenge. And yet... five more players scored. Edward’s eyes widened gradually as the scoring continued.

Even though he is swinging with a bent back he managed to hit his Heinz’s fastball. He focused on the movements, trying to pinpoint why they were being crushed. Clayton was up next. What? His eyes are closed... what is going on... how can he hit like that?

“I have a proposition for you.” Ciel spoke up, commanding attention in the first strategy meeting. While physical training had been progressing as well as expected there was more to discuss.

“What is it Phantomhive?” Bluer gave him permission to expose his plan. The group hushed, waiting.

“I will be frank.” Bluntness would serve him better than sugary words in that moment. “I do not believe the blue house has the physical strength to endure fastballs.” Despite the protests no one actually challenged the notion. “That is why I thought we don’t have to watch the ball.” Ciel walked towards the blackboard and sketched the basics of that particular strategy. “Since the cricket is all about taking the wicket it’s likely that the ball will pass through a range of about 28 inches high and 9 inches wide.” Math, probability, calculations. That they understood. That was familiar, that was the stepping stone of his plan to make them play the way he needed them to. “So if you swing the bat in that vicinity at the right time theoretically we would hit it.”

“As if we could know when to swing the bat if you are not looking...” Someone protested.

“You can.” Calmly Ciel clapped his hands to rid himself of the chalk dust, facing the group. “If you listen for it. We’ll have a signal at the right time to swing the bat. The batsman just has to swing accordingly.”

“Can we do that?” Wayne piped in, surprised.

“Yes. In fact I already...” Ciel continued, taking that reaction as a good sign.

“No.” Bluer interfered, serious and uncompromising. “If the bowler and the batsman are not facing each other in earnest it’s not cricket.”
“Is that so.” Ciel’s voice grew cold and flat. Bluer seemed taken aback, confusion aiding Ciel’s point. He lost no time in striking to make his idea as attractive as possible. “We are putting our pride on the line. Our pride as the Blue house is what we risk when we face the other teams. So it would be only a matter of courtesy to give them everything we’ve got. We have tactics. Green house has power. It would not be honourable for us to fight them with power.” Impassioned was not his usual style but after listing the arguments it was rather needed for persuasion’s sake. “The blue house is physically weak.” While they flinched and looked away they did not protest. “That is why we should work on strategy, work within the limits, think of ways to be within the rules and still have a chance to win and to truly challenge them with everything we’ve got.”

Bluer was speechless for a moment. Then he relented, nodding.

“Very well, I understand. So what is this signal?”

The successful strikes continued to the sound of music. The Green team was dumbfounded, scrambling, each attack counteracted and loosing points, opportunities.

Their swings are ridiculous but the timing is right. Greenhill considered, arms crossed, expression serious.

What kind of trick are they using... Edward looked around, searching for weaknesses, for clues, jumping when the loud sound of the cymbals echoed. Seconds after the sound of wood meeting ball clapped and the cheering of the blue house confirmed yet another point scored. Turning, seeing the disguised Sebastian in charge of the small cheering band, listening to yet another hit echoing the sharp sound of the metal amidst the musical score

“I see...” The words slipped out, bitter.

“So you have noticed as well.” Greenhill answered in all seriousness, staring ahead. “They really worked hard.”

“That’s right. We cannot allow them to use mu...” Caught up on his discovery Edward started to discourse. “what?” the break as the prefect’s words sunk deflated his remarks, dissolving the objections into silence. He is far too trusting. Another reason to not let him know. With a small resigned sigh Edward came to a decision. “Greenhill will you allow me to go next?”

“We took 40 points. And it is still our turn.” Clayton was impressed.

“Let’s try to gather more while we can.” Ciel nodded, satisfied.

In the brief respite Edward came up to throw, looking less than pleased.

“What a dirty trick. It does not befit a gentleman.” He grumbled, just loud enough to be heard, winding up. “I won’t let you get away with it!”
The motions he flowed through acquired a peculiar sequence.

That did not go unnoticed by the public. The ones that had watched the previous game recognized it for what it was and reacted as excitedly as one would expect when Cheslock’s famed Purple Burnout was being used by someone from the opposite team that could not have witnessed it more than a handful of times. The ball left in force bouncing and shooting pass the swinging bat, slipping past the angle that had been calculated as likely.

Mouser groaned, annoyed. That had broken the possibility of a speedy resolution of that fairly boring and frankly too hot affair. Ciel’s mouth hung open in surprise. Sebastian glanced over his shoulder, noticing the failure in the strategy’s follow-through. Lizzy stared at her big brother, torn. The green house’s cheers echoed.

Edward sighed, allowing a small self-satisfied smile to spread. Cheslock’s move was brilliant, performed by someone with high manual dexterity. To be able to replicate it, as clumsily as he had performed that first attempt... *I’m just an ordinary person.* He readied himself again. This time he should try to imprint a smoother top spin. Better, smoother, emulating Cheslock. *When I was 10 my little sister who had just started sword training wiped the floor with me. I’d be lying if I said I was not frustrated. But I didn’t lose hope. In front of me was a true genius. The genius sister became the model for her ordinary brother.* Another hit bowled the blue team’s wicket, beating their trick once more. *This school is the same. Everyone applies themselves to their talents in different areas. So I have to work hard so I can come closer to the genius I admire.* The spin of the purple burnout was still off, too slow. It was effective but still too far from its creator’s grace. But it was enough for now. *After it bounces the speed and height increases, often at random. There is no way to signal that. I’ve defeated the orchestra.*

Greenhill smiled slightly, noticing his fag’s focus.

An ordinary person. That is what he is thinking. The prefect shook his head, amused as he noticed the telling expressions. *He is not jealous of other people’s talents but genuinely respects them. With them as models he tries to emulate with unwavering effort. Full respect. That is your talent, your genius.*

To think he would see through the trick so quickly. Sebastian continued conducting glancing back for a moment. *He is quite something.* Something to remember and to be sure to address in the future. Then let’s use our next scheme. They had plans ready for most of the possibilities so theoretically it should be...

“Look the principal!” The murmurs of excitement filled the field as they spotted the man on the veranda, overlooking the game. Sebastian glanced at the Young Master, waiting for confirmation. Ciel nodded. The plan was to be kept if the man appeared. Mouser was looking through the opera glasses, having spotted him as well.

“McMillan.” Sebastian called the blue house student, tossing the baton and glasses at him when he responded. “I’m leaving the rest to you.” The demon stated, dashing away, leaving a confused first year sputtering in shock, getting rid of the cumbersome clothes of a teacher as soon as he was sure no one was observing him.

Ciel smiled slightly, glancing at the balcony. *So you finally show yourself. If we can capture him
everything will be solved. Go, Sebastian. I'm trusting you with this. But to be safe he still had to focus on the game that without the cue and due to Edward’s efforts had been turned.

The Green team was recuperating. The Blue team was slightly bewildered because of the signal and the coach’s disappearance. Which once again was covered by the use of the common needs of any human.

“We couldn’t hit anything without the support after all.” Clayton sighed as the time to change came.

“Yeah...” Ciel nodded, sighing. We’ll have to fight on our own from here on out.

Sebastian reached the veranda and as he peeked through the open double doors he only saw Agares’ back. He’s gone? Where on earth... carefully he approached the railing, scanning the area, searching. The Headmaster was now talking to some of the nobles on the field. how... when did he go over there? The demon turned and went towards the field. Mouser on the other side of the field had stood from her seat ready to aid in the hunt.

The Green house was ready to respond and recover, cheering to each other, encouraging and challenging. Sebastian was not back. The Blue house would be in trouble if they allowed any recovery. Ciel’s shoulder twitched as he surveyed the field, sighing, spotting who he needed to signal. I’m reluctant to use it but it seems we’ll have to go with that strategy. He whipped his arms, warning the target.

The game resumed. Weak throws were met by hesitation and hastily corrected strikes. Confusion reigned on the sidelines. The public kept their cheering and enthusiasm high, loud and unawares. The blushing faces of the batsman were plainly visible. Ciel allowed himself a satisfied chuckle.

“What? Call Lau on the 4th?” The boyo frowned as they discussed the latest cheats, placing the tea cup down, frowning, trying to place that particular piece of the puzzle into a comprehensible position.

“Yes. Their support will be of great value.” Sebastian answered, calm and collected.

“Support? What support?” he was still not grasping what he meant.

“Well...” Sebastian exchanged a smile with Mouser. The thief chuckled, appreciating the expression that went from disinterest to full-fledged blush in a matter of seconds as Sebastian leaned and explained the gist of the request to a shocking degree of planning and striking detail.
“What! I... don’t think it’ll help that much...” The boyo coughed, trying to recover from the flush.

“Well this is not very sophisticated but we believe it will work like a charm on these sheltered boys. Especially considering their reaction to a fully-clothed Mouser.” Said fully clothed woman chortled and winked. “Although it might be a little too soon for the young master.”

“We disagree on that point.” Mouser mentioned casually, giving him the Funton documents for the new products’ development that awaited his signature.

Edward was once more at a loss of what was happening as he walked towards the batting spot. It could not be a trick that time. There was no music. Their throws were amateur at best, child-like at worse. Is everyone strained because of the finals? There should be no reason for the weak bats and he was I have to set an example as the prefect’s fag. He got ready. The blue team threw the ball. There is nothing special about this throw... so why is everyone failing? I’ll settle this! Fairly confident of the strength needed for a good play Edward began to riposte only to freeze stare, barely recovering enough to hit.

The ball bounced about harmlessly, easy to catch. Confusion was etched both on Lizzy’s and Greenhill’s faces.

“Even you? That ball was easy!” Greenhill chastised him,

“Sorry!” Edward apologised, lowering his head, blushing, confused, returning staring beyond the blue house player towards the group of women under a parasol smiling, displaying bare legs in a show that he had not witnessed since the Campania. What’s with that? That shameless group... so this is why everyone is distracted? Wo....women displaying their legs so prominently? Short clothes, bare legs stretching and playing in the air, displayed to the sun. K....know some shame! And when the ball came he was not ready. Damn... I need to focus! Each angle was more and more awkward. Wha! Another throw and he almost fell as a pair of women moved in tandem, stretching their legs towards their bosoms, the skirts moving dangerously up.

“Young master Edward...” Paula whispered, nervous amidst the cheer.

“What has gotten into big brother?” Lizzy noted, eyes narrowing, confused. She had seen him practice so many time... He had never been clumsy...

It’s effective. A satisfied smile was still plastered on Ciel’s face as the ploy proved its value. The blue house students and their bad eyesight miss the details. The game paused and Greenhill approached, determined to change and redeem his Team. But now we’ll see if it works against Greenhill. It took very little. It was actually the only player to let the wicket be knocked down while he looked around, red-faced, bat swinging upwards and freezing in uselessness. It works even better on him. Ciel noticed, amused. To think such a stupid strategy would work this well... I guess it’s to be expected from a demon who knows all about human desires. We’ll keep pushing them like this so they won’t score.
Mouser was looking around, bewildered. She could have sworn the headmaster had been there a moment ago... It was not possible to disappear in the short amount of time it took to cross the field through the outer ring.

Sebastian arrived, his pace faster still, having crossed the space between the balcony and the field in a matter of minutes, still keeping it fairly human-like. They exchanged a confused look, both turning towards the other side of the camp where the target was talking to another group of nobles.

The commotion starting to brew around Lau split their attention. Without a word they separated. Mouser to care for the field situations, Sebastian to give chase.

“I told you to leave!” Security was part of any event that involved nobility. The college had his own privately funded force to defend the noble offspring and that particular one had been ordered to focus on the Chinese man and his girls. Lau of course was playing the odd foreigner

“So sowy. Me no understand Engrish so good.” Lau babbled, hands up, smiling wide and innocent.

“It’s forbidden to watch the game in such lecherous clothing!” The guard scolded, dragging him away, towards the betting carriage, allowing them to stay as long as they did not return to the field. And sold him a green ticket.

I didn’t expect the guards to check so soon. But it doesn’t look like the green house protested. So who did? Ciel groaned and looked up, checking the score. It had worked but not for as long as he wished.

“10 overs. Change sides.” The Umpire announced.

“It seems we escaped a comeback but they gained more than we expected.” Clayton sighed, getting ready.

“We have to get some points now.” Ciel agreed, resigned. In theory it was still possible.

“I know how cowards think.” Maurice Cole stated in a huff, arms crossed as he proudly thwarted the little annoying imp that had destroyed his comfortable scheme. “And why was everyone losing their heads over those women?” He grumbled, chest puffing up further in outrage. “It’s stupid.”

“I’d offer to explain but I’m afraid in that field I’m mainly in the theoretical.” Mouser answered with a smile. The weasel jumped with a shriek that the crowd drowned, looking terrified. The thief caught him by the shirt, hoisting him up to keep Cole from running. “Incidentally...” She pulled the scissors out of the air behind her back, having stashed them with the secondary knives, opening them theatrically in plain view, head tilting with a wider grin. “Do you know how much
hairdressers, barbers and wigmakers pay for blond locks?”

“The second round is starting!” Greenhill rounded the team, trying to pump some spirit back into them while calming his hot red face. “Do not allow them to get any points!” The Green team answered with a roar of excitement and determination.

Bluer entered the field, determined, planting the bat on the ground, protecting the wicket with his body. The reverse grip caused some confusion and a remark from the umpire but he chose to hold it firm. They had practiced. They had planned.

“I think we have practiced enough with the orchestra.” Phantomhive stated, wiping the sweat off his forehead. Mr. Michaelis had been training them to answer to the signal of the cymbals without hesitation. Mrs. Michaelis had gleefully been pelting them with hard throws under the rule of either you hit, dodge or are hit. Her enthusiasm was as bruising as it was effective. “Let’s get to the next one.” He announced.

“There’s more?!” Clayton had been both surprised and terrified.

“Of course!” Phantomhive was blunt and demanding. “There’s quite a low chance for our strategy to go exactly as planned. We should set up a strategy that allows us to fight on if one strategy falls through.”

As sound an explanation as that was there was still one issue to discuss.

“But what will we do, as we lack strength to gain points?” Bluer managed to pose the question in-between exhausted huffs.

“It’s rather simple. We just won’t hit the ball.” Phantomhive explained, picking up the bat once more, adopting a protective stance, bat planted on the ground, legs bent wide apart, solid. “In swinging there is a chance to hit and a chance to miss. In cricket you combine that with the constant need to protect the wicket. So what would be the best form for batting? It’s protecting the wicket entirely with the bat and not swing at all.”

That explained the position he had adopted but for Bluer it circled back to the main issue.

“It might be safe but we won’t be able to hit the ball back. It’s a protective stance and so it lacks power.” The prefect reasoned. The rest of the team waited, collapsed but paying attention.

“It will be fine. We’ll have plenty power.” Phantomhive chuckled. “Since we are against the powerhouses of the green house.” He turned his head towards Mrs. Michaelis. “Ma’am...care to toss a hard one?”
As predicted, as exemplified the stance worked with minimum work. Two runs were scored on the strength of the rebound. Pride welled in Bluer. *I did it!* Even if his arms were trembling with effort and his legs felt like giving away. *In cricket you can hit in any direction. As long as the ball goes into an area with a weak defence you can earn runs. Also you can use the bowler’s power to your own advantage to make it fly off. The most important part is to have a grasp of the outfield positions and rebound the ball to the best place. All that theory, all those rules and yet only now... Everything is based on calculations. Phantomhive was right. We lack power. But we have a way to fight.*

The style that throughout training had earned the nickname Sword in the stone gave them a true edge, a way to recover, a steady string of runs. And as such the Umpire announced the change of sides and the break soon enough under the thunderous applause and approval of the crowd.

Gathering in the sidelines the Blue team compared impressions and reviewed the situation. Gaining points and having a strategy that had worked flawlessly had boosted their confidence once again. But no one was forgetting who the opponent was.

“We only have the last inning. Can we still win with this point difference?” Clayton voiced his worries.

“I think we can hold our ground as long as we have mine and Bluer’s strategies.” Ciel stated with confidence, prompting Bluer to finish the encouragement.

“But each will, most likely, only work once. Let’s give it all we’ve got!”

As they returned the enthusiasm of the crowd had intensified. The game restarted. The gap was closing and the chances were dwindling. Bluer groaned and turned towards Ciel. It was time.

“Next bowler. I’m counting on you Phantomhive.” He announced, patting Ciel’s shoulder, looking slightly bitter.

“Yes. I have been saving my strength all this time. I’ll make it work.” Nodding he walked to the centre of the field.

“Ciel is bowling!” Lizzy clapped, enthusiastic, having finally presented what she wanted to watch.

“Do your best Young Master!” The Phantomhive servants managed a cheer in one voice, standing, joining the hum and energy around them.

Mouser sat down once more on her spot and accepted a punch glass, frowning when she noticed Sebastian was not back yet. The boyo bowling meant that he wanted to deliver the finishing blow to the match, having dragged the spectacle for as long as it was beneficial to his status.

The crowd was abuzz.

“At the critical moment they are putting that runt in the bowler’s place...” Cheslock voiced the doubt in every mind. Bafflement that grew further as a couple of gestures made the other blue players approach, crowding the batsman. That seemed to throw him. There was tension and hesitation. It added to what needed to be done, a build-up to the final strike.
Strange... Sebastian considered as he chase the elusive Headmaster through the stone corridors, stopping before entering the tower and the stairs that framed every wall. to think he would be able to escape me. The target was currently walking up the stairs and keeping himself at awkward, blind angles. And it seems he is purposely walking away. It was no longer a suspicion nor an impression. It was a certainty. Deliberate. Did he notice my presence? As that though crossed his mind Sebastian decided to toss away the constraints, stepping forth, nimbly climbing the stairs by hopping floors. If so... there is no need to hold back. A high somersault turned into a sharp hunting dive, reaching like a bird of prey. Yet what should have been a solid contact, a definite capture evaporated into fabric and nothingness. What? He’s gone? Disappeared. Frowning Sebastian glanced around, doubting his senses, stretching them. Can’t even feel his presence. Mouser could be able to do so if he got to her fast enough, if the Headmaster chose to remain within the grounds. The demon’s expression turned grimmer, staring at sleeve on his hand. The only way this could be is probably...they had dismissed that first odd feeling as a coincidence, a remnant of a recent experience. Now he was growing convinced that there was more to all those little oddities. But at the moment there was no other choice. Let’s go back to the grounds. The principal might have returned there.

The batsman was confident in his ability to respond to anything the scrawny first year threw at him. Why would he not be? He was a senior. And the kid’s arms were laughably skinny. He was hardly a threat. The throw was arched and slow as expected. Yet the rebound made the ball shoot upwards, whooshing right at his head, triggering a defensive reaction. It whacked the bat, bounced on the ground and straight into the hands of a blue house player.

“Hey that’s dangerous! You have no control.” The batsman shouted, aggravated, receiving an immediate apology that calmed him somewhat. After all what could he expect from the blue house but clumsy tosses.

Yet to the confusion of the crowd and players the second ball behaved as erratically and with a similarly dangerous course, forcing a defence. It was with surprise and outrage that he received the “Out” Followed by an apology.

“Wait a second here! I was just evading a dangerous ball!” the protests seemed to be in vain as the play had been concluded but that did not stop his rant as he looked around, the discomfort increasing. Also how can you fail to throw it straight twice...” the batsman cut his own words short, looking around. Strange. There has been an odd feeling ever since he stepped up... come to think of it... this strange defensive position. The Blue House players were too close. Could it be... the bowler aims for the face. The fieldsman then catches the ball that is reflected by the bat. So that was their strategy from the start?!

It seemed the rest of the team had caught on as well, calling out the trick, claiming the rules were being broken, chiding, and booing echoed by the public. Through it the Blue House remained calm until Phantomhive spoke up, monotone, quiet and yet forcefully enough to be heard.

throws towards the wicket. The batsman tries to protect it. So of course the ball will pass through
the vicinity of the batsman.” Enunciating the basic premises of the game created the foundation of
the ploy’s motions. “This time my control was bad and it went flying towards the batsman’s face.
For some reason he swung and sent the ball flying.” Plain, simple, justifiable. “Then, by chance,
the player that happened to be near caught it with no bound.” Simple and within the rules. “So isn’t
it just one out?” He finished his explanation coolly. The Blue House seemed to have no objections.

“Well... it’s not against the rules but...” Edward struggled with concept, having to admit that in
theory there really was nothing wrong with the logic.

But for the team and the crowd it was simpler still as they claimed that in all fairness It was not
cricket. Not even the Blue house supporters seemed willing to disagree.

“Ciel...” Lizzy whispered in concern,

“So they caught on our Young Master’s evil personality...” Bard shrugged, unsurprised. Soma,
Meyrin and Finny reacted with shock. Tanaka simply watched on with a benevolent expression.

Mouser chuckled, her amusement cut short when Sebastian pulled her towards the stands, arms
around her waist, turning her to him, making sure they were hidden from sight. He had not yet
redressed in the disguise clothes and seemed rather aggravated and concerned for some reason.

“Search for him.” Sebastian asked, voice low, sparing no interest for the events unfurling on the
field. They were, after all well within the Young Master’s calculations.

“He escaped?” Mouser hissed, eyes widening before closing, the thief exhaling softly in
annoyance, searching. Her expression turned to a small dissatisfied grimace as she looked up and
then around.

“Quiet!” Greenhill’s booming voice cut through the jeers and complaints as he stormed through
the field, heading towards Ciel. “I won’t have you heckling during our sacred match. Unfair? How
can you in good faith Call Phantomhive underhanded? Are you blind?” Better than expected then.
Still surprising when Greenhill gripped his arm and shoved Ciel’s hand upward for all to see. “Can
you not see this!?” Bruised, calloused, chipped and worn. “This hand tells us everything about his
efforts. And his commitment. Throwing with precision towards a batsman face. Saying it is easy.
Doing so is rather hard. He must have done some heavy training to get this far.” While the defence
was being more vehement than expected Ciel felt a bit of pride at the praise. Sebastian had not
been any kinder than usual. Mouser had been no nicer. “That small boy from the physically weak
blue house came this far. Do you understand what this means? The owl came to hunt the lion in
earnest!” The mood was instantly changed from anger to begrudging respect and then to
enthusiasm as the Prefect continued his speech. “Is the green house so weak that we would lose to
a strategy?”

“No sir!” The team answered in tandem.

“Then let’s give our all and win!” Spirits restored for crowd and team the Prefects faced each
other. “I’m glad we can have this competition before our graduation Bluer.”

“Me too. Greenhill.” Bluer nodded, his expression softening.
The game resumed and a new batsman got ready. The strategy had been exposed, he believed. As long as I know where he is going to hit it’s easy. So he was completely caught off guard when the next ball came low and he barely avoided its contact with the wicket. That was when he understood. It had also been part of the strategy.

With the prior knowledge that Phantomhive aimed for the face he had prepared for a high ball. To react properly to a low ball in this tense situation is incredibly difficult. Phantomhive got ready to throw again. If the ball hits the batsman they won’t get a penalty. Not to mention no one, no gentleman, could imagine that there would be someone who purposely throws a dangerous ball. From his stance it was impossible to tell what kind of ball he would throw. If you defend it will be caught. If you attack it will be bowled. Like having a his back to a cliff and his front to a threat.

We kept them scoreless and got two out. Ciel took a deep breath, taking in the field. I’ve got one bowl left. My opponent is... Edward. Which meant that the strategy would most likely be useless from then on. The throw was like he had practiced. Edward reacted fast and was able to break the ploy and throw the ball back almost flawlessly.

The public cheered louder, impressed.

“Should I be happy or sad here?” Lizzy commented, torn.

“The young master is smiling.” Meyrin whispered, peeping under lifted glasses.

This strategy is powerless against a strong mentality and a high dynamic vision that overcomes fear. I knew it would not be able to suppress Edward. Well... it’s me bowling after all. Ciel considered. He was not the strongest arm available. Even considering we are still within our estimated boundary now there’s just...

“Well done Phantomhive.” Bluer interrupted his thoughts, stepping forth and ruffling his hair, claiming the pitcher spot. “Leave the rest to me. It’s been a year Midford. Back then you took thirty points. I’m going to change that around.” For show and for pride Bluer spoke as he took the ball and prepared to throw. “The 8th rule of Weston is that students will apply themselves without neglecting their studies or training. That is why this year we will win.” And he let the ball fly. It shot straight up, out of sight.

The students laughed, commenting on the general lack of prowess always displayed by the blue house. Just for show they said. Not good at anything but study.

Bluer took a deep breath, ignoring the confused Edward and the amused crowd. In the six years I’ve been a student here the blue house has never known any position but last in the tournament. For some reason this became natural. His team knew what he was doing. Phantomhive nodded in encouragement. But there was one student who thought differently. Even though he was smaller and weaker he only thought of winning. And to attain that goal he made an effort. When was it exactly that I started to get used to losing? As long as I excelled in studying it was fine to lose. But that was a lie. I want to win. As the prefect as the blue house, at my last tournament in the school. What I could do were calculations and tactics. And keep training so I would not lose to him.

The ball descended from its parabola perfectly straight, perfectly aimed as he walked away, crashing into the wicket, toppling it, the feat met with a roaring silence and a deafening cheer. Praise, incredulity, boasting, challenges.

“The ball... came back down?” Edward whispered, looking up in shock, still trying to understand. “How did he even throw that?”
“It’s a simple trajectory calculation.” Bluer commented smugly. “It comes straight down for the wicket from the sky with speed and no hesitation. Like the hunter in the dark!”

“As expected of you Bluer.” Greenhill advanced, ready to take Edward’s place “A calculated bowl.” The Prefect readied himself. “However there is no ball I cannot hit.”

The crowd was loving the scene. Prefect versus prefect. Brain versus brawn.

The throw was technically perfect. But Greenhill had not been boasting, throwing his arms and bat back, defending from above, the wood a few inches away from Ciel’s face, much to his discomfort. The ball that made contact with the bat was given no time to bounce, catapulted forward, flying like a bullet, crashing into the bleachers.

“It’s 105 to 103!” The result only made the cheering grow louder and the buzz of excitement became almost electric. Edward allowed himself to breathe again. It was a close result but they had the advantage. Greenhill was strong and to pull that kind of stance with balance and sight was the kind of thing that only the chosen can wield. Like Excalibur.

Bluer’s eyes that had widened in incredulity dulled in hopelessness. *I have trained and betted everything on this ball... to have it defeated this fast... I have nothing else left to challenge him with...*

“Bluer.” Phantomhive called him, returning the ball. “Have a go at it one more time.” He urged him, patting his arm in encouragement, smiling.

“It will not work.” The prefect shook his head, defeatist. “Do you want to let them get the runs just like that?”

“Bluer, I’m grateful.” Ciel began to say what was needed once more, satisfied with the current progress. “It was because you gave it your all that the blue house was able to stand united and do their best.” The other players had gathered around them, giving support, smiling proudly, knowing that that was farthest than they had come in a long, long time. “That is why I want you to throw without regrets. That is to say that, even if we lose I’m sure everyone feels the same. Please give us your very best throw.”

Bluer looked around. Hope in the blue house’s students. The green house enjoying the show despite being certain of their victory. *My last throw as a student. I’ll bet all in this. I will bet my honour as a blue house student on this final ball!*

The throw was hard, as practiced. Even if he was doing it like he always did that throw had to convey it all. The effort, the determination, the pride. Greenhill reacted, shuffling to adjust, throwing the bat back to respond to the arching descent. And amidst the powerful move the crowd and players gasped in horror as the bat accidentally slammed against Phantomhive’s forehead that had been in the wicket-keeper position, sending the smaller boy falling backwards with a bloodied gash.

“This will tie it.” The green house player shouted, still focused on the game. “With a run we’ll be even!”

Greenhill however ran toward the injured player that had cried out in pain, leaving the wicket defenceless, ignoring the game in favour of proper behaviour.

“Are you all right?” he asked, concerned.

Ciel gritted his teeth and stretched towards the ball, tossing it as the prefect reached him.
“Umpire!” Ciel groaned as the wicket fell and all looked on in shock. As the green house player batting along with Greenhill he had chosen the match over himself. The man had to take a moment to collect himself.

“Out!” He declared, cutting through the tension and disbelief. “Green house 10 out. The match is over. Sapphire Owl wins!”

Cheers erupted around the field, first quietly them growing to a deafening pitch. Students, families called out in pride. Greenhill nodded, having found the match honourable and worthy. Lau, his girls and Mouser celebrated the sudden affluence of money amidst the despairing gentleman that had opted for the seemingly safe bet. The blue house crowded Ciel, picking him up, ready to toss him around.

“The blue miracle happened again!” the cry was echoed and repeated.

“Hold on.” Sebastian swooped in, taking Ciel before he could be rattled. “How rash. Your priorities should be in giving young Phantomhive medical aid.” He scolded the confused team.

“Mr. Michaelis... I’m glad we managed to win. I can even forget about the pain.” Ciel spoke up, smiling, teary-eyed, echoing the mood of the team, wringing out more tears out of them. “We showed everyone that if we try we can do it...”

“Really... you are such an incorrigible boy.” Sebastian stated as he took the Young Master away from the field, followed by clap and cheers.
Chapter 127

Pained cries echoed in the infirmary away from the celebrations. It was rather incredible the noise the Young Master as producing when faced with cotton and disinfectant, rivalling the showy howls displayed on the field. He squirmed, hissed and squirmed in place, keeping his fringe out of the treatment’s way, the other hand gripping the sheets of the narrow bed.

“Can’t you be a bit gentler?!” Ciel whined, eyes tightly closed, fighting the sting, as the blood was cleared, revealing a bruise and a cut. Not too complicated nor dangerous.

“Well, well...” Sebastian chuckled, finishing up the cleaning, dropping the soaked cotton ball into the metal bowl, placing the tweezers on the side table. “What happened to being so happy that you forgot the pain?” The demon teased, grinning.

“As if!” The Young Master huffed, arms crossed, letting his hair fall. “Painful things are painful.” Ill humoured was a good description for his current mood.

“Everything went according to plan.” Sebastian nodded, feeling a bit of work was needed to keep the façade for just a bit longer. The Young Master should not show that kind of temper to the other students, especially after the victory and the dramatics. “How splendid. However you got a nicer medal than expected.” Of course poking fun at the injury was more entertaining than just stating the obvious.

“That damn Greenhill...” Ciel groaned, the frown increasing the painful throbbing of his forehead.

“As ordered I retrieved the ball.” Sebastian ignored the comment in favour of fulfilling the remnants of the day’s duty, offering the ball.

Ciel stared at the round object for a moment before his expression softened, calculating.

“I don’t think Bluer will see through our tricks anyhow. But just in case we should always make sure.” His fingers closed around the surface. “It’s just the weight that is different. But it’s thanks to that that we could win. Throwing the same way he always did but with a lighter ball changed the trajectory slightly.” And they had had ample chance to make him do it perfectly and according to Ciel’s needs. “Greenhill followed his instinct, adjusted and the bat reached the wicketkeeper. It was a no ball and the non-striker tried to even the score with a run. But there had been an accident. The batter put gentlemanly behaviour above winning. I notice this and still went to the ball despite the injury. We took an out. Odd that it was the 10th. Thanks to the wicketkeeper's effort the Blue house which had always been dead last was able to win. Indeed with this we managed to get the points, the win, the behaviour and the crowd’s emotions. It was perfect.” The boyo’s expression grew more and more smug, self-satisfied and slightly happy.

“Of course a monologue about your cunning could be considered your downfall if there was someone eavesdropping.” Mouser mentioned, bringing the bandages, peeking under his hair, wincing a bit in sympathy. “To keep up with this entire overdramatic charade.” Then she smiled slightly. “On the plus side you seem to be turning into the unicorn you were considering...”

The boyo glared with a groan, keeping from touching the sore spot.

“Even so...” He glanced down at the ball, tossing it up softly, catching it again. “To throw a ball that you know is going to be beaten... I don’t get them at all.” That lack of empathy was understandable for someone who could not afford defeat. Mouser’s reasoning reached only
towards the ‘taking someone down with her’ or a good ol’ make ‘em pay. But it became at least slightly clear if they noticed that nothing truly important would be lost in the final effort.

“I don’t understand the human’s aesthetic of a ‘beautiful defeat’ either.” Sebastian commented as he bandaged the boyo’s head. It was not something that a demon would understand either. Unless a defeat had been planned to lure someone into a state of vulnerability due to hubris there was really no use for the glorification of failure. But ‘graceful in defeat’ was another matter.

“Well? How did you do?” Putting the game behind them, confident he had done enough to guarantee what he needed to advance Ciel changed the issues. Maybe his effort had been wasted in the field but the matter was ready to be put to rest once and for all.

“The principal is here.” Sebastian stated, offering the neatly folded clothes that had been left behind by his pursued. He looked rather vexed by that failure to accomplish the set goal. “I regret to inform you of this outcome even though I chased him with all I could use at the moment but the moment I caught up he turned into this.” The demon bowed slightly.

Mouser grimaced, playing with the mirror in her pocket, picking up the crest that adorned the ribbon of the top hat.

Ciel was staring in shock at the proof of something he had thought impossible, the sight of something he had until it happened found an interesting would be occurrence. He escaped Sebastian chasing him at full strength? He escaped a demon?! To think that would be... just what is it with this principal?! The case just grows and grows more mysterious. The boyo’s expression hardened in dismissive frustration, huffing.

“Then you might as well have been making some desert.” He crossed his legs with a groan. “I’m hungry.”

“Yes, I thought you might say that.” Sebastian chuckled, turning away, picking up a platter. “So I’ve prepared this for you.” Removing the dome lid revealed an Eton, mess with iced summer pudding. The presence was enough to make the boyo’s eyes widen in clear want. “However...” Sebastian’s smile widened in mischief. “You’ll have to eat another time.” He teased, hiding the treat as the door to the once quiet stone infirmary hall slammed open, echoing, sending the boyo scrambling for his eyepatch as the blue house first years entered in cheer and celebrating noisily.

“Phantomhive!” McMillan led the charge that surrounded the boyo’s bed.

“Quiet in the infirmary.” Sebastian scolded them, keeping a serious face before turning away with an image of benevolence as praise and concern were showered over the Young Master. Prefect and fag duly impressed and blinded, the house fooled, the blue miracle repeated...

Of course the praise was being received with a slightly more humbleness and modesty than required but it seemed to be endearing the group as they announced yet another decision to boost Ciel’s chances of being chosen for the tea party. The Cox’s hat was overwrought and flowery and it was plopped right on top of the injury, causing him to wince while smiling before getting yanked and dragged out for the upcoming boat parade.

Mouser had retreated behind a screen and had opened a makeshift map of the school, placing the mirror next to it, sacrificing the headmaster’s hat pin in yet another approach to track the man down. Despite the mercury shimmer and light glow of response there was no pinpointing on the map.

“We should be going as well.” Sebastian gripped her arms, caressing them, trying to ease the
grumpy expression, intertwining their fingers, looking over her shoulder. “Well?”

“He exists and yet he is not here.” Mouser sighed and leaned back. “On the plus side I know where the tea party will be.” It was the only place that had had any activity within the school while the action had been centred on the fields.

“So these are the clothes that have been worn by the Sapphire Owl house for generations.” Sebastian stated thoughtfully, appraising the finished product. “This is quite something... your appearance is even more unsightly than I initially thought it would be.” The demon decided with a small, disappointed shake of his head. While the spectacle was indeed amusing it was mostly against the contract and butler etiquette.

“Shut up!” Tangled in embarrassment and baggy fabric the Young Master looked both angry and embarrassed. “Normally it would be an upperclassman in the parade. It’s not unexpected.” He tried to justify the situation, shaking arms and legs without hands and feet ever reaching the edged of pants, shirt and coat, staring at the fabric, water-damaged and tatty. “Although they are already threadbare even though they were only worn once.” Even moving was hard. They had a bit of time... “Sebastian can’t you take these just a little in?” The Young Master asked turning around, trying to catch the coattails.

“That won’t do.” Sebastian stated calmly, going through the boxes, uncovering a suitcase that looked too new to be amidst the traditional clothing. Crouching and opening it revealed a pristinely done copy of the outfit and Nina Hopkins’ tailor emblem on the padded inside. Sebastian pulled the fabric out and prepared it as he would have done to any other outfit for the day as the Young Master looked on in slight confusion. “The Young Master said he would ‘win’.” Sebastian approached and, without the need to unbutton it, freed Ciel from the overcoat. “Naturally as a butler I came prepared.”

Excitement and family. The other teams’ congratulations, having changed to formal festivity clothes as well. Pictures of the taken. As a team, as a house. The boat was being prepared as well as the lanterns. They had some time until the sunset. Bluer looked around to the team, gathering them away from the public. Ciel just felt a bit of relief now that he had no worries about pants and sleeves.

“I’ll explain the parade sequence.” The prefect started, the nervousness perceptible behind his apparent calm. “We’ll get on the boat and go along the Thames. Once we approach Windsor castle we’ll take off our hats and salute the Queen. Then we’ll throw the flowers into the river and return. I won’t allow failures and there is absolutely no room for error.” He straightened his shoulders, gripping the paddle harder. “Hold till the very end!”

“Yessir!” the team answered in unison, entering the boat.

“The sun has set.” Violet mentioned.

“Light the lamps with St. George’s fire!” Greenhill took the lead.
Floating lights and flying lights started to follow the Thames’ flow. Ciel began to fulfil his role, guiding the team and keeping the rhythm as they rowed through the lights. The crowd seemed dazzled. The bridge approached. Murmurs of excitement grew amidst the students as they spotted the royal carriage. Nervousness started to fester within the team but they kept to the pace Ciel was setting.

It was time for the salute. The cox stood up first, unsheathing the ceremonial sabre. Ciel stared ahead, eyes fixed on the monarch that was flanked by the double Charles, looking at them, so small in the boat without surprise... and yet, for a single moment her eyes grew distant and the fan hid her expression. Determined he went through the motions.

*I’m close to the truth. I will present it to you without fail.* It was his sworn duty, the true one. “Salute the Queen!” he shouted, urging the blue team to stand up as well, oars upright. The boat started to sway.

“Phantomhive we managed to win the tournament due to our calculations, however... there was one fatal flaw...” Bluer was the first to notice the predicament, wobbling and trying to keep his balance. Ciel looked away from the bridge and saw it as well. “We really didn’t believe we would win so we didn’t practice for the parade.”

No balance, no practice, no ability to keep the boat from tipping and team, flowers and hats fell into the Thames much to the amusement of the other teams and the crowd. Fireworks enhanced the moment that should mark the end of the parade, explosions of colours and sound.

The green house went to the rescue and the festivities restarted in earnest.

The Double Charles, alumni of Weston came by, Phipps carrying the Easter chicken from the lost game, adopted for its cuteness, carried as a parrot on his shoulder. While they did not do more than mingle and eat Sebastian was fairly sure they were there to see how far the Young Master had progressed in his inquiries.

Music provided by the students created pockets of dancing couples. Lizzy attempted to drag the boyo to dance. McMillan gave him a helpful push. Redmond finally deigned in escorting one of Bluer’s younger sisters as the eldest grabbed hold of Harcourt. Tanaka formally invited the Marchioness to dance, softening her expression into a look of gentle nostalgia. Soma took Meyrin’s arm cheerfully, locking them and spinning. Edward and Paula were pushed together as well, stiff and red-cheeked.

“It seems his appalling dance has improved as well.” Mouser stared at the wine for a moment before putting the glass down. There were no signs of the principal’s presence in the festivities. Not even Agares seemed to be around.

Sebastian nodded, observing the surroundings carefully.

“After one year it is passable. I am afraid that I have neglected that particular skill for two years before finding out the depths of ineptitude of the Young Master’s coordination.” The demons sighed and extended his hand. “Grant me this dance my lady?” He asked with a seductive smile. Mouser scoffed staring warily at the proffered hand. “We have postponed this for two months now.” He persuaded.

Even though she grimaced the thief took his hand, allowing herself to be taken to the dance, pulled close, lead with grace and a practiced hand. Dance had not been hard to learn. Dance with your blades and blood, dance as if each step brought down an enemy and the next avoided it fallen corpse. Moving within his arms as killing in tandem, shielding, protecting, taken into sweeping
twirls, returning gently… It rarely ended without tension and breathlessness. It rarely ended without a smug smile and an inferno.

The festivities soon ended. Families and guests left. Students returned to their dorm. Ciel’s roommates were in high spirits, still commenting the match and the party. The Earl played along until he reached his bed. A teacup and saucer were there, wrapped by a pretty ribbon along with a closed flower. A moment of staring confusion was cut short by McMillan’s enthusiasm, confirming his suspicions.

“That is amazing! You have been invited to the midnight tea party!” while the freckled boy shook him other approached, duly impressed by the accomplishment. But to Ciel that just meant that the final piece had been achieved. “They say that when that beautiful flower blooms under the moon at midnight they’ll come for you. So if you put that on your chest you’ll be able to attend.” McMillan shared yet a bit more of Weston lore.

“Everyone! Bath time.” Sebastian entered the room, performing his housemaster’s tasks, noticing the cup and flower. He nodded towards the scheming Young Master.

The whereabouts of the missing students. The principal’s true colours. We’ll unravel this mystery at the tea party. Ciel decided, picking up his towel and following the group.

(There is a song that I see them both dance and embody. Can actually split the lyrics by personality. Look for “When You’re Evil” by Voltaire)
The lockdown was even tighter than the usual nightly routine. One would believe that most of the students would actually be too tired to leave their bed after the excitement of the day. However that was not true for those invited to the exclusive Midnight Tea Party. Ciel looked around in the dark, waiting, making sure he was ready to make his moves. Upon returning from the bath he had found his pistol and two of Mouser’s derringers. Along with a playful note reading bang bang. And he was certain of what he needed to ask to gather what the Queen had demanded.

The flower that marked the invitation had bloomed in the moonlight. Proving McMillan right there was a knock on the door and Clayton peeked in, carrying a lamp, asking him to follow. He guided him through the corridors, out of the dorm, towards the church. Faint lights could be seen though the stained glass.

The Prefects awaited in the same solemn positions they had taken when introducing him to the vice-principal and the school’s traditions. It seems the introduction was yet another of those ceremonial bits of uselessness and drama, as the synchronized greeting further demonstrated as he entered the nave.

“Welcome Phantomhive.” They stated in synchrony.

“To the elegant” Redmond’s voice dripped with eloquence.

“Traditional” Bluer pontificated.

“Lofty” Greenhill’s tone was clipped and to the point.

“Bizarre” Violet’s whisper closed the individuality, taking them back to a chorus.

“Midnight tea party.”

As they announced the bell rang out, announcing midnight to the ticking clock.

Cheslock made the organ sound, a specific string of interlocking chords, the wail echoing, unlocking a path behind it.

Stairs lead to an underground path.

After a small trek they came to a walled-off English garden, the stone walls hidden by roses and ivy. Flowers and pots surrounded the stone centre where the table and the tea were placed. The headmaster was already there, sat at the table’s head, in an elaborate chair, the vice-principal standing next to him. Each of the chairs around the table was different. Candles and moonlight provided an uncertain, flickering light. The table was formally arranged, puddings, cups, silverware and decorations. Apart from the hour it was what one would expect from an invitation for tea.

So that is the absolute ruler of Weston. The headmaster. Ciel’s eyes narrowed slightly. It was hard to see but he seemed to be just serenely watching their arrival. It was indeed Mr. Agares who greeted them.

“Everyone, thank you for coming.” He acknowledged formally as Edward, the last to come in closed the wooden door, and the group gathered before the table. “Please take a seat.” He asked, gesturing widely.
The prefects occupied the chairs to Ciel’s left. The Fag’s too the seats to his right. As a special guest he took the end of the table, facing the Headmaster. The vice-principal ambled to the side table where water boiled and the implements for the tea preparation were laid out, working as they did what they had been told. Conversation did not resume until the cups were turned and the tea poured for all present.

“This is a bit irksome but I guess we should toast with tea.” Redmond picked up the topic with a flourish and a chuckle. “Lawrence if you please.” The Red House prefect delegated.

“Very well then...” Bluer maintained his dignity, pointedly ignoring the first name basis he was being addressed with, taking his cup, clearing his throat discreetly and raised the fine porcelain. “To having successfully protected tradition and finished another 4th of June.” Around the cup were raised, waiting. “To Weston...”

“One moment if you please.” Ciel interrupted, looking around, noticing he had the needed attention before continuing. “I can’t toast from the bottom of my heart like this.” He affirmed, making his voice lower and grim.

“What’s wrong?” Bluer asked, showing concern, confusion.

“There is something bothering me. About Derrick Arden and his friends.” The same flinching reaction of shock and worry, unconcealed, undisguised that time. “I can’t toast until I have met them.” Firmly Ciel placed the cup down. Edward murmured his name softly, seemingly understanding what he was asking, why he had asked before. Or at least suspecting something. “Headmaster, Sir, would you heed my request?” He finally addressed his target, bluntly.

“Phantomhive that’s rude.” Bluer attempted to stop him.

“I am fully aware.” Ciel blocked him by weaving the rules the Prefect had defended and blathered about in his answer. He had had more than enough time to prepare for any response or attempt to stop his interrogation. It should be done soon. “But the 15th rule of this school states the following: at all times you should share your heart with your friends and help them out with love.” Solidarity, brotherhood, all that drivel. “Richard Gleason. Hans Hardy. Robert Isaac. Ewan Thewlis.” Each name added to the list made the Prefects look more and more uncomfortable. “None of them have returned home since the start of the school year. Have they been cooped up in the dormitories the whole time? It seemed unlikely. As unlikely as not contacting their families.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “When I enrolled in this school I was asked by their families to persuade them to go home. Just once at least, they said.” Masking himself in an expression of concern, curiosity and seriousness, ignoring the vice-principal’s murmurs of understanding Ciel pressed on. “But when I tried to comply to this request I was met with the most bizarre circumstances. I could not meet them. Couldn’t even see them. Transferred to the purple house, the rumours said.” Yet another pause, another glance around, another gauging of reactions. “But on the day of the fire when the entire purple house was evacuated... they were not there. But Violet said this: they are all safe.”

Violet’s eyes widened in shock for a moment before lowering his head, retreating into the hood silently. Cheslock looked confused, calling to the Prefect.

“I’m sure he was just upset at the time...” Redmond justified, dismissive.

“You mean a Prefect in charge of governing a prestigious house of Weston would make such a grave mistake?” Ciel countered coldly, shattering the argument. Someone in a position of authority could not allow something as trivial as ‘upset’ to interfere in the safety of others.
“Well... who can say…” Mr. Agares stated, hesitating next to the silent headmaster.

Ciel slammed his hands on the table, standing, leaning forward, his stance aggressive, words cutting.

“In any case the truth is they were not in the purple house. Five people have disappeared from a strictly supervised public school. Which is obviously quite strange. From my investigations what I can see is that they are no longer in the purple house. At best they have fled. At worst they are dead.” The fags looked concerned, shocked. The prefects were not composed and in control either. Because they were all gathered and cornered. The principal who changed the dorms. The P4 who are in charge of the school. It's obvious these people are hiding something. Before they got away with saying that the principal had decided. Now they can’t use that. I will find the truth. “There is an incredibly high chance that they were involved in some perilous incident. If so, Headmaster, should you not call the Yard?

“That won’t be necessary.” The vice-principal suddenly broke his streak, slowly pointing towards the door, maintaining a stoic expression. “Because they are right here in the school.”

The door rattled, the knob turning and the wooden structure opened with a creak. Seemingly to everyone’s shock Derrick Arden walked in, wearing the school’s uniform, a serene look on his face, smiling a bit before speaking.

“Hello there. Do I detect the wonderful aroma of tea?”

Derrick Arden?! He’s fine? But why did he disappear until now? Ciel stared in confusion. It took him a moment to notice the prefect’s growing tension as Derrick strode towards Greenhill.

“What the hell was that about? He’s right there.” Cheslock grumbled.

Violet shrunk against the chair nervously as he walked by.

“Arden?” Greenhill stammered, turning, looking up. “Are you really...”

“Hello there. Do I detect the wonderful aroma of tea?” Derrick repeated, leaning towards the Prefect. Now the voice sounded hollow, his eyes vacant. Fear dominated Greenhill’s expression. And then he screamed in pain when Arden dove, gripping his arm and shoulder, teeth digging through fabric and flesh. Chairs clattered to the floor as everyone stood up in shock.

“What are you doing you bastard!” Edward hopped over the table, kicking the attacker away. Any normal person would have been knocked out. And head and neck would not be in a good condition. But Arden’s head snapped back into place, the young man snarling, showing fabric and flesh on a bloodstained mouth, the displaced hat and messy hair showing a stitched up wound much to Ciel and Edward’s surprise.

That wound... the same as the creatures in the Campania! The prefects and Edward tried to keep Derrick under control, push him away from Greenhill. Things had degenerated fast. With an annoyed hiss Ciel pulled the eyepatch away from his marked eye, calling the backup. “Come! Sebastian!” He shouted.

Swooping down the demon appeared behind him, bowing slightly, smiling smugly, amused as he surveyed the situation, the shock his arrival created, the frantic, frightened mood, the indifference at the head of the table and the continuous attempts at chomping the corpse was attempting to commit.

“This is an order! Capture Derrick Arden!” Having to keep to the Queen’s request the Young
Master gave the restraining command.

“Yes, My Lord.” Sebastian stated, gripping the tablecloth, pulling it swiftly, not disturbing even the overturned cups, flower jar, sugar and milk pitchers or the delicacies. Not even the shivering pudding did more than a small wobble. Long fabric in hand he pounced, pulling him away from the screaming Greenhill. “An English gentleman should have better manners at a tea party.” A quick whip was enough for him to wrap and contain the threat, the corpse falling to the stones. “That will do...” Sebastian appraised his work calmly and adjusted to gloves, walking towards the injured. “Let me see...” he crouched, appraising while preparing some bindings to stop the blood. “A fair deal has been taken off.” The demon mentioned casually, doing the bandaging with Edward’s help. Please keep it raised.” He advised, walking back towards the Young Master.

Mouser walked into the garden, opening the door, approaching the Young Master, once more wearing her day-to-day’s clothes. She leaned down to whisper an update, helping him with the knot of the eyepatch before looking around. Her eyes lingered on the bizarre doll, fangs showing slightly more in a vicious grin.

“Why is Mr. Michaelis here?” Harcourt asked, nervously.

“And the Missus too…” Cheslock whispered.

“What is the meaning of this?!” Clayton shouted.

“So an episode will run wild after a while.” Agares mumbled.

Sebastian’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. Mouser snarled quietly, containing the discomfort.

Episode? What is he talking about? Ciel scoffed and took charge of the situation.“Mr. Michaelis... No. Sebastian is my butler.” They seemed to be more shocked about those news than the fact that an ambling corpse had just attacked them but such were the reactions expected of nobility. “And the reason why I entered this school was to find Derrick and the rest. However Sebastian could not find their whereabouts... Evelyn could not find them either despite being freer than either of us…” Mouser waved at the confused students. “because they are already dead.”

“Dead? What do you mean? He was moving a moment ago...” Harcourt whispered, clearly growing more and more frightened. He shrieked when the bizarre doll groaned, still twitching, repeating in a gurgle the only phrase he had uttered, gnashing on the remnants of Greenhill’s flesh that were still on its moth.

“A rather shoddy work of a dead person wouldn’t you say?” Mouser chuckled, pulling one of her pistols from under the waistcoat, aiming at the head. “Permit me to rectify that.”

Sebastian gripped her wrist, pulling her arm down.

“The Young Master has ordered its capture for now.” He reminded her. The thief huffed. The boyo decided to be direct, getting his own gun and pointing it at the top of the table with a steady hand.

“I’ll have you explain what’s going on in here... Headmaster.” He demanded curtly,

“Phantomhive what is the meaning of this?!” Clayton tried to interrupt, concerned over the many, many, many breached in etiquette, protocol and common courtesy.

“Clayton! Ciel... I mean Earl Phantomhive should not be opposed.” Edward shouted. He had
realized that the event, the threats, the whole situation was part of his cousin’s duty to the Queen. Just as much as if he had been ordered to apprehend someone under the authority of the British Knights. However the fags only grew more and more confused, looking from authority, to minor authority to challenger.

“I have seen things like this before.” Ciel continued, gesturing towards the Bizarre Doll. It was obvious he had been killed and in an attempt to cover it someone had reached out to the Aurora Society. As they had been defunct for months now both acts had to be perpetrated fairly early on. Or at least before April. “What did you do to Derrick?” If he was dead he needed explanations, justifications and solid proof that he had had nothing to do with that.

Silence hung heavy in the rose garden. And then the ones that had been acting the oddest, yet the ones one would least expect spoke up.

“We... just wanted to protect the school.” Greenhill hung his head in defeat.

“Protect?” Sebastian examined the word, eyes narrowing. It seemed a bit outlandish.

“The saint that is this school’s patron is St. George.” Bluer adjusted his glasses, joining the Green House prefect. “His legend has him slay a dragon to protect the country.” He took a breath before continued. “In other words if you don’t cut off the source you won’t be able to prevent new disasters. We obeyed these teachings.”

“That’s why we dealt with Derrick” Redmond continued the story, serious.

“And killed him.” Violet completed the picture after a moment of bitter silence.

“In my world dealing with someone means they don’t surface. Ever.” Mouser shrugged. “Sloppy work and undead dead. Sebastian would you please give them as many Y’s as possible?”

Sebastian chuckled, patting her head as the young master stared ahead in shock, the gun lowering in disbelief.

“I see. Now everything comes into place.” The demon stated, calculatingly. “Your earlier reactions though there seemed to be no Bizarre Dolls around. Students who had disappeared, body and soul. An Headmaster that was able to escape my pursuit. An association with the aurora society. To figure this out should be trivial. But the one who wrapped all of it in such a tangle was you, wasn’t it.”

“The Headmaster has nothing to do with this!” Redmond shouted, concerned. “Us prefects did this ourselves.” Still defending the school.

“No one said the Headmaster was involved.” Sebastian grinned, facing the man at the top of the table. “Why don’t you drop the teacher act?” He invited.

“Alas...” As soon as he spoke it was rather easy to see who had been evading every attempt at capture. “I really liked this job. It was truly pleasant to watch you struggle from a high tear. You have offered me the best laughs.”

“Undertaker.” Ciel murmured. Sebastian adopted a defensive stance. Mouser grinned back

“Hello there Earl. You’re as tiny as ever.” The Undertaker greeted casually, pulling his hat off, silvery hair cascading down, covering his eyes and back as he leaned loosely against the chair, twirling the hat playfully. “But I’m pleased to see you doing so well. Did you enjoy your fist experience in group life?” all perfectly pleasant, as if he hadn’t been the source of the greatest woe
experienced so far.

“I have wondered where had you gone after closing down your shop.” Sebastian conversed. Maybe he would say something. If not, no concerns. “To think you had started working in a school of all places.” It was unlikely that school had caught the Young Master’s attention in any other event. But it was hard to say if the death of Derrick Arden had triggered it or it had been merely a fortunate coincidence.

“Only temporarily though.” The Undertaker shrugged, placing his hat back in place.

“It seems our investigation has taken an outrageous turn.” Sebastian turned towards the P4, examining their reactions as the Young Master still seemed to shocked to continue the investigative duties. “You four assassinated Lord Derrick Arden and then requested his resurrection from the Aurora Society.” A shot sounded. Sebastian glanced at Mouser who had just put a bullet through the gurgling doll’s head, ending it. She looked back and smiled. “Too painful?” Although his voice gentled Sebastian still sighed, a bit put upon. While it would have to be done sooner or later as they could not afford to give the Queen a moving doll, risking an accident of imperial proportions it was still rather soon to go against the orders. Then again it had been his order. Mouser could justify her actions however she pleased.

“He was already dead when I found him.” The thief stated innocently, nodding behind the words. Not a screech. There was something more jarringly wrong with that one. Not the same pain but a dull sense of nausea.

The Undertaker giggled a bit.

The Young Master and the shocked boys present barely noticed

So the demon chose to continue as if little had happened.

“What was so important to protect that you would resort to such means?”

Faced with the question the Prefects livened. Bluer was the one to answer.

“Derrick Arden was not supposed to be at this school.” The absolute certainty in his voice seemed to leave no room for anything else. The boyo was not cowed.

“What do you mean by that?” Ciel demanded, gripping his pistol harder, knowing that he had to maintain control and gather all he needed for the report.

It had happened in the start of the new school year, when the Prefects had been announced and they had sworn to uphold the school’s values and traditions. The four of them had been full of enthusiasm, eager to do what was expected of them, believing in all. Entering the exclusive grounds of the Swan Gazebo had been intense, proof that it all was real. Bluer had been moved to tears.

But in the privilege they never forgot their duties. When a note about bullying had been placed in the complaint box the School rule nº 15: every student is equal under the principal, had to be enforced. So Redmond had taken his f Derrick Arden’s offer to investigate. He had been his fag at the time, a reliable, talented chap, captain of his local cricket team, embroidered like a craftsman,
his pottery was genius, always getting good marks on his reports, a marquis, cheerful and talented. Derrick Arden was dazzling. But because of that they had not noticed the deep shadow he casted.

Some time had passed and the bullying complaints were written off as fakery as Derrick claimed to be unable to find any proof of it happening at all. Then the ones that had attempted to denounce cruelty had taken a subtler route, understanding before the Prefects the source of their unanswered pleas. A poem for the prefects, read out loud by Derrick.

When Thor was lying beside a clear lake a torch by his side, lending an ear to a benevolent apostle playing harp of bent pearl, a naughty fairy appeared, tossing his torch in the lake. The light was no more and the lake filled with starts. The beautiful lake became legendary for its healing powers but the god who had been deprived of light could only wander through the night.

It seemed simple. And yet when Redmond looked at the written words he saw that something had been concealed in blue ink that would look as black as the rest to the inattentive. The construction, the marked words... Deciphering the message he had called the others.

Thursday was a word derived from Thor, god of thunder.

A benevolent apostle refers to the apostle John whose name means the Lord is Merciful in Hebrew.

An harp of bent pearl must refer to baroque music.

A John within baroque must mean Johan Sebastian Bach. His bust was in the music room.

The torch went out refers to after the lights out.

That poem had a time and a date skilfully woven into it.

Go to the Music Room after dark on Thursday.

Yet the last part remained unclear until the doors were opened.

Deprived of light meant this: Derrick Arden’s dazzling results were all fake. Everything. He took talents from others through despicable means and used them to make himself shine. For the entire four years he had been at this school. And the Prefects had caught him with four others, bullying, stealing, drinking, smoking. All recognized the bullied. Some of the boys had been punished for sneaking out of the school and bringing back illegal item. The same the bullies were enjoying. Others had been punished for failing to deliver homework, projects, even Y’s. All were shirtless, bruised, crying.

Derrick was unfazed after the initial shock of being found out. He had immediately complained about the year that he still had to endure, his status as the heir, the pressure of the family of former prefects, asking shamelessly for them to overlook his actions in exchange of a bribe and a light punishment.

Bound to their duty the Prefects had stated they should report him to the Headmaster and vice-principal only to find out that Mr. Agares was much more susceptible to bribes than they had been. Before their eyes they saw that what they valued about the school was being torn asunder. The punishment was not met out for their crime and when they attempted to make Mr. Agares see what was happening they were met with threats. And when Derrick casually mentioned buying a place as a prefect...

Enraged Greenhill attacked, smashing Derrick’s head with the cricket bat. Violet closed the doors. Bluer and Redmond subdued Agares.
That could not be. As long as they are here our school’s traditions will continue to crumble! That cannot happen because... tradition is everything.

No bully was left alive.

If they allowed things to be Greenhill would be blamed for murder. But they chose to take the blame as a group, as a whole, as those sworn to protect the College, proudly committing murder for their traditions. But they could not leave Derrick dead and as the nephew of one of the main backers of the Aurora Society Redmond had asked for their assistance, striking a bargain with a doctor and, unbeknownst to him, a Grim Reaper.

Once again silence was the only thing filling the space after the tale.

“Our actions are inexcusable. But there was nothing else we could do to protect our traditional order.” Bluer spoke up, still convinced and backing his choice. The boyo and the other fags were absolutely shocked. “We did not want a scandal to tarnish our school’s name. You understand, don’t you Phantomhive?” The Prefect tried to reach out, to empathize his reasoning.

“Killing someone just like that...” Ciel murmured, shocked. “What are you saying?”

“How about tattling to his daddy?” Mouser suggested with a giggle.

The Undertaker burst out laughing, falling down the chair, rolling over the colourful petals.

“That’s so amusing! I have been gifted with more laughter than I deserve.” He stood and readjusted the chair, sitting back down, leaning, elbows on the table, face shadowed. “Human beings are supremely tragic, absurd and delightful.”

“Oh? How curious.” Sebastian whispered, looking thoughtful. “For once it seems we are in agreement.”

“Our school is famed for producing great numbers of elite students that will take pivotal roles within the country.” Bluer became desperate, noticing his ideals were not being conveyed, that no one seemed to be understanding the importance of their actions. “We can’t let our generation desecrate the traditions that have been held with honour for many hundred years since the founding of the school. The history of Weston is the history of England.”

*The difference between education and brainwashing is paper thin.* Ciel considered. *And these have been conditioned for six years already.* But he had to fulfil his role and there was no escaping that they were nobles. So...

“I see. I was asked to investigate this incident by a high ranking individual. They will not stand idly after hearing the truth of this matter.” The boyo stated grimly before smiling, looking rather softer. Mouser scoffed, amused. “However I will ask for the circumstances to be considered.” Sebastian chuckled discreetly, noticing the ploy. “Well then. That just leaves you. What do you want?”

Turning to the Undertaker Ciel demanded answer. Nonchalantly the Reaper took a pastry and bit into it.

“Seeing I have received copious amount of payment just now I’ll tell you for old time’s sake. So
“Derrick was conscious if only for a moment. It was clearly different from the previous moving corpses. No. They evolved.” It was not a question but after seeing the destruction those things could inflict and the fact that that investigation was not closed he should dig further.

“It makes me happy to hear you say that.” The undertaker smiled widely “You are right. Even the dead can evolve as long as there are episodes.” The same thing Agares had said when watching Derrick revert to a single-minded Bizarre Doll.

“Episodes? Do you mean those fake memories you crafted?” Sebastian used the previous knowledge, frowning. “I believe connecting those to the deceased was the mechanism behind the moving corpses.”

“Wrong. But close. It’s not that easy.” The Undertaker vetoed his hypothesis, Mouser was staring at Derrick, her expression turning darker. “What is driving them now is their yearning for a future. In their dying moments humans review their life. Those images come and go.” The thief looked up, eyes widening slightly. “At the same time they crave for a future that they were supposed to have. It’s fragmentary of course. Those fragments are episodes.” The Undertaker focused on Mouser for an instant. “Do you want to elaborate?”

“I ain’t helpin’.” Mouser grumbled. *They were less noisy. And the end still comes. Also they fray easily. They feel… listless, sick, decaying…*

“These are like a self-made map of memories for a future that never happened.” The Undertaker chuckled, continuing his explanation. Taking delight in talking about his creations. “My false records are nothing compared to these. So if we attach these records together… wouldn’t it become complete?” True living for the dead. Then he shrugged with a sigh. “Well the success rate is still pretty low. It depends on the quantity and quality of the episodes.”

Mouser took note. Blondie would need to know.

“I don’t understand. Why would you do that? What’s the purpose of bringing the dead back?” Ciel asked, his voice shaking. His hands holding the pistol were steady. Also they were both on the pistol to better withstand the recoil. The boyo was ready to fight.

“I just want to see what comes after the predetermined end.” The Undertaker repeated his justifications, his self-deceit, standing like a showman, arms open, voice clear and loud. “You have never thought about it? There might be an interesting development lurking beyond the ending!”

“That’s where we differ. Exactly because death is such a hopeless and definite end it is beautiful.” Sebastian weighted in his opinion. It was hopelessness, a fear of the end that drove most to deal with his kind.

“I’ve told you all I can for the given price.” The Undertaker stated, turning away. “Well then. It would be a hassle if I got found out by some annoying individuals so I shall be going now.”

“I won’t let you get away again! Sebastian Capture him!” Ciel shouted.

“As you wish!” Sebastian lunged, dashing towards the target, Blocked by Agares. The fallen hat had revealed the stitching around his head. The demon grinned, showing fangs. “As I though. You are dead as well Mr. Agares.” That strange feeling back then, the softer body of the dead, Mouser suspicious remarks on his soul quality.

“He was full of episodes. My masterpiece for now.” The Undertaker stated, landing on the wall,
watching the struggle, snapping his gloved fingers.

Bursting from the flowerbeds in a sudden onslaught of pain were the corpses of Derrick’s friends. Mouzer groaned, grabbing her head when the screech started, reaching for the pocket with the rune-marked tin circles.

These Dolls babbled too, advancing, shuffling, speaking.

“Everyone run out of the garden!” Edward shouted, shouldering Greenhill. Ciel pointed towards the opened door, the path still clear.

“My legs…” Harcourt whimpered, fallen to the floor, bladder voided in fear. As a creature approached him. Ciel ran up to him, gripping his arm, pulling him along, avoiding the slower doll.

“Even though he is a Phantomhive he is different from his ancestors. Interesting.” The Undertaker commented.

“You don’t seem to be in a hurry.” Kept in place by Agares Sebastian commented back. “Do you believe this will suffice to keep me down? You underestimate me.” He taunted as the young Master ran with the other boy. Per aesthetic he should not act until the interlopers were out of the way.

“Not at all. It is just... that we have different goals.” The Undertaker answered, glancing to the side.

Sebastian froze. Could he mean… at this distance he is closer to the Young Master… then... He could see quite clearly what course of action could be taken from that moment. If he obeyed the order the Young Master would be caught. Mouzer was closer but getting between the Undertaker and the Young Master would most likely result in her death. Especially as she staggered, affected by the Dolls. Protecting the contractor comes first. It was the only choice.

Moving fast Sebastian grabbed and slammed Agares head on the stone, bending backwards, using their weights for a greater. And as he dashed towards the Young Master the Undertaker simply hopped the other way, laughing.

“As expected of you butler.” He challenged.

“Sebastian?” the young master stopped, turning, confused by the refusal of the order.

“You should keep protecting the Earl with such devotion.” The Undertaker laughed under the moon, arms raised up as if supporting it, shaking in a dance before vanishing. “See you!”

“Stand back.” Sebastian demanded, stopping a charging doll, keeping it still.

“Why did you come to me? I ordered you to capture him…” The Young Master started to chide.

“As per our contract your life comes first.” Sebastian looked back, annoyed, his fangs showing as he spoke. 2I have spent a considerable amount of time and suffered great pains to cultivate your soul. I will not be robbed of it.” Under his hand the head shattered, splattering blood and brain. The young master looked properly chilled by the scolding. Harcourt fainted the sight of blood. Sebastian stared at him coldly. “I thought it would be best to let him sleep seeing that the after-party clean-up isn’t quite finished.”

“Pop goes the weasel…” Mouzer whispered weakly, answering to his remark, partially laying on the table, ignoring the dolls that ambled, half towards her, half towards the doorway and the
fleeing humans, the boyo and Sebastian. Simultaneously the heads exploded, as if something had been triggered within. She smiled and closed her eyes. “They worked…” the demoness cheered for her magical bombs tossed into their open gaping mouths by raising her arms and keeping her forehead on the table. Her head and insides still felt rather fuzzy. Headache or nausea. She preferred the headache-inducing first dolls.

“How will I explain this to her majesty…” Ciel fretted, annoyed.

“Can’t you just tell her the truth?” Sebastian suggested, picking up his covenant. Mouser groaned in protest before placing her forehead on his chest, complaining in an unintelligible hiss. There should exist something to lessen or break the soul awareness. Sebastian seemed to work on an on-off at will basis… “A former Grim Reaper is reviving the dead?”

“As if she would believe…” Disdainfully the Young Master ruminated on that hypothesis.

“Ciel!” Edward returned, carrying a sword, as ready to fight as he had been in the Campania. “Everyone is safely out…” He stopped when his shoes made a squelching sound. Looking down revealed blood.

“We are done here too. Watch your step.” Ciel turned, sighing, relaxing a bit. What he should tell the Queen could be adjusted as soon as he was at the townhouse. The audience, even if he requested it that night would only be granted for the afternoon at best.

“Ciel… I’m scared.” Edward blurted out suddenly, gripping his sheathed sword, shaken by the events. “If this had continued I might have become like those prefects.” Conflicting his nature with the teachings of the school, confronting a shattered pedestal… Edward was feeling lost. “The kind of person that mistakes the sin of murder for justice.”

Ciel smiled, patting his shoulder.

“Don’t worry. As long as you are afraid of that you are still normal.” He smiled, attempting empathy. “Unlike me.”
Chapter 129

The boyo would remain behind in the school until morning to keep a veneer of normality.

It would not be good for too many to vanish at the same time without at least looking like they were just leaving because of regular reasons, such as family issues or fortune loss.

The report had been sent to the Queen not an hour after the events had ran their course and the answer came swiftly. The P4’s punishment was expulsion rather than jail time. Not out of kindness. It was to cover the scandal that a relative of the Queen had died because of his own mistakes and abuses. However as they all valued the school’s traditions more than their own lives it might have been a punishment more cruel than death.

It was to be announced the next day that Derrick and the others had died in a boating accident.

Mr Agares had finally fallen to his very obvious clumsiness.

The Headmaster was still in his voyage.

The bodies were buried in secret.

Those involved were sworn to secrecy.

Three of the fags already in the upper year became the new prefects. The fourth, belonging to the red house knew nothing.

The boyo would speak to the Queen in person the next day.

And thus Weston would resume its daily routine as if nothing had happened.

Mouser finished up the chalk markings covering the flat, polished surface of the ballroom of the townhouse, ensuring the designs were as fluid as possible, ticking boxes, searching for any loose threads in the string of events that had led to that moment. Dawn was a couple of hours away and she wanted to have that call settled before leaving London. Sebastian was gone for a moment, ensuring everything was in order in the streets in the rather long absence of the Phantomhive control. If anyone knew the state of disarray that absence left it was him, having had to sweep and dominate them once before.

Oddly enough Agni was not in his post. Now that she thought about it, without the plans and the focus on the game and targets, it had been strange that he had not been cheering for Soma either.

Chalk down on one of the covered pieces of furniture, a last survey of her work and she slashed her thumb with the index claw, tossing a drop to the summons.

“Baby.” Blondie did not take too long, stepping out of the circle with a smile, adjusting her green dress.

“I’m reporting.” Mouser stated, arms crossed. “The renegade resurfaced.” Blondie’s eyes narrowed. “It seems the Bizarre Dolls from the Campania were the failures. What he truly is after is full resurrections. There was at least one in front of me and my covenant all the time and while the recreated record didn’t fray it just felt and acted like a depressed human.” Blondie tapped her claws against her arms, concerned. “It seems he is using the dead’s own fabrications instead of his fake records. But they are frail. As soon as the episode run their course or are denied they
degenerate back into simple-minded dolls, no longer able to resist going after the nearest soul.” Mouser pressed her lips together. According to Muireall a soulless under a geas lived on through memories and former desires. While it may not pursue them fully and could feel that something was missing there was no reason to suspect or break down. So many other still with souls within also felt lost, with no will or desires… they just moved on through life to an empty death. “They screeched at first. Now its noise and nausea. It makes them very hard to fight for me.” The thief sighed and snapped her fingers. The corpses of the vice-principal, Derrick and his four accomplices floated up behind her. Blondie winced, stepping back, fingers going to her head in a defensive gesture. “Blondie?”

“They are still buzzing.” She whispered, taking a deep breath, focusing. “Muireall!” Her voice did not rise into a shout as she called out but a second circle drew itself in light, fading without mark, the redhead falling on her rear rather ungracefully, looking around bewildered before tucking her long-bloomer clad legs under her body, smiling in greeting, wincing a bit.

“Hullo…” She stood, clearly having been caught mid-dressing. “Good to see you baby-sister but why is my head buzzing?”

“According to Blondie it’s the dolls here.” Mouser greeted her.

“Dolls? The Campania thing?” Muireall tilted her head, examining the floating corpses. “You remember a different pain… And you did say that they went silent when the head was destroyed.” The demoness clicked her tongue, stepping back. “I think that with a bit of tinkering those corpses could be fixed into moving again.”

“I can’t feel it.” Mouser tried to focus on them once more. Nothing buzzed. They seemed quieted, the connections the Undertaker had sewn shredded. Mayhap it was her youth. But if with her still low soul-sense it had caused that much pain how would an old one fare? “Destroying the head only makes them stop then…” So it would be best to make them disappear completely. “How did you stop the pain?” She turned to Blondie who looked calm. Muireall was still slightly twitchy.

“Sensing souls for us comes naturally. Normally it would not be a bother. With these we will have to forcibly shut down the connection lest it causes us the pain you describe and the echoes we feel now. Focus on yourself or on a true soul nearby. Did they talk?”

“These bled from every orifice of the head and while skin is intact everything inside is mush… Nicely done” Blondie chuckled very softly at Muireall’s excitement. “explosive rune?”

“Low grade, tin etched.” Mouser nodded, smiling. “Mumble. They didn’t even appear from under the ground until the Reaper wanted to escape. Very close to failures but just a bit more than that.” She pointed towards Derrick. “This one was able to look normal for a couple of minutes. Repeated only one phrase and then attacked a human for his soul. Oddly enough it did target the one who had killed him so I’ll say it was closer to being a breakthrough.” Then Agares. “This one he called his masterpiece. Full of episodes he said. According to Sebastian his body still felt like one of the bizarre dolls, softer than a human. But unlike some he didn’t smell of chemicals and peeking at his soul just gave the feel of depression, as I have said.”

“Did you make a pocket plane?” Blondie asked, stepping back.

“No I just marked them in their coffins for easy retrieve and return. Working with layering realities still confuses me.” Mouser sighed. “If they can be repaired that would make them even more ideal as a weapon.”

“What are you thinking?” Muireall asked, caching her frown.
“I said it before. Starting an army of bizarre dolls can be as easy as digging up a cemetery. Or start an epidemic in the dregs for the bodies. Or poison a water supply… same effect War makes corpses. An unprepared enemy would fall easily to these. If they can be repaired would like missing limbs would require just stitching and if you took precautions to protect the head and neck against bullets and decapitation…”

“The clichéd army of the damned.” Blondie nodded, seeing it.

“Grizel set a precedent for a soulless army. The Immortals, while contracted to Cyrus the Great, second of Persia. 10,000 souls. 10,000 bodies under a geas of obedience. A fearless army of blindly loyal men. More souls to replace any that fell. Reapers still hiss when hearing about her.” Muireall considered. “Maybe we should call her too.”

“You can borrow these for 48 hours. Then put them back in their coffins.”

“We will send you the results.” Blondie stated, serious and grave.

“You might want to contact your reaper friend. If this renegade is affecting the souls it rather concerns demons and reapers. They won’t want their records tainted and we don’t want our food to dwindle.” Muireall added. “I can keep Lizvetta calm by telling I’m hunting for a new beauty product.”

“Poppet might tell me nothing but hey may agree to see the same threat.”

“Be careful Baby.” Blondie made the corpses disappear and turned away.

Mouser just smiled as the Coven’s leader and Muireall vanished in her circle. Sighing she picked up the mop and bucket began erasing the chalk marks from the floor.

“Shouldn’t you be a little cheerier?” Mouser lit a cigarette, leaving the lighter on a side table, approaching the sulking demon on the armchair lazily. There was no need for a fire on the hearth and the carpet felt plush. “Mission done, no wounded, no significant deaths. Took a bit of time but…” The thief shrugged and occupied the second chair, stretching. She settled, examining him, his silence, head tilting. “Vexed.” She settled on the definition, draping her legs over one arm, nestling, calling one of the newspaper, leafing through it to find the chapter of the serial.

Sebastian looked up, his expression breaking into a blank before chuckling, amused at her findings, and shaking his head, ridding himself of a quick denial, relaxing a fraction. There was no Young Master to attend to for now. The tasks were done, the household was quiet and yet…

“I believe I am.” Sebastian admitted, standing, pacing a bit, restless. Mouser hummed, peeking over the paper. “It irks me to have been tricked so easily by the same man. It annoys me that…” he had had to break an order and play the fool even if he did have a reason to believe the Young Master was at risk.

“You were chained by your duties.” Mouser replied calmly, turning the page, cutting his rant.

“You saw?” Sebastian approached, taking her paper. The thief protested, reaching up. “Even dazed?” He was staring again. It seemed useless to explain it had been just like a massive hangover with no warning or booze. Oversensitivity, nausea, head pain. If pressed she would have fought.
But the suddenness had made her flinch. And since the Campania he seemed less willing to take her pain at face-value. Well... word-value. If she could lie she would. There was no need for anyone to see the extent of one’s weakened moments.

“In these two instances he tricked you because he knows at least part of your original contract.” Mouser balanced a bit between comforting or scolding, tossing the cigarette into the fireplace, the smoke dying down soon, the butt hidden in the mostly decorative logs. Then she just spoke her mind. “Throughout these years the Undertaker had ample chance to gauge how you act, react and answer to requests. You fall into the trap because you do not listen to his goal but listen to his words. The boyo is safe from him. Safer than us.” The thief reached up for the demon leaning over her, tracing his nose gently hands on the armrest. “It is you he wants to see mangled.”

“He threw the Young Master off a balcony.” Sebastian grunted, still chagrined.

“And you were there to catch him. And turned your back on a foe to do so. Just as expected.” She cupped his face gently and her free hand poked his chest. “Even if you were not in time I would be.” The thief smiled watching his expression. “I am here.” Sebastian smiled, gripping her wrist, tracing the inner part of it, over the scars. Possession ran both ways there. He leaned further down, lips brushing her forehead, to the tip of her nose, grazing the lips lightly.

Nearby the grandfather clock chimed six times.

Dawn was starting to peek under the heavy curtains.

“Still…” Sebastian continued, returning to his earlier sulk, stepping back, offering his hand. Time had ran out

“If you are miffed at having to disobey to keep the contract I think the boyo understood your point when you cracked that doll’s head.” Mouser mentioned as the left the room to prepare for pickup and daily businesses.

“Resurrecting the dead?” Queen Victoria had been able to meet Ciel as soon as her work day started. Fresh from the school, sitting in front of the monarch with elezens prepared, the double Charles standing guard the Earl relayed his findings in greater detail, keeping most of what was glaringly supernatural under a layer of science and human experimentation. The Queen looked shocked for a moment.

“I’m sure it must be hard to believe...” Ciel reacted at once, keeping a serious face.

“I don’t doubt your words.” Victoria smiled, waving her fan delicately, dispelling his concerns. Still he hid a caution expression behind the tea. “But bringing back and controlling the dead is a frightening skill. Keep that cute nose of your sniffing around.” The Monarch decreed, accepting the case’s resolution.

“Of course.” Ciel stood and bowed. “I will report all new information immediately.” Then he left as he should, having respected the protocol of the meeting and kept the monarch’s trust.

“I don’t think the truth is a good thing for him to tell the Queen.” Mouser voiced her opinion
through the coach’s open window. Sebastian glanced inside, waiting by the door. The coachman waited on the other side of the vehicle, holding the reins.

Sebastian nodded, understanding but not answering. While the truth was the easy explanation it was also true that it was a dangerous thing to say. Especially if it resulted in more interest than fear.

The boyo was approaching the gates of Buckingham palace where they waited. Sebastian opened the door and waited, entering after the Young Master, settling as he tapped with his cane, signalling the departure.

“You must be exhausted.” Sebastian resumed his role as the journey towards the manor started.

“I’ll say.” The boyo grunted gruffly, staring outwards. “I want to go back and eat sweets already.” Already making the demand he could not in the month that had preceded that ride. Mouser chuckled, already working on the daily sorting of mail, separating the invitations that had cascaded with the season’s start. Now that the boyo was out he needed to attend some of those parties for appearance’s sake.

“I’ll prepare some as soon as we get back.” Sebastian condescended, smiling in amusement. “Ah, that’s right.” Mouser extended requested the letter without looking up from the report on doll sales where it seemed the ones with the green dress were outdoing the pink ones. Sebastian picked it up, offering the letter to the Young Master. “This was delivered by a runner while you were with the Queen. To keep you busy during the trip.”

McMillan’s name was clearly written on the envelope.

“I don’t need it.” The boyo dismissed it easily, shrugging. “Throw it away.”

“Are you sure? Thrashing a letter from McMillan without even reading it.” Sebastian prodded, curious, trying to puzzle the motives behind the action. It was just interesting. Especially considering that it was a noble son whose family connections could be of future use.

“It’s fine. I won’t ever return to that cramped miniature garden.” The Young Master stated haughtily, the dislike for the place clouding over the future uses of those young people, discarding the links because they were of no use presently.

“Is that so.” Sebastian said evenly.

The trip went without a hitch. However as the manor’s façade came into view the road was blocked by a white flock of bawling sheep, occupying the lawn, the fountains, chased by the servants. While it was a relief that the house was still standing that new event was just strange. Ciel looked stunned. Sebastian groaned in anticipation the workload. Mouser defended the papers by holding them above her head.

“Ah! Young Master, Sebastian! Welcome back!” Finny greeted chirpily, holding a sheep on his arms.

“Welcome back. Says Emily” Snake transmitted Emily’s greeting, standing amidst the fluffiness, waving.
“Old man Sam’s fence broke!” Bard informed them while trying to tackle one of the bawling animals.

“Don’t eat my skirt!” Meyrin shouted, struggling to keep the piece of fabric intact.

One of the sheep ran off, skipping through the lawn.

“You little!” Snake shouted, running. “Stay out of the herb patch! Says Wilde.” He relayed his snake’s warning.

“Come back here!” Finny followed, both running towards the lawn, crossing it without a second thought.

Ciel stared for a moment before laughing.

“Is something the matter?” Sebastian inquired as they managed to cross the space that separated them from the doorway.

“No. A lawn is just a lawn, isn’t it.” Mouser chuckled as the boyo said that, dismissing the traditions he had been forced to play along for the last two months. The servants tried to control the flock. “Clean this up and prepare the afternoon tea.” Ciel ordered, going inside.

“Yes, my lord.” Sebastian acquiesced. Mouser waited for a moment before leaving as well. It could be a bit late but she still had to browbeat the boyo into working for the company.

The kitchen seemed to be in order, Sebastian noticed as the task of recovering and controlling the sheep was done. Finny and Bard had been tasked with guiding them back into Sam’s farm. The fence should be mended by then. Meyrin was unpacking. Tanaka was enjoying his tea. Snake was helping Mouser with the paperwork, mostly carrying the heavy loads of reports that an absence demanded before burying the Young Master in them. He took his tailcoat off, looking around as he arranged the shirt’s sleeves.

“What should I prepare today...” the demons murmured, finding the discarded letter. Curiosity was a funny thing. He opened the letter, finding the parade’s photograph and a note. “It was a nice shot.” He considered placidly before crumpling it, using the paper as kindling, tossing it into the lit oven, picking up the apron. “Well then... let’s prepare an exceptionally sweet cake.”
Mouser stared at the mirror mounted over the basin, tilting her head left and right, watching the flow of her hair. It was longer than she had allowed it to be in a long time, already reaching past her shoulders, long enough to need at least three twists before pinning down. It was an annoyance she thought, gripping it, pulling back, taut, free hand gesturing for a dagger, gripping the handle as it manifested from storage.

A weary sight accompanied Sebastian’s hand as he gripped her wrist before the blade got to the hair. He came closer, arm draping around her waist, nails scratching her hip slowly, steadily, the sensation spreading warmly, playfully. Squirming but glaring at the mirror whose tilted reflection didn’t show Sebastian’s face the thief let go of blade vanishing it back into its place amidst so many others, the brown tresses falling around her face. Further antagonized by her own her she blew on them, attempting to get the strands away from her eyes.

“You either allow me to trim it or call a hairdresser.” Sebastian whispered, freeing her wrist, brushing the offending fringe away, tucking it behind her ear, caressing her cheek, waiting her choice.

“It’s a bother either way.” Mouser answered grumpily, lowering her arms, poking the mirror, making it tilt enough to face him through the reflection. “It has grown too long.” A harsh tug pulled her head back, exposing the neck to Sebastian nip. Her breath changed into a sigh when he moved his lips along the length, keeping his grip on her hair. “That.” The thief groaned out. Gripped in a fight and anyone could have easy access to her throat with less pleasant intentions. “Also I don’t trust a blade at my neck.”

“You trust me with my teeth in far more delicate areas.” Proving a point said teeth sunk into her neck feeling her pulse pick up, hot and fast, a laugh vibrating against his cheek, conceding the point.

“It’s a kneejerk reaction.” Mouser whispered, shivering, amused, gripping the metal of the basin-stand, twisting it, letting go when she felt the damage scrape her palm. “Why stop me?”

“Your hair is beautiful. I merely stopped your abuse of it.”

Mouser snorted and laughed.

“Meaning your old man sensibilities like longer hair.” He frowned at the age accusation as usual, mitigated by a tiptoeing kiss on his jaw as she turned away from the mirror, basin water jug and broken support. “Where is your line between flattery and flat out lie?”

“It is surprisingly flexible if you use omission or misdirect the main subject.” Sebastian answered with a smile brimming with challenge. His challenge was met with a look of doubt while still tiptoeing, her hand brushing his hair away tenderly. When she smiled her eyes had reddened, warmth fanning his neck as she nuzzled, nipping in return, the feel of fangs sending a shiver down his spine, his hands gripping her waist, pulling her upwards as a clawed caress moved over his skin, her arms resting then possessively around his neck. Mouser tilted her head so her lips brushed his ear

“Time?” as her voice drawled in temptation.

It took a bit of control to keep his touch around her light. Despite that his palm flattened against the
small of her back, pressing Mouser against his body. How long until dawn or how long it would take until he was sated? His smile spread slowly, unseen.

Gently Sebastian allowed her down, slowly, keeping the contact, until her toes touched the floor, stepping back nonchalantly, breaking the connection, watching her reactions with interest. The shirt was askew and the hair that had started it all fell around her shoulders tousled. With a shrug she decided it was time that had kept them from continued, turning away to continue the morning preparations.

It was rather interesting to hear the sudden hiss of surprise and shock and to see her jump on the bed, loosing balance, startled when the shadows unfurling from him brushed against her leg, twining on her skin, falling on her back, the feeling soft, feathery, cold and hot.

There was a flash of fear in her eyes as her own grey marks traced the skin touched, the feeling fading when Mouser looked up, at him. Her breath trembled as the tendrils moved, grey lips tugging into a knowing smile, the fangs showing in a brief moan, as he approached the edge of the bed pushing her down, pinning her in place. Her hair fanned around her head, darker in the light that was being engulfed by his unleashed presence.

“You had me tied once.” Sebastian whispered. “Did you not think about retribution?” He asked, brushing his claws over the offered expanse of skin. Darkness chained her wrists together, above her head. The thief chuckled, groaning, closing her eyes, writhing.

“I did...” She whispered, the challenge returning. Still nervous, slightly spooked. But her markings had surfaced, to match them, showing the covenant more clearly. That pearly-white spot on her chest glistened, pulsing fast. She was still struggling.

Sebastian waited, darkness slithering down her legs, delighting in dragging out the voice she kept locked he used only the tendrils to break her resistance, taking her to sobbing peaks that were not quite enough, judging by the pleasure, annoyance and frustration held in her eyes. Pinned and writhing, biting her lip, straining but already overly sensitive, mewling when his hands started to trace her markings, before lips and teeth followed the same path, teeth nipping, proving that she did indeed had less qualms about something much sharper than any knife.

It was a long time before the torture ended for the poor demoness bound to his merciless vengeful whims. Not that she complained overmuch as her musing of what retribution would entail were exceeded.

Routine had returned to the Phantomhive household quickly after their return and a week had gone by without more than simple businesses, meetings and the flurry of invitations for the Season. The kitchen was full of the usual morning activity, getting task after task done so nothing would be delayed.

Mouser walked by, calling to Bard after a quick, fruitless search for Finny, announcing that the delivery had arrived. The uneven slanted fringe had been softened from years of knife use and loose tresses still framed her face as usual. Sebastian stopped caring for the china for a moment, appraising the loosely braid weaved with sapphire-blue ribbons, pinned in place as if it were the regular twist, deciding if it fit the look needed of someone in that particular position.
Snake and Bard volunteered, carrying and storing several crates and baskets with a week or so of produce. Snake waited as Bard selected the potatoes, taking them away for peeling. The chef selected carrots, lettuce, cabbage, turnips and spinach, leaving them for Meyrin to wash, picking up a hammer and starting to tenderize the meat. Mouser stretched, giving the delivery lists to Tanaka, allowing him to conduct an inventory of the fresh produce supplies.

Sebastian prepared the Young Master’s tea tray as she left, consulting the schedules next to the door, confronting them with the notes she had been given before heading towards the main hall to retrieve the mail.

The kettle started to whistle.

With his hands full Sebastian called out to Meyrin.

“Meyrin, hand me the Fortnum and Mason royal blend.” He asked, readying the set.

It was a simple enough task. Asking should save a bit of time.

“Yes, right away.” The maid stepped away from the stone sink, drying her handsome the apron quickly, rushing towards the shelves that held the tea leaves held inside many cans of different blends, brands, qualities and maturations, the labels all turned outwards. Meyrin hesitated, gesticulating, glancing from shelf to shelf. “Um…”

“Mr. Sebastian! I picked all those herbs you needed.” Finny entered the kitchen as Meyrin backed away, adjusting her glasses in an attempt to see what she had been requested.

“Very well, separate and wash them.” Sebastian ordered, appraising the maid’s situation his attention turning to the gardener when the young man turned, revealing the tattered and patched straw hat. The glasses were not a new issue but now it seemed they could not be further postponed. There was need to add a few more purchases for the good of the household.

“Young Master it’s time to wake up.” Sebastian called out, stopping the tea cart, opening the curtains of the bedroom systematically, waiting until there was a response to start pouring.

“It’s a blend today?” Ciel sat and stretched, glancing at the cart, settling on the bed, staring at the chosen tea set as well. The lack of the bell was something he truly appreciated. And the civilized hours were also something he was very pleased about. Also his studies, conducted by either Sebastian or the many expert and tutors had been lessened due to the Season and an agreement that the test he had had to study for had been enough to grant him a month of reprieve.

“Quite discerning of you.” Sebastian answered pleasantly without looking up. “Today I prepared Fortnum and Mason.” Sebastian placed the pot down. “Will you be taking milk?”

“Yes. And honey.” The Young Master asked sleepily.

After preparing the request Sebastian opened the remaining windows and began to sort the clothes in preparation for the day. And then, after the tea was finished, help the Young Master to get dressed.

As usual Mouser arrived after Ciel was mostly covered.
“I have gathered all the papers you need to sign. Not too many it turns out.” Unceremoniously the thief occupied the couch, crossing her legs. “There are fifteen invitations for various events that need your yes or no. There are twelve others I already sent out with your ‘no’ and fake apology.” She paused a bit, waiting until the boyo nodded in understanding to move business away from the house. “The coordinator of the new label we’re developing for Harrods’, the one we are angry about, insisted that you came to take a look for yourself.” Sebastian smiled when the Young Master hesitated for a moment before sitting next to Mouser to be helped into the socks and shoes. The we in that phrase was purely feminine and came armed. “To make the meeting we should either depart or send a note for a different time after breakfast. Unless you want to go now and have breakfast at a tea salon.”

“Ah… that. I’ll go today then.” Ciel nodded.

Mouser hummed, opening the planner, making the needed adjustments, standing.

The carriage and horses needed to be prepared then.

“Certainly.” Sebastian acquiesced the request as well. That meant there was no need for lunch preparations although he should leave supper ready to be done as soon as they returned. “I also have a small request. Meyrin needs new glasses now that her current pair seems to no longer be effective and Finny’s hat is exceedingly tattered and patched.”

“That’s fine. So today they can accompany us.” Practical-minded the boyo nodded after the eyepatch was tied into place.

“Then about breakfast…” Sebastian began.

“Ciel!” Thundering through the stairs and shrieking like a banshee storming through the door. “What is the meaning of this!” the Prince demanded as the charged towards Ciel, gripping him by the shoulder and shaking him about easily. “You quit school without telling me!?” he shouted his very justifiable reason to be angry while rattling the Young Master.

Mouser chuckled and walked away. It seemed that the horses would be needed earlier to escape, greeting Agni cheerfully on the way out, ready to gather the servants that would accompany them, asking Tanaka to stay and rest.

“You can just stay there until you graduate. It’s a good place to learn about British society.” Ciel tried to calm the Prince, stammering a bit before regaining both balance and composure.

“But it’s so boring if you aren’t there.” Soma harrumphed and complaining, arms crossed. “And the coursework is way too easy. I learned those things when I was a child.” Soma complained.

When the contents of his statement sunk the confusion only increased in master and butler.

“That’s absurd…” Ciel mumbled after a moment of stupefied silence. It was simply impossible for such a thing to be truth.

“Even if it is a rotten system it is still a school for nobles and royalty…” Sebastian mentioned, quicker to recover with a shrug. “It seems royal private tutoring is on another level.” It seemed the easier way to account for the statement. A prince should be educated faster and more sternly than a noble because of succession reasons. He had seen that century after century. Human royalty was usually held to another set of requirements.

“So Agni came too?” Ciel acknowledged the new arrival as said brilliant prince was slouching over the Young Master’s shoulders, trying to capture his attention much to his annoyance.

“Yes. It has been quite some time since we last seen each other.” Agni smiled and bowed once again.

“A while? No, I believe I have seen you in Weston recently.” Sebastian thought back, the presence of the Prince’s Khansama making the memories clearer, overcoming the focus on the several missions that had left little room for anything else. Agni paled, mumbling in shock and surprise. “Right after Master Soma enrolled. Following the Prince around, worried, and accidentally startling the elephant. Isn’t it correct?” Sebastian smiled slightly, thinking a bit more. “Also were you not at the tournament as well. I noticed your presence under the table when I was delivering the ‘special’ pie.” And there the pieces clicked. He should remember to tell Mouser that it had not been a failure in the formula but an oversight on their planning. “As your religion forbids beef you were prepared for the Prince’s sake. Don’t you remember that either?” And as distracting Soma was the fastest way to divert attention, allowing the Young Master to finish dressing and... a whistle outside warned him that the preparations to depart were complete.

“So that was why he was fine…” The Young Master mumbled, catching on as well, finally clearing that loose thread.

“Mr. Sebastian that’s…” Agni attempted to cover the facts that had been uncovered.

“Agni… you ignored my orders?” The Prince’s attention had been successfully diverted.

“I’m sorry but I was so worried.”

“Do you have no trust in…”

As they fought there was time to fit the jacket and get the bowler hat.

“Well then we will be out for a while.” Ciel announced halfway out the door. “We’re leaving you in charge of the house for now.” He continued his retreat, chased by Soma’s indignant scream.

That’s a huge clock!

That’s Big Ben.

It looks so strong...

“I wonder when the bridge will be done.” The chatter between Bard and Finny as they crossed Westminster Bridge echoed the young Master’s idle question. Mouser peeked out the window, staring at the structure for a while. Boats with workers filled the Thames around it. People moved on the stone and metal structure. It seemed as busy as ever and a source of new cripples every day.

“The planning started around the time you were born and the construction began three years ago. It will probably take a while before it is done.” Sebastian supplied helpfully before gazing outside as well, growing silent, watching. “Humans have such short lifespans yet are so easy-going.” He considered.
“That’s because unlike your kind we have various interests and obligations.” The boyo answered haughtily.

Mouser said nothing, sharing neither opinion, playing with the edge lace cape that had been ordered, in all similar to the one lost in the Campania.

The first stop was an oculist. Meyrin had been holding on to her glasses as a valued keepsake but that was simply not effective for the household as the minute errors proved. It did not affect her diligence, dedication nor the skills she was hired for. But fixing every blunder was taxing.

“How are these?” the salesman asked, changing the pair the maid was trying.

“Ah… I can see so well…” Meyrin adjusted the frames and looked around, smiling when every fuzzy thing came into perfectly sharp focus. Finny waving cheerfully, the young master waiting with a serious look. Mouser staring at a pair of silver frames and then sneaking an appraising glance at Sebastian.

“We’ll take those then, correct?” Sebastian stepped forward, leaning to have an answer eye-to-eye, coming into her sight in every sharply defined detail.

“It’s not good to see this much!” Meyrin blushed and looked away, panicked.

The next stop was a hatter. Meyrin and her new glasses began to admire the new fashionable hats for the season. Mouser stole her simple hat and placed the frill-trimmed object of her admiration on top of Meyrin’s auburn hair, offering the item. Bard and Snake chose once more to wait outside. The Young Master had chosen to occupy one of the plush round stools.

“Were you looking for something in particular?” the shopkeeper asked politely, approaching.

“I want a straw hat as big as the Big Ben.” Finny declared immediately, full of enthusiasm.

Sebastian sighed, grabbing his head to stop the bouncing.

“A regular one will do.” The demon asked, divided between amusement and annoyance.

“Don’t you two want anything?” The young Master asked as they walked out of the hatter, glancing at Bard and Snake conspicuously standing still amidst the many people browsing the store windows. “This is your chance.” He allowed, gesturing lightly. Snake darted towards one of the bag stores, picking up a rather large messenger bag. “Do you really want such a big one?” Ciel asked as the smiling shopkeeper followed Snake.
“Yes.” Snake nodded, looking down. “With this everyone can go out.” One of the snakes that had accompanied him peeked from within the new bag, scaring both the girl and Bard. “Says Wordsworth.”

The bookstore was a stop the Young Master imposed. As he was browsing through the shelves Bard returned with a brightly coloured magazine with a scantily clad woman on the cover.

“Young Master! Can I take this?” He asked with a big smile.

“Absolutely not.” Sebastian answered sternly, covering the boyo’s eye. “You have some gall showing something like that to the Young Master.”

“He already saw me wearing less.” Mouser mentioned flippantly walking by, glancing at the cover, with an armful of volumes. “also slept with a young lady, copped a feel and why was Lizzy in her unmentionables when we showed up for the rescue...”

The confused boyo went from bewildered to blushing in a few seconds.

Sebastian allowed him to go free with another put-upon sigh.

The retreat was swift, towards the shelves that displayed new editions.

“The Young Master is still too young.” Sebastian complained.

Mouser hummed in an amused tone, placing her books in his arms.

“Oh. It’s an historical novel.” There was a small bubble of excitement in the boyo’s voice as he selected the tome that had caught his eye.

“My, my…” Sebastian turned and a glance gave him the gist of the discovery. “Is that not the work of Master Arthur?”

“The wordsmith?” Mouser peeked too. “Good for him.”

“He can write historical novels anytime.” Ciel disdained as he leafed through the first pages. “I think he should be writing detective novels.” Verdict given but the book joined Mouser’s on Sebastian’s arm.

“You are still buying it I see.” Sebastian did not resist the easy mock.

“Just to kill time.” Ciel huffed, tapping his cane and moving on.

“As you wish.” Sebastian stated neutrally, walking away to make the purchases.

The brightly coloured display of treats in the candy store drew the young Master in, as it would have done to any other child. Outside it some kids struggled and haggled with their chaperons,
attempting to convince them to go in. Others stood at the windows, pointing and dreaming.

“Young Master if you eat that your appetite will be spoiled.” Sebastian looked at what the boyo was doing, selecting a wide variety of candy and chocolates, placing them on the scale’s plate.

“I’m doing market research.” Mouser approved of the sneaky answer. It was a good deflection, knowing of his position. But if he wanted to make it more believable he should have added bits of his own product. Sebastian would not have believed it either way but it would look a bit more believable.

Ciel’s hand stopped for a moment on his quest for rival-brand sweets before taking the box.

“Bard.” He called as they walked out of the store, tossing the candy tin box. Sebastian looked rather disappointed, close to pouting. Bard stared at the object in his hand, frowning in confusion at the candy cigarettes. “Well you are the only one who didn’t get anything and as a chef you cannot allow your sense of taste to dull.” Saying that while taking a sucker out of its wrapping was a bit ironic but the Young Master did not notice. “You need to cut back a bit on your smoking before your tongue goes bad.”

Mouser arched one eyebrow as she lit one cigarette herself, smiling. If her tongue went bad it would be a relief from barbs in his mind. Said tongue was stuck out playfully when the boyo glanced at her.

“Got it. Thank you very much.” Bard thanked him happily, chuckling, touched by both the gift and the concern.

“Just the inspection left then.” Ciel stated, looking around. Everyone seemed to be gathered.

“I am sorry but can we visit one more place before that?” Sebastian asked as they walked towards the carriages.

“Where?” The boyo tilted his head, curiously.

“Somerset house.” Sebastian answered, opening the door, helping them in.

“So? What was that all about?” The boyo asked as Sebastian returned from the austere building and the horses were in motion, taking them to Harrods’. Mouser returned the files to the folder, settling back on the seat, looking at Sebastian as well.

“This.” The demon pulled out the chain and the charms, letting it clink before returning to his pockets.

“The Undertaker’s mourning chain?” The boyo’s eyes narrowed, curiosity taking over, making him sit up straighter, waiting.

“Yes. I had it researched, thinking it might give us more information about him.” They had never really asked, questioned why that man gave them information so easily, why did he seem to know the Phantomhives as well as he did. “The death date engraved in the silver, the where it was made according to the hallmarks it bears. I had these compared to the death certificates kept at Somerset house.” Sebastian took some certificates out of his breath pocket, handing them to the boyo. “These
are the death certificates from the seven people whose hair is within the lockets. This part of the investigation is concluded.” The demon stopped as the boyo read each name, reaching the last sheet of paper. “There was nothing linking the seven people. However one name stood out.”

“This is… Claudia Phantomhive?” Ciel looked agitated for a moment as he read the certificate. “I do not know much about her but this is my grandmother. The fact that he had this would suggest he had ties with not only the previous generation but the ones before that as well.” The boyo closed his lips into a thin line, looking disgruntled. “The initial P. for a last name is not so rare so I thought nothing of it. To think it stood for Phantomhive…” Sebastian extended him the amulet. Ciel took it, staring at the hair inside, at the engraved name. “Undertaker… just what kind of ties does he have with the Phantomhive family.”

“Maybe he loved her.” Mouser smiled softly. No one carried around amulets with no meaning or feeling. Then the smile widened into a mischievous grin. “Maybe he is your grandpapa.”

Harrods was full as always. The space reserved for the new Funtom products had only a few curious ladies and the saleswomen in the uniform dress with the company’s logotype. Mouser was frowning, appraising the placement, taking the notebook out of the bag and making some annotations.

“Funtom’s new product! Please try our new perfume!” One of the ladies stated, smiling behind the counter.

“Special for young ladies. Please take a sample.” Another advanced with the decorated heart-shaped pieces of thicker card impregnated with the carefully developed scent.

It was a good product. But it didn’t seem to be having that much impact in sales.

“Why are they giving it to men! As if I’d need any!” Ciel protested, embarrassed. Meyrin seemed delighted.

“I’ll tell the coordinator…” Sebastian acquiesced, glancing at the person in the unicorn costume. It was poorly done. Fat. Short-horned. Dead-eyed. Shapeless. And sending little girls screaming in fright. “However… that character couldn’t have been done a bit better?

“The Funtom company has different icons for different lines. We already have a cat and a rabbit…” Ciel defended.

“So for the young ladies you chose a unicorn…” Sebastian completed. It made sense if one thought about all the symbolism of purity and gracefulness. But that was not...

“Tell me about it.” Mouser snorted, annoyed. “There were graceful ones in the samples.” Hose-head profiles. One classical with the mouth open. It looked too aggressive and almost heraldic. There was another with the beard which was a bit on the unfortunate side for the brand. There was other that was very slender and gazelle-like, straight-horned. And there was the favourite that was not too slender, not too strong, delicate profile, tapered spiralling horn and curling mane. And the mascot suit made it justice as well at least in the drawings “but the boyo here approved the fat and cheap.”

“Oh do shut up.” Ciel bristled, embarrassed. “You and Lizzy have been very clear.”
“I don’t even ask for cute boyo, just well made.” Mouser countered sourly. “That fat ugly pony.” She sneered at the costume again.

“It’s great that you have decided to expand your business with womanly products but it seems a bit hard to capture a woman’s heart with just data and quality.” Sebastian smirked with a stab following.

“The perfume is lovely. But I’m about to throw data all over his head very violently.” She smiled sharply, looking down at him. “The boyo needs to improve his charm. Maybe we should have made him work harder in Weston in the art of cajoling.” Sebastian answered with a similar smile and an agreeing nod.

“Stop grinning!” Feeling the attack the boyo reacted, hissing. “I will devise a better advertising campaign and then…”

“Replace the symbol.” Mouser growled.

“With what!?” Ciel growled back.

“A unicorn that has not raided the sugar storage!” She hissed.

A crash and shouts of panic interrupted the exchange. Horses neighed.

Sebastian dashed away. The boyo looked confused.

“Where are you going?” Bard shouted, looking a bit nervous at the suddenness of the departure and the instructions of caring for the Young Master.

Mouser huffed and straightened, looking around. People around had stopped, all concerned. Most likely a simple accident, nothing to threaten them. And amidst the faces of strangers she found Charlotte, shaking her head, dismissing something, talking to a man in simple clothes, like the ones her aides wore. But she had never seen that one before...

Alerted and reminded of the note the thief looked closer. She had promised Charlotte her time that weekend to sort out all about the suddenly interesting gentleman that had ended the visits of all others, the one who had captured her friend’s attention. It seemed she had a chance to see the demon before an introduction.

He was tall and rather big. Almost burly. Tanned and freckled skin. Freckles all over, giving a boyish charm. Light brown hair with darker roots. He looked cheery, more handsome than beautiful. Poison-green eyes turned towards Mouser and he smiled widely, inviting and open, winking. The thief gasped as the memories of others told her exactly who he was. Unlike Sebastian he had no reason nor contract to hide rank and identity. That was Sitri... that was... Bloody hell that was Sitri...

Looking down and making sure her clothes were still where they should be Mouser walked towards the pair.
Panic and onlookers surrounded the toppled carriage. The horses had ran away, spooked. A few people were on the ground looking a bit battered, the driving being one of them. Shattered glass and splintered wood littered the area around the accident. The vehicle itself was warped and partially broken. According to the frightened voices around the people inside had not come out yet. Despite the many voices of concern and the suggestions of well-meaning help none of the fashionable people of the *ton* approached. It would after all require effort and could result in torn dresses.

On the other hand the poor rarely travelled through that part of town and on one of those finer paid carriage so Sebastian was fairly sure whoever was inside would be of use as soon as they felt the proper gratitude towards a rescuer. Also he had a faint sensation of recognition echoing from the moment the screams had started.

The door was easy to rip away as soon as he hopped on top of the toppled carriage, the scent of blood was faint beneath the wood, no more than paltry scratches.

“Are you all right?” He called into the box, watching as its occupants rustled, startled looked up, confirming his suspicion. “My, my… if it isn’t Miss Irene Diaz.” The fair-haired opera singer was wide-eyed, struggling to remember. Sebastian smiled pleasantly. He had a notion now. “Thank you once more for attending our dinner party.”

Memory jostled and rumours of his survival remembered the actress began to exchange the expected pleasantries until a voice pleaded from underneath her petticoats.

“Could you please save the small talk for later?” It sounded like a male. A bit winded, a bit strained.

“Oh, yes…” Irene looked down, still half caught in the shocked daze most humans were vulnerable to when startled and harmed. “Are you unhurt?”

“This is” The man under her was not the one he had been expecting. Although still young and good looking he looked less groomed and less of a dandy than the former companion.

“I’m Julius Pitt, an actor at Haymarket.” He introduced himself, sitting up, aiding Miss Diaz.

The murmurs around were dying down. People saw him there, seemingly aiding and felt free to do as they pleased, leaving the scene, ambling away, continuing their window-shopping and purchases.

“I see.” It was not hard to understand the opera singer had found herself a new paramour and the gossip had not yet reached the higher tiers of society. “Were you on your way somewhere perhaps?” It was valid information but it did not give Sebastian that much to work with. So he tossed the question, watching.

“We’ll miss the start of the performance now…” Concern was etched into the actresses’ features as she started to grow panicked and concerned. “and if I’m seen with an actor from a rival company…”

“I have a good idea…” Sebastian continued, smiling, catching what he needed to further the day’s goal.
Delivering an opera singer stealthily while concealing her lover would be time consuming and less than ideal even if the carriage had been undamaged. As it was and the fact that it would have to be used as a rickshaw would make it impossible. Already stretching the limits of credibility that he was pulling the vehicle meant for two horses. So the solution was to simply head straight to the delivery, shocking people on the way and the producers on the wide veranda, and let the other actor fend for himself as soon as the vehicle was out of sight and Miss Diaz readying for the stage.

The actors were nervous, running out of ways to prolong the scene. The public was growing restless.

A white flash broke the tension, creating a stir. The maiden riding an unicorn accompanied by the scent of flowers, the cards fluttering towards the crowd,

“It’s Juliet.” The actor that played Romeo took the entrance in stride, awed. “Ahh… this sweet smelling fragrance, that beautiful figure riding a unicorn just like a goddess…” It seemed an actor was perfectly suited for such publicity stunts. Of course they had had the precedent with their own play for charity.

“I am sorry for being late.” Irene Diaz waltzed to the centre stage, away from the unicorn as murmurs of approval and wonder swept through the ladies of the afternoon session. Young and old seemed to be curious about the perfume as much as they were about the dramatic entrance. “I am the Lord Capulet’s daughter, Juliet.” She introduced herself before turning towards the one that had aided her, kissing the chubby face of the unicorn, closing the adlib with a flourish. “Thank you for bringing me, Mr. Unicorn.”

Charlotte had left them together after a brief introduction, amused and pleased, requesting the usual appraisal of new members for her network. It had been a precaution that had served them well through the years. And if she was seriously considering Sitri and if the demon wanted a covenant it was for the best. So, unconcerned, the thief waited, sighing. Sitri has stuffed his hands into his pockets, indolently waiting with a light smile.

“What have you told her?” The thief asked as they walked away, ambling towards a place where they could talk calmly. Harrods was too crowded and if things turned a bit more dangerous it would be bad to call attention to them.

“I done told her little.” Sitri’s voice was deep and woven with a drawling southern American accent. The thief paused for a moment before shrugging. Odd but he could have been there recently and adopted the quirk for his own amusement. War dragged deals out of humans and America had been steeped in conflict for a while. “But I is interested.”

“What have you told her?” Mouser ducked into an alley, leaning against the wall. Sitri plucked something out of his pockets, offering. It was a tobacco-wrapped cigarette. Smiling the thief offered the lighter. It looked like a bribe. A good bribe. “Why?” Slight surprise that he smoked too.

“I cain’t very well ignore a Caith Síth a-markin’. That ain't fittin’.” He chuckled, scratching his
head, stretching leisurely. “The Coven is allies too. Most demon-folk try not to upset Blondie.” Still amused the demon sat down on the piled up boxes, rolling shoulders, getting comfortable. “Nah… you is thinkin’ how come a coot like me ain’t got one? Most get cautious. Makin’ a covenant is mighty dangerous. Can kick up a ruckus and then there is the spooky tales of maddened ones.”

“To my knowledge it’s mostly because you aren’t very good at choosing.” Mouser smiled, poking fun.

“Nah ye see… there is that. Womenfolk early on were also a-gettin’ skittish cause of the church types. Made to soul-cattle. Witches might could work but some were just a-lookin’ for a bit of freedom. Spooked of the real offer. Yet Charlotte…” Sitri smiled softly, his boyish freckles making him look softer than his bulk. “When I came a-sniffin’ I was doubtful. And then… Hack my legs off and call me shorty…”

“From the letters she told me she fended off most of them and hired a few for errands.” Mouser continued, still trying to see. What memories she had of Sitri were of alliance. It was true that in hell he had a lasting pact with the Coven. A few of the links were personal as demons of his legion were covenant to Caith Sith. “And those made contracts with humans for their souls faster than they would have sitting on their rumps and waiting for a plea.”

“She done bullied me into submission and hired me for information gatherin’ as soon as she spotted me ease in gettin’ them.” All that was said with a goofy happy smile. “She kissed me. Charlotte never kisses the blokes she bleeds.”

“So why ask for my permission?” Mouser blew smoke, popping down next to him, stretching her legs, pulling down the lacy hood. If Charlotte was interested enough to show affection it was a good sign.

“Protocol says so.” Sitri shrugged. “And Charlotte trust menfolk as much as you so… you both ornery and mean-streaked.” He made a waving gesture of doubt and helplessness. “I can offer her all. But you is the one she trust. Much like she encouraged you to get… he is in a contract so I have to call him Sebastian.”

“Do I have to threaten you?” Mouser asked, nodding, decision made. If Sitri was so keen on Charlotte it should work well. They just needed to tell her with all the details and care before the choice was hers.

“No Ma’am. I have a list of what you done to those who hinted harm.” Sitri smiled. “I do have a request. Talk cockney to me. I cain’t get Charlotte riled enough to do it.”

“Where is he… Taking such a long time.” The boyo was grumbling sitting on a chair that had been provided by the worried coordinator. As expected he was both safe and fuming. “And where were you?” He turned to Mouser as she returned, hiding a cigarette box with Sitri’s happy payment of a few moments cussing at him in her street accent and being yelled back with the odd American drawl. She lost it laughing when he told her to hold her potatoes. Not that he fared much better when told to stop fannying around. Mostly because he did the connection to the fanny. Ah well.

“Gallivanting through the gallery and looking for the next expensive thing for you to buy me
boyo.” Mouser smiled, poking fun when he paled. It was getting late. Sebastian should have returned already if he was his usual self with the house schedule. “Also to the parasol shop.” The thief tilted the black parasol, the repairs concluded and the fabric free of water damage. Little silver baubles had been added at the end of every rib.

A rumble began to echo on the stone floor, made of steps and heels. A crowd surged suddenly, heading towards them in frills, fabric and excitement. The sudden onset froze the Phantomhive household in shock and surprise as they charged towards the perfume stall. Predictably the boyo fell from the chair and drowned in skirts.

“What a pitiful cry.” Sebastian chastised, picking the boyo from the crowd, pulling him away.

“Sebastian” Annoyed and before being placed on the floor he squirmed, shouting. “where have you been?” Then he noticed the half black half white situation. “And … what are you wearing?”

“I went to do some advertising.” Sebastian shrugged, unabashed, stripping out of the outfit as Mouser glared at it, walking out of the crowd with a few new rings, pulling an almost catatonic Snake by the waistcoat. “That scream a while ago I thought I recognized it. Miss Irene Diaz. I made a deal with her in exchange for help.” Sebastian explained, discarding the outfit, turning to examine the commotion his cations had cause with a look of smug pride.

“You were doing that?” The boyo was taken aback. Such a simple thing had dragged out the whole female audience of a play. Some of them he recognized a gossips and social butterflies, the ones whose word made the others buy the same items in an endless imitation and fake flattery, vying for position.

“How could I be the Phantomhive family butler if I could not do something as simple as double the sales of our new product.” Sebastian chuckled smugly as the rest of the household finally freed themselves from the crowd that tried to get to the salesladies.

“Well… that way we won’t have to spend any more money advertising.” The boyo considered, already making calculations.

“You will spend money on a new unicorn or I’ll stab your arse with that mask.” Mouser threatened, poking the boyo’s back with the parasol.

“But even so to think that a performer would have such an effect in sales…” Ciel took a few cautious steps forwards, nearing Sebastian and getting out of the parasol’s range of poke.

“In the end that is what the masses are about, Young Master.” Sebastian considered as a disappointed sound wafted through the women as the sold out sign was placed on the empty shells. They then crowded another lady to place a reservation.

“And so I had them put adverts with Irene in it and slimmed down the unicorn to Lizzy’s cuteness approval.” Ciel presented the new campaign a few days later. Mouser had sneaked the unicorn’s head into his room until he had signed the papers. He suspected Sebastian had done nothing to stop that particular part of her mischief. “It needs to be fresh and elegant to capture the sales.”

“Your greed knows no bounds Young Master.” Sebastian clapped in amused approval.
Mouser smiled, satisfied, and returned to the paperwork.
Chapter 132

“You knew him” Charlotte stated simply, placing the last bottle amidst the others before plopping down on the armchair, adjusting the flowy fabric of the summer housedress. Sherry in crystal decanters, brandy in thick-glassed smuggling bottles, rum and cognac. Corks, stoppers, caps and glasses peppered the spaces in-between, littering the small coffee table. The ashtray was also somewhere in there.

“I knew of him.” Mouser sidestepped, lighting one of Sitri’s cigarettes, relaxing. Going by Charlotte’s amused glance she had recognized the mirrored glibness. It was, after all part of her job and words could be twisted and worked as they pleased. “I did the usual. Now I want your account before I spill.”

If Mouser was to have an answer for either of them she had to first ascertain the interest.

“You did see my letters.” And, as anyone who lived off blackmailing, they were carefully worded to an almost cryptic level to those that did not know the writer’s true motives, past and personality. Mouser had also received thankful and admiring notes from the hired demons. Also some complaints from the spurned, weaker ones. It was good for one’s reputation in hell. “Sitri arrived a couple of weeks after you were gone. I thought he was a gang boss from the way those blokes reacted.” Which meant the other demons had cowered and tiptoed around the Great Prince of Hell. Mouser took a swig as Charlotte swirled her glass, hiding her smile. “He was cocky but fit. But made no flashy promises. Just offered himself. So I made him work.” It was a difference she had stressed on the letters.

“Bullied to submission were his words I believe.” The thief poked.

Charlotte smiled as well.

“You know me. I have to control these lads well lest they turn. And first I have to make them obey and be happy to do it.” The usual methods. “Also I did not like to look at him and feel… awareness.” Evasive words. But Evee had been no more forthcoming when it dawned on her she was developing an attachment. There had been a few others, not fit for victims, catching her eye but it annoyed Charlotte. “So I kept him away.” Evee nodded, waiting. Something had changed from keeping Sitri working in the lower tiers to walking around at Harrods’ by her side and appearing so prominently in letters that hid all that was personal and usable as leverage. “He found out about a meeting where we were expecting treachery. My information was slightly skewed so it was a bit more dangerous…”

“Sitri showed up?” Mouser asked, picking up the cognac.

“Vexingly yes. With a shotgun and a few more men to even the odds. And then he threatened to make them all Memphis Belles and open up a bordello.” Charlotte chuckled, toasting. Mouser laughed. That she would have liked to hear. “I… kissed his cheek and all started to…” She looked down and sighed, repeating what Evee had said a year ago. “Get harder to ignore.”

“So you are also interested.” Mouser waited for the nod before placing the glass down. Now it came the hard part. “Then there are things you need to know. Let me start with a question. What changed about me?”

“You stopped eating.” Charlotte answered without showing discomfort with the apparent change of subject. “Either you show disinterest or pity.” Which for an orphan brought up with little was
strange, especially now that she had the chance to take the best society had to offer. “Your nails are fully black and glossy. Staining is not why.” She continued calmly. “Not much else.”

“Is that so? I could have sworn you would have listed trusting a male as the wonkier thing.” Mouster smiled softly. “Anyhow... all of that is due to the fact that I became a demon.”

“Figuratively?” Charlotte tilted her head, bewildered.

“Literally.” Mouster answered to her change of expression. Charlotte was still willing to listen. “I am not mad either.” The thief sighed and stretched. “I can give you proof too.”

“I don’t have a reason to disbelieve you.” The information broker whispered tiredly. “Not with the reports I’ve been receiving.” Strange events, cults, deaths, hunts, sightings. Accepting Evee’s information meant that some of that made more sense. “Sebastian, Sitri and all of those you’ve sent to my door with the promises and offers...”

“Yes.” Mouster acquiesced. “Sitri wants to form a covenant with you, make you a demon as well.”

“Why?”

“Because I asked. And because you have potential.” Mouster fidgeted. “I’d be lonely.”

“So this offer he made... was to give me power.” Calculating Charlotte placed her glass down. “So this was what I encouraged you to take?”

“Yes.” Mouster smiled. “Not only power as I’ve been learning. But yes.”

“It’s odd to care...”

“You’re telling me. When we first met Sebastian would have killed me for an order. Truth be told I was also ready to rip his throat open and leg it.”

Their ideas were simple in a way as they worked out the plans for the future demoness.

Mouser had asked for Charlotte to take the Undertaker’s place as information broker. The price was the same as it had even been. Jewels. The first piece of information traded seemed to point out to an inauspicious return. It was then agreed that the covenant agreement and rituals should take place outside of London, in the country cottage Charlotte owned for quiet vacations.

It was not even that odd to find Sitri eavesdropping on the stairs as the thief left to enjoy the rest of her free day.

It was odd to play happy patty-cake and be hugged before he stormed into the study to tackle Charlotte and finish giving her all the answers she would demand.

Books and a plain-ish dress to replace the lost grey one in the Campania were picked up before the
thief made her way to the toybox. Weapons, old books and tools, magical, chemical, mechanical or mixed, were scattered about. It seemed the summoning style she had devised had a bit of a problem when returning the items, leaving them in whatever space was available.

Something to work on it seemed. Tilting her head Mouser looked for the notebook, opening in the experiments entry, leaning on the table, testing the system. The dagger vanished from the floor and appeared, falling on her palm. When vanished once more fell neatly on its proper place.

The thief made a note, marking distance as yet another factor to consider.

If the where was an issue when summoning weapons it could leave her vulnerable when she needed them and was away from the building. Maybe she should do that pocket-plane for the sake of convenience as it would be metaphorically and metaphysically attached to her.

Clearing some space to start working on the new skills Mouser found a big lacquered box and an envelope with Sebastian’s handwriting. Curious she opened the letter.

*As your mind is still human-focused I am sure you still place some value in the birthday traditions but as we will be working I will be unable to properly celebrate until after duties are settled.*

Inside the box, neatly arranged over black velvet was a set of feather-shaped twin daggers, throwing knives, pocket knives and needle-blades of dark metal, perfect for a thief, metal that would not reflect light. Mouser smiled, caressing dagger, picking it up.

Although glancing back at the confusion of the toybox explained the pained looks she had received a day or so ago.
“And then she done tossed me out.” Sitri complained, pacing the toybox, sour-faced.

The demon had appeared at Mouser’s door a few minutes ago, after a few hours of explanations, reporting, seemingly concerned, explaining the chain of events, fixating on that particular detail.

“So?” Mouser looked up from her notes and plans, voice flat, refocusing. Charlotte did so fairly often, when she wanted to be alone to sort information and order her men around. Sometimes it was to be expected. Others were abrupt when some boy or other arrived with a scrap of paper and a new development in ventures, investments or targets. There were even times when she had been tossed out with an address pinned to her shirt and instructions to go deal with it. And seeing they were leaving for the countryside she had a lot of preparations to make in a short amount of time. Declining invitations, cancelling previous appointments, making a few key appearances at social haunts. Resupplying. Issuing new orders. Making sure her network could function without direct supervision. Possibly choosing a few outfits. And if the hints were right Charlotte would also be cutting ties with her current paramours. At least until Sitri showed signs of comfort or discomfort towards the easiest method of getting a male trapped. Sebastian had never asked but it could have been a sound play to deal with Joker if Beast hadn’t been easier. Mouser however felt iffy on her ability of not murdering.

“Tossed out!” The demon stressed, gesticulating.

“Did you thoroughly supplied the information needed and answer her questions?” Mouser reclined, amused. It was funny to see such an overreaction when Sitri could just use his affinity for information and secrets to peek about and find out what his prospective covenant was doing, thinking or plotting. Much like he did to find his way to the toybox, caught in an offhanded remark.

“Nah ye done spooked me. Might could’ve said the wrong thing...” Sitri sulked, pulling a chair.

“Charlotte is interested in power and she seemed keen on you. Not exactly by default but... well enough to be seen in public. Especially considering her clientele wandering about with their wives.” Mouser poked a bit of fun, pulling a bottle from the shelves, offering the French brandy. “Also attracted enough to ask for my advice. Not that it goes further from kill or don’t kill.”

“Mighty practical.” Sitri accepted the offer, relaxing, stretching.

“Thanks. Did it help?” Sarcasm.

“Ye done soothed me pride.” Eyes narrowed slightly for a brief moment. Sitri’s reasons were simple to understand and his concern was not unwarranted. Old demons by his own admission were a bit off on the human perspectives and emotions and in wanting that particular covenant he was experiencing things that had been otherwise either elusive or befuddling before. It was funnier still seeing him that had a certain reputation in the love/lust department to squirm. “Ye lyin?”

“No need.” Mouser lit a cigarette, shrugging. “So why track me down instead of having a butchers at the house?”

“Well nah... there is the alliance thing.” Sitri placed the bottle down, leaning on the table. “Us. I help ye, ye help me. Common enemies and common allies. Simple-like.” Mouser offered a lighter when he plucked a cigarette from the box, under the papers. “Nah two things. Charlotte warned ye about the flutter-about. Go for the wings. Clip it, bind it, maim it. Kill it. It’s good reputation. Also
safety concerns from what I know.” A small pause. Mouzer stared. The she smiled, nodding. “War is coming.”

“From…” the thief whispered softly, noticing the change on his face.

“Everywhere. All prepare. Something will trigger.” Sitri’s smile grew wide and his fangs showed, thick and feline. “It will be enjoyable.” His accent slipped slightly but the drawl remained.

“Death and despair. Pleas in fear. Simple wishes. Easy food.” Mouzer answered her echoes, making a note to check the factories. Angela had tried to rush a war through drugs. While acting alone made the threat lesser if there were plots already in motion… “do you gamble?”

“Indeed I do ma’am.”

The thief stood, balancing the cigarette on her lips, clapping his shoulder, motioning him to come along.

Charlotte found them amidst the smoke and wails in a card hell burying dandies in debt and drinking the place dry.

According to the guards four men had already been dragged out of the place, bleeding from derringer bullets and a lot more bruised men. Amused she watched as Sitri cleaned the table with a smile and a look of innocence not eased by the dim environment, fooling the new blood that paled as they saw the game turn on them, and Evee lounge on a worn couch, waiting for her turn, making the other participants shiver as she played with her knives. The harlots that worked the den seemed to have taken a shine to her, keeping the glass at her side full. Most likely one of the men she had shot were the brutes she had received reports about.

“Just one more game Sitri.” Charlotte fully entered the room, crossing it, leaving a light pat on the demon’s shoulder, receiving an open smile and a quick obedient nod. Those who recognized her balked. The workers greeted her politely. Lonnie hastened to get her a glass and some good scotch. “How are the pickings?”

“Fair.” Evee smiled too as Charlotte sat down and adjusted her skirts. “All done?”

“Yes, yes. A bit tedious to review everything in such short notice.” She picked up the glass, thanking the girl. “I have a few targets for you to deal with. Took me a bit longer because of those irregulars.”

“Just leave the list.” Evee acquiesced, watching the game for a moment. “Have you started Isles?”

“It’s so terrible. But then everyone knows Lady Crofton paid the editor.” Charlotte gossiped, amused, launching the debate on the merits of the new books that would pepper the Season, toying with tattling in a string of creepy letters that that was not the way someone died. Usually a decapitated man was less verbose.
The clock ticked quietly, echoing in the mostly empty entrance hall where it sat. It had chimed two A.M. a while ago, the echoes never able to reach the upstairs. Wheels creaked over cobblestone, alerting Mouser, taking her attention away from the reports in four different handwritings that had appeared on the bed, detailing the doll’s examinations and possible flaws. Blondie, Muireall, Grizel and Lorna according to the signatures. It was more than they had had and came with a handful of helpful ideas to dampen the ill effects of its presence. Also it could be very much useful as negotiation material, leverage for when she needed to play the Reapers. Plans for the plane had been laid out as well idly, the measurements worked out. It should be roomy enough to acquire a lot and to retreat into. A new, bigger and better toybox.

The thief stood and walked towards the main door, crossing the silent halls.

Opening the door, nary a creak sounding, revealed the boyo and the entourage. Tanaka, Snake and Pluto seemed to have been left behind to watch the manor. The horse shifted restlessly.

“Good evening Boyo. I’m pleased to inform you both Prince Soma and Agni are asleep due to your crafty choice of time. Your room is ready.” Mouser greeted him. Grumpy and starting to show the signs of tiredness the boyo walked into the city house, heading straight upstairs, followed by Sebastian and the luggage needed for immediate use.

Bard took the carriage to the back. Mouser closed and locked the doors, heading towards the service door as the cook dragged the boxes and baggage that should be in the dressing room the next morning. Finny walked in with the servant’s own suitcases, sleepily and wobbly, heading to his room with a hazy smile. Meyrin also skipped along quickly, stopping on the bathroom first.

The day was the Season’s start for the boyo, already late. But as he had a reputation of a recluse any accepted invitation would be regarded as a hostess’s triumph.

Mouser was asleep once more when he entered their room which was a sore sign of depleted energy. Sebastian approached the bed, kissing her forehead in a greeting, noticing the half opened eyes, semi-alert, closing again when she noticed who it was, adjusting deeper into the covers.

Reports had been left neatly on the desk. The demon picked them up, lighting the lamp on the opposite side of the thief, adjusting the pillows and sat down, half laid on the bed, reviewing the layouts and possible threats of the next few days.


Sebastian stopped reading for a moment, reaching out, petting Mouser’s head. The thief made a small sound, rolling again until she was draped across his legs, receptive to his petting, hands opening and closing, claws grazing his thigh. Soothingly he continued, taking the quiet time, appreciating the companionship, reminded that someday she could shapeshift into an actual cat. And if Mouser did not claw his face away in a fit of annoyance when asked maybe she would be willing to curl up in furry purring ball on his lap. Although he was much more interested in her current form if she woke up.
Chapter 134

The week had gone by smoothly. Presence had been marked on the fashionable haunts and plays. Support had been given to Miss Diaz to strengthen her cooperation in advertising the perfume and future product of the Funton Lady line. Social obligations were being fulfilled slowly and steadily, a soirée, a tea party, a ball a night. Underworld duties had also been completed satisfactorily, although some outer meddling was starting to show. Yet it could not be addressed as the casual interference was not enough to warrant retribution. In any event the unlawful seemed hesitant to make any missteps after the last purge.

Lights glittered above the salon, the gas keeping the flames steady behind the glass stained golden, giving the space a halo-like hue. The effect it had, however, was utterly broken due to the sheer amount of bodies and fabric pressed together. The servants were having a very difficult task. It was almost impossible to serve the refreshments and finger foods. Likewise reaching the buffet tables almost called for a battering ram. Rather inefficient, Sebastian considered as he scanned the crowd for threats.

Lady Colchester was beaming with satisfaction, pleased with her social success. In the game of connections and influence she was the hostess with more to offer to those who attended her gatherings. The Marchionesses’ presence along with Lady Elizabeth’s had also played a rather major part in deciding which would be the last public appearance in London to appease the peers.

Unfortunate that her grand moment was cut short by something as trivial as a burning city.

It had been a clever way to go about the arson. Starting in the slums where it would spread easily and reach the warehouses. Then with the added vigour of the material there stored the fire was ready to aim for the factories whose consequent explosions would fuel the flames into fanning further through the city.

In an inferno of red and black fear was spreading just as quickly. People and animals ran, fleeing from the danger. Some however contributed for the chaos. Pillaging, stealing, harming property and people. Deaths had already happened from burning, wounding and falling debris. Trampling and screams within the smoke.

A deep animalistic howl echoed through the streets.

The Young Master looked around in an almost dazed state, walking forward mechanically but still ready to perform his duty. The Queen was in town. It was summer after all. So the Earl of Phantomhive and the Marchioness Midford had ordered the Colchester’s party around and instated a plan of evacuation for nobles and commoners alike. The Yard and the police had been mobilized. Lizzy had been a bit disgruntled to be relegated to the manor, away, with Tanaka and Snake, but a fire was not something one could fight with swords. Mouser was also doubtful of his own usefulness but if the demons’ suspicions were right Ciel was the main target and had to be guarded as they fulfilled the task of quelling the flames.

“Compared to the Great Fire of London in 1666 this is spreading rather slowly.” Sebastian considered looking around. If it was deliberate or a result of less wood in house construction it was
still open to debate. The smell of smoke was deep and choking, masking every other scent, making ordinary tracking close to impossible.

Reapers would be running around without a doubt, plucking easy pickings away. Undoubtedly some demons would have been also attracted to the surplus of unattended souls leaving their bodies. Fights could break out. And they could interfere with their job if they happened to stumble into a brawl.

“It’s hellfire.” Mouser appraised, stretching her hand towards the nearest flame, high up on the roof of a house whose inhabitants had just vacated, already in nightclothes, a shrieking baby in the woman’s arms. Grey swirls spreading through her skin, reacting showed it to be true. “Low burn. Bad breath.” She groaned.

Angel-thing was controlling Pluto through the collar, using the hellhound as start and fuel. It was so much harder to extinguish hellfire. And if she had examined the class correctly angel coldfire only burned impurity, meaning it had no ignition power unless it was used on... say... a bad bad being and then the immolated victim was tossed into a flammable environment. Even so it burned out fast as soon as it ate away the “filth”. Holy light had the same issue but a smiting just left ashes behind, heat without flame.

“No longer any doubt about the origin then.” Sebastian answered, aggravated, adjusting his gloves. “While the beast is loose we will have to hunt it down first.”

“Can you control it?” Mouser asked, pulling the boyo away from a falling piece of brick, ignoring the vehement protests. He had not issued any order yet. Most likely the scale of that attack was making it hard to plan and prioritize. It also seemed random. But if arson could be pinned on someone it could be used in another attempt to blame the boyo or to blame another nation to start the plot of the purification Ashangela was so fond of.

White ash looked pure on sunlight if that made any sense.

“The dog?” The demons frowned, looking down, searching her eyes, finding them red and feline, pupils contracted into slits. The fleeing humans had dwindled. But something was still there, watching.

“The fire.” Mouser shook her head, turning, scanning the street. “The collar can only be activated at close range and for a tight control to be maintained the bitch has to remain close and focused. I have a nullification.” The thief supplied. “Twice as hard to control him now because Pluto is a demon.” A devil dog that had met the natural masters was less likely to obey other entities. It was a much beloved loophole when lending the creatures for guard duty. That was the reason for the collar.

“Create a cage...” Sebastian understood, glancing around and then up. It would be the perfect way to minimize the amount of work needed to deal with that particular threat.

“I have a solution for that too.” Mouser grinned. As Sitri said clipping the wings was the best way to go about.

“Very well.” Sebastian acquiesced. “Young Master you will need to return to the Manor for now.

It was subtle but the fire started to behave like they needed it to. While it still grew as Pluto breathed it relentlessly, mindlessly, ridden through town by a madly laughing Ash. A trap closing
subtly. But when it did the destruction of the threat would be brutal and complete.

The collar was glowing, keeping the devil dog under divine submission. Their first goal was to break it.

The servants were hunting him as well, having received word from the Manor when the dog had been taken. No damage had been dealt to the main Phantomhive house as the target was away and the angel just wanted the means to spread his desires of purification through fire.

Ash was focusing on the destruction, crying for purification. Of course the irony of using hellfire was completely lost to its shattered mind. It was not noticing that, while the flames looked more aggressive, as if answering to its desires, they were also dancing into a circle that was closing in, containing the rampage and the damage. It had opened its wings now, leaving the devil dog to do its desires, surveying the area, still blind.

Sebastian covered his contract mark calmly, appraising his work from the top of the Westminster dome. Any angel who came close to those fiery walls would be severely harmed. That was his fire now.

Mouser looked up at the sky, watching the glimmer of metal through the thick smoke. To a casual observer they could be the starts, still there even through the choking black miasma. The white wings crossed the sky, flying low, taking in the scene, ignoring all but the plan. She lit a cigarette with a smile and followed the howls.

Time to play with the puppy.
Chapter 135

The Young Master had never arrived to the town house. His path had been intercepted by the servants, fully armed and chasing after a berserk Pluto who was howling and spewing fire through the streets until it had reached Trafalgar square and claimed the top tier of Nelson’s column, right beneath the chap’s statue. Finny was distraught, in tears amidst the debris, looking up. Meyrin had not used her rifles, the eyes behind the glasses wet and kept useless. Bard tried but the tranquilizer darts he had chosen to use in an attempt to salvage the situation seemed to be having no effect, not even piercing the devil dog’s thick hide.

“It’s not working.” Bard lowered the shotgun, spitting the cigarette on the ashy ground, teeth grinding in frustration. Pluto howled once more, a raspy, empty sound of menace. The fire he spouted had reached the surrounding buildings, making the air uncomfortably hot. And the risk of the structures collapsing on them, flooding the square in stone, wood and brick grew by the second. “The tranquilizers are not working…”

“But… I…” Finny’s voice trembled as he looked up, at the dog they had taken in and that spent so much time sharing the open air with him. He had been hoping. “I want to protect the manor, all of us, all the smiles.” The gardener mumbled, hands fisting, biting his own lips to the brink of drawing blood. “Pluto is one of us. I want to protect Pluto.”

“I know but…” Meyrin tried to comfort him, not knowing what to say.

Ciel grimaced. Pluto was not truly attacking. Burning what surrounded him seemed a mere distraction. There were no signs of the Angel either. Neither of the demons had returned yet. But that had to be dealt with and quick. And running out of options meant… It was a decision he had to make.

“What are you doing?” The Young Master snapped, steeping his voice in authority, deciding. It was a threat to the city, to the Queen and to himself. It had to be done.

“We want Pluto back to normal…” Meyrin voiced, gripping the rifle harder, as if to keep it still.

“Look at its eyes.” The Young Master stated, seeing nothing but a beast with no mind or spirit. “He has been stripped of will and pride. He is a beast. Not Pluto.” Finny’s tears seemed to be too close to falling. Bard just looked resigned. Meyrin pressed her lips together, bitterly. “Living like that, under a will that it’s not his own is wretched. You should know this. A rabid dog needs to be put down.”

“Hasty and wasteful boyo.” Mouser called out, joining them from around Whitehall, looking up at the dog. Her own cigarette ended up in the ashes, spat out with a deep sigh as she appraised the situation. “Get the boyo back to the town house.” The fire would be relatively harmless as soon as it joined an already burning area.

“This is my responsibility.” Ciel turned rigidly, chewing on whatever was going through his mind.

“You’re in the way boyo.” The thief stated plainly. The collar was shining brightly. She just needed to draw blood and doodle. “We’ll get you if there is a need to dangle bait.”

“You’ll save Pluto?” Finny asked, gripping the boyo, ready to take him away. Bard changed his weapon to a pistol, scouting ahead. Meyrin primed the rifle, gaining a look of focus, determined, pushing the glasses up.
“I’ll try.” Mouser smiled, waiting as the beast howled and the Phantomhive group retreated back to safety.

The dog snarled, noticing the movements, turning, claws marking the stone, gaining impetus to charge, teeth bared, coming from above, slamming onto the ground, dashing. It was indeed going after the boyo, as if the idea had been planted into its mind. Most likely it was a set of orders, a list of targets he had to pursue for Angela.

Mouser grinned, opening her arms, catching the parasol that fell from about her eye level, widening her stance in a quick step back, freeing the chain, sweeping it through the ground, aiming for the paws.

Pluto tripped mid-dodge, sidestepping the attack, snarling, stopping, changing who he was targeting, ignoring the stone shattered at its feet, moving with the intent to circle, hackles raised, teeth bared, cautious.

In response the thief challenged him, moving the chain, whipping it.

Predictably the beast snarled harder, charging, gaping maw aiming for the head, slamming against a wall of darts as the thief pulled back the chain once more, with purpose, swinging it down in a loop, attempting to entrap him. Some stayed in place mid-air. Others were knocked down. A few had sunk into the fur but had failed to draw blood.

The beast reeled for a moment, wobbling backwards, just enough, leaving itself vulnerable.

A cluster of explosions took advantage of its confusion, forcing him back, sound, smoke and impact worsening its state. The chain swept again, cracking the pavement, finding the paws. More tin circles exploded around it, disorienting.

Amidst the air biting, trashing about, looking for a target Pluto failed to notice he was entangling itself in the metal links.

The parasol’s blade sunk into the ground as Mouser moved towards the maddened dog, yanking the chain, bringing it down. The metal was plain. It would not hold out against a devil dog for long. Her hand gripped his head, avoiding the teeth, slamming it on the pavement hard, aiming to daze him.

The whimper was hard to hear but it had to be done.

Pluto stopped struggling at least for a moment, paws at an awkward angle, big body darkened by ashes.

Sharp black claws sunk into its shoulder, through the fur, gathering the blood. In quicks strokes, avoiding being burned by what light was still pure in the angel’s collar Mouser etched the runes.

Red eyes opened wide, in pain when the spell was complete, as both orders clashed. A strangled howl escaped from its throat as it writhed. Mouser stepped back, watching, the chain was pulled free with a quick motion, returning to the parasol. The thief made it go away, blades waiting. Foam gathered around the teeth. Claws slashed the ground. Paws slammed, creating craters. Howls echoed, encasing whimpers as Pluto convulsed.

The collar shattered, leather shredding under the light and blood, leaving silence and fire behind.

Its furry white form shuddered, changing back into human-like, watching as Mouser approached, understanding as the blades vanished, as the thief, crouched, patting its white hair gently.
“Welcome.” Mouser smiled. “Finny will be happy you were able to come to.” Even when freed there had been a slight chance, but still a chance, of lingering madness. As his red eyes had lost the sheen and emptiness.

“Mistress?” Pluto whispered, looking up, looking lost.

“If you want.” Mouser answered, smiling softly, eyes narrowing. “Do you want a new name?”

“I… Pluto… Me…” He looked at her, confused, aware of himself as someone for the first time. Either releasing him had forced the growth into the next life stage of a demon dog or the Angel had kept him stunted. “Mistress.” He nodded and fell against the thief, trying to snuggle like a puppy looking for comfort, accepting the new leash he had asked. Gently the thief touched his chest, placing her sigil mark on him, the first of her legion. Power was personal but it could always be bolstered through how many she controlled. Or employed. Whatever the term one wanted to use.

“We’ll keep Pluto for now.” Mouser decided, watching as a spiral formed on his skin, pearly grey and black. True to her youth it was still incomplete. As a demon she could not yet be truly summoned. “Go rest.” It was easier to keep the name.

Pluto nodded, abandoning the human shape into the bigger white dog, stepping away, vanishing in his own steps, leaving the fire and damage behind.

All that was left was trick the angel into the chosen battleground. The thief smiled slowly, noticing the familiar presences. As expected it was not far from the dog, looking disdainfully from above.
Chapter 136

The name of the street was Birdcage Walk. Not that Ash seemed aware of such triviality as it glided through the heavy hot air, above the cobbled stones, in-between the fiery trees that flanked the path, the honour guard of a hallowed ceremony, sure of his plans, focused on the lofty goals, proud of his work.

Once the filth and vice got hold of something they required a great deal of effort to eradicate. Fire was the only answer. It devoured such sins easily, steadily, blazing, burning, burnishing the grime until only glimmer and sheen remained. When the flames had burned everything down a long awaited era would begin in this ordinary earth.

Starting with that city. Burn the city, burn the queen, burn the world in a holy war with the fabricated martyr of the old woman to guide the enraged country down the path he had laid out.

*I will open the gate to the next century, to Heaven’s pure rule.* Its thoughts clamoured. *It’s ablaze. The human world, their sin is burning away. Soon it will spread. Blood, smoke and flame herald the new era.*

Standing in the shadows of dancing flames, untouched by fire, by light, by the fire, by the purity of fear and chaos the meddlesome demon challenged him, presence blocking the path.

Anger flashed on the angel’s mind, a reaction born of instinct and aggravation. Their human had to be purged as salvation was impossible for such a damaged soul. A human soul that refused the divine touch that eased pain, grief and despair was despoiled, impure. It had to be seared into pure light, lovingly destroyed for its own sake. And Ash had been kept from that goal one too many times...

But if the devil dog could be used to fuel a righteous fire there could be use for them as well.

A redeemed demon.

A purified demoness.

Ultimate proof of the new world’s absolute virtue, of Ash’s righteousness, of Angela’s love.

Folding the wings gracefully the angel deemed to descend to the ground, the feathers vanishing within two steps, a look of peaceful benevolence, a mask of trickery.

“All things radiate light no matter how contrary they seem. They seek harmony, unity. Dawn and dusk. Man and woman. Light and dark. All should be one, as a pristine being of love. Living in this new-born world, a pure world, as a ruler…I could become one with you.”

“Even though I am the very origin of the corruption you so despise?” Sebastian answered, nonchalant, neutral. It was inside the trap. Mouser should be ready to fight as well, as soon as she finished the wards. Without the Young Master in harm’s way it should be easier to deal with the creature. “I have no desire to become one of your vulgar captures.” The dog, the dolls, the baron, the cultists, the Italians. The failures.

That hit a nerve. It struggled to maintain the pale face from showing hatred, keeping the serene smile.
“If you wish I can take you in as a woman.” Low turned to whispered high, eyes concealing intent in a half lowered gaze. His generous offer had been scornfully refused but a wise being should not be deterred in a divine quest. An angel should enlighten all. From Ash to Angela was a subtle change at first as gloved hands worked on the necktie in a clumsy attempt to be seductive. At least until the shirt was opened and the shape changed too.

The biggest change however was the sudden gaping hole blown through the head, aided by a ridiculously shocked expression. It staggered, smile turning to grimace, pain, startled, anger showing, struggling to control the rage. Male and female overlapped and shifted as the wound closed, control lost.

“Am I late?” Mouser asked, approaching, pulling the lever, lining another shot before making the rifle vanish. Her angry scowl turned into a slight smile as Sebastian hid laughter behind his gloved hand.

“A lady is allowed to be fashionably late when she plans an impactful statement.” Sebastian conceded. It was a privilege usually reserved to the host of the event but as they had manipulated the circumstances it seemed only fair.

The fire died throughout the city, pulled into the Walk, high enough to mask that it was no longer having any effect on the buildings and people. Deceit was crucial.

“I still haven’t given up on you.” Ash’s deeper voice rang out, the vestiges of seething wrath hidden. The open shirt showed the physique of the male. “The fire will leave London pure. And I will spread its purity further. Purge the filth, the unclean...” charmingly, the smile returned in an attempt to lure them in once more. “So deep in the embrace of darkness...” He focused on Mouser, extending an offering hand, having no more control over the attempt of being enticing than before. The thief twitched. “I offer you the same. Become one.” Sebastian’s expression grew darker, shadows elongating, the fire roaring louder. “A trinity. Fallen, damned, corrupted. Righteous, ascended, purified.” Mouser sneered, showing her fangs plainly, eyes already red. It left little doubt as to what she thought of the idea. Uncaring and unseeing the angel continued, turning its attention to Sebastian, renewing its efforts. “If you cannot accept me as a woman then as a man I will become a ray of light that will penetrate you down to the deepest depths of your core...”

The shot interrupted whatever spiel it was going to utter, leaving a bloody pulp where the throat should be.

Better to shut it before any ideas of a threesome arose.

Mouser lowered the rifle used before, levering it ready, aiming, huffing. It was mostly for hurting.

“Distasteful through and though.” Sebastian stated, the corners of his lips moving upwards behind the inflexible butler focus. He was trying rather hard not to laugh loudly at his covenant’s choice. Human weapons, as ever, seemed most effective at close range.

The mask finally cracked with a shriek of rage, one offense too far, wings unfolding hard and fast, beating, taking Ash away from the ground, feathers raining down like razors.

Knives intercepted the blows.

Flechettes did the same, returning the barrage, focusing on the wings along with a quick emptying of the shots left in the rifle.

Sebastian charged jumping into the air to go for the throat.
The thin rapier was unsheathed, blades meeting, bodies approaching in a mid-air parry, the demon manoeuvring Ash to show his back.

The thief took the offered chance, giving a running start, pouncing with both blades inverted, digging them deep in Ash’s back, right next to the wing base-staining the jacket red.

Movements limited between them Ash shrieked, wingspan sweeping, forcing them away.

The demon landed gracefully, stepping into a straight stance, avoiding the wing altogether, tossing the knives against it for good measure.

Mouser freed herself from her daggers, leaving them where they hurt, somersaulting and landing in a crouch, smiling, claws cracking the surface of the pavement before she stood and went for the pistols.

“So this is your answer.” Ash roared, his voice twining with Angela’s, the rapier slashing the air angrily, “It seems angels and demons are fated to never be.” Wings opened wider. The metal stuck in him dissolved. “The final judgement draws near.” Ash announced, ascending, ready to escape. It seemed whatever his plan were they had to truly be enacted in the palace for maximum effect.

“So Pop goes the weasel.” Mouser whispered as Ash reached the apex of the trees.

Fire filled the sky. The force of the explosions threw the Angel to the ground. The flames joined the hellfire, becoming a cage. The danced over the feathers, singing the wings, painting black streaks in it, dampening the light the angel was so fond of. It struggled to stand, face contorted in anger.

Moans echoed, cries and wails. Black smoke slithered around them, clinging.

Sebastian looked down, surprised, caught.

Mouser shivered when they touched her, pinning her in place, the whispers in her head giving away what they were. Souls pulled out of the dead by an angel thread. Pulled out of the living by promises of purification. Souls under a corrupted divine influence. Her markings showed soon enough.

“It seems I’ll have to purify the world from here.” Ash rasped, standing, staring at the swords, the clingy souls simply swaying around him. “I was not done with you.” He turned, approaching Mouser, moist eyed, smiling. “Your pain is enticing. Let me hear your cries again…” The blade sunk with a laugh into her midriff. “You are a demon. This pain is auspicious. I will purify you.”

Glee turned into a shout of agony, blood trickling, splattering the ground. Sebastian had broken free of the souls restraining him, eyes red, fangs bared, gloves off to favour the claws. Feral. Advancing, meeting blade with knives, parrying attacks and raining retribution, maddening the angel further, aiming for the kill.

Unable to feel her legs Mouser slumped to the ground. Most likely her spine had been severed but Sebastian was giving her a chance to focus on the souls. The angel thread was forcing them to give power to Ash. If they were taken… Still in pain the thief began to weave the spell, stealing the souls, cutting the thread, slowly, steadily. Those were true souls, not to be torn asunder. To gather, to keep. Maybe to snack later… or…

“Demon your chest will be my sword’s sheath! Accept my sword!” Maddened in frustration Ash attacked with force, as desiring of their death as they wished its. Sebastian blocked and countered, sparks flying. “Pain is the greatest of pleasures, a climax that can only be savoured by experiencing
one’s body being ripped apart.” The fire still burned above, more aggressive, responding to its master. Flecks of hellfire rained down. The Angel tried to avoid them as much as the demon’s blade and claws.

Blackmail for Reapers. Mouser thought, having all of them in a grey shimmering bubble. The threads looked like a thick cable. She turned her captures until the threads were in reach, choosing the feather blade, severing the connection in one stroke.

Sebastian smiled slowly, amused.

“How disappointing. It seems that climax of yours will not be reached.” The demon taunted, voice low, a growl underneath.

Ash screamed, losing more focus, turning, eyes swaying, looking for a target. His stance changed, breaking. The preparations for his ritual and fire had failed. Backed into a corner, unable to run.

“How dare you interfere in this sacred ceremony!” The souls he had worked to gather, to empower himself were in the hands of the demoness. Wings opened for speed, a mad punishing dash. “Every single one of you will burn!”

Mouser gritted her teeth, still unable to move. The bubble vanished, protecting her new asset. A quick summon readied a wall of blades. But it was Sebastian who took the impact. He stood in front of her blades, deflecting the rapier’s strike, the angel’s blade slicing though his left arm, severing it.

“How Sebastian!” Mouser shouted, watching the blood and limb fall, sending the blades flying against the angel who backed away, covering him.

Wings fluttered in an attempt to use wind to deflect the strike. It tried again, enraged, sending feathers through the air. To take advantage of the injured demons. To take his revenge.

In her distraction Mouser was too late to use the blades for protection. Unable to dodge as well she readied herself to feel the same pain as in the monastery. There was an impact, something tossed her against the ground. But there was no piercing pain. Opening her eyes showed Sebastian’s face, close, above her, covering her body. Blood dripped slowly from his severed arm, just remnants as the wound had closed. It would take a few days to regenerate… left arm… the contract mark…

“Are you uninjured?” He whispered, softly, voice low, the tone so close to when they… Mouser smiled, touching his cheek. It was clear his back was peppered with wounds, with feathers tainted in blood.

“Just my legs.” A loud whistle was piercing the air. Ash was trying to call for the dog. Mouser smiled, dragging herself to a sitting position. “It’s mine.” She confessed. Sebastian sighed, on one knee, looking up to the angel that fluttered with the fiery cage, having realized it was impossible to escape as he had no dog to counter that hellfire. The pain of the falling flames was only worsening its insanity. “End him.”

“I am playing a butler. It is not often that my true nature is needed.” The demon ran his thumb against her grey-tinted lower lip. “Do you want to see it?” He offered, oozing seduction.

“I want it dead and its feathers on a dress.” Mouser whispered.

Sebastian smiled, his mouth widening to show all his fangs.

“As you wish.” He whispered in a low voice, eyes losing the dullness needed to look human, pupils
sharpening. Feathers fluttered, black, soft in a flurry around their bodies. Tendrils of darkness snaked in-between the shadows of hellfire. Ash froze, his expression shifting to pure dread. “Vicious.” Sebastian whispered, advancing. It was hard to say if the spike on his heels was shoe or a talon but it was clear that it was piercing. Stomping on a victim was that much more painful. “Bestial.” Claws unsheathed. “Vile” Recognition shone in the angel’s eyes as Sebastian attacked, black wide wings unfurling amidst the feathers. His smile brought terror.

Claws ripped Ash’s body apart, starting by returning the favour of the pierced stomach, a punch simply going through it as if he was no harder than a ragdoll, pulling its innards out. The lost arm was swiftly answered. Feathers and blades sunk into the Angel in a flurry that would make an iron maiden lacking. Blood spattered the air around them. He slammed its white and red body against the ground, crating it. Fire contracted, rained down, the cage diminishing to that small arena, burning the flesh off its bones. The screams continued, fear, accusation. It was a demon much older, much higher than he had expected. "Deadly" Then the sounds stopped. The white feathers settled. Death came, a faint, frayed record leaving. Amused Mouser snatched it, bubbling it as she had done the others.

Who he was… Sebastian approached, returning to his disguise, the form she knew best, falling on one knee once more, reaching for her, cupping her cheek tenderly, remnants of claws caressing her skin before becoming juts black nails. Watching all Mouser saw it too through dozens of memories.

“…” His name didn’t come. Mouser frowned.

“I am under contract.” Sebastian explained, hand sliding down her legs. The thief groaned. Some sensibility had finally returned. Not that feeling her own cold blood slithering and drying on her legs was any good. “My true name is of no use.”

“You tried to pet Ailsa.” Mouser laughed as he picked her up, dismissing the fire.

“And she bit my hand off. It ruined our contract’s covers at the time.” Sebastian smiled as well walking towards the town house to report a successfully executed order and ask for a vacation to regrow his arm.

(I will be leaving the Tower Bridge alone mostly because it appeared in the manga rather recently and I suspect Yana may have some use for it later on. Also plot-wise here the areas mentioned (Westminster Abby and Trafalgar Square) form a triangle in which vertices is Buckingham palace. An angel aiming for war and chaos has to strike the heart (AKA: Her Majesty Alexandrina Victoria, by the Grace of God, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India [I think there were more titles but meh]). Whether she is in the palace or not is a bit of a moot point as the trio may have though “oh look a fire, let’s get the royal bustle out of harm’s way” but a strike at the Royal palace is not something the people would ignore.)
There was precious little that justified a change in the rhythms of the household and less than that diminutive amount of events had its origins in the servant’s quarters. So it was not peculiar to hear the sounds of the teacart being steadily pushed down the hallway and the doors that lead to Ciel’s bedroom being opened quietly after a quick, sharp knock. It wasn’t until the curtains were opened that Ciel noticed something was not exactly regular.

“Good Morning Boyo.” Mouser spoke up chirpily, preparing the tea with quick motions despite the bandaged left hand, the second sign Ciel noticed that last night’s battle had not gone smoothly. Sebastian’s absence was a bit more of a glaring example of that fact. “It’s a ghastly day, already sweltering to start with and made worse by the embers and cinders that still burn on the fallen buildings.” And sure enough the scent of burnt wood, brick and ash sneaked in through every crack it could find. “Today’s tea is a Ceylon Dimbula, light and fresh.” She gave him the cup after his daze had subsided enough, allowing him to sit up taking the cup and saucer.

“What is Sebastian?” The boyo asked after a few sips of careful disinterest as the thief walked away to prepare the day’s clothes, standing in front of the closet with a tilted head.

“We had a bit of a mishap dealing with the angel. For the time being he will be unavailable.” Mouser stated, leaving the outfit on top of the chair, next to the screens, returning to the tea cart. “Is the tea to your liking?”


“Even so, I’m afraid. You can try. It won’t happen. And if you try too much rest assured I’ll take it from your hide or your pocket.” Mouser smiled widely. “Your choice. Prince Soma chose the breakfast as usual.”

“Why not let Tanaka take the butler position?” Keeping the tone chillingly composed the boyo moved on to the next question. Best not to press when she sweetened her tone to that extent.

“That is indeed the plan. However it can only happen after we return to the manor, seeing the old man stayed behind this time.” After a moment of silence Mouser continued, reporting the night’s events. “The angel is no longer a threat, as requested. All that remains is for you to report to the Queen that the pesky «fanatic terrorist cell» has finally been erased and explain the fire was an attempt to rush England into war. Mention loose threads if you must.”

“I see.” The boyo nodded, looking a bit satisfied.

“I left the previous cases and the associated reports on your desk as well as a few notes about the night events. Try to make it as persuasive as possible.” Mouser sighed, wearily. More scrutiny because of irregular cases now that trust had been regained and solidified would be an upset. “Then you’ll have a formal lunch with Prince Soma to keep him appeased and we will be ready to depart for the manor before sundown.” Amused she glanced outside, towards the smoky day. “It seems this Season will be a House Party extravaganza.”

“You sound pleased about it.” Ciel returned the emptied tea cup.

“The empty summer houses are always a good pick.” Mouser shrugged, rearranging the cart. “What’s more it does make it easier to refuse invitations on the basis of the party’s overly long...
“Good.” Ciel perked up a bit at that. “The newspaper?”

“Not for a few more hours boyo. I’ll pick it up while running some errands as you pen the report.” Mouser looked around. Tea, report, clothes, shoes, water, the bathroom was prepared, work was ready to be tackled, schedule had been relayed... No it seemed she was done. “I trust you can dress yourself after all that Weston education.” The thief mentioned before leaving, pushing the cart, closing the door softly.

Agni was finishing the main dishes when the thief returned, pushing the cart into a corner and taking the porcelain away from it. The small teapot held two cups at most and what was left was already too cold and bitter be enjoyed. Sugar and honey just had to be returned to their previous containers. The milk would still be usable.

“Is everyone still asleep?” Mouser asked companionably, pouring the tea out, rinsing the pot before it had a chance to stain. They had waited, nervous, wanting to know what had happened to Pluto. And then they had promptly collapsed into a snoring pile. Agni had been pacing the windowed rooms and halls, watching the distant fire, concerned for the sleeping Prince. The boyo had also fallen asleep before arrival, unconcerned.

“Yes.” Agni answered, smiling. “Do you need to wake them up?”

“No, no... You can manage the Prince and the Boyo and they have their own work to do...” Mouser rinsed the cup and placed it on the drying rack as well. “If you have need of it wake them up and send a runner for me.” She dried her hands, mindful of the bandage and unrolled the sleeves of the shirt, buttoning them, the blades and holsters returning discreetly to their place. Practice paid off as they resumed their position buckled and complete.

“Do not fret.” Agni assured her, carrying the fragrant food out of the kitchen. “And do be careful.” The Indian advised brightly. With Sebastian wounded and seeing himself as his friend Agni had taken upon himself to care for the butler duties and those that he cared about. It was endearing. And a bit suffocating when he tried to make her feel better about Sebastian being injured, fretting like a mother hen about eating and sleeping.

Mouser nodded, acknowledging the request without a fuss, donning the light lace cape, ready to perform some mundane damage control and good will building.

As the place where the fire had started was predictably more affected than the posh streets where the Sebastian’s hellfire had taken control of the dog’s flames. But fires were so common in the area that the gangs and poor inhabitants already had their own ways to fight and rebuild. It was an unspoken rule that things could not run smoothly unless the playing field was clear.

There were also a few lynching’s exhibited on the streets as Mouser crossed them. Self-inflicted justice for those who had ignored orders or not acted in accordance to the code. As usual the police
was not interfering. And as it was within the regulations of the Underworld neither would the Phantomhive household.

The Thames ran black with sooth and ash. Smelled worse than usual. But the buildings across the waters seemed untouched. Mouser marked another trace on the map.

Last night, after regaining her ability to walk and taking a bath she had done a few rounds to erase the more blatant evidences of the supernatural, such as the mangled winged corpse splattering the street and snatching more wayward souls undetected by busy reapers. They seemed to be focusing their efforts on those that had died or were still dying after the angel had called. Also planting some common bombs and methods of arson in the logical points that should have started the inferno.

Now the boyo needed the burnt area report, an estimate of the dead, the where the how and the who of fire starters and a list of charitable actions undertaken to build his reputation.

Children cried on the street. Some of them would have been made orphan last night. A few were from orphanages that had burned down. Her boys were on the street, taking them in. Jack would already be clearing his area then. The civilians that had fled, unable to face the danger were returning once more. Those whose workplaces had been unaffected were once more toiling away for money to rebuild. People looked for loved ones amidst the lines of recovered bodies. Moans, cries and hopelessness. The already overflowing cemeteries would be groaning under the weight of so many fresh corpses. The body snatchers however would make a tidy profit.

The thief paused, staring at the bodies. How many of those would they be seeing as bizarre dolls? Perhaps a bit of pre-emptive beheading and skull destroying would be in order after the burials.

Lau and the Gangs would be cooperating for the time being. Securing their loyalty under the Underworld rules and the Phantomhive crest was easy. Especially after being assured that none of them had nothing to do with the fire. Distrust settled they were more than happy to work for the favour of the nobles and the money to pour into their pockets.

Lord Randall was harder to deal with. The bitterness still remained and his hands were still tied because of the Queen’s favour. Seeing Mouser was also not having giving any benefit to his mood. But he had no other choice but to agree to the conditions imposed and swallowing the fabricated story.

To rebuild the entertainment the city offered Mouser reached out for the nobles through letters, poking at their entitlement and promising status buffs and bragging rights. It made for a very happy part of the boyo’s report, showing the Queen that the haute monde cared.
Also the newspapers severely blew the deaths and the event out of proportion and would be receiving a string of very annoyed letters later that day.
Chapter 138

The shadow of wings made Mouser pause in the cobbled path of the park mildly concerned, looking up, drawing weapons only to sigh in relief when Sitri landed in front of her, big angular wings, like a bird of prey opening wide, grey, brown and gold feathers shuddering before vanishing.

“You bloody daft wanker!” She hissed out. Anything big with wings circling overhead was bound to a bit of a fright for a while longer. “Charlotte all right?”

“Charlotte’s fine. Powerful annoyed at havin’ freckles nah but mostly feelin’ right with power. Then sick because… ye know…” Sitri answered, comforting. The process of turning had gone right and Charlotte was showing no signs of rejection or madness. As expected she had been a very good bet. But back to the reason he had been dispatched to London. Mouser looked healthy if a bit jumpy. Considering the events he was not blaming her in the least. She also looked slightly hungry so it stood to reason that something depleting had happened to her covenant. Her left hand was bandaged but not harmed. A longer look told him exactly why.

“Yes… I do quite recall.” Mouser nodded along, relieved. “Freckles?”

“All demons has spots that is harder to hide.” Things that took a bit more energy or effort, tied either with true nature, caste or shapeshifting defaults. Sometimes they were so easy to conceal through human methods or so similar to naturally occurring blemishes that it was a matter of not even bothering to shapeshift them. “My leopard spots. Your raven’s talons. A spiders’ hairy legs.”

“You are telling me Claude Faustus has hairy legs.” Mouser went very still, eyes wide, laugh firmly bottled to the point of choking.

“That I is, ain’t I…” Sitri smiled cunningly. “Covenants mirror some o’those when a-turnin’. Sometimes.” He picked her black-nailed hand, giving it a squeeze. “She done sent me here to see if you was good.”

“Right as rain Sitri.” Mouser smiled, summoning a copy of the damage and loss report. “Information. London should be fine to return to by August.”

The contained souls swirled about in her grey bubble like too many fish within a bowl. Retrieving those had been easier, safer, less energy consuming than what she had attempted in the Campania. Mostly because the severing of the bond between flesh and soul had not been her doing and as little to no irregularities marred them they caused no distress other than the pressure of their amount.

Some had died in the fire, in the ruins, in the robberies, in the panicked stampedes.

Some had been manipulated in life to give themselves up when called.

They were meant to use as fuel but she had snatched them before being consumed for a massive divine submission of the minds within the radius. Like Pluto’s collar in a wider scale. And it made rather obvious how the angel would control the flow of the war it had started. If the Queen had been within the area of effect...
Eight hundred and seventy three souls had converged, kept from the Reapers who no doubt were seething in frustration. Last night the records they had tried to gather had been empty, what gave them the images, the feelings, the core gone. And fear after they detected who had taken them would be running high.

Maybe.

Mouser smiled, making the bubble float.

Souls hardly looked tempting as food at the moment. On the other hand they were a currency. Loyalties could be bought with just one or two of those. Or even scraps. Her reputation was not that fearsome on that side of the planes. Leverage was what she wanted from them and she had already contacted Poppet to put things into motion.

Hence being in the park, one that had been left unburned, deep in the side paths and the artistic “ancient” ruins that had once been in fashion. Places for meetings, trysts and picnics. They would be left alone for a long time as people were sure to be a bit overcautious about the fires. For a while. Fire was rather banal even if it did not spread so wide too often.

The other soul she had collected that night would hold no interest for a Reaper as it did not belong to a human. But in hell it was something that would fetch a very nice price. Corrupted as it was it looked even less appetizing than the captured human souls but it was infinitely more exploitable. As Sitri said it was a great reputation boost.

Yet a measure of infamy seemed to be in her possession as the Reaper that came to greet her was not the one that was, twistedly enough, the easiest to talk to. But of course that was quite deliberate. They would not be sending the vulnerable one to the demon with all the right bribes.

William T. Spears in his sedate, prim and proper suit approached with a crinkled frown and death scythe in hand, held aloft. They had barely started and he already looked like he had downed vinegary wine. His expression turned more thunderous behind the glasses as Mouser’s claws moved along the grey bubble, creating ripples along the path they traced, agitating the glistening souls inside.

“As I recall your distaste for overtime I’ll be brief.” Mouser teased, turning. “What are you willing to give to have these back?” Met with silence she kept smiling. “Nothing?” pouting she poked the bubble deeper, her claws creating a flurry of distress. “Disappointing. But not unexpected.” The thief shrugged and began to leave.

“Wait.” Surly Spears spoke up, the death scythe striking the ground irritably. “I have been tasked to reclaim those souls. I will not fail to do so.”

“I see. Yet you make no offer while thinking of a way to circumvent the rules and just slay me for them. Quaint.” Mouser chuckled. “Let me help then. One: you can’t because my current age does not exceed my human lifespan. Two: despite my caste and the many many many instances where I could have stolen and gorged on souls there is not one missing from the records. Three: although I have stolen and destroyed souls they were simulacrums, fakeries you would have to dispose of yourself. After investigating maybe but in the end all the same.” Spears was fuming. Good. It seemed her reasoning was sound. “Then we come to these currently in my possession. A demon with stolen souls. In any other occasion it would be so clear, would it not? Should I explain?”

“I am well aware of the circumstances.”

“Ah, are you now…” Mouser muttered dismissively. “Even so I will want to make this very clear.
These souls have been plucked out of their flesh by an angel that would have consumed them in a ceremony to bind even more souls to its will. A considerable amount were taken of their own previous will, tampered with beyond any chance of Reaper judgement. And a demon has collected them where your lot failed, keeping them safe from further tampering and erasure. Should be worth something.”

“What a shameless display of gloating.”

“Yes, yes it is.” Mouser nodded, agreeing to the hissed sentiment of distaste. “You want the souls. I want information. Luckily what I want is information on a common enemy. The Undertaker. The renegade. It lessens the blow, doesn’t it guy?” Ruminating on his lack of options if he wanted to have the souls back Spears nodded briskly, agreeing. It was indeed a lesser demand of he kept in mind a demon’s nature. “Do we have a deal?” She asked sweetly.

“Very well.” Spears answered bitterly, taking the arrangement. The beast tossed him the imprisoned souls, turning to leave. The grey bubble did not pop nor release a single one of the imprisoned individuals within. Irritated he poked it with the Scythe’s blade. It did not produce any effect. Vexed he turned to the demoness. “The souls…”

“Of course I am not giving them willy-nilly.” Mouser turned, smiling. “Tit for tat. You give me information and my bubble releases an amount of souls equivalent to the value of what you have given me. To be fair.” She smiled at his angered and dumbfounded face. “Also in this warm and fuzzy spirit of niceness and civility I can tell you I would have been more generous with Poppet and given her a dozen of those souls just for the sake of making the deal.”

Before Spears could decide to act on his outrage Mouser dashed away.

The Queen seemed to accept and even feel some sense of satisfaction and conclusion with the explanations given. She had gone as far as to show some pride in the displays of goodwill and mindful duty the aftermath of the event was dragging out of those with high social status and money to back it. To see the Earl of Phantomhive integrating seamlessly his duties in the Underworld with his status and making them work for the benefit of the city seemed to particularly please her to the point of praise.

Another royal had been appeased as well. Prince Soma had been reminded of his duties and shown some achievements. Having been given the time to play chess he had also been able to show his progress in cornering Ciel a few times, making for enjoyable games and less complaints. Which made for peaceful goodbyes and an uneventful departure. Of course it could have been a plot on the boyo’s head to make it so. It was hard to tell sometimes.

The Marchioness had not been particularly happy about the abrupt departure to deal with the fire but had understood and undertook a vital role herself, keeping fools away from the danger. It was also due to her prodding that so many were moving to help. But to mitigate the social appearances Ciel would have to accompany Lizzy to a yet to be determined number of parties. Sheepishly the boyo complied, not even daring to ask if he could pick the events that suited his arrangements.

Tanaka had heard the report with calm and grace, taking over elegantly, organizing the household, the tasks and the inner schedules to account for the recovering butler and the boyo’s request for quiet. Not that they had much to do on arrival. Mouser had phoned before they left, requesting that
a light meal was ready on arrival and the beds were prepared. With Snake’s help it had not been too strenuous for the old timer.

The manor was standing.

It seemed that when the dog had been taken Pluto had been keeping to the outskirts as told. A few singed trees and downed trunks showed a bit of a struggle. It was good to see that he had not let his mind be taken without at least a bit of resistance. The people that lived nearby, under the Phantomhive protection, seemed to be fine as well. a bit spooked with all the dreadful news coming from London but relieved it was over.

Mouser stretched, walking down the darkened corridors of the servant’s area, heading towards her room. Natural and supernatural had been dealt with. All she had now was an angel soul to decide what to do with. Personal power, shattering for enticing scraps and servants, hold hostage for… well something. It was unimportant at the time. It was another bargaining chip to have.

Pluto looked up from his fluffy curled form at the foot of the bed, panting in welcome as Mouser entered the room, closing and locking the door. As far as the household knew she was alone in there.

If Sebastian was injured enough to request leave he had to be in a hospital, correct?

Absently she scratched the dog’s ears, sitting on the bed. Pluto’s eyes were still clear. Actually they looked sharper. He accompanied her despite huffing in effort, relocating at her back, taking a guardianship role with a proud look on his snout, siting solemnly. Mouser scratched the underside of the furry face, chuckling.

“No need for that Pluto. Just rest.” The thief whispered. With a huff the dog curled down again, resting its big head on the bed, whimpering with a questioning look. “You are safe now.” She assured him with soft strokes between the furry ears, waiting until he closed his eyes and sighed, adjusting in contentment. His warm fuzzy belly felt rather comfortable against her back. Also she was allowing him on that part of the bed. Even though his ownership had changed the dog still held to his trained loyalty towards Sebastian. As Mouser was connected to him created no conflicts in his mind juts a change on who had the last word.

Sebastian was still asleep, mending. Mouser turned her attention to him, curious. So far he had regenerated the bones and tendons that kept them connected. It was startlingly white as the blood would be the last item to resume its place. Bone came first, growing out, back into the human-like skeleton, accompanied by the tendons that kept it in place. Otherwise it would be rather bothersome to rearrange the bones one by one as muscle grew and gloved them into shape. Skin would cover them later and then blood. The contract mark should return in-between those phases.

Amused the thief poked his nose. The demon opened one glowing eye, smiling faintly.


“Indeed it is. No need to exhaust yourself further.” Sebastian straightened a bit, falling against the arranged pillows with a disgruntled glare. “I trust there have been no troubles.”

Mouser nodded slightly, ready to report, frowning when the wards cried. She sighed. Pluto growled, straightening.

“Calm. I won’t need you for this.” She commanded the dog, standing, slightly annoyed. “It seems we have an intruder.”
“You are trespassing itsy-bitsy.” Mouser taunted from the shade of the parasol, finding the tree where the spider was perched, watching the greenhouse and the small and grumpy soul-container that was having a quiet afternoon tea amidst the greenery and snakes. And infestations should be exterminated. Especially the persistent ones with no business to be poking about other contracts. While masters could and did cross from time to time it was very clear that the interest the Trancy Household was manifesting was very much fabricated. Why was still open to discussion. The agreement however was to quell any and all attempts of interference.

Gently she lowered the metal and fabric contraption, closing the top into folds, letting the tip touch the ground, adjusting the weight. Balance taken the newly released blade slashed diagonally in front of her, angling upwards, cleaving the tree free from its roots.

Smiling the demon took notice of the shock and annoyance above as well as of the drawn weapons. He had finally noticed a threat right under his nose. Overconfidence told her why he had come so brazenly.

One hop backwards avoided the golden knives, parasol resting against her shoulder, out of the way as she spun, raising on leg, slamming it forward. The short kick assured that the tree was falling backwards, stealing the footing from under Faustus.

Jumping gave enough height to call forth a storm of blades against the unbalanced interloper. Also it was chance to try something out of those. As they fell and failed they were called back, falling once more in a punishing curtain. But as that adversary was a demon they were meant as little more as distraction, falling for him to ignore the parasol blade aiming for the throat.

Defences raised Faustus was set to stop it, to divert and disarm, ready for the longer weapon, taking hits from the shorter blades. He would consider them lesser damage, just a by-product of avoiding the harshest blow.

Might have worked if the blade hadn’t vanished abruptly, its place taken by the favoured twin daggers, breaking through the barrier of three knives on each gloved hand, opening his arms wide, Mouser’s smaller frame jumping into them, knees to the gut and groin first. Faustus was forced against the falling trunk, bleeding from healing cuts, daggers managing to deflect and harm the flesh, too many cuts to count before the impact.

Blades inverted within the movement as Mouser crouched on top of the spider, slamming them down, through his palms, pinning him to the wood with a grin, standing, heels digging into his legs to keep Faustus motionless. The parasol skewered his gut seconds before the trunk slammed into the ground, creaking and groaning.

Mouser leaned against the rounded end of the handle, looking down at the very much hurt and confused demon under her a grin spreading over her lips. It felt nice. Also the simmering hatred beneath the golden eyes told her the angel had done some rather harmful damage to him from that sweet time the thief had lured and abandoned Faustus for her own agenda.

“Good afternoon Mr. Faustus. What brings you here through a place obviously not meant for those not of the household?” He glared, not answering. Unaffected Mouser twisted the parasol a bit. He barely reacted to the pain but the point was made. “For future reference the post, the front door and the back door are the proper places to approach.” Still no answer. Not that she was expecting much when he was obviously trying to sneak under their watch. “You obviously felt the link of contract
snap and though that a marked and unattended soul should be easy to take. Are you that bored or that lazy?” Stretching the thief groaned.

“I am here on orders.” He tried to moved, to reach within his coat. A frown drew itself behind his glasses as he found himself unable to move. Mouser snapped her fingers, freeing her blade from his left hand. He tended to lead with the right so assuming that was the dominant... Faustus produced a decorated envelope from his coat. “I proudly bring the invitation to the Trancy Household Masquerade Ball.” He stated coldly, deciding to ignore the fact that she had used poison strong enough to hamper a demon in her blades.

“Again... the front door would have been more acceptable.” Mouser leaned against the parasol, the invitation vanishing, taken. “It is doubtful the boyo will be interested.”

“Shall I recite the guest list to assure you of this event’s importance?” There was a little smirk of smugness underneath the façade. Work was a convenient excuse he had had prepared in case of crossing with Sebastian.

“Guests... No. Hostages.” Mouser caught his meaning, dismissing the blades, walking away from the tree. “Go away.” She demanded. As no attack had been made she had no grounds to kill him. Maybe she should have let him go for the boyo but Sebastian needed rest and she was also feeling a bit wobbly of leg.

Claude Faustus stood, staring her down.

“Ciel Phantomhive’s soul seems to no longer be vulnerable.” He stated, looking towards the greenhouse.

“So you did come to scavenge.” Mouser chuckled, turning. “So let me make this very clear Mr. Faustus... That soul is the property of my covenant. And I assure you...” The thief pulled the bandages free from her left hand. Sebastian’s contract mark was etched on the back of it, entrusting both the soul and contract to her guard for the time it would take him to regenerate. “It is very much secure.”

“You did not kill him.” Sebastian stated as Mouser finished her report after making sure the manor was once again warded and pest free. Faustus had left docilely possibly plotting another attempt at annoying them when he was in familiar ground. Spiders rarely attacked outright.

The thief leaned against Pluto, groaning, arms crossed, keeping the mark that would tell the boyo he could order her around and retain the teasing and complaining hidden. She lit a cigarette lazily, legs crossing. Yet another reason why she had not allowed the other demon to get closer. The boyo would have called Sebastian and she would have to both appear and obey. Too much of a hassle for little compensation. Entirely too much payback waiting.

“I had no ground to get away with it.” The thief answered. “I’m happy to have hurt him but that does not last.”

“You are a female. Any justification you gave would have been easily accepted especially if you stated that he intends harm towards you.” Which he did but that was neither here nor there. Sebastian was most likely just humouring her in her murderous whims. “In any even it seems that we will have to play his game for now.”
“So we will just have to wait until he supplies us a reason to do him in.” Mouser gestured with the cigarette, leaving a trail of smoke. “I knew I was forgetting something in all these commotions. Should have assassinated them before going into the Campania.” She tskd, stabbing the spent smoke on the ashtray. “We need to go to the ball and meet his leash. They are getting too meddlesome.”

“And either tighten it or break it.” Sebastian nodded, glancing at his fleshless arm. “Any news on the Undertaker?”

“Not yet. They will try to disrupt the bubble first.” Mouser shrugged. But using what she had seen of death scythes the spell had been made from the souls. It could not be shattered. It could not be torn as the scythe could not harm the souls themselves. At least not in the hands of those bound by regulations. “Mundane measures have seen nothing either.”

“Is it troubling you?” Sebastian sat up, edging towards her, taking her hand, examining his own mark.

Mouser did not know or was not seeing how great proof of trust that was. Bearing his mark meant that is she fulfilled the Young Master’s revenge she would be the one entitled to devour his soul. Or if she wanted to break the oath and take it there would be nothing to fault. Not that she could be blamed even if she did not bear the mark. It was just part of her breed.

“As long as the boyo does not call it will be fine. If he does call and tells me to do something I don’t want I will be taking my due from you both as soon as I’m free.” She smiled, making a show of being threatening, aiming to make him smile.

Light always burned in the Trancy household in a childish attempt to keep the darkness, the fear, away. It was of no use. The so dreaded blackness was firmly ingrained within Alois Tancy’s mind. The estate was not as quiet as it should be at that advanced hour. It seemed his master was causing a fuss due to his absence.

*Bored or lazy*… those words were proving to be rather bothersome in the fact that they were both true to an extent.

A vague contract that would only close with death. An average soul, a bland taste of a broken doll, that would take too much to season and whose container was draining, cracked, imperfect to the core. A constant need for attention.

Those who served Phantomhive were stronger and the soul they nurtured more flavourful.

However tangled strength would be rendered useless. It was a matter of dragging them to a web. And for that he could use his master’s blind affection, jealousy and folly.

There was much to be done before the feast. *Passion to calm, hesitation to resolve, love to gravestones.* Claude adjusted his glasses, walking towards the noisy master.
Chapter 140

“Alois Trancy...” The boyo grumbled, abandoning the sulk he had maintained through the three hours of travel, the packing and the aftermath of the negotiations to attend an enemy’s house party, as they crossed the property’s wrought iron gates. Much like the Phantomhive estate there were only the gates and small stone walls to demark the entrance. Mouser closed her book and looked up. Sebastian stirred from his passive watch, attention sharpening. “I thought I had made it clear that I do not wish to rekindle or maintain a connection.” He seemed to grow a bit more annoyed at the lack of response of the pair.

There really was no other choice but to accept but they could use the provided chance to deal with the loose thread that was proving to be unstable and gather information for the old spider archives to both get a better grasp on the situation and for the boyo to scour it for a clue about his own revenge. And of course the end goal being deciding how to eliminate the annoyance in the least troublesome way it would be preferable having all the cards in had to make sure the Queen would not be displeased. Bother or not a title was still a bit of a shield.

The trio chatted merrily above, on the driver’s seat, excited. As outside servants they were allowed to participate in the festivities while attending to the needs of their employer. It was seen as polite to bring a small entourage so the household would not be strained to the point of neglecting the personal needs of the guests. Some could think of it as a reward. Tanaka had been amused, telling them he was too old for such festivities. Snake was still very shy and the events had the Campania had also left him slightly wary of accompanying them. Pluto was once more running around the grounds, proud of his guard duty but his newly found ability to speak and his skill in hold forms when excited were still too poorly controlled.

“Well at least you can fulfil your promise of accompanying Lizzy to a social event.” Mouser restated yet another argument that had been liberally used to lessen the irritation and make the boyo a bit more pliable, shrugging. The boyo expression did not change. He was well aware of his snarled situation.

The manor beyond the trees and garden had a classical look, as if it had stood there for generations. While it was true for the most part façades changed as often as fashion unless a noble scoffed at the social world and had enough money and little scandal to stand as an unchallengeable paragon. Ciel looked at it for a moment. There was no recognition, no memory of it. So it seemed that the Spider was indeed just another thing he had had no time to learn from his predecessor about the Phantomhive’s duties.

Bard drove to the wide doorway, making the carriage stop.

Sebastian stepped down first, looking around, surveying checking for threats. The Young Master walked out after, expression souring further, cane tapping against the stone tiles. Mouse took Sebastian’s hand as she stepped down, hesitating, remembering she should. Last time it had been easy to sneak in through the second floor. The window latches on the guest wing of the house were a bit weaker. It seemed mostly unchanged. Poorly protected.

“Look forward to our costumes Young Master.” Finny waved, cheerfully, oblivious to the tension.
Bard chuckled as he moved the reins, making the horses move forward, towards the back where they would take the luggage to the rooms assigned to the Phantomhive and entourage. Meyrin looked at the manor amazed, adjusting the glasses, peeking beneath the lenses.

It was time. Faustus opened the door before Sebastian knocked, standing there in the usual house-guardian stance most servants adopted when faced with outsiders at the threshold.

“Earl Ciel Phantomhive. Welcome.” Recognition elicited a slight bow of acknowledgement and an opened path to the entry hall. “We have been expecting your arrival. I am the family’s butler, Claude Faustus.” Perfectly formal, nicely executed and all the roles were in place.

The Young Master moved forwards without hesitation.

Sebastian paused, his attention focusing on the darkness above the door. Webs hung on the rafters and spiders scurried about.

“What’s the matter?” the boyo turned, impatient.

Faustus looked up too, noticing the other demon’s gaze.

“Ah. As a spider is featured on the Trancy heraldry it is considered bad luck to kill them. It is a time-honoured tradition.” He gave the superstitious justification. Truth or lie it didn’t matter. It just showed a bit more explicitly that the lair was his.

“I see. If one attempts to break out by force it coils around and prevents escape.” Sebastian commented offhandedly following the boyo inside, waiting.

Mouser placed the invitation and the business card in the silver platter next to the doorway, counting arrival cards. It was surprisingly bigger in attendance than she had been expecting which did put into a bit of a doubt the spider’s motives. Despite the hidden spiders above the doorway the hall was impeccable, gold and glittering.

“I wish to speak to your master.” Ciel Phantomhive demanded, still holding on to the hope he could avoid the ball altogether as he gave the coat, hat and cane to Sebastian.

“I apologise but my master is away on business. He will arrive before the ball.” Faustus was fast to dash that hope without any particular tone, pulling a golden rope, calling a trio of servants. “They will guide you to your room.” and then the demon said nothing more, returning to his duties.

Mouser smiled a bit saying nothing. Some of the known souls were already within the manor. Even without sifting through the cards she knew so. And within so was the contracted soul. Upstairs, vaguely speaking.

The triplets moved in tandem with ease. They looked young dark haired lads, like they were leaving their teens, wearing simple white shirts, dark pants and waistcoat. A typical attire of a working pageboy. But their red eyes and deep silence showed something else as they moved towards the upper guest wing.

“This is annoying.” The boyo complained quietly, looking around.

“Certainly.” Sebastian answered neutrally, eyes scanning the surroundings in a different light.

“I want a set of that.” Mouser whispered, pointing at the trio of one demons. The paintings were valuable but hard to steal. The wall fixtures were gilded but hard to get off the wall silently. And there were no valuable trinkets scattered around to be nicked easily.
“Dogs are really not to my taste.” Sebastian scowled as they arrived to the corridor of the guest area and a door was opened to a big room with all the amenities a noble was liable to demand. The bags had arrived, piled between the bed and the closet. The boyo groaned and sat down in the plush bench at the foot of the bed, waiting.

“Loyalty-wise it’s a good starting investment.” Mouser closed the door after the trio left, turning, snapping her fingers lightly after clicking a flame to life in the lighter, making a spider perched in the corner fall in flames, twitching. No need for spies there. From the pile she retrieved the briefcase, taking its documents and spreading them on the dainty desk.

“Certainly logical but...” Sebastian nodded pained, sweeping the room for any other hidden extras that were surely not needed or asked for before signalling that all was as it should be, proceeding to the usual travel routine of unpacking, straing by returning the hat to its box, the cane to the stand and the coat to the hanger and preparing the clothes for the event.

“Investigate the mansion thoroughly.” The boyo ordered when h could speak freely.

“Understood.” Sebastian nodded, still unpacking.

“Aye, aye...” Mouser nodded, leaving the room, lighting a cigarette as she walked down the hallway to see to the group, their rooms, the costumes and finally to do a little sleuthing.
From luxury to plain quarters. About the same as any other manor in the world. A clear break of worlds, a reinforcement of place. But no uniformed house servants scurried about to tend to guests and party preparations. The few she saw while snooping about belonged to the guests and were too frantic in fulfilling their master’s requests to notice her.

There were bits and pieces in place or in the midst of preparation throughout the house.

Crossing the kitchen revealed pots and pans simmering, things baking in the ovens and glimmering trays ready for the several food items in various stages of readiness. No one in the empty space to keep an eye on it though. Not even from other households. Eating would be the last thing in someone’s mind as they tried to squeeze into their outfits. Still if she fancied a bit of poisoning there really was not much to keep the thief from doing it. The room smelled nice though.

Six doors. One, wider, heavier, lead to outside, to the gardens. One lead directly to the corridors of the main areas of the manor ground floor. Two opened to staircases, one leading to the servant quarters and the other curving towards the guest wing. One lead to the pantry, with a not too long staircase. Just enough to place the room under the ground and colder. The last one was locked, tucked away, partially hidden.

Lock-picking was rather obsolete nowadays when Mouser could just snap a lock open or smash the door into nothing. Or even manipulate the inner mechanism with a bit of telekinesis. But it was also made easier by the keenness of her ear added to the many years of practice. Also the best set of tool the boyo's money could buy did no harm to the endeavour. Adding to that the old lock and its rather basic and obvious innards... It was simple. And it was a bit more fun.

After the old one had died no other boys had been taken from the orphanages in the flesh trade after a suspicious number of bodies cropped up around the manor area and drifting through the Thames. But no boys had been returned either. And no corpses had surfaced after a long time after the death was known. There had been a faint hope that the survivors would be returned to the street gangs that had attempted to welcome them.

Four years ago it had had no meaning.

Now it was both suspicious and obvious.

It grew colder the deeper Mouser descended. The stairs were not too narrow. Once the room's purpose had been that of a wine cellar. Trancy had made it into a different kind of area. Like the dining room on a Thursday. The wide cages within the masonry arches still remained, empty. Doubtful that the new one ever ventured beneath the ground. Doubly so as the thief had little doubts remaining about the boy that had taken the title being a true blue blood. But as basements went at least that one was cleaner than Baron Calvin's and showed no use. Her single line of dusty prints on the floor said so. So there really was no danger of that area being used as a stage for their confrontation.

Sitri had been unable to provide real names due to the contractual nature of the situation but had described the style of Faustus as a Lurker or an Ambusher. A demon that settled in one place where there were the desperate gathered, hearing pleas and selecting victims, making the summons readily available, usually through a meaningless invocation or password. While not a gorger it placed little significance on contracts preferring the easy meals and quick contracts. Little effort, moderate rewards. Which did make his long association with Alois Trancy rather baffling although
the lack of souls in a place that was drowned in pain and despair rather cleared it up as well. Snacks.

Mouser sighed, snuffing out the cigarette, looking around sadly.

"You daft blighters." The thief whispered at the air. "I warned... ye should've listened to me." Jack had lost a few to the Spider over the years. Little annoying brats who thought they knew better.

"Bard. Report." Mouser asked, entering the chef's room after a quick knock as he unpacked and prepared his knight outfit for the night. "I need you to look at this place as if it were a battlefield." She asked, glancing through the narrow window. It was an individual room with a narrow bed, an armoire, basin and water.

"You really think the Young Master is in danger?" The long straight sword paired with a round shield were propped against the wall. Bard turned, running a hand through his blond hair. The spent cigarette was on the ashtray still smoking slightly.

"So far it seems like a mild rivalry but these things can escalate into duels very easily." Mouser shrugged, smiling pleasantly. It was a good way to make the group aware of danger without being overly divulging. Besides they all read the newspapers and knew what they had to do to protect the Phantomhives. It was just a different ground. "If the boyo’s suspicions that Trancy household is compromising the Queen are correct..." Bard nodded, understanding the suggestion. Trancy was harming the Queen by being inactive but that was really not their reason to act. Yet having the justifications ready at hand with a sound dose of proof about the many failures to comply to the royal wishes did the Phantomhive position no harm if it came to a purge. "Within the terms of civility we can do little more than defend the boyo and girlie. That is your task. To keep them safe. Sebastian and I can deal with anything that is hidden. You are to stay in the ballroom."

Ill-humoured Alois Trancy stared through narrowed blue eyes at the many outfits displayed for his perusal through the spacious and elegant room he called his own. Its many shapes, styles and colours had failed to be of interest to the teenager that had claimed the title. None seemed as showing or pleasing as his current plum outfit.


Frustrated, looking around, through the dozens of choices he grabbed the crown for a royal costume, turning in annoyance towards the quiet, dour dark skinned and light haired maid that kept her eye cast low. She had at least learned that lesson. The bandaged side of her face told the tale rather starkly.

“Worthless.” He threw the crown hard, scornfully. Without avoiding the hard metal struck the maid on the forehead, cutting deep enough to drag blood. There was a soft knock on the door before Claude walked in, waiting. “So?” Alois turned as if nothing had happened, pushing the blond fringe out of the way, the scorn vanishing.

“He has arrived.” Claude answered, assessing the situation, standing by the doorway. There was no
disapproval, no approval, no sign of anything but cold service. Hanna was the same, standing still, just watching, ignoring the blood that dripped down the side of her face, staining the bandages.

“I was selecting a costume.” With a grandiose gesture Alois turned once more to the task at hand, to the surplus of fabric and outfits he had ordered. He grabbed a pink dress matched by a white mask adorned with glass beads and rainbow quartz in the Venetian style, draping it over his butler’s shoulder, laughingly. “Claude you will wear one too. How about this one? Olé.” A playful clap was ignored in favour of a glare, making the sour mood return. “These costumes are useless.” He lashed out, turning towards the maid. Maid… An idea crossed his mind, calming the rage that was about to snap, making his voice smoother. “Hanna. Take yours off.” The order was immediately obeyed with little hesitation. Apron and dress were allowed to fall on the plush carpet, leaving her in the simple transparent shift, stockings and shoes, preserving a bit of modesty pressing her forearm against her breasts. “Are the preparations in place?” Ignoring her in favour of machinations

“Yes. Day into night. Pleasure to pain. Waltz to requiem. That is the Trancy butler.” Claude acquiesced, bowing dramatically.

“You’ll have a good time here Ciel Phantomhive.” Alois muttered, smiling.

Sebastian had started to fulfil his order by investigating the most obvious place where information would be stored. A lord’s study. The library. The gaming den. The through the rooms and halls that were out of bounds to guests during the event. Unsurprisingly the search was proving to be less than fruitful. Leaving after checking the time brought him face to face with the household butler. A sly smile covered the frustration as he addressed Faustus.

“Fabulously kept rooms.” Avoiding any question as to why he was there he Sebastian delved into superficial compliments laced with annoyance. “From bed making to cleaning. Even the insides of the desks are kept immaculate. How thorough.” And annoying. Whatever carelessness he had displayed when the confrontation first started seems to have been corrected. “It shows effort and attention. Quite enlightening.”

“Very well.” Stiff and motiveless Faustus accepted the fabricated tale. As for the stealthy insults he did attempt to retort. “You are devoted enough to be a sneaky thief for the job. I am the one impressed.” Behind his glasses the spider watched for a flinch or a weakness.

“Thank you for the compliment.” Sebastian kept smiling.

“Although that is usually my domain.” Mauser spoke up, from the corridor, at Faustus back. He was able to conceal most of the surprised flinch. “Blimey old boy. Not used to be sneaked on?” Her smile was wide and fanged. “Sebastian the time is very late.”

“Indeed it is.” The demon acquiesced, checking his clock, ignoring the other who seemed thrown out of balance. “Now if you will excuse us we all have duties to attend to.” Several corridors later, halfway through the boyo’s designated room he spoke up, inquiring as to the results she had hunted through.

“Not in the basement. Not in the attic. The other rooms that are big enough to this kind of event are occupied by the ball. So it will either happen there or there will be something to lure the boyo out of our sight.” Mouser reasoned. “Nothing on your side?”
“It seems Faustus was through in eliminating anything that could be found.” Sebastian nodded simply. “Hopefully your friend’s update on what you had collected before will be useful.”

“Go dress up the boyo.” Mouser smiled, turning, reaching for his face, making him look down. “We just need a reason. Let’s see if they provide it tonight.” The thief tiptoed and kissed him, a quick peck before continuing down the corridor to their room as he turned to go prepare the young master.
Chapter 142

The ballroom glittered in gaudy gold, the lights kept low and misty, befitting the atmosphere needed of a masquerade. It also alleviated the gleam. The musicians were hidden so the notes could waft through the air, ethereal and alone. The thin balcony that surrounded the upper part of the hall’s high walls was accessible through a pair of spiralling golden metal staircases symmetrically placed on the upper corners of the ballroom, only noticeable after a few steps had been taken into the rectangular room. It was darker in that above area. Premeditated for encounters, most likely. Even if the ball was a trap the attention to the customary details was still being observed. Centred on the lateral walls double doors lead to the two other opened rooms for the event, the dining hall with its grand table bedecked with dainty dishes and the parlour for talk and rest. Smaller tables peppered the areas along with chairs. All three areas lead to a single wide stone veranda overlooking the manicured gardens and the entrance of a hedge maze. Lanterns adorned the railing, prolonging the party area where the guest could mingle.

The triplets were the only ones wandering about, carrying trays and aiding the guest that requested any and everything. Steadily the rooms filled.

Not a sign of the host Ciel though with a glower, standing against the wall in his buccaneer costume. It had seemed like the simplest thing to arrange. Boots, pants, shirt, overcoat, sabre and tricorne. Rich blue, accent reds. And even the eyepatch fit the mood.

"Where is he then..." the Young Master grumbled, arms firmly crossed, staring down, having lost interests.

Sebastian smiled beneath the wrought metal half mask of a raven, offering the lemonade. It was the only nod to the event he had deigned to don. Not all the guests occupied the rooms yet. And as it seemed more and more likely to be a trap it was doubtful they would strike while he or Mouser were around. Either could easily recognize the contracted soul. But at the moment he had no valid reason to leave the Young Master and let the event take its course.

"It is of no use to be hasty." Sebastian advised, looking around once more.

"Ciel you look so dashing." Lady Elizabeth lost no time joining them, the gossamer layers of her dress in greens, browns and jewels flowing with each step in flowers, leaves and layers of etherealness, the dainty fairy wings attached to the dress shivering lightly. The blond hair was still curled, divided into twin tails and twisted with briar roses.

Simpler in white and costume jewellery, dressing up as an ancient Egyptian Paula jingled her bells, smiling in greeting, standing near her lady.

The young Master kept looking down sullen but managed to pay a compliment after a glance accompanied by a slight smile.

Sebastian bowed as courtesy instructed.

"Queen Titania I assume." Mouser joined them. The triplets glanced at her, staring at the white feathers that along with the black created the illusion of a magpie tail on the train of her mermaid cut dress. More white feathers created the thin white stripes of the bird's chest. Black feathers composed the wide shoulder-to-shoulder neckline. Her mask was similar to Sebastian’s although the beak was smaller and less curved. Satin gloves with feathery edges around the wrists and tipped with crystal talons completed the outfit. Wearing the feathers of an enemy as bound to be
impressive.

"Shakespeare is always popular at these parties." Lizzy laughed, nodding. "And the play was so delightful last week that I just had to."

Truly there were a few wandering around along with the animal-themed gowns, domino masks, Venetian style dresses, Roman, Greek, Orientals, Turks and Egyptians along with the medieval themed knights and ladies. Arthurian legend, characters of the season's most popular books… a bit of everything.

"Shall I book a few dances Girlie?" Mouser took the chance to torture the boyo for a while. He grimaced but had no chance to refuse. Also he didn't actually looked like he wanted to refuse that much. At least not that time.

"Ciel!" Prince Soma greeted from across the room, dashing towards them, full of energy as usual. A few disapproving glances were given but as they noticed the title of those he was mingling with no words were proffered. Agni kept up easily, greeting them with a bow and a smile. Clearly influenced by the *Study in Scarlet* Soma had chosen to appear very normal to the English public, dressing as Sherlock Holmes. Of course Agni had acquiesced to play Watson. "I hadn't been invited to this kind of party yet. How very interesting..." As he chatted Agni was looking around, frowning when he spotted the same activities Sebastian and Mouser were tracking. Courts and society followed similar patterns of intrigue and deceit. Death was not as far from the upper crust as some believed.

After a quick scolding to prevent any disasters from misguided helpful intentions the servants had snapped into body-guarding shape. Being told what they needed to know, what they needed to hear about the potentially dangerous situation had helped to dampen the excitement into focus.

Bard was standing keeping true to his costume, chainmail, cuirass and sword a smidge more real than the others, close to the wall to keep his back covered. From smiles and occasional chat to focus and calculating looks.

Meyrin in an elegant medieval green and gold dress whose skirts concealed weaponry neatly walked about, appraising the field under her glasses before making a quick prowl of the galleries above where a sniper would feel at home.

Finny seemed to feel better in the veranda, his jester outfit colourful and noisy. Put together with his youth and demeanour it charmed the ladies and some of the younger guests. Even carefree he was aware of both duties and surroundings, watching the Young Master, making sure he was always in sight.

Amidst the growing crowd Lau and RanMau were found lounging in one of the lover's couches along the wall in oriental costumes. A samurai and a geisha if guesses served. Lau was keeping to his usual air of oblivious bliss. RanMau was a bit sharper as she stared at the crowd, a slight frown beneath her usually blank façade.

"All the hostages are here." Sebastian mentioned as the party acquired a normal pace for the Young Master amidst chat, dance requests, a few games and food sampling.

"Should we pretend we are not here?" Mouser answered playfully, glancing up.

"Perhaps."
Ciel took a deep breath crossing arms, steeling himself before heading towards the parlour.

Events like that were so bothersome and with the goal nowhere in sight or reach it only grew more aggravating as time ticked by. Not that the other nobles seemed to care that much that the host was missing as long as he was providing proper entertainment. Some musical pieces meant for dancing had already started to sound and the ballroom grew hotter and more crowded.

Lizzy was proving fiercely capable of keeping other women from showing undue interest in dance or conversation although she was adamant in requesting a waltz for herself. And now that she no longer felt the need to hide he was noticing that she had inherited more from the Marchioness than the fair hair.

Soma, introduced as a prince, an unmarried prince, was the main target that night it seemed. Agni’s good natured handling of the situation did not diminish the interest in his money and status but kept him from being drowned in skirts, frills and masked men in need of a status boost.

The demons were nowhere to be seen.

Yet nothing had happened.

A bump in a ballroom was nothing new. Unfortunately it was against a maid with a tray of wine glasses. Some fell on the wooden floor as she gripped the tray. A few crashed against hi, soaking patches in the jacket.

"I'm sorry." The maid spoke up. She wore the Trancy uniform in blue and white. Blond hair was long and kept out of the face by two short pigtails. There seemed to be nothing but worry and concern in her features.

Put upon but uncaring Ciel shook his head. A blonde young maid had not been in any reports.

"No, it's nothing." The earl dismissed the event, turning away.

"But it might stain." Missing the annoyed look that crossed the maid's features before she gripped his arm in earnest concern. "Please follow me." She urged, pulling Ciel away from the ballroom.

Mouser smiled from the balcony. It had started. She turned to get ready before pausing and looking once again over her shoulder, eyes narrowing when a nagging feeling gnawed at her. Blue, broken hollow eyes burning with hatred and longing for retribution... It was familiar and the body had never been found… One who was mad and broken, that could manipulate a pervert…

Shouts echoed in the alley. Like Zach said three blokes were beating up the new kid. Fancily dressed, venturing into the stews for fun. And dissatisfied with what they had hired they turned into other kind of sport. Mouser sneered, fishing a gun from her jacket, a warning shot sounding. They jumped away from the crumpled blonde on the dirt.

Mouser smiled beneath her shaggy fringe, taking aim. They paled. The second shot grazed one of their ears. That sent them running right quick, not even bothering to play haughty. The thief lowered her gun, stuffing it into a pocket again, approaching the kid, poking with her boot until the body was turned.
Bruised, beaten but breathing. Also not a girl, despite the low cut, cheap dress.

"I told you before kiddo. When those hire whores they like to find the right dangly bits in their proper places." Mouser crouched, lighting a cigarette, holding it on her mouth, poking him for broken anything.

Despite the pain he laughed. Jim was a new arrival, from the country, found in a destroyed village. And he didn't seem to grasp the concept that he didn't need to whore himself out for blokes of the street. At least not under Jack's employment. Also if he wanted to stay in that line of business the gang or Charlotte could find a safe brothel. At any rate safer than the orphanage for boys where he had been thrown. That was more a flesh market than a home for the lost.

(You thought I was kidding about making it into a dress.)
The empty darkened room Ciel had been guided into was filled by the flat hum of a song as the Trancy maid patted the stain away by the light of the writing desk. Ciel narrowed his eye, annoyed, sitting on the bed. Idle waiting for something so trivial was a waste of time. Sebastian would have dealt with the issue fast but the baiting tactic meant he needed to be kept away for now yet his plan seemed to be at a standstill. If he was away from the ballroom he was not as great a target as he needed to be.

The soft cascade of notes caught his attention abruptly. The song felt odd... Actually all the situation was off.

From the Trancy household that was the first and only person that had approached. If he thought about it carefully even the accident looked a bit crafted. And the truth of the matter was that he was now truly alone, away from the crowd that could serve as padding for any aggressive action. And they had been unable to provide a likeness so the Earl of Trancy could resort to all kinds of masks and subterfuges. Meaning...

"I'm done..." She stood, showing the coat. The stain was not gone. But the helpful smile was still there. Suspicion settled strongly. "What lovely blue." The maid whispered suddenly, dropping the coat he had approached to retrieve, stepping into Ciel's space, gripping his gloved hand, staring at the Phantomhive ring, the smile breaking into a misty grin. "I wonder if the souls of the dead are in this colour, trapped in the jewel."

"What?" Ciel hissed as the maid stepped closer, staring at his face, catching it between her hands, gazing.

"It's the same colour of your eye." The whisper was close and insidious. The closeness was not helping. "Same colour of the ring." Fingers dipped into his hair, making Ciel's skin crawl in disgust.

"What are you talking about..." the Earl hissed.

"Yet the other has been corrupted." The maid taunted, leaning in closer, a sudden wet feeling tracing Ciel's ear. Avoiding a yelp he stepped away, pushing her away. But when he did she was holding the eyepatch, waving the stolen piece of fabric and leather, dashing away, laughing.

Ciel gritted his teeth, annoyed, covering his marked eye. Yet a small smile appeared as he reasoned. It was finally happening. Targeted when alone. As a bewildered and wronged Earl should he gave chase, running through the corridors of the manor, chasing the skirt, lead deeper, away from the ballroom, down staircases until he emerged in the garden, near the woods that cradled the back of the manor. Alone.

"What's the matter?" The maid taunted, standing still amidst the trees, steeped in the shade of the rustling leaves.

The moon silvered the darkened area. Quite perfect for a trap. Ciel approached, calming his breathing. Even after running for a while it seemed he was not that tired. No asthma hints either. So it seemed running around and training for cricket had done some good for his body.

"Stop this farce at once Alois Trancy." Ciel demanded, challenging, eager to deal with the issue.

"So you knew." Alois demeanour changed immediately as he pulled the blonde wig, revealing
blonde shorter hair, fluffing it up dismissively, scowling. "How boring." His voice dropped lower as well, threatening, glaring before his eyes softened again is smug satisfaction.

"It was obvious that you would make your move when I was alone." The answer was obvious. And saying it as if he had always known was the best option to take the superior stance.

"Did you follow me on purpose?" There was a little bit of surprise as he spoke up. But it turned to a grin. "Even if you did..." Claude Faustus stepped out of the shadows solemnly, standing to the right of his master. The triplets dropped from above, to the left. The threat could not be more obvious. But for someone who was just a bit taller and older to need that much to confront him was amusing.

"Don't underestimate me." The boyo dismissed the superior numbers with a mirthless chuckle, head tilting upwards.

"Quite." Sebastian answered to the implied call, stepping out from behind a convenient tree, maskless.

"Kiddo always had very poor taste when choosing targets." Mouser called out to the left, out of the costume. Sebastian's shirt was too big on her, creating what was in essence a short dress but as she had argued if she had to put herself back in the feathers after the fight there was no time to change into formal, informal or anything that demanded lacing up. Her eyes turned to Faustus. "And punters." Also being in white-and-black diamond stockings paired with dancing slippers meant she was standing at roughly the same height as Ciel. Mouser also had attempted to go in her corseted underdress but for some reason Sebastian was against practical underwear that time.

Alois eyes widened and he stepped back.

"You..." He whispered, choked.

"Never found the body kiddo. Didn't think this was why." Mouser smiled warmly. Either Faustus had said nothing or had not used her names. "Do go on." She encouraged with a little hand wave. "Know I am a bit glad."

"It really is nothing." Despite the sudden change in tone and situation Alois was able to keep his act. It was his goal, his wishes, his selfishness. Nothing much had changed from those few weeks. "I just want to talk quietly." He stated, bouncing back into arrogant.

"Hosting a ball. Dressing up like that. All for a conversation?" The boyo was scathing, scoffing. "What do you really want?"

"I want you." Alois answered plainly, having regaining the faint, mocking smile.

"What do you mean?" Ciel flinched, annoyed, confused, pressing the issue.

"I want you. That is all, Ciel Phantomhive." Alois said once more, shrugging.

"If you want playthings Kiddo the old daddy spider proved that there are easier methods." Mouser shook her arms until the sleeves were at her wrists, crossing them and chuckling. "Same level of smarmy but..." The kiddo gritted his teeth behind the nonchalance. Reminding him of what he had been and what he had gone through seemed the best way to incur his wrath and force a mistake out of his smug arse.

"If you refuse everyone in the ball will be slaughtered." So that was the purpose of the invited hostages. Mouser huffed, lighting a cigarette, vanishing the lighter behind her back. Sebastian was
gauging the boyo's reaction, satisfied to find no visible change or fear. "I prepared some entertainment. Once it begins everyone will die including your loved ones." Alois continued speaking, convinced of his advantage, an unpleasant smile plastered on his face. "What are you going to do?"

"Do as you please." Ciel retorted, shrugging.

"Is that really all right?" Taken aback but unwilling to lose what he thought was a winning hand Alois pressed the issue. Faustus looked interested. Sebastian smiled in pride. Mouser chuckled, shaking her head in disappointment towards her former kiddo.

"Of course. If you can, that is." It showed lack of preparation. It showed Alois knew little of who he was playing with. "Still I have questions." The boyo turned to what he wanted now, taking a stiffer, demanding attitude, adopting a smirk, staring ahead fearlessly.

"Of course I will answer." Alois huffed. "If you kneel down before me and wag you tail, that is." Taunting he turned, wagging his bottom in a crude challenge.

"Didn't you say something like that recently?" Ciel glanced at Mouser.

"I might have." The thief answered, tossing the cigarette to the ground, snuffing it out. "Did you do it?"

"Don't get cocky just because you have a good butler. My Claude is far better." Ignored Alois shouted, approaching his demon, leaning against his chest like some maiden in love. "Get Ciel!" He demanded, showing the contract mark etched on his tongue.

"Sebastian." Ciel called, grimacing. "Protect me no matter what."

"Yes, you Highness." Claude answered emotionlessly, staring ahead.

"Yes, my Lord." Sebastian acquiesced, pulling his gloves into place,

"Why not just order him dead boyo?" Mouser complained.

Alois Trancy was not the source of the problem or the answers. But he was the one that posed the main threat and obstacle. And quite frankly as he was he would be better off dead. Zach had argued for it back then. Mouser had seen the signs that Jim would need to be executed if he didn't change. But before he was sold there had been a slight chance for the country boy to live with his shattered self. Now after spiders, demons and demon spiders piling up with being a threat to her income and covenant's food supply there was no chance to be offered.
Chapter 144

Plucking the boyo from the ground and carrying him away from the triplets' charge was easy enough for Sebastian. There really was not much room to doubt the given orders. They gave chase with gardening implements that would be a far cry from effective even against regular humans. Determination was not amiss, however. Even if their given instructions were being a bit…

"Assault! Alliance! The gleaners of hell!" Faustus spouted dramatically with the appropriate arm gestures as the triplets circled, trying to entrap him with the clamps and ladder. Trancy looked smug and sure of his advantage.

Overdone. Still Sebastian kept avoiding them, pushing them away though quick kicks, arms occupied, moving a bit away, smiling slightly. Ciel was not amused at being shaken and handled like some sort of keep-away token.

The fight was pointless. There were no purposes or goals to be achieved.

Especially with the orders they had been bound to obey.

However…

The demon dodged the attacks, surging towards the adversary, leaving the trio dazed, looking around for the suddenly absent target. Alois looked elated. Faustus stepped in the way, grimly determined.

Smoking quietly, removed from the action by virtue of not having the much sought after Young Master Mouser smiled in answer to Sebastian's high kick, feinting, somersaulting above them to continue his escape.

Returning to the ballroom seemed like the most effective way to resolve the tiff until some other solution could be achieved. Sooner perhaps.

"Sebastian is remarkable." The blonde was impressed, turning, following the movements before snuggling up to Faustus back. However his butler kept glaring at Mouser, standing between her and the master, ignoring the actual order quite blatantly. "Could he be better than you Claude?" The thief giggled at the flinch, tossing the spent but on the ground, crushing it with the soft slipper. "It would be far more entertaining to make him kneel." Mind and target changed Alois gripped the tailcoat harder, smiling gleefully. "Can you do that Claude?"

A golden blade deflected the bullet, the sound of the gunshot startling Alois into letting go of the coat, screaming when a dagger narrowly missed his throat, sinking into Faustus' protective arm, biting to the bone. Mouser smiled widely, twisting, slamming one black and white leg against the demon, pushing him away from Alois and her blade. Before it could sink into a strike the thief hopped back, avoiding a barrage of golden knives.

"I can certainly do so." Claude answered stiffly. "But at this time she is the main threat."

Even so the triplets dashed by her, still focused on the chase.

"Let me play a guessing game." Mouser taunted, snapping her fingers, sending a barrage of small blades against Faustus, forcing him away from her prey, walking in for the kill as he was kept at bay by harm and explosions. "After you allowed your stupidity to blind you and disobeyed me and the gang you found out there are hells worse than the stews." Alois stepped back as she showed her
blades. "My you have grown…" She whispered tenderly, looking slightly up. "In despair there was a path that lead to a hope." A very old, crafty trap that only lead to dinner. Mouser turned, parrying Claude that had managed to breach through, singed and cut. "What did you ask for?" the thief called out, slashing, moving out of range. "Everyone dead? Wasn't that what you wished for so often when you cried at night? Or did you wish to never be alone, to be adored?"

"Shut up!" Alois shouted, accusing the blow, anger bubbling up, rushing to Claude's side once more.

Mouser laughed as she caught the vulnerable and twistable wish. Nothing but an open order with no end but death. No ties to keep the demon under control or behaved. A foolish master made for a fast meal yet... The thief turned to Claude.

"Why not let me kill him right now?" She tossed a knife that was stopped inches from the kiddo's nose. "The soul would be yours anyway." Mouser offered, crossing her arms behind her back, tiptoeing. "You are not that picky of an eater either. Quick and easy." A sound, dissonant and high pitched started to echo amidst the trees. Music that sounded like someone was stepping on an army of squeaking rats. Mouser shook her head as the tune wormed its way into memory. Like some nursery rhymes that would never leave.

Claude Faustus stepped towards his master covering his ears.

"The entertainment has started. If you will excuse us the Master has to be dressed to see to his guests." The butler stated, absconding with his charge, disappearing towards the house.

Mouser huffed, watching. Might as well go. She also had to stuff herself back into her own dress. Faustus had not answered but seeing how close she had been to carve Alois into bits he did not really care much for the food source or its proper seasoning. In an open life contract he could have continued to snack on souls under the Master's orders quite easily and put his pieces in entertaining ways instead of just going through the days hoping for the kiddo to keel over.

"Young master please cover your ears." Sebastian asked as he dodged another attack, sending a demon into a same-faced body, placing the Young Master down, back to a tree, gloved hands covering his ears for safety as the glass-produced sound reached farther than any instrument should. "It has been a good hundred years since I heard this tone." He mused for a moment.

"What is that sound?" Ciel asked as the music plunged into his head like a knife, mercifully cut silent by Sebastian as he fended off the triplets, unimpeded by the awkward positioning of his hands. When a kick broke the saws and the axe was pivoted and tossed back into them they decided to retreat, leaving the demon free to use the

"Should we return to the ballroom?" Ciel asked, his tone louder than usual.

"Please do not worry. One of my few friends is here tonight." Sebastian answered, using the handkerchief to make some impromptu ear plugs, urging the young Master to follow him back. The coat had to be cleaned and his outfit rearranged before the Young Master could return to the ballroom. So he had to deal with those tasks before setting to thwart the "entertainment" Trancy had provided and attempt to deal with this misguided annoyance through Faustus. As the attack had not stopped and the song was ongoing Mouser had most likely been unable to assassinate Alois straight away.
There was something odd going on in the ballroom. Lizzy noticed the shift right about the time Ciel had vanished with a stained coat. The triplet servants had disappeared. Evee was gone. Sebastian was nowhere to be seen. But the guests had not detected the lack of attendance. After all most of them had more than one servant brought in to not feel neglected by a party staff focused only on pleasing their own master.

Suspicion kept her alert. Now it was becoming rather clear that invitation and event were part of the Watchdog's duties. Like the Campania. And if it was going to degenerate into another night of mayhem Lizzy was regretting not choosing something like Joanne d'Arc or Queen Boudicca to wear. Just for the sword's sake. Mother had been right in her train of thought. And she was not the only one showing tension. Ciel's servants. Agni. Prince Soma. All had noticed what was missing. Actually

Murmurs echoed through the crowd as the main door opened, allowing a dark skinned woman with long pale hair through. Judging by the spidery, web motifs of her dress and the dark red fabric that covered the boxy cart she pushed she was both part of the staff and the entertainment. The music quieted down. Couples stopped their dances. Those who had wandered away for food or conversation returned, observing, crowding the ballroom.

Theatrically, surrounded by excited whispers the cloth was pulled, hissing dramatically, swaying to a stop, revealing an instrument underneath. It was a strange thing of wood, metal and crystal.

"I did not expect to see one of those here." Lau, Ciel's oriental business associate told his companion, taking a drag of the eastern pipe. RanMao nodded softly as the woman continued with the expected theatrics, sitting down for a performance.

To the shock of the present the start of the show was a slow moistening of slender fingers that brought blushes to the faces of gentleman and sneers to the proper ladies. The ingénues blushed brightly. The chaperones glared in distaste. When they touched the crystal, moving through the motion of her booted foot on the pedal, a soft sound whispered through the crowd, erasing even the deepest frown of contempt.

The instrument produced a song as crystalline as its material. The woman looked focused as her hands moved gracefully over the spinning cups, making them sing in the stunned silence. Beauty turned into thorny brambles, digging deep through the minds of the guests, grating in the dissonances of the high notes.

Pain coursed through their heads.

In confusion and agony the guests contorted to the song. Cries, shouts, pleas echoed in the crowded room. People fell to their knees, heads clutched. Soma looked around bewildered. Agni was keeping him upright in concern, hiding the same pain. The prince was shouting at Lau who tilted his head, unflinching, unaffected.

In a crescendo some of the voices stopped, their owners straightening with empty, mindless smiles, approaching. More and more seemed to be succumbing.

Lizzy's eyes widened. As people fell around her, stood up and attacked, she reached for one of the many roses of her dress, following the Chinese's example, stuffing the fabric into her ears, the sound dimming, her mind clearing.
Agni, having followed her gasp of realization nodded, covering his own ears with a torn handkerchief.

"The sound is controlling them!" the Indian butler shouted, grabbing Ciel's staff attention, punching a musician out of the way as he reached Prince Soma. "Prince cover your ears!" He asked, using the flaps of the investigator's hat to do so.

Lizzy closed her gloved hands into fists, stepping back as the dominated people began surrounding them, holding whatever they had grabbed as weapons. Agni immediately took a combative stance. Bard was holding his knightly sword aloft, following Lau's example with corks. Meyrin's veiled was firmly wrapped around her head. Finny had gone with fabric, the chirping of his bells helping to break the song's hold.

"You are too defenceless without swords." Mouser said softly, sitting straight with her legs properly slanted.

The Marchioness arched one eyebrow regally, picking up cup and saucer.

"True but a lady cannot carry a blade openly all the time." She answered. "It's not done."

"You could conceal it in a parasol. I know a workshop." Mouser answered, glancing at her tea, deciding against it. If she needed to dodge something better do it without splashing anyone with boiling hot rougui tea. "But that is not what I am defending at the moment. You need a bit of fighting skills without a weapon."

Lizzy took a sip of her tea, listening.

"Boxing?" She asked, giggling at the preposterousness of the statement.

"Heaven's no." Mouser smiled, glancing at the Marchioness, scooting a bit away just in case. "Brawling."

"Quite." The Marchioness snapped dryly, placing the tea down. "I assume you mean a way to avoid a situation, to buy time to get a proper blade or help."

"I am." Mouser allowed a relieved sigh to get out. "Lizzy was fortunate the ship favoured nautical sabres as a decoration." The Marchioness nodded, agreeing. "Hitting hard, hitting fast and leaving whoever is attacking dazed or out. That is the goal."

"Very well." Lizzy seemed surprised. But her mother had her best interests in mind as usual. And a new discipline to train mind and body never seemed to bother the Marchioness. Hunting, running, sword fighting. She was adept and enthusiastic about those things. "I will also be taking part of these lessons."

Mouser swallowed a whimper.

Too late for Paula to be able to counter the song's effect, Lizzy noticed as she gripped her skirt, swinging her leg hard against some poor lady with a candlestick, catching her midriff, leaving her gasping for air, crumbled. She stepped away, looking around, dodging, looking for a sword she could use. It would be easier…

RanMao knocked out her maid with a quick chop to the shoulder, spinning to kick two more men, one with a chair, the other brandishing a cello, pulling Paula away from another attacker as the
young lady's elbow sunk into some guy's throat, approaching to see if her maid was mostly unarmed, concerned.

Meyrin moved in quick circles, trying to find the higher ground, shooting against the weapons, taking them out of the wielder's hands, using upturned tables as shields, grimacing, glassless.

Finni punched and kicked carefully but not without glee, finding himself in the middle of the biggest crowd, recognized as the biggest threat. Some of his attackers were flung into the air, tossed away.

Bard defended with the sword, pressing those that came after him into the other rooms, managing to lock a crowd away in the dining room with Soma's help. They seemed to be working out a plan to do the same with the other available room and throngs of dazed attackers.

Agni's attempt to charge at the source of the song were frustrated, constantly blocked. But he pushed forward, trusting the others and the Prince.

The thorny sounds of the crystal grew, harsher, sharper, trying to claw through the protection of covered ears. Madness grew in the controlled guests. Not only were they attacking those free of corruption but they had started to attack each other, trying to kill.

Keeping themselves safe, keeping a disaster from occurring… the small group was growing overwhelmed. And soon the song would cut through their covered ears. The song itself could be felt in their bodies even without its sound. The crystal resonated with their bone, their flesh. A slip, a misdirected movement could bring them under the spell if the song broke through…

And in a soft whisper of a crystal note the enslaved guests stopped moving as Sebastian placed the last cup on the balcony and ran the pad of his finger through the rim, producing a pure note that mixed through the song, each consecutive cascade of sound and contrasting sound combating. The demon smiled and kept playing the glass harp, battling. It should not take long as the harmonica was a manmade toy with limited range.
Chapter 146

An interference in the song's flow was more than enough to disrupt its effects, something the female was frantically trying to counter, changing tone and tune, expression clouding while her hands skittered fast through the spinning domes. But whatever changes she produced kept being drowned, twisted, broken and rearranged.

Sebastian smiled, amused at the game, both tunes mixing into a single complex melody. She had the refined skill of practice, age and a good musical sense but the medium she was using was very limited. With the amount of glasses he had prepared the range of his influence and the subtlety the sounds he could achieve was greater. Unless she changed to a glass harp or brought two more harmonicas it would be nearly impossible to overturn Sebastian's work.

"What a feat." Agni whispered, watching as the weapons were lost, the people coming to their senses, turning away from the woman, looking up, staring at the other performance, as if nothing had happened. Those unconscious came to as well, dazed for a moment, regaining their bearings and following the crowd's focus. Blank expression turned into admiration. Approval. Applause. "Sebastian's performance is overlapping with the instrument, changing the sound's nature." He took the handkerchief from his ears. Lady Elizabeth hid the swords under one of the few tables that had not been overturned, pulling the roses away, replacing them on her hair, using the thorns as pins, aiding Paula to her feet, replacing the smile on her face. Meyrin was looking up in admiration, hands together. Finny was bobbing his head to the sound, smiling. Bard sighed, popping a cigarette on his mouth. "Once ominous and grave is now graceful and gentle. It reflects nothing less than the pure soul of the performer."

Perception was a funny thing, Mouser considered, sneaking the boyo through the balcony, unnoticed by the enchanted crowd. The performance was flawless because the notes had to be precise and timed correctly to shatter against each other. It could also be achieved with a bit of shrieking and caterwauling. But that would be against Sebastian's work aesthetic. Also she refused to sing. Either way the instrument was starting to crack under the sound and strain.

There was a frustrated frown on the Trancy maid's face before it vanished in a neutral mask, unmoving even as shattered glass flew around her, the instrument broken, its energy released, pushing her down. But where a human would have suffered multiple cuts and a rather nasty backlash if not a few broken bones, she seemed unscathed. Which put into a rather odd point why the demoness was keeping her eye from regenerating. Especially when there was an unconsumed soul within her. She was not starved...

Under applause and enthusiastic compliment Sebastian took his bow and left the higher ground. And after they had had their fun the nobles ignored whoever had provided it in favour of returning to whatever they wanted to do. As that trait kept them from focusing too much on what had occurred moments ago it was a trait worth nurturing.

"I could give a fabulous performance thanks to you." Sebastian taunted the still fallen female in his path to the Young Master, the musicians having returned to the soft songs a masquerade required, barely receiving a reaction. It seemed she was resigned.

"What a show-off." The boyo murmured gruffly. Mouser smiled, shrugging in agreement, offering Sebastian's mask back. "What was that instrument?" Crossing his arms, annoyed at the still absent Alois, the boyo leaned against the wall, glowering.

"It was a glass harmonica." Sebastian answered mildly, glancing around to see the situation flowing
once more as a proper ball, putting the mask over his features. "It was very popular in the 18th century. Although called the voice of the angels it was a demon-inspired instrument." Frowning he poked the boyo, reminding him of the proper posture expected of an Earl. "Through its sounds it ensnared, corrupted and controlled souls. It has been mostly forgotten." Despite that it was not that hard to acquire or build one. Once that had been the creator's goal.

"I see. As a manmade thing it held no challenge for you." Pride salvaged and the guests used to pressure him proving to be more than Trancy could handle was a very clear cut victory in the boyo's view.

Mouser kept watching the other female, eyes narrowed in curiosity crystalline claw tapping against her arm. Older. Uncontracted. Thorny. Well fed. Keeping a former contracted soul within. So why…

The triplets swept the shards away, barely acknowledged by the chatting guests, straightening tables, replacing food, returning the look of normality to the hall. One of the trio led the female away. There was an odd reverence there, a care that revealed who was the real master of those three. Still it did not explain why she was there and obeying.

"Everyone please excuse my tardiness. I am Alois Trancy." As soon as things seemed to have calmed the double doors opened to let the kiddo through in a purple-and-red devil costume with tiny wings and fur collar, attracting attention and murmurs. Mothers sharpened their claws as they smelled money and single title. Fawners prepared to mooch. But the kiddo was playing his part, the streets' and country accent masked and controlled. "It is a pleasure to meet you. I am relieved to see that you enjoyed the entertainment provided in my absence." The Earl of Trancy moved through the ballroom, greeting, accepting thanks and answering questions with a friendly smile and a sunny disposition. Faustus followed silently, sour and stone-faced. It was obvious where they were headed. "That was a fabulous performance." Alois stopped in front of them, pointedly ignoring Ciel in favour of the demon. It annoyed the boyo slightly but Ciel chose not to show it. It was a natural frown. Rarely it did go harsher than that. "You seem to be musically talented." Alois seemed to be better at pretending. Then again no one liked, or payed, a grumpy whore.

"It would be pretentious to talk of talent. I am merely one hell of a butler." Sebastian answered with a small bow.

"You certainly have a good butler Earl Phantomhive." Alois turned smugly towards the boyo.

"He is just a butler." And Ciel just stayed in his annoyed cocoon. That could also be due to being carried around and ignored during the fight. Or it could just be the ball around him and the daunting prospect of dancing not only with Lizzy but with half a dozen other ladies, most of them older and taller than him.

"Young master. Would you mind if I have a little word with Mr Faustus." Sebastian requested with a smile, leaning. A plan was required and it seemed they could get more that way than simply through snooping through the manor. And there was the underlying promise of an early retreat from the festivities if cooperation was assured.

"Why not…"

"Go ahead Claude." Alois answered the quiet look his butler gave him cheerily before his tone chilled, eyes narrowing. "Ten minutes. Get it done in ten minutes. If you don't I will punish you."

"Yes your highness."
"Be quick about it, understood?" Ciel acquiesced, turning away, willingly heading towards Soma to have a politely plausible reason to not speak with Alois.

"Yes My lord." Sebastian sealed the order.

"Again boyo… he is right here. How hard is it to say shoot his face off?" Mouser grumbled.

"Come along Mouser." Sebastian paused, looking back. Faustus stiffened by the door.

"Why? I've seen you rip things apart before." Mouser looked around for any servant with flutes of champagne. "I can do that too." The thief teased, winking behind the mask, finding Alois and trying to decide if it was a good time to do him in with Sebastian distracting the damage-soaking wall.

"And you do it beautifully." Sebastian waited for her to approach, adjusting his own black feathers on the edge of the dress before tracing her shoulders with a slow touch. Her eyes were narrowed in suspicion, fairly immune to flattery. "But this is part of demonic formalities."
Chapter 147

Few would question why the servants had left but some measure of privacy was needed for their conversation. More so if their conversation took a predictable route due to the many tensions, orders and actions had piled on them.

Deep within the Trancy's property there was a small manmade lake, yet another fashionable addition made in the past and overlooked in the present, the quiet surface reflecting the moonlight. A graceful metal and marble gazebo stood at the end of stone path, secluded within the trees arranged to mimic a true forest and a clearing, the manicured lawns rustling softly. The mild summer night had not changed its mood in the short span since their last venture outside.

It was there with the expected stoicism Faustus guided them to, waiting, marching down the short pier with measured steps, keeping the same look and attitude he had displayed earlier. Whatever else could be said about him one had to admit and admire a good gambling mask.

"Quite persistent of you to keep coming after the Young Master." Sebastian challenged annoyed, purposely overlooking courtesy and wordplay, staying on the stone path, smiling.

Mouser straightened her skirt gently, observing, uninterested, finding the cushioned seats around the gazebo's low edge a bit more enticing. With three corsets overlapping she was unlikely to participate in that part of the fight. If it came to blows. Sebastian had left it rather open as to what formality they would be deferring to.

"My master ordered me to take Ciel Phantomhive." Faustus stated. It was a weak excuse at best. If an order interfered with another's contract they should work out an arrangement that kept both parts happy and fulfilled the orders without undue meddling. He had announced his presence and intentions but failed to keep distance and discourage his master as he should. Also he had been the one planting the idea of a sudden animosity in Alois' mind. If it had been a real desire it would have manifested sooner.

"My contract. Interferences such as these are punishable." The demon pressed the issue.

"Perhaps." Faustus nodded, turning away, staring at the still water. "But we cannot disagree that he is a rare soul of a very fine quality."

Coveting something was not unusual. But going as far as he was... Mouser sifted through the memories. True to what was being said she had several images of enforcers and executioners. Most of them female for politic reason. However there were a few loopholes to cover before an accusation could be made and approved. Claude Faustus had been toeing the line but had not outright crossed it. So they talked, stalled and waited. Food was always a touchy subject on the streets. It was still such for demons.

"My soul, my craft, my workmanship. Something like you has no taste." Sebastian scoffed, not bothering to mask the growing contempt. "It disgusts me to think of my work being defiled by the sticky white web of a vulgar lazy poacher."

Pride won over the veneer of calm. The truth of the accusation was a bit too much to stomach with quiet dignity. Faustus gritted his teeth, turning taking his glasses off in a smooth motion, shifting his weight. Hard to say if that was the start of the attack or if it caught Sebastian's own aggression midway. For creatures with a weapon arsenal of natural, supernatural and everything in between at their disposition it was both amusing and surprising how easily they defaulted to the reliability of a
fist. Mouser mused as she moved away, trying figure out a way to sit down as both demons traded blows.

Like an official gentlemanly boxing match there was little to no blood drawn.

Punches, taunts, jabs and dodges. Inhuman grace and speed. A lot of showing off with the running on water and using sweeping kicks to make tidal waves.

Frankly Mouser would have preferred the underground ring of blood and roaring excitement and bets. Or without the bets and excitement it would be just work. But the fascination of the books with a good old cockfight seemed somewhat warranted as two wet demons in the moonlight fell into the lake.

Sebastian was the first to emerge from the remnants of the whirlwind, standing on the relatively shallow lake, glancing around carefully. Time was coming to an end. The sneak grapple succeeded not because of stealth but because they needed the fight to come to a halt. And a Sebastian pinned by the throat with an annoyed expression and an altogether too close Faustus was a good picture.

"My master's soul is also a very precious kind." Faustus made his point. Sebastian concealed a smile.

"So eat it." The thief shrugged, adjusting. The magnesium burned, catching the moment. Sebastian escaped the grapple, somersaulting above Claude, inverting their positions, bringing a knife to his throat. The bright light of the flash shone once more. Mouser lowered the camera, dismissing it. Poppet would be delighted to have those. Tradable items for a pliable reaper were always in demand.

"I believe you wish for a full-flavoured soul then." Sebastian asked smoothly, having gained the advantage. "Something can be arranged."

Faustus paused for a moment, considering. The blades were put away. The Trancy butler replaced his glasses.

"Indeed a deal can be arranged." He agreed.

"So this is a pocket plane?" Mouser looked around the gold and green room a step had lead them into. It was small. Windows looked on into nothingness. Broken statues held candles. A round table with a golden thread cloth was set on the centre. Both males headed to the two available seats, across each other, silver platters placed in front of them. An odd arrangement of white roses with purple stems and thorns was in the centre, lonesome.

"Of a sort." Sebastian sat down, elucidating. "This is accessible by all demons that need to make deals when contracted, as we cannot return to hell while bound. It makes any deal ironclad when there is doubt and distrust between the parts."

One rose was on each plater. Both demons frowned and glared at each other. It had started. The coven was blood-bound and familial. What she had with Sitri was informal but very much secure and official. This made the coercion she had put William T. Spears through seem light, bubbly and friendly.

Sebastian pulled his glove free, showing the contract mark.
Faustus did the same.

The symbols brought forth a hint of their natures.

Sebastian bit into his wrist, drawing blood, letting it drip on the rose, the petals drawing the fluid in, slowly changing, turning a deep dark red. Faustus favoured the clean cut of a blade. Whatever the method the rose was red now.

"The deal I offer is for the Phantomhive household to become the target and final goal of your current Master." Sebastian offered a solution for Alois lack of seasoning. A clear goal and end. A bit of guidance. And a bit more seasoning, yet another test for the boyo and an end to unscheduled interferences.

"And as a result I receive a flavourful and satisfying soul. Contract accepted."

The roses were exchanged, blood mixed on their petals, turning the red into a purplish black.

"It is sealed." Sebastian glanced at Mouser as she picked his wrist, licking the wound closed, kissing the skin gently, challenging the other demon with a smile.

As Sebastian's covenant and witness to the deal Mouser would be the one to deliver punishment to either of them should the deal be broken. And if that was not enough to keep Faustus on the straight and narrow being branded an oath-breaker and hunted by the coven should do the trick.

(There was no wifi in purgatory.)
"One minute…" Alois whispered after another dazzling smile and light conversation with one of the many guests wandering towards the chairs lining the wall, an area emptied by the waltz, staring at the clock, fairly immune to the glares Ciel Phantomhive was throwing him from across the ballroom, leaning against the mantel. The focus turned into a startled gasp when his demon made his presence know, standing by his side as if he had never been missing. "Claude." Enthusiasm and pride coloured his voice before turning into a smug look, directly aimed at his target, little fake fangs showing.

"Why is he here?" Ciel murmured, disbelieving, the crossed arms kept folded even though they had lost their strength, hands closing into fists. Sebastian could not have been...

"I told you he would look concerned." Mouser teased to the left, offering him a champagne flute. The smug look across the room vanished slowly, turning to bitter annoyance.

"Of course. It would be against the Young Master's pride to simply perish in a squabble." Sebastian spoke from the right, glancing around, bowing his head to the inquisitive glower of the boyo ash he took the flute. "As ordered I dealt with it quickly." And as vague the message seemed to be it also promised an explanation.

"Why is Sebastian alive?" When thwarted a tantrum was the go-to answer Alois employed before it shifted into a gleeful chuckle. "You failed Claude." Wonder, anticipation as he picked the blackened flower, playing with the brittle petals. "You failed. I am going to punish you." And the simple joy of being the dominant one. "What should I do?"

"You never ordered me to kill Sebastian Michaelis." Emotionlessly Claude dashed the kiddo's hopes. Then he proceeded to make the same formal bow, offering reassurance to his master, taking the rose back, glancing at the opposition. "The plan is in place. Day into night. White into crimson. Lie into truth. That is the Trancy butler."

"Ciel where are you?" Lizzy called out, moving through the crowded ballroom, letting go of some of the formality expected of someone of her status. Enough was enough. Even if it was part of the Phantomhive duties Ciel still had to make good on his promise to entertain her as a fiancée should. And he had even agreed to the conditions Mother had placed on the outing.

The party seemed to have regained a more regular and pleasant style after the scuffle and the attempted musical murders. Not one of the guests seemed to recall what had happened in-between the start of the song's influence and the exploding instrument although some complained about some pains no one was sure how they had acquired. Most still spoke highly of the performance from solo to duet. Or the food. Or the orchestra. Or the outfits.

"Let's dance Lady Elizabeth." Earl Alois Trancy appeared on her path, gripping her hand with a smile, pulling her out of the search path into a graceful spin and right into the colourful flurry of dresses and dancing couples.

"Earl I'm sorry but Ciel…" Lizzy attempted to escape politely. As the host he had to be the one responsible for all the events that had transpired. And that made him an enemy. But if she wanted
to keep an edge over the likes of him there was the lady façade. And as he didn't let go and started
to waltz she began to wonder if she could not pry something more out of him by pretending to be
charmed. After all a rival's ego would be fuelled by a stolen fiancée, wouldn't it… and pride made
men chatty and error-prone.

"Oh are you dancing?" Sebastian remarked, watching the scene as the Young Master marched
towards the Young Lady with a grim expression. The demeanour was enough to scare a path open.

"Shut up." The simple growled answer was amusingly dour and obvious.

"Oh... I see that the party is turning interesting, right, RanMao?" Fresh from the hideout Lau patted
RanMao's leg, smiling, smoking as if nothing exciting had happened before.

"The Young Master is dancing?" Meyrin whispered in shock, staring, pulling her glasses a bit up to
peek from under them, to make sure the event was not the result of fogged lenses.

"Of all the things..." Bard scratched his head, bewildered.

"It's rude to steal a turn kiddo." Mouser interrupted the dance, sneaking between Girly and Kiddo,
stealing him in a fluid spin, winking, bumping Lizzy into the boyo, waltzing him through the
crowd, towards the veranda, pushing Alois into the night air, closing the doors, leaving them
alone. No demons, grumpy Earls or meddling guests followed. "I have longer bloomers than your
outfit kiddo." She remarked, getting a cigarette and a lighter, leaning against the stone railing,
cheerily igniting it.

"Never thought I'd see you in a dress." Jim retorted, something snapping into the past within. Jack's
ruthless enforcer... Not that she looked any less dangerous. "Why let me live now?" He vaulted
onto the stone, sitting down. The thief offered him the cigarette, stretching, still finding no way to
beat the dress. Distracted Trancy took it, taking a drag, slouching forward.

"What, slip a knife on you kidneys mid lock?" Mouser teased. It was a plan, true. Knife in the
belly, shot in the chest. Anything that the close contact of a dance could hide. "They did an
agreement of sorts." He returned the cigarette companionably. The scenery had changed from the
many bridges of East End and he was less bruised than back then but... "Did I guess right?"

"Yes." Alois answered simply, staring at his feet.

"I warned you" Mouser shrugged. "So what did he tell you to focus on us now? That the
Phantomhives knew?" Jim nodded, eyes closing. "All the underworld knew." The thief dismissed
the claim. But people did not need reasons stronger than their own feelings to act.

"And Sebastian Michaelis was the one that destroyed my village." Jim snarled, turning venomous.

"Some demons keep to the truth. Others lie even when there is no need to. Then there are those that
do and say whatever they feel like." Mouser chuckled. "No one is trustworthy but everyone has
uses. And as always you should know where to prod to get the right reaction or where to chain to
make sure they don't snap."

"Am I being used?" Alois challenged, prideful, dismissive. He knew his soul held value but saw it
as prize and not a tool. And while a soul could be both as well as a meal he was not entirely wrong.

"Yes, no and maybe." Mouser shrugged. "Do you want a deal?" the thief offered.

"Claude is the only one for me." The kiddo was still defiant. "My Claude will bring me victory.
Ciel Phantomhive will be mine."
"And then what?" she offered the cigarette again. There was no answer. But some lived for the moment. Instant gratification. Short term goals. Grabbing whatever happiness they could whenever they could. It was a livin'. "I warned you." Mouser tossed the cigarette down, walking away, opening the doors. "This time, however, I will make sure you are dead before vanishing."

Ciel was incensed and swearing death up and down as he demanded the carriage to be ready for both himself and Lizzy after the party ended and the guests had retired for the night. Courtesy conscious Sebastian convinced the boyo to stay the night and depart after breakfast. Other guests with busy schedules in London or other house parties to attend would do the same, sparing the Phantomhive from any social mishap and gossip.

Mouser curled on the couch by the window in girlie's room as another layer of defence, reading.

A sabre rested on the girlie's nightstand, where she could grip it easily, just in case.

Sebastian was standing in the boyo's room, unsurprisingly, doing the same, trusting the Trancy even less.

The game was different now but it was no less time-consuming.

(Happy New Year and Thank You.)
One week went by without further incidents after the Earl of Phantomhive abandoned the house party with Lady Elizabeth. It was not too discreet but neither had been the other guests. A line of carriages had been waiting in front of Trancy's estate, the servants and attendants loading them with luggage and a few gift briberies while breakfast was being lavishly served.

The quietude was both odd and appallingly normal. Business as usual, focusing on growing wealth and influence in-between tea breaks and cakes. Newspaper and book reading, letter writing, lessons to catch up with and preparation for the next releases in the several Funtom lines as well as inventing the upcoming ones.

That was until the letter arrived with the afternoon mail, properly delivered this time. Mouser found it while separating them, frowning and scoffing, standing from her paper-surrounded seat, tossing it on the desk, pulling the string to call Sebastian from the butler room. This was bound to sour the moods of the entire household.

The tempestuous frown returned quickly to the boyo's face when he noticed the spider crest. He picked up the letter opener, his mouth stretching and then opening into an impressive scowl, reading and rereading the piece of paper. His glare deepened more and more with each new analysis.

Sebastian knocked for politeness sake before entering, waiting. It took no more than a glance to see what was upsetting the boyo. Mouser was sitting on the desk, legs crossed, lighter clicking to life. The demon stood in front of the desk, waiting.

"The Earl of Trancy would like to apologise for his discourtesy at the Masked Ball." The Young Master started to read out loud. It was not clear if it had been a dictation or if Alois had simply instructed Faustus to write something to look good. But the words were most certainly not his. Same for the lettering. "As such he would like to request Earl Ciel Phantomhive's presence at a private fête to make proper amends. The event will take place at the Trancy Mansion tomorrow afternoon at 4 PM. Eagerly awaiting your reply and presence. Signed Alois Trancy." The impressive amount of poison and growl in his usually dry tone was something amazing to hear, a sure proof that the kiddo got to him. Anger, frustration and self awareness of the mirrored situation. It was precisely what Sebastian had bargained for. "What is this..." disgustedly he ripped the letter apart, tossing the paper into the nearby bin. "Light it." He asked Mouser, arms crossed, sinking into the armchair.

Weston gave him contact with other kids.

Alois Trancy was showing him another him without purpose, without sanity and logic. And it was incensing him.

"It seems they are far more eager to challenge us than expected or prudent." Sebastian summarized as Mouser clicked her lighter, making the contents of the bin flare up. He sighed and walked towards the window, opening it before the smoke had a chance to seep into the fabrics and provoke an asthma attack.

"You have not explained the purpose of your deal and delaying erasing this annoyance." The boyo complained once more leaning forward, glaring at the desk.

"He is very sore about Trancy trying to use Lizzy." Mouser teased. They had been a bit sketchy on
that, hadn't they… the thief considered, tilting her head. Sebastian chuckled in accordance, returning to the boyo's line of sight.

"What was done was to keep this undue and unruly meddling in check. Apparently it was not enough." The demon admitted to part of the deal. "The young Master should treat this as a chess match." That seemed to catch the boyo's interest and clear away some of the anger.

"Mouser. Write the reply. Agree to it." Ciel instructed. Eliminating Alois had to be his current Endgame and done with calculated moves, calm and controlled to make sure this time there were no errors or interferences. Meaning he should use that misstep, that overeager advance, to do away with him. "Be prepared for combat."

"Aye, aye…” Mouser blew a small stream of smoke, smiling giddily.

"Yes, My Lord." Sebastian answered with a bow, the tilt of his head hiding a smug smile.

With that all the scheduled tasks and chores had to be rearranged. It was nothing new and nothing overly complicated. Only an official meeting of the Funtom Company could not have been moved, occurring as planned two hours after the letter's arrival. The others had not been informed exactly why the boyo would be absent the next day but it was not abnormal for such things to happen. While not exactly a day off it was a less tiring, less supervised day. As display of unearthly things were being foreshadowed it was very much beneficial to keep them away and fairly unsuspecting.

Their room was filled with weapons. Finished with the night duties Sebastian had returned to Mouser, finding her amidst half of her toybox, selecting bits and pieces to go into the coach's trunk. There was another pile placed to the side of broken, bent and dulled toys. Paperwork in neat piles was displayed on the desk. Leafing through it revealed lists of motives and ways to justify pretty much every scenario both to the Queen and to any demons that could question the execution or deals.

"It seems you are prepared." Sebastian mentioned as she transferred the selected arsenal to the trunk, closing it, pushing it to the corridor. The rest vanished back to the infernal mess she called warehouse.

"Those were the backups." Mouser smiled, closing the door, stretching. "Should I take the dog?"

"It seems wise." Sebastian nodded. Even if it was just a matter of numbers and bragging. And despite the Young Master's intentions things could always take unexpected turns.

"I am curious. Could you summon from your legions while contracted?" the thief asked, opening the closet, preparing tomorrow's clothes and the weaponry array to go with them.

"Not in the agreement made with the Young Master." Sebastian admitted. "Do you recall…"

"If this is about what happened in the Campania I was angry, busy and trying to stab." Mouser snipped in a clipped tone, throwing him a very convincing glare.

"Yes, true." Sebastian cleared his throat and stepped a bit back. "The summons that had been placed and the contract the Young Master requested were for a single entity." Sebastian shrugged. "I didn't think more than myself would be needed or requested."

"But theoretically we could call on allies to resolve this matter fast and forcibly." Mouser pressed slyly.
"Indeed." One arm looping around her waist, bringing the thief closer, leaning down, whispering on her ear. "But do you think so poorly of me that you'd think I cannot crush a single spider and its cohorts?" Mouser made a small startled sound and then laughed, taking his free hand, unbuttoning the glove, sneaking her fingers under the fabric, pushing it out of the way. "We didn't dance." It would have been a good way to show off the feathers.

"I had to go threaten the kiddo because of girlie and for old time's sake." Mouser smiled, nipping his fingers playfully, avoiding having to admit any doubts. Having them or not was irrelevant. "And besides tomorrow we will." She tossed the glove down, tiptoeing, kissing him gently, lips brushing against his lightly, unhurried.
"Ah, you really came Ciel!" Alois Trancy was standing in front of the Manor, excitedly waving as the coach approached. Behind him the servants were lined up. Formality-wise it was a very good way to present themselves while greeting the guest of honour. Even the bow performed when the boyo stepped down of the coach was perfectly timed and executed. They could complain in whatever way they wanted about the annoyances and grievances but there was also something to be said about looking and acting the part.

"Trancy." The boyo was blunt and dry, glaring as he stepped down from the box, barely shy of discourteous. Mouser stepped down next, opening the parasol. She and Sebastian flanked the boyo, standing ready. Pluto snarled quietly, playing the coachman. The thief glanced up, encouraging him to follow his part and drive the vehicle to the stables. He would join the after he took care of the animals.

"Welcome to the Estate." Faustus took over the greetings after a moment of aggressive silence between the youth. One of them at least. Another bow followed.

"Come." Alois was still perky and enthusiastic, gesturing towards the gardens, turning without waiting, chattering as he guided them through the stone path curving around the manor, leading to yet another part of the immense gardens. "I had the best stage for today's event prepared." He announced proudly, gesturing widely when the turn opened to show a massive structure amidst the shrubbery.

The stage he was referring to was a grand chess set of light grey and deep black stone elevated from the pounded ground. Massive pieces were lined in front of Nordic-looking armour-clad men in old-styled, opera-inspired armour and long beards with deep set frowns and stone weapons nearby. Like something out of the overwrought paintings in vogue. A lavishly furnished skybox with two chaise long, side tables each with its own pitcher of some refreshing beverage looked on the arena. Ostentatious was a good definition to start with.

"What is this?" the boyo murmured, eye narrowing in suspicion.

"A replica of a duelling ground." Sebastian answered after a quick analysis, coming to a stop, waiting for what would unfold.

"Either that or an opera stage." Mouser chuckled. It was too melodramatic to be taken truly seriously. Although the stone pieces could be used...

"Ciel lets make the servants dance." The Kiddo was buzzing with unspent energy, tossing his challenge. Close to feverish, eager. "The one who makes it to the end wins. The loser will follow the winner's orders. How about it?"

Simple enough, wasn't' it... Mouser considered, trying to decide who had come up with the notion. Both Master and Demon were eager to acquire their goals. But Faustus may have been the one, eager to prove himself in a battle ground after the string of bruises previous contacts had left on his ego. Maybe. Perhaps it was just pride and arrogance. But a brawl was better than long drawn, empty negotiations.

"It seems they had been interested in a deadly match as well." Sebastian leaned to quip at the boyo.

"A ball more suited to your nature." The boyo quipped back.
"Either way you would not be limber enough." Mouser teased. It was not surprising to see that his mood had improved. It made things quicker and easier to handle if they didn't have to smash a tea set to start a fight.

"Indeed." Sebastian agreed to both statements easily, amused.

"This is an order." Ciel agreed by pulling the eyepatch away from the contract mark, showing it proudly, glaring at the adversary. "Win and bring Trancy to me. I will deal with him with my own hands."

"Yes, My lord." Sebastian acquiesced.

The tendency the boyo was revealing to attempt to solve problems by his own hands was becoming more and more pronounced within reason and self-awareness. And willingness to acknowledge and bear with the consequences of those was yet another layer of complexity to be added to his soul. Whether it was due to injured dignity, anger towards someone who threatened girlie or plain annoyance. Unhesitating, decisive, unflinching.

"Master. Order me." Contrast with someone who had to be reminded of his purpose. Faustus called slowly as Sebastian walked towards the Young Master's seat, searching for traps, preparing the pillows, pouring the drink, testing for poison. And appraising the terrain from above.

"Oh, right..." Alois snapped back from his distraction, glancing at Faustus. "Make Ciel mine." He glanced up, tongue poking out to show the contract mark, eyes narrowing as he watched his target and the one he had been lead to hate. "And deliver the greatest suffering to Sebastian Michaelis." He added slowly, as the idea formed. "You can do it, right Claude?" Giddy Alois asked, the idea taking hold, smile widening.

"Yes. Your highness." Faustus answered as Trancy walked away, towards the spectator's statue.

The demons were in the chessboard on opposing sides. Each triplet had its own weapon. A longsword, an halberd and a crossbow. Hanna wielded two long daggers. Faustus stood, empty-handed, staring them down. Sebastian smiled, fanning a set of silver knives. Mouser closed the parasol and lowered it. Pluto preened in his white fur, taking the shape he was more comfortable with. Alois seemed amused by the seemingly harmless choices.

"Then let's begin." Faustus adjusted his glasses as the clock struck four with a mournful bell.

"Danse Macabre." Sebastian announced, accepting the challenge.

Three on five or three on three.

"Assault! Alliance! Ambush! The bloodied trial!" Faustus commanded, gesturing.

The triplets charged, halberd wielder in front of the triangle.

Pluto stepped forth, planting his forepaws apart, snarling, spewing fire, breaking the formation. Halberd took cover, crouching, curling over himself. The other two dodged, scattering, each to a side, avoiding the flames, eyes widening in the exact same expression, the momentum lost.

Mouser tossed her parasol upwards, following in the flame's path, dashing by the dogs before they regained their bearings, regrouping to surge. She freed the blades from her forearms, crossing them with Hanna's, blocked. Defence, protection and guardianship were characteristics often associated with the thorny bramble of dead flowers. All of her focus was in pinning Mouser in a
locked parry, keeping her from moving forward or even separating the blades. The thief's heels didn't touch the stone as she pushed against the deeply rooted female. And Mouser pushed harder, making sure to keep Hanna's focus and effort in the arms and legs.

So she did what only a handful would do in a combat situation.

The discarded blades fell to the black square followed by the bewildered female as the thief simply evaded, kicking her out of the way, tossing a handful of explosives. The fire was red and engulfing, burning hot. Mouser whistled. Pluto hopped to her side, biting down through the flames, forcing the other demoness to retreat, giving chase, keeping her busy.

"Good puppy." Mouser praised, catching the falling parasol, releasing the top blade, turning to Faustus with a grin.

Dodging the sword was simple. Deflecting the halberd required only a tap of Sebastian's palm. The crossbow took a bit of finesse in getting under it before the bolt was unleashed, pushing it upwards, forcing the projectile to be harmlessly released.

Each failed strike put one of the three in a surrounding position, ready to try once more, moving in sync, adapting.

Sebastian spun, avoiding the attacks, knives outstretched as claws, kicking the pups out of his way. Surprise and rage crossed their features when they found their weapons cleaved apart, retreating.

"Assault! Alliance! Ambush! The mirrored curse!" Faustus called out, reorganizing his troops.

This time the triplets attacked with short spears, moving at the same time, charging, tips converging. But instead of assaulting in a single strike they began to barrage one at a time, each dodged stab attempting to guide where the next one would be aimed. And as that failed fast two of them, standing parallel thrusted their spears forward.

Fork and knife pried the spears apart, rendering the strike harmless. And the third charge as predicted was vaulted over, the knife sunk, balancing Sebastian above the three, smiling, looking around at the three frustrated faces that hesitated.

"As expected of one with three equal muzzles. Well-coordinated. Moving as one." Sebastian taunted.

The eyes changed with a small snarl. The one who kept the demon balanced swept the spear, dislodging him as the three backed away, gaining distance, the three short shafts connecting into a long handle spear.

Sebastian's eyes narrowed as he took a defensive stance. Throw or charge…

Wielded by the three the spear gained height though the chess pieces, thrown hard and fast, the strength of the motion tripling with perfect execution.

Impending beheading forced Faustus attention away from any gloating he could have mustered as the triplets fought for him. Caught off guard, barely ducking away from the blade, the demon lost ground, scurrying. Mouser smiled, snapping her fingers, hurling the manifested blades against the now defensive butler who returned the projectiles in golden, trying not to be lead near Sebastian.

Getting skewered would be an option but with the depth it could reach on the stone it promised to be a somewhat slow release. Avoidance was easy. Sebastian allowed it to pass, the wooden shaft
balancing on his shoulder, the back of his hand tapping it, changing the motion into a twirl around his shoulders, making the weapon his, building his own force, letting the speer fall, heel snapping it upwards, above his head as the demon straightened with a smile.

"Then..." He murmured, a harsh grip and a sudden toss sending the weapon against the shocked three heads, spearing through, hammering and hanging them against the stone statue at the edges of a the board. "Now you are truly linked." He mentioned, clapping the dust out of his gloved hands, turning, scanning the board.

"He's good." Alois whistled, impressed.

Ciel grunted, keeping his opinion locked, watching.

Faustus was stubbornly being defensive and unleadable. Not by blade, daggers, explosions, flechetttes or throwing knives. Like killing an actual spider and having it tarantella away from the bottom of the sole.

Pluto burst through a couple of pieces, muttering «sorry» as he tried to keep up with Hanna, tripping on the curve as his claws found no traction, snarling as he stood, ready to continue with his order.

The female tossed her blades against Sebastian, slashing through the sleeve of the tailcoat as he was about to hunt the Trancy Butler, making him stop, following her motions. Mouser's current efforts to eviscerate Faustus should be enough to keep him busy while Sebastian dealt with the new interloper.

"Oh I'll need to mend this right away." The murmur was more to himself as he surveyed the unsightly damage.

"No need. It will soon be filled with bullet holes." It was a surprisingly sassy and bloodthirsty thing to say from someone Mouser was sure they hadn't hear a word from so far. She ripped her dress getting a pair of two-shot derringers, shooting in quick succession as Sebastian shrugged off the tailcoat and started the patching process, avoiding the shots easily.

Pluto jumped after her only to hop out of the way when she pulled a wheel-less Gatling from under her skirts, unleashing a barrage.

Mouser kicked Faustus away, choosing her riffle, getting Pluto to tag in, shooting the ammo belts. It was obvious Hanna had a pocket plane or her own or at least a storage but it was still a bit unsettling to see that coming from under there. Especially considering what they could actually smuggle under skirts, under the underwear.

"I see. At this rate it might indeed be full of holes." Sebastian nonchalantly avoided the bullets flying, taking cover behind a pawn, checking his stitches before donning the coat, adjusting watch, fobs, albert's and waistcoat with calm precision. "Let me even this out with an equal amount of blades."

The demon charged, climbing the pawn, jumping above her. The bullet Mouser had put on the belt jammed the gun. Between the confusion and the blades raining down she was very much helpless. Also a couple of bullets through the ankles were not very helpful when one wanted to run. Nailed to the stone she waited for the final strike.

It was after all sanctioned within the contract and she was technically an interloper. By Hanna's own deeds she was in a very frail situation. Her execution would not harm Sebastian's standing.
A groan of stone interrupted the knives, the silver blades sinking into the pawn Faustus had kicked on their path.

"It's nearly tea time." He announced as the clock struck half past four, serious and duty-minded.

Pluto was out of the board, growling under a couple of fallen trees, clawing his way out.

"Oh, this late already?" Sebastian retorted, hiding the remaining knives.

"I must make some snacks for my master afternoon tea."

"May I borrow your kitchen?" Sebastian nodded in understanding, accepting the interval for duty fulfilment.

Mouser huffed and pointed the gun down. The pawn crumbled to dust. Hanna sighed in relief, eyes closing.

"You know... I asked Blondie if you could be executed." Mouser spoke up. "She said you should be."

"There is nothing wrong in..." Hanna snapped, going beyond the meek maid she had so far looked like, proving to be all bramble.

"Bollocks. I took a peek inside. And as a thief I saw that I can't get the soul you are keeping without ripping out yours." Mouser lit a cigarette and glanced up, towards the boyo and the kiddo. "You are merging. And you are losing. You as you is dying anyway."
Chapter 151

How the triplets had assembled an outdoors kitchen more suited to cater to a grand garden reception than a simple two person high tea while still having their heads connected was both baffling and outstanding. Not only the task but also the timing. Assuming the one in front was leading and the other two just acted like puppets able to carry things made it more understandable but no less bewildering. Also the spear should have knocked down a lot more things than it had.

Hanna had retreated to change her torn uniform. And maybe to stay out of sight. It was hard to tell from someone so blank-faced if intimidation worked at all. Which was a good thing to have not a good thing to challenge.

Either way she was gone for the moment. And so were the triplets to remove the stick through their heads.

Pluto was sulking in the shade, lying down. Mouser was using him as a pillow reading while lounging on his furry back. While reassured his mistress was not angry or disappointed… He glanced over his shoulder, tongue lolling out of his mouth, panting happily. She had called him a good puppy after all, rubbing his fur as his body got through the pain. Pluto lowered his head once more, eyes closing. He was not satisfied with his lack of kills to place at mistress's feet.

Kiddo and boyo sat up in their shaded booth going through the remnants of the battle snacks while ignoring each other, staring at the kitchen spectacle.

As for the demon butlers they were glaring at each subtly while setting the materials for the sweet creations.

Things started to grow tenser by the time Faustus started working on the crème pâtissière, tempering the sweetened yolks so they wouldn't scramble. The whisk slowed down gradually as the demon's attention focused on the souls above, breaking the work rhythm.

Sebastian's eyes narrowed slightly when he caught the change, flinging the white cream he was preparing, splattering across the other demon's glasses both obstructing his view and annoying him greatly behind the still stoic look. Although the look was completely demolished by the bib and handkerchief around his head more fitting of an old biddy than a chef.

"Oh, excuse me but could you stop coveting my handiwork?" Sebastian returned to work after remarking on the event, smiling acidly. "After all we do have a deal." He brought the subtle threat easily, avoiding the glob of flying half completed crème.

And it then degenerated into a childish competition of food tossing accompanied by some food art in the form of Valkyries wrapped in snakes, Valkyries killing snakes, avoidance of sweet artillery and mutual minor sabotage providing the show. «Worthless entertainment.» was the boyo's final assessment of the event.

Spear-free the triplets set the tea tables with fine linens, good porcelain, a few floral arrangements in crystal vases and an elaborate silver centrepiece. The chairs were placed on each end of the table both in enmity and as a way to avoid having to converse. It was nice of them to do so.

Presentation-wise it all was spot on when the masters came down the stairs, down to the disappearance of the kitchen. The nobles took their places. And yet another part of the farce began. The housemaster had his tea and treats presented first.
"Today's sweet dish is Puits d'Amour with raspberry jam and crème pâtissière. The tea is Mariage Frères Eros." French pastry, paired with French tea. It was indeed a good choice to pair with berries but the sweetness of the pastry cream could be considered too overwhelming for the hibiscus and mallow flowers that flavoured the black tea. And he got down on one knee after placing the napkin on Alois' neck to feed him like a toddler.

"Forêt Noir." Sebastian placed his voice in the best formal tone, taking the knife, slicing through the pure white, taking a perfectly sized slice, placing it on its proper place with the adequate silverware. "The tea is Keemun Black, the Hao Ya leaves." With its strong taste and smooth unsweetened cocoa-like flavour it balanced the cake and added another layer to the tasting. And Sebastian preferred to pretend the boyo was a fully fledged adult capable of holding a cup of tea on one hand and the fork on the other.

Mouser yawned as they tried to outperform one another, closing and dismissing her book, looking fondly at the cake.

After tea all was cleaned and the battlefield prepped. The clock struck 6 pm. The summer sun was starting to show signs of decline, shadows elongating. Masters were back at their seats. Dogs sat on the sidelines. Demons were at the centre, ready to clash.

"Let's resume." Faustus stated, glasses thrown away, pulling the right glove free, dragging Hanna closer. The little exchange ended with, somehow, him shoving his arm down her throat with little to no resistance.

"Is a pocket plane actually inside of her?" Mouser asked, tilting her head, grimacing.

"It is very usual with brambles, yes." Sebastian answered with a deliberately neutral expression. "Few demons can or chose to do it for the glaringly obvious reason you are witnessing."

Meaning she was a keeper of something. Most likely a weapon with some special characteristic. To get something from a bramble, a thorn demon, either she summoned it herself or it had to be retrieved. And for retrieval there was a risk of losing an arm to the sharp insides. Not to mention the gurgling, choking and drooling. It was not being a good experience for anyone.

Also doing that showed that Claude Faustus was feeling the need for some serious backup. What he took out of her was a sword-like thing, green with yellowing edges, twisted sharply or curving oddly... a bit like a bug's stinger. Done with it he tossed a gasping Hanna aside smugly swinging the blade to grasp his balance points and adjust to the weigh. He was looking a lot smugger now.

"Oh... this is a demon weapon." Sebastian murmured, glancing down. Mouser was watching the weapon carefully, eyes narrowed. She seemed to be making calculations and adjustments. The demon leaned over her, tracing her cheek until she was facing him. "You will not fight." He murmured sharply. "This is an order."

"What?" Mouser whispered flatly, glaring, annoyance tinting them red. "You may want to rethink that dearie." Her greying lips started to part in a very mean and meaningful smile, clawed hand capturing his wrist near those sharpening fangs.

It was a beautiful sight, Sebastian admitted but he needed her away from the bladeling as much as he had wanted her away from a death scythe. Mouser was strong but still very young. A bladeling was made to harm and leave the demon hurt for a long time. It was a tool for punishment and execution.
"I will let you kill him as soon as I take that from his hands." Sebastian whispered, attempting some enticement. "but for now you cannot be in harm's way." Mouser's expression grew bewildered as he let go to face the enemy. "Shall we dance?" Sebastian taunted

"It's time for the Danse Macabre." Faustus charged, one arm outstretched to balance out the blade held on the other hand, attempting to pierce through Sebastian who responded by charging against him, the usual blades drawn.

Mouser stepped back, ignored by the next seeping strike, walking away to watch on the Queen's crown, waiting, claws digging into the stone.

Faustus changed his grip to two hands, chasing after Sebastian. Proof that the weapon was more dangerous than the previous methods was the downed pawn in one slash. But it was also harder to manoeuvre, making the second demon slower.

"Ciel look at Claude's sword." Alois gloated, overly impressed by the outwards appearance of danger and power the blade imparted. It was true that it was also keeping Sebastian fairly defensive, evading, darting, diving, dodging and sidestepping each strike, moving about the board without a solid chance to truly riposte.

"Yes. Certainly impressive." Ciel answered, glancing at his adversary, eye narrowing in calculation. This dancing demons deal was taking too long by his standards. And there were other ways for proper gentleman to settle their differences. "Would you mind showing me around the estate Alois Trancy?" He asked, changing into a more neutral face.

"Do you need the restroom?" Alois tilted his head, surprised before laughing and standing. "Fine with me." He gestured to follow, turning away from the combat.

"How rude of the masters to leave the entertainment." Sebastian commented, stepping away from an incoming strike that was returning them to the centre of the board. Mouser whistled from above, clasping her clawed hands together in a cage. Sebastian frowned before he felt the cut of a strong thread across his cheek.

"Do not divert your attention." Faustus taunted dryly, the light changing slightly to reveal a network of crisscrossing thread around Sebastian, limiting his movement.

"How quaint." He murmured. "I didn't even notice."

It had been an oversight to disregard the usual method of spider hunting just because he had gained a bigger stinger.
Chapter 152

The library was set in the style that created the most spacious area surrounded by shelves, books, weaponry, classical armours and polished marble statues. It was also surrounded by a balcony, creating a shadowed corridor underneath it, between two sets of carved wooden shelves. It was a place created more for show and party than actual reading. A trophy room with some books to show educated sophistication and intellectual panache. But they could also be blank pages in fancy coats.

It was fine for what Ciel had in mind.

Especially after noticing the crossed longswords with bejewelled crossguards under the Trancy crest adorning the mantel of the green marble fireplace.

"Hey, where are you going?" Alois finally seemed to perceive that something was amiss about all the wandering about in the manor, away from anyone that might have guarded or stopped them, complaining loudly, his voice and tone quite grating on the Earl's nerves. The insistence and constant attempts at touching were not helping his mood either.

Ciel approached the fireplace with quiet dignity, turning, staring the other boy down coldly and haughtily, close to sneering. That seemed to finally convey the message that he was not going to play along any longer.

"I have had enough of entertainment." Ciel stated, pulling his glove free with a sharp motion, tossing it against Alois' face, deliberately insulting. It fluttered to the floor, crumpling near his boots. "Consider yourself challenged for injuring my pride and dignity." The Earl of Trancy was staring at the piece of leather and fabric fallen on the patterned floorboard, showing no signs of comprehension, a light frown creasing his brows, before looking up, eyes narrowing in mischief, grasping the concept. "Swords are the weapon of choice." Ciel pulled both blades off the wall, managing fine, keeping his balance, having correctly gauged his reach, tossing one, unsheathing the other. The edge was sharpened.

"So we are not going together to the bathroom." Despite sounding ridiculously disappointed with that new course of events Alois shrugged, having managed to catch the weapon with little trouble, pulling the thrown blade free, waving it loosely about, eyes following the form, catching on the edge, smiling at the reflection. "Well whatever." He tested the weight unevenly, eyes widening in enthusiasm. "First time duelling. How do we do this?" he grinned even widely, patting the flat of the longsword against his palm.

"We start back-to-back." Ciel no longer bothered to hide the sneer, the snarl and the contempt, thoroughly done with all those overly amicable antics, gripping the hilt tighter, raising the weapon upwards, holding it as a knight would, pressed against the heart, tip to the sky. Turning his back on an enemy was countersense but duelling had its own gentlemanly etiquette and, even if he was attempting to assassinate his adversary while keeping his defensive demon busy with his own, it should not be disregarded. "Then we take ten steps, turn and duel." Otherwise he would be no better than a common street brawler or the annoying creature in front of him.

"I see..." Alois scoffed, sweeping the sword, grinning. "Let's begin." He turned on his heel, sword held loose and low, like a knave.

Back to back and expecting betrayal. Tense seconds, spine straight, tension growing.
They started to count, Alois spitting the one in a clipped, harsh tone, each step accompanying the number, voices and soles echoing in the empty hall, deliberate, solemn, counting down.

Ciel turned on the fifth, blade over head, sure to be close enough to strike.

While not in the true spirit of fairness five steps were the norm for blade duelling with ten being for a meeting at dawn with pistols. And any advantage he could get he would use.

"No cheating." Alois taunted, ready to face him, a cruel grin replacing the giddy young that had started the conflict, the sword held evenly, disregarding its weight, pointed at Ciel's face, smugly stating his jeer.

While hypocritical, seeing that he could only be there, right before him and at stabbing distance by cheating himself, the jab was enough to enrage the already prickly Ciel.

The assault he answered with was vicious, bringing the blade down like a cleaver.

Missing the rival Earl by a sidestep he sliced to the left, blades crashing, boys grunting in surprise, in anger.

The momentum knocked Alois' arm back, his weapon out of the way, forcing him to step back.

Ciel found his centre and charged, attempting to skewer his adversary.

Phantomhive was expecting inexperience, a weak defence, easy to breach.

But agility and strength enabled Alois to keep his weapon in hand.

Alois turned to retaliate, regaining his balance, using the surprise to gather all the advantages he could.

Blocking the haphazard hacking blow lead the blades into a parry.

Both boys stepped closer, trying to push the other down.

Technique on Ciel's one-handed hold, backed by training, kept the block in place.

Raw force in two hands and height supported Alois.

The pressure evened out whatever edges they had possessed.

Unfortunate.

Ciel's annoyance only mounted.

He disengaged, pushing the adversary away, slashing forward to force him back, trying to corner him for an easy execution, stepping forward, thrusting.

Alois defended crudely, glaring when the blades clashed and hissed, backing into a reading sofa, kicking it away, the piece of furniture skidding, cutting Ciel's path. Alois stepped back, darting off, laughing.

"Trancy!" Ciel shouted, following, his swordplay degenerating into a barrage of arching sweeps, chasing blindly after the taunting enemy through the room, forced to manoeuvre more carefully as he reached the stairs that lead to the second tier, climbing, defending and attacking, fearing a trap, annoyed at the prolonged physical activity.
"Come and catch me..." Alois kept dodging easily, antagonizing.

Ciel's breath grew short, the strain of using the weapon and chasing the target taking its toll. On the other hand all that training had paid off seeing her had been able to fight for a while with a blade heavier than a fencing foil while chasing a moving target.

With a laugh Alois swaggered towards Ciel, countering the Earl's advantage with clumsy but heavy swipes of the blade, gaining ground, pushing him around, knocking down books and antiques with careless abandon, glee even. The strikes were missing but the dwindling room was making it very complicated for Ciel to riposte.

The wooden balustrade met Ciel's back eliciting a pained groan, a distraction, a glance over his shoulder. The downwards chop was met by an awkward block. And amidst those actions Ciel was unable to avoid Aloï's sudden choking grip and the harsh push that threw him over the second tier.

The fall was hard. Luck avoided it to be a headfirst dive into the polished stone. Ciel found himself flat on his back, every bone, every muscle throbbing in pain, struggling to breathe but still keeping a tight grip on the sword somehow.

Alois jumped down, crouching to cushion the impact, glaring, standing slowly, shaking his sword outwards. As he approached his face changed into triumph, blade pointed at Ciel's throat.

"You will be mine." Alois murmured, kneeling, moving closer, entrapping, pressing the blade against Ciel's throat. "Your demon will not have a soul." Giggling he provoked as if the entire plan was laid in front of him, clearly, flawless. "I win."

"The Queen's Watchdog will not submit." Ciel sneered back, seeing his chance in the gloating, moving, gripping the blade that was inches away from his skin, pushing it away much to Aloï's surprise, the inaction giving Ciel time to move it away before it started to push back, blood staining the metallic edge.

In the balance, moving out of the trap Ciel pulled his arm back, as far as he could without reaching the floor, shaking Alois back, letting go of the adversary's sword with a final push, thrusting his blade forwards with a shout.
"My thread can cut through steel." Faustus gloated in his smug monotone, jumping on one of the wire-like strands revealed in the dusk and elongating shadows, gracefully, moving towards Sebastian in balance. Performing a remarkably unimpressive high wire act not too far from the black and white stones was a way of claiming the high ground, as if it mattered on that instance.

Plucking and prodding a few filaments with his free gloved hand as he walked by them, making the hastily yet expertly assembled crisscrossing structure sway and wobble nearing the second demon caged within, close to hacking. A few cuts split the fabric on Sebastian's left arm without reaching the skin.

"If you move you will lose your head." Faustus slashed his flattened palm across the throat, smugly, stopping a few paces away, bladeling balanced on his shoulder.

Tellingly a spider was not affected by its own web no matter what shape he was wearing. Clothes and flesh were undamaged. Yet where the wires had touched skin Sebastian bled.

"So it would seem." Sebastian answered blandly, glancing upwards, examining the trap itself, glancing beyond for a moment, for the glitter of copper. It appeared indeed that a wrong motion would bring the sharpened edges too close to his body.

The addition of a blade only increased appeal to the Spider's game. At least his pride on going through the tormenting of the adversary in a heavily controlled and one-sided battle.

Sebastian saw no purpose in keeping the game going when the Masters were gone.

The orders were rendered moot, purposeless.

Claude Faustus was toying with him regardless, slashing with the bladeling gleefully.

To avoid it was to go against the threads.

Even a minute movement could be too much.

A miscalculation could mean parts lost.

And depending of what cut what a trivial or a painful growth.

Mouser hopped down from the crown, approaching, arms crossed, her annoyance mounting, done with the game.

"Watching your covenant bleed must be painful." Faustus raised the demon blade, noticing her presence with a sneer, readying a strike. It would be highly unlikely to be dodged.

"Seen him worse." Mouser shrugged, dismissive, smiling openly, cocking her hips. Sebastian smirked in answer, head lowering slightly. Not fighting directly did not necessarily meant that she would stay out of the conflict altogether. And of course she would skirt that demand as soon as she saw a way. "In any case... Pop goes the weasel." The thief called, clicking her tongue.

Explosions rang out in quick succession, some in tandem, in answer to the almost sang command, the planted explosive runes blasting through the statues, cracking stone, the threads going slack as the pieces and flooring they were anchored into shattered and cratered, dropping the spider
unceremoniously on his arse. While he did not stay there for long it was a rather satisfying image to see him down and scrambling.

The faint echo of clashing metal interrupted the match as Faustus readied a charge, Sebastian drew his knives and Mouser chose the pistols.

The three stared back at the manor, stopping altogether.

It seemed the kiddo and the boyo had grown overenthusiastic in matching their strengths.

The double doors opened to the messy end of the unplanned fight, to the shrill scream of the stabbed kiddo, to the blooming scent of blood, to rage and fear. Alois expression was a mingling of pain and absolute shock in a stark contrast with the grimace of effort and anger of the boyo.

It had been a long while since he had last been hurt, Mouser would bet. At least since the death of the old man.

Alois pulled away from the boyo that still held the bloodied blade, falling, writhing, clutching his stomach, trying to stem the rapidly growing red stain soaking through the fabric.

"Help me Claude!" The kiddo called out, desperate, frightened, pained, reaching out for the one thing that was contractually bound to do just that.

"Yes, your High..." Faustus started to acquiesce.

"Do not interfere!" The boyo shouted, standing, grabbing the sword harder, glaring at the group. Faustus was brought to a surprised halt, staring, showing more expression than Mouser had seen so far. Almost as much as what he had done when left with an angel. "Until he is dead do not dare to." The Earl of Phantomhive completed his order venomously, drawing to his full height. Not very impressive but enough to cast a shadow over the prone kiddo.

"Understood." Sebastian straightened and bowed with one hand on his chest, waiting, watching, smiling proudly.

Mouser tilted her head, watching as well, less impressed. Like other lads that had defected a threat was to be eliminated. No exceptions. Still if he had been so keen of dealing with Alois why not just shoot him. It was not like the boyo did not carry a revolver at all times. After all in his line of work it was just common sense. Instead he risked harm to himself because of some faded notion of nobility. That needed to be addressed by a stern talking to.

"I don't want to die..." Alois sobbed, crawling, curling, trying to defend himself, abandoned, looking up, trying to connect, all his energy and bravado gone. "It hurts... help..." Glancing at his unmoving butler gave him nothing. Desperation started to show through his expression, hope abandoning his eyes, understanding. Betrayal, deception… it was rather clear he saw it. Neither the concept nor the action changed. Not in time, not in species. "Ciel..." The kiddo begged, trying another approach, another way to preserve his life. His instincts still seemed sharpened to survival at all costs.

"Pathetic..." Ciel sneered, blinded to how the demons reacted. His current goal, to eliminate an annoyance and an obstacle, was in reach. All the boyo had to do was act.

"Please..." Alois strained, crawling to his leg, leaving blood on his wake. "I won't bother you again..." he pleaded, trying to appease the Earl, realizing his mistake, that he had played with something that was far more dangerous than expected. "I will apologise..." He tried again, more
and more desperate.

"Your life is the only way to atone." Ciel claimed, sword ramming down in an inverted hold.

His vengeful strike was interrupted by Claude Faustus, having decided that upholding his contract was better than having his ribs shivved.

The demon picked the boyo easily, throwing the blade away from his hand, ignoring the hissing struggle expertly. Granted he probably had seen and dealt with worse from the kiddo.

"Claude!" glad and hopeful Alois cried, managing to look up.

Foolish in Mouser's opinion. It was obvious to see that Faustus had teetered on the edge of a broken contract and the kiddo had seen it. Yet as soon as he went to his side all was seemingly forgotten. His choice to interfere was complying but the time it took to do it, clearly obeying an order meant for another.

"Let me go!" Ciel shouted, annoyed, struggling, bloodied hand slamming ineffectually against Faustus' face, leaving red in its wake.

"Young Master." Sebastian scolded, casually picking up the boyo, taking him away from the scene, surveying the tiny for further damage, turning the professional voice towards a stunned Faustus. Blood and soul. "It seems we cannot continue in this situation. Terribly sorry but we will take our leave for today."

"I see. It is indeed impossible to endure such circumstances." Faustus answered flatly, snapping back to what could be considered normal.

"Claude!" Alois cried, unattended, bleeding away.

"Leaving, getting injured. How troublesome of you Young Master." Sebastian muttered as they walked towards the main entrance.

Mouser leaned forward, hand diving into the boyo's coat, startling him as Sebastian cared for the bleeding palm. The carriage moved smoothly through the path, taking them to the manor. Having found the gun she gripped and drew it, cocking the hammer, placing the barrel against Ciel's forehead.

"Was doing this so hard boyo?" the thief asked, taking in the shock in his eye before it turned into grumpiness. Sebastian rolled his eyes quietly, tying the bandages. "You would instantly know if he was dead." She returned the gun, huffing, sitting back, looking out.

In any event it was mostly done. Alois Trancy would be dead in, at most, two days. The wound was crooked, the placement was very bad and internal bleeding in addition to the massive amount of blood loss and lack of immediate treatment would make it so.
Chapter 154

What the web had done was gone. Had taken little more than one hour after they had left. Where the bladeling had sliced the cuts still bled. Had been doing so for as long as they had been made. Mouser tilted Sebastian's head, curious about the effect, examining the cuts in the small breather they had while the boyo studied the new business proposals. To be honest it simply looked like the demon had been careless with the straight razor when shaving that morning. Visually they were not grave. Faustus had not started to seriously torment Sebastian before she had done away with the web and the distraction had occurred. She brushed her finger along a cut, taking the blood, clearing it away, to find the torn flesh, watching. Red soon bloomed again. Without drying or coagulating or vanishing.

"Interesting." Mouser remarked, eyes narrowing as she watched the slow build up of the blood on the several slashes. "Is this like a death scythe?"

"Similar." Sebastian answered submitting to the exam, sinking into the parlour's armchair. The room had just been prepared for Lady Elizabeth's visit. It was possible the Marchioness was coming as well. "Less harmful by a fraction but no less slow to heal."

"Should I kiss it to make it better?" Mouser teased, running the tip of her tongue along the bloodied slash. It stopped. The thief blinked blankly, head tilting, moving his head to the side as well. That trite old adage actually worked? Not completely healed but not bleeding either.

"Evee..." There was a light urgent clicking sound on the window. Poppet stood outside, smiling, waving.

Mouser's eyes narrowed slightly, suspicious. Currently there should be no reason for a reaper visit unless it pertained to the entrapped souls. But they had given her nothing and that was exactly what they were receiving. Waiting for the bubble to burst was useless. Killing her would leave them with the souls in hand and no way to liberate, watching as they withered away, rotting, crystallizing.

Sebastian stood, alert, mistrustful.

"Hello poppet." Mouser greeted, changing to a light ribbing, moving her bloodied finger over her lower lip, tinting it. "Fancy a kiss too?" She asked playfully, pecking her palm and blowing the kiss, unlocking the window. Maybe they were breaking sooner and finally willing to share. "Or is this just business?"

"If you must talk please do so in the garden." Sebastian uttered the request in a strained tone, turning away.

"So what is it, poppet?" Mouser asked, placing a slice of Victoria sponge and a pretty blue and white cup of nilgiri tea on the metal and stone table of the rose gazebo in a new blooming corner of the sprawling Phantomhive gardens, lighting a cigarette, sitting across the Reaper. "Ready to give me the information I want?"

"Well... not exactly." Grell answered, glancing through her glasses, coyly.
"Then what makes you think I'd be interested?" Mouser smiled through the smoke, leaning over the table, resting a cheek against her palm, taunting, legs crossing, boot bobbing.

"Alois Trancy." Poppet challenged, sipping her tea with an audacious grin.

Mouser laughed, the sound spontaneous and true, amused by the very crooked negotiation attempt. Shifting an enemy was not part of the deal but it showed the Reapers were desperate enough to get those souls out of the bubble. Grell would know that if the name ever popped up in the note Mouser would be interested, having garnered that through the encounter with Faustus those months ago.

Kids were either very frail or very resilient. It seemed all those beatings he went through while whoring had made him strong enough to survive a stabbed stomach. Idly the thief scratched her own belly. They were very uncomfortable wounds to say the least. "I see." The thief picked her cigarette, gesturing with it softly, watching the smoke. "It is an enemy... What are you offering then?" It was not a full agreement but surrendering a few souls even if it was for a different cause would do no harm. There were a few hundreds to negotiate.

"According to the Death Note he will die tonight." Poppet played with her fork and cake. "His soul is showing abnormalities usually associated with demons but he is clearly scheduled for reaping." So Faustus was not claiming and Hannah who undoubtedly wanted it would be prevented from doing so, if Mouser understood poppet correctly. "So far I have two separate pages. If he arrives at the Phantomhive manor two of the staff are also in the list. If not it is the last soul in my night's roster."

"Let me see..." Mouser murmured, eyes narrowing, smiling widely. "One kiddo. One demoness. One weapon... Of these presences I am sure. One spider and a trio. These may appear." She clicked her tongue, calculating. "I will be allowing and facilitating the reaping of Alois Trancy and offering the original dozen I was going to give you if you had been the one meeting me at the park. And a baker's dozen for the information and the help."

The coach was barrelling down the road, the horse pair that pulled it huffing in effort, galloping, a wrong command away from out of control, driven by Hannah at the kiddo's request undoubtedly. Why he had decided to go and confront the boyo once again was an iffy theme but it was giving a perfect chance to deal with the Trancy problem permanently. All that rocking could not be good for his wounds but that hardly mattered.

Mouser glanced at Poppet down by the wide tree chosen to set the event in motion, ready to slash. She seemed pretty merry and giddy, ready. Keeping poppet invested and in a good mood was easy enough at that point.

Forcing the crash by chopping down the tree, making it fall on the road. Later Mouser would make the trunk look like it had been sawed through with a normal tool. The horses were freed running away, panicked, leaving their tracks on the dusty ground. The demoness was tossed to the dirt, rolling into the ditch, giving the time needed for the Reaper to make her preparations.

Poppet vanished from sight, slipping into the seat in front of the marked soul.

Unwilling to follow Mouser listened and watched.
"Hello." Grell greeted, probably waving gleefully.

"Who are you..." the Kiddo answered with a very faint, pained voice. Very close.

"I have no interest in immature brats but this is a favour for Eeve." Poppet complained, the rustling of paper giving Mouser the hint that she was checking the Death Note to confirm that the course was set and the second outcome had vanished from the possibilities.

Hannah had returned, jumping on top of the broken down vehicle, ripping the ceiling off, trying to reach her obsession, looking down on the Reaper, ready to fight. Mouser smiled slightly from her tree. So she was indeed older and stronger than she wanted to look. Had to be to be keeping a bladeling.

"Kill the redhead Hannah!" Alois shouted, trying to crawl away from the now mostly flattened cabin.

"Such a hot blooded kid..." Grell criticized.

Hannah complied without a word, attacking, slamming bodily and from a height into the coach, wood shattering around her. Alois crawled away, whispering Claude's name, trying to move on, avoid the fight, find shelter and wait.

Poppet dodged before the impact. Scoffing she stood in the middle of the road, flaring out the red jacket, tossing hair over her shoulder in a challenge and dismissal, getting the death scythe with a wide, sharp grin, ready.

"Well it's not as if we didn't come ready to fight." She mentioned as the dust settled and the Thorn demoness walked out of it, slowly, grim, ready to obey an order she didn't have to.

"Do you want help Poppet?" Mouser approached at a similar pace, lighting a cigarette, smiling too, challenging the other. There was a brief hesitation on the adversary's part, as if trying to understand why a reaper and a demon would share a goal.

"Just watch Eeve." Grell chuckled. "I'll paint her red and you'll be in my debt."

Mouser laughed, stepping back.

"Just win poppet." There was not much a debt to be contracted when Poppet was being paid in souls, consideration and an indirect kiss to be delivered post-job. Also this was a good chance to observe the way she fought without needing to defend. It would come in handy by the time they would have to attempt murder on sight. The kiddo was going nowhere fast and his itsy-bitsy was not interested in putting up an appearance.
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Grell wasted no more time in posturing or taunts, attacking, slashing, levelling everything on the scythe's path, the whirring blade catching Hannah's dress, ripping it apart, missing the flesh beneath in the hasty retreat. The dodge was followed by a relentless chase, the whirring closing in. Poppet was suppressing the range of motions Hannah could attempt, very keen on splattering red through the green and brown of the trees and rural road.

A bare handed block was the single ill-fated attempt of fending off a reaper. While Hanna did catch the scythe by the non-slashing and rending portion Poppet was ready to strike kicking hard, breaching easily through the flimsy defences, sweeping the scythe around, guiding the combat.

Mouser tilted her head, stepping out of the way, observing. Poppet still moved with ease but had not really changed it up from other times she had seen her fight. It boded well for the thief if she was certain of that much.

Controlling the battleground was key to poppets' strategy and Hanna seemed to be having some difficulty in adapting. Thinking back into the dance macabre she seemed to have the same issue as well. Fighting as front-line but having movements, strategies and mind-sets better suited for defence, patterned, rigid. It suited her demonic nature but limited her to hack and beyond.

Deprived of pawns and henchmen soon Hannah was skewered to a tree, spraying blood from a torn gut.

Poppet pulled the scythe with a grimace of dismayed disgust, red spraying the area, staining ground blade and Reaper.

"Don't waste my time you plain-looking maid!" She growled, whirring the scythe to life once more, raising it above her head, ready to deliver the finishing blow.

"Poppet stop." Mouser approached, placing her hand on Grell's arm, keeping the motion in suspension.

"Evee?" Poppet lowered the blade, grinning. Not happy. "Showing mercy?" the grin spread wider. "I would so disapprove of that."

"Look up." Mouser scoffed, unimpressed at the implied threat, claw pointing up to the dark sky. "Any cows floating by?" the thief gripped Hannah's neck in a choking hold, pulling her up against the tree, free hand diving into the disembowelled bloodied hole Grell had carved. It stung but her fingers found what she was groping for within.

"She has to be killed now if our jobs are to be completed in time for the play." Poppet mentioned, receiving an annoyed grunt.

Grell stared, tossing the blood away from the scythe with a whipping motion, adjusting her glasses. Evee's arm was shoved down the wound up to her shoulder but the hand had not burst through the other side like the weapon had. Her claws on the dark-skinned neck were digging into the skin, keeping the dying demoness from attacking with whatever force she had left.

The sleeve was torn, the grey markings and tanned skin slashed by crisscrossing lines, blood blooming red, fading fast. Evee's claws were long and closed around the handle of a poison-green twisted blade. She released Hannah, stepping back.
"There we go." The thief whispered, amused. "Oh look… it's a him." She cradled the demon weapon gently. "Poor thing. Dormant and drunk on spider poison." It vanished suddenly and Mouser clapped her hands. There was blood only on the remains of the sleeve now. "Oh, don't worry about that. We still have time to kill her, kill him, change clothes and make it to the box before the curtain is up." Mouser looked down. "It's not like I would leave a weapon for any other enemy to grab.

"No cows then." Poppet answered.

"Be a dear poppet and get on with it." Mouser stepped back. Her eyes narrowed, noticing the sudden panic in Hannah's posture. It was not all hers, now was it... "Don't worry. I'll make sure Faustus does not get him." Immediate extinction, the sentence was carried out on reaper and demon rules. But there was gratitude in her eyes in the end. Whatever was inside and merging really cared for the kiddo.

"Hey kiddo." Mouser greeted approaching the tree Alois had collapsed against, pressing his bleeding stomach. Pale skin was turning ashy. His eyes were sunk, heavy lidded. Fever seemed to be wracking through his body as well. Even without the clear schedule of the Death Note it was clear he would not be lasting long. Most of his blood was outside, leaving that easy to follow trail. "Made a really hash of things didn't you." The thief sat down next to him, legs crossed, back against the tree. "He ain't coming."

"I know." Jim answered, tilting until he fell on her shoulder, slinking closer, eyes shutting, breathing ragged, sweat shining on his forehead due to the effort. "You didn't either." It was a half-hearted accusation.

"Kiddo I made you no promises back then." The thief caressed his head, comforting, letting him snuggle up to her like before. "If you had stayed you would have been safer. But you defected and betrayed Jack. You disobeyed my orders. You made your choice. I had others to care for. And I am selfish enough to want to live on." Gradually she adjusted, hugging him. "I had a funeral planned for when we found your corpse in the sewage." Jim chuckled weakly, arms going around her waist, pressing closer. His pulse and breath were very weak, arms almost limp.

"You are demon too…"

"I can no longer offer you a deal." Mouser whispered, keeping her hand moving on his hair, playing with the hair, untangling the sweaty coils it had become. "It is a pretty night to die in. Full moon." She paused, feeling him cringe as he sought to ease the cold that would be settling within his dying body. "You are in so much pain kiddo. Do you want me to hasten your passing?"

"No." Jim panicked, flinching.

"Easy kiddo." Mouser smiled, settling him, a caress moving down his back, kissing his forehead. It was burning and yet it was also cooling. "I will stay with you until you are gone." Dying alone was still frightening. It did not matter how much hatred for other you held. "Listen… You will be judged. And you will go to hell. Once there ask for Blondie. Tell her you are mine."

Jim said nothing for a long time, just clinging to the thief. Poppet waited beneath the trees, a few feet away.
"Mouser?"

"Yes?"

"Is love warm?" Jim asked carefully.

"I wouldn't know." Mouser answered in all honesty, patting his head once more, looking into his blue eyes, smiling. "It is nice being warm though." It was something they understood all too easily.

Jim, reformed into Alois Trancy by hatred, despair and desire, smiled too, more innocently than she had ever seen. And then his soul left, the cinematic record playing around them, gathered by Poppet. Pain, suffering, cold, a brother he cared and loved, the city, the beatings, the prostitution, Mouser scolding, caring for his wounds, sharing cigarettes by the Thames, in the dark keeping nightmares away, the fight, the disagreement, the orphanage sale, the old spider, rejection, hatred, abuse, seduction and twisted intentions, a spider's touch throughout the plan. Vengeance without a goal, target without fault. Confusion, agony, desperation. Warm. Comfort. Hope.

Mouser's eyes widened and she smiled, letting go of the dead boy.

"You daft blighter" She murmured quietly getting a gun. "Poppet you done?"

"Ready." Grell answered, putting away the scythe.

All that was left to do was make it look like bandits had accosted the Earl of Trancy as he was going to the hospital and warn Claude Faustus that he was under an execution order for breaking the human contract and the demonic agreement. And to go to the theatre with Poppet. And getting kissed to deliver a kiss.
"G'Morning boyo." Mouser greeted Ciel chirpily, purposefully, annoyingly shrill, entering the room midway through tea. Sebastian looked up from the clothes he was carrying out of the closet room, deciding against interference. "Here we go. The newspaper saying Trancy is dead." She gave him the folded paper. "The queen asking for you to check if he died of what the paper says." Showing the Queen's open letter and placing it on the nightstand. "The documents of the bandits who are exactly the ones that did the deed or at least some deeds like that." A pile of papers appeared from somewhere and thumped at his feet, over the sheets. "And the schedule for today is made of three meetings with publicity, manufacturing a factory projecting in this order at 11, 12 and 13, AM and PM respectively." The thief smiled widely. "I'm afraid your lunch will be delayed a bit for this so you can have the free afternoon requested on Monday." She paused, glanced around, finding the boyo sufficiently bewildered. "Have a nice day." The thief added with a smug grin, leaving.

"What was that?" Ciel asked carefully.

"Order of business I believe." Sebastian answered, choosing to not elaborate on the issue. "It is Mouser's day off but she went ahead and dealt with the request. All that is left it to gather the culprits." Highwaymen preying on the many nobles traveling to and for house parties. Easy targets. Nuisances that were already on the list. So why not use them to cover up whatever had actually occurred the night before… The pawnshop owner swore that they had tried to sell the Trancy crest ring, proving they were indeed the ones that had taken the dead Earl's possessions.

The doors of the Trancy state opened wide, barely creaking, showing the spotless and sparkly entrance hall. Unchanged. It seemed someone had not gone berserk on the temporal possessions when the grand disaster had struck. He was clearly already gone. But the property was not exactly abandoned.

The spiders in the dark crevices under the arches burned into ash, falling in small piles along with the webs. Little spies, left behind, abandoned to nature. Not that they were much else than actual arachnids but…

Mouser closer the lighter, glancing around, arms crossing, unimpressed, placing the cigarette back on her lips.

Daylight should be enough to conduct the search and collecting.

So she had to clear that out before the line of succession gave the responsibilities to Arnold Trancy, the brother of the old lecher. He also had to be encouraged to obey. Fortunately the new Earl of Trancy and future Spider seemed easy to buy into compliance. And if not he was not too young to have a heart attack. Even if his little heart had to be encouraged with a little drop of poison.

A Cerberus demon hound was a breed of guardians. It was bigger than Pluto, the short glossy fur the same purplish-black the triplets' hair had taken. The bed had splintered under the creature's massive size and weight, the three heads curving, snuggling each other, breathing steady. Less wolf-like, a broad, shorter muzzle like a mastiff. But despite the short fur their tail was a bit
feather-like, poufy and wagging.

The triplets had reverted back to a more natural form and were still keeping to their order of protecting the Manor even though their mistress was gone and the ones they had been asked to obey either traitors or dead. As a display of loyalty it was promising and impressive. If Mouser could entice it…

"Didn't get your names when we were working." she called out, closing the door. One of the heads perked up, ears shivering, staring at her with red eyes. The middle one just opened it eyes, staring. The third one huffed, pressing nose against belly, keeping the sleeping pretence.

"Thompson. My ears point forward." The left head said, showing teeth.

"Timber. My left ear is bent." The middle head growled.

"Canterbury. My right ear is bent." The head that was not interested in the conversation answered, voice muffled.

"Named yourself?" Mouser smiled as each head stated its name, using the ears as a differentiating factor. As if the fact that they were currently immobile, attached to the same fuzzy body would not be enough to tell them apart. If they were in the triplet for or each head his own pup then it would be a nice indicator. "Why are you still here? Your mistress is dead. The arachnid is gone and the kiddo by now is in hell."

"No mistress."

"No security."

"No job."

"Soft bed." The three agreed to that last one.

"You know you can't stay. Humans will come." The thief crossed her arms. "And you can't eat them this time." She added when the Cerberus seemed about to protest.

"Smaller boobs." Canterbury glanced at her.

"I will take no offence in that." Mouser clicked her tongue, tossing the cigarette on the floor, crushing it. "I am willing to take you in, to be your new mistress." It sat up but had to keep its heads bent, sniffing the air, suddenly perked up and interested. So it was time to make a pretty sales pitch and con these puppies into her pocket. "You know my covenant and, seeing your noses are really close, my breed." That showed rank and power. If rumours had reached them maybe a bit more. They had also seen what she and Sebastian were capable of in a fight. "There is already a devil dog in my tiny legion." They had met and seen but it was after all recap of value. Everything that could be mentioned and keep her upper hand should be used. "You have seen me wear the feathers of a dead angel." Their eyes sharpened further. The dog was getting very invested. "And if you ever wanted to take a bite out of Faustus he is hunted and will come after the boyo." And as he had shown contempt for their former mistress and if she was correctly interpreting those toothy smiles they liked that prospect. "I won't keep you on Earth if you don't want to remain." That took care of the three main issues the Cerberus had pointed out as to why they persisted in the manor. "As you seem to have chosen your names you are allowed to keep them unless you request a new one from me or a situation arises where you need a new designation." Serving a demoness again returned prestige and purpose "As for the mattress we can go shop for one that makes you happy."

The three heads turned to each other, conversing in a growl, discussing the options. Mouser
refrained from mention they would have to fight it out in case of refusal. It was fairly obvious. And if their physical form was damaged enough they would be unable to regenerate on earth and would have to return to hell to do so. It would be a loss of energy of prohibitive proportions.

"Mistress." Three heads bowed down, approaching. Mouser smiled, patting their furry heads, placing her sigil on the three necks and one chest, binding them to her will, the significant boost of power she felt proving that this puppy was older and more powerful than Pluto.


They reverted to the shape of young males, staring.

"Can we have the mattress now?"

"I want blankets."

"Pillows too."

"Sure, sure." Mouser answered as they left the Trancy Household. This would delay her a bit but pampering new acquisitions was a good way to set some loyalties. And perhaps she should really look into how to shapeshift into a cat before Sebastian had a dog overload.
A demon weapon was a dangerous thing to be left unattended and unguarded. However no more dangerous than a Cerberus in a house that was about to be given to humans in short notice. Also it was in some sort of dormant state, less prone to attract attention. So prioritizing had left the decisions about the thing for last.

As in the last issue to tackle before heading home.

Pampering the new dog(s) had taken more time but less money than Mouser had expected. They had carried their new carefully chosen mattress into the toybox, chattering amidst themselves happily, planning. Currently the Cerberus was settling in the upstairs room. Odd they had chosen to not take her permission to go back to hell but maybe they just wanted to enjoy playtime while it lasted.

In the end she had to postpone visiting Charlotte at the country house to the next day. Probably she would be able to eke more time out of the Boyo. Not like she did not have several unused days and a few blackmails to ensure absolute cooperation.

The twisted blade was resting on top of the worn table, looking as innocuous as a weapon could. Its form was still ugly and twisted, a poisonous teal-green-yellow mix. What was she able to know about bladelings, Mouser wondered, observing without reaching out.

Bladelings were demon weapons crafted from former demons that were too weakened to reform back in the hellish realm. Usually the result of a bad encounter with a death scythe that managed to escape the very bad result of oblivion and drag their shell-less soul back only to crumble in weakness. The remains could be converted into a bladeling, an it. Demon weapons were given to a demon’s guard to be wielded or guarded. Sometimes they were what was left from someone’s covenant. As most other demons age meant power. They could regain some of the awareness of self. And this one was obviously old enough to resonate as a he when Mouser had retrieved it. But he had no covenant. There was no link to anyone, however faint it could become.

So how to persuade a thing?

Souls and blood would be the obvious answers. Whose was a good question.

Waking him up was also something of a crucial step to take. Mouser considered, circling the table, claws tapping the surface, considering. It then linked to the question of what had triggered his current dormancy.

Maybe a bit more of investigation and asking about was in order.

Seeing she had a wealth of demons to ask...

Carefully she warded and bubbled the bladeling.

“Thompson. Timber. Canterbury.” She called, going up the stairs, finding them in dog shape burrowing on covers and pillows. “Please guard the bladeling downstairs.” The thief asked, sitting down on the new mattress. Timber’s big head rested on her lap. She scratched his bent ear. Canterbury flopped to her left. Thompson nuzzled her right. “So here are some rules.” Pluto would meet them formally later and would also help to relay what was needed to work for the current contractual situation. “You can’t take souls and you can’t eat anyone while in town. That means no killing unless ordered.” They whined a bit but a stern look quieted that. “We don’t want any more
“Bath.” Sebastian stated grimly, towering over Mouer with a grimace, barely giving her time to fully enter the kitchen, snatching the thief, tucking her under the arm like some runaway hen and carrying her up, towards the bathing chambers, locking the door. “Now…” the demon placed her right side up on the edge of the plush rug, kneeling down, unlacing the boots.

“Sebastian?” Mouer was finally able to cut through the confusion, looking down.

Smiling lightly he stood, hands brushing over her pants until they encircled her waist, pulling her out of the shoes and placing the thief on the carpet. Deliberately he let her go, fingers lingering on her hips before biting and stripping his gloves down, appraising the Mouer with deeply red eyes. Her lips parted wordlessly, eyes widening. Torn between feeling apprehension about the clouded mood he displayed and enjoying the scene.

“Growing your power is a wonderful thing.” Sebastian lectured, appreciative, pulling the ribbon around her neck free, hand curling around the back of it, gripping, taking her tilt her head, leaning down, nuzzling the white spot, licking slowly, feeling her shiver and gasp, nipping along the bared throat until her reached her ear, teeth tugging one of the many rings. It was so clear, so alluring. “But I will not allow you to smell like a dog.” The demon stepped back sternly along with the criticism, placing the ribbon straight on a knob of the vanity, making sure it sat right so there would be no crinkles. It was salvageable, with no scent other than hers. Now the rest of Mouer...

“I promise I’m scrubbing the hounds until they smell like soap.” Mouer chuckled, reaching for the buttons, understanding. The day was ending anyway and if he was letting her use the boyo’s big and fancy bathtub she was not going to complain. Sebastian tapped her hand into stillness before turning the faucet on, filling the tub. “What?” He said nothing, face serious, eyes following her every move and then focusing on his task, undoing the buttons of her waistcoat slowly. “You want to bathe me?” It sounded weird.

The piece of clothing was pulled back and down her arms by Sebastian’s hands, nails sliding over the fabric, leaving an echo of touch on the skin beneath, his body stepping closer, almost flush against hers.

“This time it has to be a thorough soaking.” He taunted in a calm tone, moving to the shirt, fingers dipping beneath the waistband of the pants, hooking on the shirt. “Blood and salt come away from skin much more easily.” Not as easily as that shirt was pulled out of the pants and unbuttoned bottom to top. How he managed to do that and burn sweeping caresses across her sides, still over the short slip was anyone’s guess.

“Fine.” Mouer shrugged, helping the shirt along, vanishing the blades from her arms, dismissing the armoury to make his work less tasking. “Pamper me.” The thief asked, cupping his face as soon as the piece was discarded on the floor, next to the shoes, shunned and banished for the wash pile.

“Of course.” Sebastian smiled, kissing her forehead. “It seems the issues have all been resolved.” The pants dropped. Holding Mouer’s hands he encouraged her to step out of the fabric, leaving to

reapers sniffing about, now do we?” Mouer gentled her tone, teasing. “If you want to hire whores and feed on sexual energy be nice to them. Most of the night ladies are under the protection of a new demoness called Charlotte. I’ll leave money. You know how it works.” She stood, brushing her clothes into a neat appearance. “Anything else one of you go to the manor and ask for me.”
close the water. The thief sat down on the plush bench that matched the vanity’s wood and embellishments, waiting. “Perhaps we can look forward for a bit of peace.” Sebastian stripped out of the tailcoat, folding the sleeves to test the water, drying hands, returning to Mouser’s side.

“There is one thing.” Sebastian knelt, undoing the snaps of the garter belt, rolling the embroidered stocking away as Mouser spoke, biting her lower lip as his palms smoothly glided down her leg. “The bladeling.”

“You have it?” The second stocking followed the same path.

“Yes.” Garter belt away Sebastian turned her and began to undo her hair. “I want to wield it. Or just have it.” In the mirror Sebastian smiled, leaning down, kissing the top of her head, hands reaching the edge of the slip, tugging it over her head and tossing it to the pile.

“Stand.” Mouser did so, uncaring as her unmentionables fell away, walking towards the tub. Before she could dip in the demon picked her up, lowering the thief into the warm water. She groaned, satisfied, fingers tapping on the edge. “You need to awaken it first, ask its name.”

“His.” Mouser answered as the warm water worked wonders. Droplets of something nice-smelling were added by Sebastian. “How do I awaken a bladeling?”

“I would advise as a gesture of goodwill and for him to appraise you right away to give him a bit of your blood.” Sebastian moistened her hair and began to wash it, smiling as she purred. It was a long pleasurable pause. Her arms fell loosely into the water, body sinking just a bit. “From there I trust you know what to say to make him agreeable to the idea of being yours.” He rinsed the soapy hair, palm over her eyes gently, keeping the water warm.

So it seemed a sleeping weapon was not a strange thing. But better safe than sorry.

The thief opened one eye as Sebastian patted her hair with a towel, using a dry one to wrap the still moist hair.

“I will return shortly with your clothes.” Sebastian played on the formal tone, gathering the dog-smelling items, walking away with the intent of disposing of those.

Pluto was groomed to a satisfying degree. Those new mutts needed to be sheared, washed and taught not to cuddle too much to his covenant no matter the amount of buttering up, attention and grovelling they wanted to give their mistress.
Following one of the curved edges of the blade with her index finger lightly Mouser allowed the pad to be cut, leaving a trail of fresh blood over the bladeling, carefully avoiding what remained of the spider's poison, the gleaming, yellowish-green, like puddles of bile, areas. Using her left had also guaranteed that the cut that healed slowly wouldn't be too much of a bother for whatever long it remained.

The thief pulled up an armchair, slumping down on it, stretching, watching, waiting, idly bandaging the cut.

There was a hum in the shattered and remade soul within the bladeling. Like someone peeking under the covers or through a keyhole none too subtly.

It was like stalking a target, Mouser smiled, lighting a cigarette, waiting, carefully, patiently. Except on the small difference of how to keep her presence. There she wanted to be seen and recognized. On the other hand the bladeling was trying to be true to discretion.

Pluto was standing next to her chair with Timber, newly groomed and in the black Phantomhive uniform. They were glaring at the new possible addition to the group. Canterbury was lying by the door, his tail tapping the floor, taking guard duty seriously. Thompson was organizing the weapons, moving around the room with boxes and toys.

It started to turn pearly grey, matching Mouser's markings, the green draining away. A slow, tentative process, as if gauging the watcher's reactions.

"Flattery?" Mouser chuckled. He hummed, fully grey, stopping the slumbering pretence. "I though what would a weapon could want." His attention sharpened. "To be wielded in combat, to taste blood and feast on souls." The bladeling rattled on the table, its form twisting, curling to further emulate her markings. Wordless begging. Still too smothered in dormancy to speak. Satisfied Mouser smiled. It seemed her guesses were spot on. "You were being kept sheathed, smothered. How long has it been?"

*Laevateinn*. His voice was a faint whisper. One ear twitched on the mastiff by the door. Pluto and Timber growled. Thompson stopped his effort of organization, approaching the table.

"Laevateinn" Mouser used his name very softly, approaching. "Do you want to be mine?"

"So this was what happened so far. The only loose end left is Faustus himself." Mouser finished her tale, lighting one of Sitri's tobacco-wrapped cigarettes, staring at Charlotte's freckled face. Familiar yet bewildering. She did not look very demonic either, keeping a very good control over her eyes and the moods that made them red. Same old Charlotte. Just pretending it was a new makeup was the easiest way to cope even though Mouser was sure she had seen weirder. Like the three headed giant dog and the white giant dog playing tug-of-war in the yard. Then again it was twenty-plus years of a familiar face suddenly being redone.

"He does not have that many places to run to. Not with the label of traitor and oath-breaker." Charlotte answered easily, smiling. Her progress was slow and steady. A Sitri without contract was
able to keep her away from situations that pushed the growth too fast. Even if she had been playing around and experimenting within her own organization. "And not with me keeping watch."

"Don't ya worry none." Sitri nodded along his covenant's words, voicing his reassurance, looking proud and amused, lounging on a thick patterned rug under the sun, over the lawn, just outside the stone edges of the gazebo.

"Interesting to see you take on helpers." Charlotte continued the conversation, changing the subject as Pluto ran by, now chased by three dogs that tried to claim the thick braided rope, placing the cards down, adding a few coins to the betting pile.

"Why is that?" Mouser huffed, peeking her cards, staring at her friend's hands, looking for the telltale pinkie tap. It was subtle enough to be a tell known by few. But as it was not happening she forfeited that hand. "I've had others working under me."

"But they were part of the gang. Not actually yours. Not like this." Charlotte smiled. "Pretty bauble."

Mouser glanced at her left wrist where the silver Laevateinn had wrapped itself around in the shape of a bracelet for filigree-like spirals and twists, returning to his slumber in a more discreet shape. Ready to be awakened as soon as there was a fight. One droplet of blood away from her hands. Shape-shifter as he was it was much the same as carrying an arsenal.

"So you bought land in London?" Mouser asked, shrugging.

"Yes." Charlotte chuckled, pouting, pushing the lost money towards Mouser, restarting the betting pool. It had been cheap too considering that whatever the buildings had been were so burnt not even the metal and stone were recognizable. "I have been thinking that this demon contract thing is highly inefficient in the way that has been conducted for time immemorial." Sitri chuckled on the background, listening in without interfering. "So I though... what about a place here on earth where business can be done much more easily and less conspicuously?"

"A bar or a brothel?" Mouser asked, blowing smoke. That was how it worked for the criminal class.

"Close. A place where all can come and want to come." Charlotte grinned. "A place where rumours say people can solve all your problems. For a price, of course."

"Some sort of entertainment pavilion?" Mouser reasoned, head tilting, blowing smoke into the air, staring at the manicured garden. "Like Vauxhall was."

"Yes. But also because demons seem to get inactive out of boredom or fullness. And when they return either because of curiosity or an actual contract humans have changed." Charlotte continued her reasoning. Mouser smiled. "Thinking of calling it Reverie." Charlotte nodded, announcing the name, watching Mouser's reaction, waiting to see if it reminded her of any of the aforementioned establishments. "Construction will start shortly."

"You rake in money from humans. Gratitude from demons that get food and an education on how to behave in the changed world. Reputation in both sides. Reapers can't do much because even as the deals happen souls are not being randomly taken. They might even be happy that no wild feeding is taking place. Angels don't care. And humans don't need to be actually informed that the price is steeper than the money they are spending." Mouser's grin grew wider as she examined each facet of Charlotte's plan. "Because of the supernatural nature of those employed... I'm assuming everyone within will be a demon."
"It seems easier and more profitable that way." Charlotte agreed, placing the cards down.

"Reverie can be considered quite above the law and able to circumvent any issue easily. Or with greater impunity than a similar human business might expect." Mouser chuckled, doing the same with her hand.

"Thank you." Charlotte smiled proudly. "It is a good way of securing importance, allies and potential."

"And information." Mouser shook her head, snuffing out the cigarette. "Why Reverie?"

"Brothel, Den or Bar." Charlotte answered with a sigh.

"I remember that game." Mouser chuckled. "I see, I see..."

"What game nah?" Sitri approached, stretching, sitting down next to Charlotte, smiling.

"Say a name for the kind of establishment I'm going to create for us." She challenged, patting his leg.

"Heaven and hell are out." Mouser added, elbows on the table, resting her cheeks on her open palms, grinning. "Those are cabarets in Paris."

"Purgatory."

"Unappealing, gambling den and rather on the nose."

"Paradise."

"Brothel."

"Nightmare?"

"Bar."

"Dream Pavilion."

"Brothel."

Sitri snorted, amused.

"Most brothel-like name ye can think of that ain't?" He challenged, freckles moving as he kept from laughing.

"Cock Call." Mouser answered.

"It's a rather upstanding pub actually, right by the parliament." Charlotte added.

The owner refused to say rooster.
"Germany, you say?" Sebastian echoed the complaint, looking up from the tea arrangement and the slice of coffee and walnut cake he was placing on its proper plate. The library where the young master had been taking a well-earned break was brightly illuminated by the summer sun. The books he had selected were pushed to the side, near the phone set. Teacup was still untouched.

"Yes." The young master was clutching the letter, glaring at the paper, seemingly annoyed. "Her majesty sent a message. She wants us to investigate a string of mysterious deaths in Germany."

The boyo elaborated on the contents of the letter Mouser hard brought, tossing it on the desk's polished surface, groaning, after the cake and the silverware had been given. The thief incinerated the cigarette butt, blowing the ashes out of the window, closing it, approaching Sebastian.

"And she asked you to go personally?" The demon placed the silver plate under his arm, turning to the tea cart, arranging what was left before approaching the table, picking up the letter.

"Any hint of suspicion about the last string of events?" Mouser asked, peeking at the open letter.

"The Phantomhives are supposed to manage the underground society of England." The boyo answered, shaking his head. It did not seem like a punishment or a test. It was just a request that took him away from the ground he was tasked with defending and unlike Paris had nothing to do with the duties of an earl, an investor or an industrial. "So why do I need to go all the way to Germany?"

To my cute little boy.

Various deaths have occurred in Southern Germany. Perfectly healthy people have suddenly become grotesquely deformed and died shortly afterwards.

I have many relatives in Germany, in the hometown of my deceased parents.

If there is an epidemic I would like to send medical support immediately but neither the Kaiser nor the German government have given me a reply with the proper information.

I am very concerned.

Victoria.

"Since there have been no official replies from the German side she can't send official representatives." Sebastian reasoned, folding and returning the letter to its envelope. "So she decided to send you."

"To resolve incidents of the underworld I have only been abroad once." The boyo shrugged, taking another bite of the cake, glaring at the parcel of paper as if it was doing him some great offence. "I don't get why she wants to send me this time."

"An epidemic can be used to assassinate people and be rather low key about it." Mouser spoke up. "There is usually a lot of collateral damage in the servants and those around but it also raises very little suspicion." Perhaps she was concerned about action being taken against her family and not the deaths themselves. Or also because of the risk of a plague being brought to the British Empire in a more genuine reason to act. For a monarch they were not strange concerns to have. Still sending the boyo was just shy of odd.
"Should we request for a more defined reason to be sent?" Sebastian inquired.

"They will just evade it. It's a dog job to get excited and run after the bone as soon as it is shown, right?" The boyo complained.

"Isn't it great?" Mouser chuckled.

"It is delightful to see you having such dedicated servants." Sebastian groaned.

"This is about the triplets snarling at you?" Mouser patted his arm softly, pretending not to smile.

"The Phantomhives have an information network that stretches all the way from Europe to Asia. My predecessor made a lot of those connections without relying on the Spider. I have thought about using that." The boyo took the teacup and sighed. "Especially «that guy» I have inherited. Seeing it is Germany we are talking about…" Tapping the table the boyo came to a decision. "I'll have Klaus go over to his place. Inform him."

"As you wish." Sebastian bowed slightly, leaving the library.

"Your break is almost over boyo." Mouser mentioned. "There have been some issues in the Northern factories."

"It has been a while Klaus." The boyo sat down for dinner with the guest he had requested, seemingly less sour than usual. Sebastian pulled the chairs after the guest was seated, helping the boyo to his place, glancing around, making sure everything was ready to proceed. "Sorry to call on you so abruptly."

"Don't worry about it." Klaus was a middle aged man with quite the jovial attitude. While his name was frequent appearance on the correspondence Mouser had yet to meet that particular part of the network. It had taken Sebastian less than a day to go to the location of the last letter received and track him down. "But your butler is quite mysterious. I was quite surprised when he appeared while I was enjoying a sauna on Finland." The man joked a bit, taking his wine glass.

"Sorry about that." The boyo kept to the courtesy as the first dish was served, waiting for a bit before diving into business. "I am glad your travels didn't take you too far this time. You could have been at the other end of the earth."

"An old man like me has nothing to amuse himself with but travel, you know." Surprisingly it was the man that went right into the matters he had been asked to investigate. "Well then let us talk about my trip to Germany then. I went straight to him after arriving. But he just coldly ignored me, saying he was busy." The boyo nodded, clearly expecting that result, encouraging the man to continue. "So in the end I went to that place myself. There wasn't any good food either." The complaint was said jokingly but Klaus eyes were rather serious behind that façade. Mouser approached to pour a bit more wine. Sebastian exchanged the plates for the meat dish. "It was quite hard, being so far into the countryside. So I tried to visit the villages nearby and more specifically the mansion where the death occurred. But it didn't seem there was a contagious disease going around. Neither were there signs of chronic disease nor any wounded." The demons exchanged a glance. No epidemic. And if those signs were so obviously lacking there would be no reason for the monarch to want to send medical assistance when the news that could so easily be gathered spoke only of a few dead. "When I asked about how they had died everyone said it was a witch's
"A witch?" Ciel asked, unsure if he had heard right.

Sebastian frowned, standing back, waiting for any need or for the next stage of dinner service.

Mouser tilted her head, doing the same on the opposite side of the table, sifting through memories and knowledge, trying to find anything in centuries and hundreds that fit in with what they had so far.

"The victims were all of different ages and genders but they all had one thing in common." Klaus nodded, understanding the disbelief. "All visited a certain forest before they died. The werewolf woods. It's a forest considered taboo by locals."

"Werewolves you say?" This time Sebastian voiced the echo with extreme distaste.

"Yes." Klaus nodded, agreeing partially with the sense of oddity. "Southern Germany had some terrible witch hunts from the 14th to the 17th century. The witches that managed to flee took refuge at a certain forest and released their familiars into the woods. Ever since that day it is said that those who wander into the woods are cursed."

That was the legend. Mouser frowned. Werewolves… were not exactly in her memories as anything other than tales or legends. Berserkers. Dog, wolf and mastiff demons. Cerberus. Demons who took dog forms. Shapeshifted or shape-warped humans… glamour and illusions. Lycanthropes… not so much…

"People are dying because of a curse? That is ridiculous." Ciel scoffed, putting his fork down, waiting for the plate to be taken away.

"I thought you'd say that." Klaus laughed in agreement. "However that was all the information I could get."

"No. Sorry I made you go. It seems that there really is no choice but to go myself." Defeated the boyo sunk into his chair as desert was served. "Also… this is unrelated but there is something else I'd like to ask you. The Undertaker disappeared."

"Oh… that guy." Klaus didn't seem very surprised or affected.

"You've known him longer than I have and should know more about him." The boyo pressed the issue, taking care not to say too much. "Anything is fine. I want information on him."

The Undertaker had vanished and nothing was heard of him since the Campania. Charlotte couldn't find him. Sitri was empty handed, saying that Reapers, renegade or not, had their ways to keep secrets even from him. In the end they agreed that he had hightailed into the continent somewhere. Too many corpses being tampered with in England would draw attention once more. Too small of a country to escape the gazes of the factions hunting him.

"We never interacted that much." Klaus admitted, taking the silverware for the last plate, eating with gusto. "Vincent knew him first. The only other who knew Vincent before the Undertaker was «him» seeing as they have been together since their school days."

Defeated Ciel sighed and sunk into his chair, focusing on the dessert. They had enough on the task at hand.

"Then perhaps we should pay him a visit seeing we are going to Germany anyway." Sebastian
suggested neutrally. It was a matter of common sense to join goals seeing they converged at the same spot.

"That is a good plan but German beauties, I mean former beauties are quite stiff." Klaus praised with a chuckle, winking. "You'll have to play him well junior."

"I guess I can only pray he is in a good mood when I visit." The boyo sighed, shrugging. "Sebastian prepare the tickets." He ordered. Dinner was done. If they acted now they should be ready to depart before noon.

"Yes my lord." Sebastian bowed, walking away, calling Meyrin and Bard to clear the table. Tanaka walked in to guide them to the smoke room.

"Mouser I'll need to write a letter." The boyo continued his planning as they walked down the hall.

"Aye, aye." The thief nodded, detouring into the study for the supplies finding a helpful Canterbury already holding the pens, papers and wax to seal the letter around the corner.
Guest and Master were in their rooms and likely asleep.

It was time to get on with the travel preparations.

The Young Master's clothes, shoes and hats had already been packed into their heavy trunk so he would not be disturbed before or during his sleep. They were now placed on the entrance hall, waiting to be joined by the rest of the luggage. The new one did minimize the need for shoe boxes although it did not eliminate the need for the hat boxes. But it was less than what they had taken to the Campania.

"The Young Master's duties are taking him to Germany." Sebastian announced to the gathered staff, glancing around, making sure all the tasks had been done as they should. "We are unsure of how this mission will play out or how long it will take to see it through to the end. With that in mind all of you will be accompanying the Young Master. Please pack accordingly and with every possible outcome in mind."

"Yes Sir." Meyrin nodded, gripping her skirt.

"Alright." Bard stretched from where he had been slouching against the kitchen table, saluting.

Finny lowered his head in a short nod, looking a bit sombre than usual.

Snake exchanged a look with one of the snakes that was wrapped around his shoulders, standing from his corner.

Tanaka simply took a sip from his tea.

Mouser sighed, taking her boots off the table, crushing the cigarette.

There would be time for sleep during the trip.

*Rifles, pistols, explosives, daggers*... Mouser crossed them from the list as she stuffed her trunk. Lae prickled her wrist, silver filigree shifting along her arm, half awake, half interested, as Pluto curled by the luggage, whining, pouting as much as it snout allowed. The Cerberus was running around town, picking up supplies and errands eagerly. But the triplets were also sulking about being left behind.

The dogs were to have their leave.

Go play, go to hell, check on the manor if her wards warned them of anything sniffing about.

And be ready to be called if need arose.

The possibility of that need seemed to perk them a bit when presented.

"Yes, yes. I know you are ready." The thief assured the bladeling. "But still never hurts to have more." She packed a set of throwing knives into the corner before turning, eyeing the book she had been receiving. "Rest assured that I will give you the snake venom you like and all the blood you can slurp."

The boyo's track record pretty much guaranteed there would be a bloodbath before the mission
ended.

Lately other names had been included on the letters. Blondie most likely had spread the blood around and with it her existence and knowledge to the other Caith Sith. All sent what they thought were useful for a budding demoness. Books, advice, trinkets and lists of willing servants. And all asked for something. Jewels, machines, updated texts on various subjects, tickets for the opera or theatre…

"Have you packed the German language manuals?" Sebastian walked into the room, placing the clothes luggage on the ground peeking at her box, resigned, trusting her with a few more knives and forks.

"They're in the light cabin briefcase." Mouser tilted her head towards the leather briefcase before diving into her trunk, pushing the blades more tightly together, making room for the new and unread arrivals. Both demonic and gothic horror romance. "Along with the information and files we could scrounge up on the area to add to what Klaus brought. Not enough of anything if you want my opinion…" She wiggled out of the trunk and adjusted the waistcoat. "I have no one in Germany either old or new. What I asked of others is about 20 years outdated." The thief reread her list. "Also I have inquired about covenants made in the time and place Klaus referred us to but I wouldn't be too hopeful about timely answers."

"So we truly are diving into this matter blindly." Sebastian shook his head.

"Not the first time." Mouser shrugged.

"Quite. I expect things will be more apparent as soon as we are in the terrain."

The train from London took them to the Port of Ramsgate in a couple of hours of rest to the tired staff.

The Young Master made sure to look displeased though the ride despite the tea and sweets offered.

Maybe it was simply the thought of the ferry that would take them to Calais that left a bitter feeling of sea-fear on his mind.

From Britain to the Continent the matter of the language was ignored.

As soon as they boarded the train that would cut through France to Nuremberg Sebastian donned his glasses, produced the books and engaged in stern tutor mode announcing that the Young Master needed to be taught in earnest so he would not disgrace himself while fulfilling the Queen's request. That meant grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation.

"Eeg froye migh zie kennenzulernen." I am pleased to meet you. The boyo attempted once again.

Hours of training seemed to be getting them nowhere but there was not much else to do.

"That is terrible." Sebastian shook his head, looking miffed. "Your accent is preposterous." He scolded. "Please refer to the book and correct it at once."

"Eeeegh…" Ciel tried again, the book shaking as the train rattled along the tracks. "I can't do this anymore." He groaned, lying back on the wide seats of the cabin. The trip took a few days and the cabins were ready to let the upscale passengers sleep in them rather comfortably. "Reading in the train makes me sick…"
"Also a terrible lack of discipline." Sebastian lectured, disappointed.

"I can't pronounce German." The boyo continued his complaints. "I can read it just fine. Isn't that enough?"

"So what are you going to do? Carry a chalkboard and write down what you want to say?" Mouser teased, putting her book down as the ill-fated heroine was being chased by some shadowed beast, unaffected by the shiver of the metal transport.

"How come you can speak it just fine when a few months ago your French was a disaster or coarse street pronunciation?" The boyo shot back bitterly.

"I cheated." Mouser answered with a pointy smile as Sebastian declared a short break on the lesson.

From Nuremberg there were only a handful of trains that would take them further south, to the village closest to the forest where the rumours and deaths had started. Going by carriage would take too long by comparison. Losing one night on the hotel and catching the first train early in the morning seemed a lesser evil after all things considered.

"No one looks too concerned." Mouser pointed out, closing the windows of their room, lighting a cigarette, leaning on the plush setee, placed where the guest could enjoy the view. "If it was a plague I'd expect to see signs of panic or preparation. We are two hours by train away from the origin of the issue."

"I agree." Sebastian stood by her side, looking into the night.

"Did you ask about the forest in particular or just random directions to the area in general?"

"I went through both approaches." Sebastian sat down. The thief moved, leaning closer. "Neither gave me more than what I had procured. Directions."

"It can't be a matter of communication" Not with the trains still running and the people moving about. "and they are not hiding that things did happened there. Klaus made that clear. So… It's localized and nobody fears it will get out of that area." Mouser hummed, tongue rubbing her canines slowly.

"Still not enough." Sebastian agreed with her frown.
Chapter 161

The village was small, as expected, peeking amidst trees and hills as the train approached swiftly. Houses clumped together in a very old, very traditional style where a handful of roads lead to the centre and away, into the farms.

There had been people gathered around them on the boarding platform at seven in the morning from all walks of life. Eight had shared the first class corridor coach with the boyo. More had entered to second and third class.

Mouser had even spotted a few sneaking into the storage wagons. The boyo had been sleepily grumpy but ready to move on. Finny had dozed off against the trunks before the loading started, carried on Bard's back to their seats. Snake was very protective of his friends in their new big travel sack. Tanaka was looking around with a slightly nostalgic look with Meyrin happily peeping through the new glasses at the un-fogged world. Sebastian was supervising as usual, still scanning for signs of anything that could be questioned.

The train station they arrived at after a couple of hours of the boyo's scratchy German attempts, was at the edge of it, a minutes away from the first actual house. It was little more than a rectangular building with a shaded area on the boarding platform.

As they left the train it was still obvious that something was still not quite matching the events that had prompted their involvement. There was no panicked gathering under the shade, desperate to enter the train to flee a disease. There were people waiting for relatives. Fancy coaches waiting for their fancy owners to lead them to fancier country estates. There were goods being delivered and goods being loaded.

"The line…" Mouser called softly as the boyo waited for the luggage to be unloaded. "It doesn't stop here."

"Indeed odd." Sebastian unfurled the map where instructions had been precisely penned by him. "It should be cut off here as a last stop." He confirmed with the piece of paper, staring ahead. It disappeared into the distance, fading into trees and mountains.

"They announced it as the last stop." The thief nodded. "So who is wrong?"

"Us, them, neither. Can be a soon-to-come expansion of the line." Sebastian folded the map but kept holding it, looking around. "Take care of the lot. I'll go reconfirm our directions with the stationmaster first."

A market was assembled on the square to add to a couple of general stores whose windows displayed fresh and useful items. Carts were coming from the farms with fresh produce, making it harder for the Phantomhive household to make their way in. Crowded. Cramped. People moving with purpose. People wandering, staring at the stalls. Children playing. People loitering and talking to one another.

The lack of fear would make it easier to ask questions. The villagers were not even glancing their way as outsiders as it was so often an occurrence in more insular rural communities. Like they had experienced in other cases. Mouser frowned for a second, stopping to allow a lady with a big basket of produce walk by. Houndsworth. She was thinking Houndsworth. A village. A request about a wrenching, pained heart. Rumours. Death by a canine. Liar, lies inside concealments and a
truth that was less true than the liar that had layered traps and tricks.

"Wait here." The boyo asked the servants, pointing to one of the less busy side roads, having had enough of elbowing the way through. A larger group could go either way. It could cut and part the crowds or it could get caught in a small unmoving circle trying to scuttle through. Unfortunately due to the bags they had become the second kind. Luggage was placed down, backs cracked and groans muffled. A few thank-yous were mumbled through the process.

The boyo scanned the crowd, eye narrowed.

Sebastian counted the bags and saw that nothing was lost before joining the option appraisal.

Mouser lit a cigarette, eying the bejewelled young lady walking by with a maid and a guard.

"So who to ask about the odd events going on in the neighbouring forest?" The boyo voiced his thoughts. "And more importantly to take us there."

"A farmer would be the best choice Young Master." Especially if they could pinpoint one that came from the closest farm. Sebastian considered the crowd and spotted a chubby older man bundled in coat, scarf and hat, sitting on an empty open horse-pulled cart. He had the right scent. "I would suggest that man, Young Master." The demon supplied.

The boyo fidgeted a bit, approaching, tapping his cane a bit harder as if he was mustering something up. By the tempestuous look on his face Mouser decided he was simply trying to remember how to do a greeting in the Country's language.

He did manage it. But the response was a string of sounds that could have been words.

"Sebastian what is this language?" The Young Master demanded, vexed.

Mouser tilted her head, also at loss with the new language. Not German. Close. The man spoke up again. The sounds seemed to have a place in her memories. So…

"It's East-Franconian." As an amused Sebastian explained, hiding a grin. With the name of the language given the thief found the right memories. "A dialect of Southern Germany."

"This is not a dialect!" The boyo almost shouted, flustered, turning. "I can't even make out the words!" Mouser sighed, letting go of the memories, having taken what was needed from it, smiling as well. Sounds made words, words made sense. "Everything I learned is useless!" And of course that would be a great part of the boyo's current aggravation.

"Everything starts with the basics young master." Sebastian soothed the ruffled feathers with a simple statement of fact, taking over the conversation, asking about the forest.

"So what is he saying?" The boyo waited, impatient, cane tapping harder.

"I ain't gonna die from no witches' curse, I ain't. No matter how much ye offer me I ain't goin'!" Mouser answered, her accent thickened.

"Indeed that is what he said." Sebastian nodded.

"Don't translate a dialect into a dialect." The boyo murmured, glaring at Mouser. She winked, smiling, blowing smoke in a taunt. Grunting and gritting his teeth the boyo returned to the inquires. "Has he seen someone who has been cursed?" He paused as Sebastian turned to the farmer, posing the question. "And do not translate in dialect." He hissed at Mouser, receiving a mere chuckle as
his answer.

"Have you seen someone with this curse?" Sebastian was asking. The answer came, long, excited and frightened. But placing it on a curse did make sense of the people's attitudes. It was something that only happened to those that went to that specific place. Mouser frowned, taking her cigarette from her lips, translating in a low tone as to not disturb the farmer's story and to keep the boyo informed.

"I did. Wasn't a pretty sight, it wasn't, I'm telling ya guv. Their faces... all swollen. Like mud melltin' they were. They says one died but one survived, he did, and went off his rocker with shock." The thief relayed, frowning. The boyo was no less pleased at the description.

"The one that survived?" Sebastian pressed, losing the easy smile he had been taunting the boyo's lack of language skills with.

"He justa kept on shoutin' 'the werewolves a' commin'." Mouser continued her translation, tossing the spent butt on the ground, stepping on it. "They have their hands full with that bloke, they do."

"And where is he now?" Sebastian followed the natural path of the questioning.

"He was the eldest son of the Briegels. Rich folk livin' outside the village. He ain't there now, he isn't. Officials came an' took him away to the big hospital. They were scared he might make folks sick. Same as dyin' really, it is." The thief sighed. "Well this is just perfect innit..." She muttered. The man had gone quiet, arms folded, staring at the ground with a grim expression.

"A survivor... And werewolves..." the boyo murmured. He had hoped that talk would be dispelled the closer they got to the problem but superstition seemed to grow thicker the more they approached.

"Shall I search for the victims in these hospitals?" At the crossroads Sebastian asked for the boyo's input. Search for the source or the consequences.

"No, that's fine." The boyo waved away the suggestion. "If he really went insane there is no use in talking to him." Coming to a conclusion the boyo decided. "It will be faster just to head for the forest ourselves."

"However he does not want to take out the carriage to those parts no matter what. No matter how much we might offer." Sebastian pointed out the final hurdle to resolve now that it was plain that no more information was to be had without heading into the woods where the issue originated.

"Then ask him how much the carriage costs." The boyo demanded slyly, circumventing the matter.

"Ahhh my butt hurts!" Bard complained, thumping his buttocks as he attempted to stretch, groaning. Long train rides and sitting down for an extended period of time didn't agree with his bones.

"Bard that's indecent!" Meyrin scolded, flustered. "But we have been doing nothing but sitting for a while." Yet agreeing was not the same as condoning.

"But it is pretty rare to come along too." The cook mentioned, looking around. "Even if Sebastian says it can take a while."

"That's right..." Meyrin nodded.
“Sorry can you toss that back?” A child's voice followed a lost ball rolling towards Finny's boots. It tapped against them, coming to a halt, both events taking the young man away from his silent, saddened mood.

“Sure here it comes!” with a perked pep on his step Finny picked up the ball, answering with a smile, tossing the toy. Unfortunately he miscalculated, making the ball fly fast, away, startling the kids into an hurried chase. “Sorry!” Embarrassed Finny apologised as the children vanished, hunting the ball.

"You speak German? Says Dan." Snake asked what the snake wanted to know.

"Yeah, a little." Finny chuckle, ruffling his hair nervously.

"Everyone." Sebastian called, returning along with a pair of farmer's carts with a pair of horses each. Enough room for people and baggage. "We have procured a carriage. Please put the luggage on them. We will depart as soon as Mouser returns with some food for the journey." The bakery had seemed suitable and the Young Master had complained about hunger. Bread and meat pies should do for now.
They had guided the carts through the bumpy roads and along the edge of the forest, carefully looking for a way in, a chip in the tree fortress, a flat part of land to cut through. Human presence could easily be concealed by the centuries but it was a bit harder to erase altogether unless one was considering the harshest of climates or other humans purposefully obliterating what was left.

It came as no surprise when such a parting on the trees was found with an overgrown path running between them.

Wheels and hooves had no trouble crushing the thick undergrowth away. Yet no trees had grown back on the path even if the others formed a thick canopy above, taking away the light of the sun, despite it still being high in the sky.

The effect of darkness and silence around them, cut only by the sound of creaks, cracks and hisses was proving deeply unsettling on the servants.

"So this is the werewolf forest." Meyrin whispered in a squeaky voice, looking around, in-between frantic and careful. Her glasses were pushed slightly down and then up again as she hunted for threats, one hand gripping the side of the cart hard, gloves bunching and stretching.

"Creepy…" Finny's voice trembled as he spoke, curled against the wooden corner of the cart.

"I get why people get cursed here." Bard was no less nervous but was able to keep his flippancy up.

Snake said nothing, pulling his scarf a little bit higher, keeping the horses steady. Oscar curled around his head, standing tall, tongue tasting the air. The others were tucked away in their bag, keeping each other warm, quiet.

Tanaka was also silent, fairly unconcerned as the vehicle wobbled under him.

Their hushed murmurs were also starting to chip away at the Young Master's sense of composure.

"The compass is spinning." Sebastian mentioned, taking the small device from his pocked, staring at the needle that refused to settle. In any event they just had to follow that road. It was plain and obvious. A road of centuries should have been gone.

"There might be mineral resources buried here." The boyo dismissed, leaning on his cane, sceptical.

"It could also be the curse." The demon glance back, teasing.

"Do not be ridiculous." The boyo gritted his teeth, glaring.

Mouser closed her book, Charlotte's last recommendation of ghostly drama in a derelict manor, deciding that if they were going to get into that again she wanted to play too.

"I find it quite peculiar that you, who controls a demon and has met Grim Reapers, does not believe in curses." Sebastian continued, adopting yet another untapped angle of the argument, voice low, kept from reaching too far back. "That which binds us is also a type of curse." And that had been brought up as the main piece of evidence, or at least probability, previously. The Reapers were however newly added to the reasoning.
"I have said what I needed about witches before." Unrelenting the Boyo grimaced.

Mouser smiled and exchanged her book for a very witch-looking tome of thick yellowed pages, dangling ribbons, metal pieces and bones coming from its spine and pages. It opened with a creak and a groan, deepening the boyo's frown as the pages of spidery writing were peppered by summoning circles. Well… circle was used loosely. A shape of a summons while it could be circular or contained within a circle varied with each type and individual. The almanac held the list and summons of demons that worked for the coven as a collective. Like a human would call a trade if they were in need of a skill they did not possess. In essence it was no more mystical than an address book.

"A curse with that kind of supernatural meaning is rubbish." Squirming in annoyance the boyo glared at the demon's back. "More peculiar is to believe in such nonsense I would say."

"I wonder." Sebastian murmured neutrally, chuckling, moving the reins a bit, leading the horses to the other side of the road that should have faded away, avoiding a thorny area.

"I could curse him." Mouser suggested, bookmarking a demon with a list of forging skills, closing the book, sending it back to the trunk. "Really a curse is the basic of the basics. It relies on causality, probability and odds often by cheating the predetermined or the self-inflicted balance and piling on the chance of bad occurrences. Like magnetism." Like attracts like, good thoughts bring good thoughts, bad thoughts bring bad thoughts. Mind-set mattered. Playing on that a curse worked its way very subtly. "Of course the more powerful the caster the greater the pull. But even a human with no occult knowledge can do curses."

Just saying curse you was enough.

*I'll spit on your grave.*

*I wish you would die.*

Things like that.

Little phrases, little thoughts with enough spite in them…

"I would prefer if you refrained from straining the Young Master's luck any further." Sebastian sighed, glancing over his shoulder warmly. "Threadbare as it is it would start souring the fortunes of those around him even more."

"That's how a curse grows." Mouser agreed. "Gorges on the unfortunate events it provokes or that provoked it and drags more and more into it, expanding influence through contact and emotion, fear, anxiety, anger..."

"So have you met a witch before?" Ciel attempted to cut through the conversation, focusing on Sebastian.

"Yes." Sebastian nodded, noticing the attempt. Still he indulged. "In the past I have met people who called themselves witches." Acquiescing the scepticisms the demon could recall amateurs. "And I have met actual witches that became such through a deal, a covenant or being demonesses." That returned the frown to the temporary smug face the boyo made. Mouser showed the tip of her tongue, laughingly.

"Have you been summoned and worshiped at a witches' Sabbath?" Trying to turn the table on Mauser the boyo went to the other bit of witch's lore. Although Mouser was a bit iffy in the knowledge he possessed of what «worship» meant in context.
"Summoning and worshiping demons was not the real purpose of a true Sabbath." Now she was iffy if her prude-when-in-the-boyo's-presence(mostly) covenant would actually explain it. "But those that more often occurred were just gatherings of adults escaping their reality to drown in lechery." Oh. He did. He was also looking back to catch the boyo's suddenly disgusted and trapped expression. "That would be a more accurate image of the mockery of the event." Without actually revealing his opinion Sebastian shrugged. "Giving up your soul for your wish." He stressed that point. "If you are not prepared to do so there can never be a summons." As in demon bound to a single will.

There are some demons that appeared because of a whim. Sometimes there was just someone who needed a bit of a push to be willing to make a deal. Sometimes there were covenants prospects hidden in the gathered souls, willing to bargain for power and freedom.

"You…" Suspicious Ciel muttered, gnawing his words.

"What is it?" Sebastian looked over his shoulder again, the image of solicitude.

"Nothing." Dismayed the boyo shook his head, slouching.

"Oh my…" Sebastian stopped the horses, signalling Snake to do the same, staring at an opening in the thick canopy. "Young Master I can see buildings over there." rooftops. Chimneys. A window of an attic.

"There really is a village within the woods." The boyo grumbled as the demon adjusted the horse's direction, giving them a bit more freedom to move faster.
Chapter 163

The village in the woods stood in the centre of a clearing, cut from the forest by a stream. A bridge flanked by fire-lit lanterns provided some more light to the faded sun filtering through the canopy. With the afternoon the temperature was also dropping. Fog was forming due to the water's proximity.

All that, along with the dated and slightly crooked bits of the construction, was contribution to a certain gothic-like charm Mouser was sure she could find in any of her novels. It was the expected fabricated atmosphere of just those books. The emptiness. The fog. The lost in the middle of the woods idea. The only bits missing were either a thunderstorm or a creepy man in a top hat and moustache. The boyo had a top hat but it hardly counted.

"There's no one here." Bard cut through the silence, looking around, his eyes hardened, soldier-like. "Was it abandoned?" Tension was starting to seep into the group.

"No." The boyo said in an irritable tone, tapping his cane as he surveyed the area for himself.

"The houses have been taken care of." Sebastian answered. There were signs of life everywhere. Tools that would otherwise have rotted away. "It is certain that there are people living here." Not to mention the fresh scents of humans. It should be held as a certainty that they had been spotted. So why where the inhabitants not showing themselves? And there was that quietude, that forced silence of people trying to be still.

"Hey? Anyone here?" Finny called out with a shaking voice.

«Intruders!» The shout came from a woman banging a ladle on a pan. «Everyone after them!»

Sign given and more women burst through doors and corners, carrying pitchforks and work tools in bulky dresses and headdresses that looked out of some story book, shouting, surrounding them. Windows were thrown open. A small army gathered, circling, surrounding them.

Sebastian placed the boyo behind him, glancing around, looking up, to the reflexes of metal in those windows, half hidden. His frown deepened. The clear German babbling of threats continued as the women, not one of them older than forty, gathered. Their hands were not shaking. It wasn't fear.

"Well that sure is a big welcome." Bard showed his open hands, biting down on the butt of the cigarette, glancing over his shoulder.

Fini had done the same almost immediately, big eyes wider.

Meyrin's hands twitched, trigger finger moving. She gripped her skirt and stepped back, eyes narrowing behind her glasses, disconcerted, cautious.

Snake flinched, his friends out of sight.

Tanaka stepped next to the boyo, within the circle of people.

Lae moved against Mouser's wrist, pricking her skin, begging to play. The thief grinned as she followed the demon's gaze, hiding the daggers she had pulled out of habit once more, much to the bladeling's disappointment. Not the time yet. Not before things unravelled.
«Who are you? How did you get in here?» A tall blond woman demanded, hoe held at heart height. A big, round metal amulet dangled from a ribbon around her neck. Around all the necks surrounding them. Even in skirts the legs were noticeable tense, as if ready to spring.

*There are only women in this village and those clothes are from centuries ago.* The boyo considered, taken aback by the bizarre scene, gripping his cane tighter. Taking a deep breath Ciel shook away the concern and glared at Sebastian.

"Tell them I wish to speak with the Lord of this land." The boyo demanded.

"Yes." Sebastian nodded before switching languages, staring at the women, polite and non-threatening. «We do not wish you harm.» That seemed to surprise them. «We would like an audience with your Lord.»

Lae felt amused and bemused as the thief reached for her cigarettes, lighting one idly, leaning on her heals, patting the silver surface of the bladeling in reassurance.

«What?» that request however brought back the agitation.

«Lord they say?» the whispering among them grew.

«Could they be after Lord Sullivan?» The weapons were gripper tighter.

"Lord Sullivan?" Sebastian murmured the name, catching it through the many voices.

"What are they..." the boyo was looking around, lost in the language.

«Silence!» The woman shouted, raising her improvised weapon. "You lot must be rats! Traitors! Betrayers!" With each word the crowd grew more and more agitated. Ready to attack.

«Traitors?» Finny murmured, frightened. «We are not...» he tried to calm things down.

«Death to the traitors!» The shouts escalated.

«Don't let them escape!» They came closer, approaching in a thigh mesh, leaving no room for escape.

«Don't let them live.» The threats grew.

The Phantomhive servants closed around the very confused boyo.

But the women were not attacking.

They seemed tense, as if waiting for something.

An order?

A provocation?

«What are you making such a fuss for?» A clear voice accompanied by heavy steps cut through the confusion. The women parted, as if startled, turning to the newcomer, bowing, murmuring apologies and respectful greetings.

«Are you Lord Sullivan?» Sebastian asked with a slight frown, appraising the situation, not advancing or offering commonplace greetings. No the time yet.
«Indeed.» The dainty black-haired girl carried by a beefy blond man answered. Like the rest of the village they were dressed in clothes that would have been fashionable centuries ago. And it was obvious that they would be the ones of the higher category judging by the quality of cut and fabrics. «I am Sieglinde Sullivan, Lord of this Forest.»

Fabrics… Mouser frowned, sniffing the air, glancing around at the now quiet mob. Clothes… Dallis disliked the heavy headdresses but her master was too entranced with them… it was the lace Mouser noticed.

They had not moved from the south. Accents travelled far unless schooled.

This child is the forest's lord? The Young Master seemed to have grasped that part of their situation. He was returning a cautious, curious look in the pair's direction.

The old boring discussion of handmade versus machine.

Expensive versus fine and more varied.

Too thin, too soft.

Lae bit into her skin, pulling her back from the memories that were flooding, like a handful of mirror shards that needed to be rebuilt and reflected.

Something was amiss.

Crossbows were not so metallic…

«Where did you come from, hah?» the loud voice of the big guy as he stepped forth and towered over Sebastian, growling an intimidation attempt snapped the thief out of the maze of ill-fitting pieces.

The demon was less impressed with the attempt than he was with the tiny chastising coming from the thick arms. Not all little girls would have the spine to be that bold.

«Stop Wolfram.» the little lord slapped the butler's head and pulled his hair, concerned, turning to them with curious green eyes. «I'm sorry. It has been a long time since someone came here and…» her words stopped as she caught sight of the boyo, staring with what could only be called interest. Or suspicion. A pick could be made.

«I don't know how you got here but our village of Wolfsschlucht does not allow visitors to stay.» The butler got over his embarrassment cleared his voice and spoke up with authority, standing stiffly once more. Mouser grimaced. She could spot someone trained miles away. And all of those were moving as a unit behind that broad back. All except for the little girl that sat like a doll. «If you understand leave right away.» What kind of training was hard to tell until they acted but that they were used to behave as a group was plainly obvious. In essence if not in actual strategy. A gang moved like that. A patrol moved like that.

"Maybe we should go back and think of a plan." Cautiously the boyo conceded. Night was coming. They were tired and the people were hostile. It seemed unlikely to have any positive result in such a situation.

Sebastian nodded and faced the villagers again.

«I see.» In neutral agreement the demon nodded. «Then we shall…»
"Wait." At that abrupt shout all the women tensed and circled once more, farm tools ready. "You know... I don't think you realize how lucky you have been." Wolfram spoke in all seriousness, staring them down, as if trying to see something. "Crossing the forest unscathed is..."

"What do you mean?" Taking the chance Sebastian prodded. Whatever knowledge he had and would be careless enough to tell without noticing could help at that point.

"I am sure you heard about it." the man answered stiffly, eyes darting away, into the woods beyond the houses. "The werewolf protects the forest." Tonelessly he finished.

"So you mean this is actually the witches' village protected by a werewolf." Sebastian smiled, rubbing his chin in thought, delighted by the prospect.

"Lousy guard dog they have." Mouser chuckled. "If any of ours let a group this size pass when our intentions are... olc..." Her grin grew.

"They would have to be retrained, wouldn't they." Sebastian nodded.

"If you say so." The thief shrugged.

"Lord Wolfram they are dangerous. We must dispose of them." The woman that had taken the lead when they arrived was shouting at the butler that had fallen in silence.

"Wait." The doll spoke up, one hand raised to the women before turning and whispering into the man's ear.

"Young lady that's..." startled, concerned, torn...

"Did you hear what I said?" She demanded, showing a serious look, demanding.

"Ja..." Wolfram lowered his head with a sigh, conflicted but unable to refuse. "Listen." And he sounded like he was chewing on rocky lemons while speaking. "If you go back now night will come before you can leave the forest. It gets very dangerous at night. I can't guarantee that you can make it home safely." While partially true it did not sound as if he actually had any concerns about their safety. Why should he? "No... better to say you just won't make it." there it was. Complete honesty, complete belief. And yet they had made it in. "So... just this time we will allow you to stay here for the night." shock ran around the women. They were not happy. "We will give you a place to sleep. Leave as soon as the sun rises."

"Lord wolfram! Why are you letting strangers into the green manor?!" The woman-leader shouted, angered.

"Hilde. The young lady requested it." It was all he said in resignation, turning to the women.

They started to go, dispersing. Not one of them seemed pleased.

Mouser glanced down at her forgotten and burnt down cigarette, frowning.

"What did they say?" The boyo asked, following the movements around him without a total picture of the situation.

"It seems they will be letting us stay the night at the Lord's manor." Sebastian explained, frowning.

"Please follow me." the man asked, turning without pause, starting to walk.

"First they want us to leave, now they let us to stay." The boyo muttered, glaring. "What is going
"I am unsure." Sebastian answered, glancing at the closed windows, making sure everything was once more stable. "However… this is surely not a normal village." And that was a notion their short walk to the Green Manor would only emphasise.
"What is this place?" Meyrin voiced everyone's shock as the group delved deeper into the village, coming to the central square where a display of metal, spikes and rust drove the point home about the witch past of the burg. They stopped, shocked, staring, unsettled. Mouser sighed, eyes narrowing, sniffing the air. The metal's scent was... not as covered by the tang of rust one would expect of items with at least three hundred years. Nevertheless they were there. From an iron maiden to a dunking stool, cages for forced standing and sitting with added spikes for the discomfort, iron spiders, axes, swords, blades and branding tools, heretic's fork, maces, breaking wheels, clamps, racks and whips. The leathers... were not that corroded or rotted out either.

"It's full of torture instruments. Says Wilde." Snake shrunk back.

"They were used during the witch trials." Sebastian explained, having stopped because the Young Master did so. It seemed ill advised to put too much of a distance between himself and the one that was in need of protection when not too long ago the whole village had openly proclaimed their hostility.

"And I know how each one of those feels." Mouser whispered with red eyes, lips greying, parting. She sighed once more, looking away, shaking other memories out of her head. The hatred of other demonesses would not work for her at the moment. But it brought to light an issue. Such an odd assortment to display so blatantly, publically, if the village had been founded by those running away from the men that used those items. Just a way of reminding themselves of what was out there? Or yet another item to the fairy-tale-like feeling around them. In all honesty even the foggy weather was helping.

"After all this... there might be indeed something of the occult here." The boyo mumbled, starting to sway on his opinion, having too much to see and process without time to filter.

«Hey. Shorty.» Mouser snorted at that call, snickering to the side as the boyo looked around, startled. The Lord and her butler were waiting for the group to resume walking. «What's your name?» She asked peeking over a broad shoulder, staring at the boyo.

«Ahh how rude of us to forget proper introductions.» Sebastian grinned, nodding in acknowledgement. "She is asking for your name." He relayed the question to the boyo.

"Why do I have the feeling that there was something offensive in there..." The Young Master mumbled in an aggravated tone. Of course it was rather obvious that there had been something more to the inquiry otherwise the grin would not be quite as wide. "I'm Ciel Phantomhive." The boyo answered directly, staring back.

«How old are you?» Sieglinde asked after another moment of silence as they resumes walking towards the manor that rose above the village, behind yet another wall of trees, kept separated from them.

«The young Master is 13 years old.» Sebastian answered ignoring the confusion on the boyo's face.

The manor was surrounded by a deep chasm before the wrought iron gates and fence. Fortification-wise it looked solid with the only access being a bridge that lead to a locked gate. Beyond was a lush garden of odd, bright plants. Beyond it the manor was an odd mash of styles and ideas, both symmetrical and asymmetrical. A tower jutted into the sky. Turrets protected the round arch of the entryway. Ivy crawled over the face of the house. A fountain sprayed water before it, round, the
spray feeding pale flowers around and in it. Dead gnarled trees were paired with mushroom-shaped shrubbery and conic rose bushes.

"So deep! You'd die if you fell in here." Bard was fascinated with the chasm.

The fine mist pouring, roiling from it was darker, thicker… almost smelling like smoke… like… Mouser sneezed. Lae protested as he got caught on the protective gesture. Like smog. Good to know that even if the forest they could smell like the lower dregs of the East End.

«We're here.» Wolfram announced in a monotone, taking a key from his pocket, opening the gates. «This is the Green Manor.» he announced, standing to the side, allowing passage, keeping a sharp eye on the so-called guests.

Bard was groaning, rubbing his arms, recovering from the chasm's depth.

Meyrin and Snake were still huddling together, walking arm in arm to dispel the fright.

"What a strange flower! I've never seen this before." Finny was immediately attracted by the plants, making a beeline for them, crouching, reaching. Tanaka peeked over the gardener's shoulder, equally curious.

«Careful. They are poisonous plants. Your finger will swell if you touch them.» The little girl called out as her butler crossed the entrance garden, after closing and locking the gate with a metallic screech.

«HEH? Okay!» even in his surprise, startled state and confusion Finny answered in the language he had been addressed with, scrambling back and away.

Within the entrance hall, surrounded by high glass windows a stair spiralled around a dead tree whose branches held lanterns and glass baubles, shaped like stars, moons, acorns and spheres. Their colours glittered against the flames, casting speckles of light through the wide room. It seemed the only place it lead was upstairs. No doors of any kind beyond the main double doors. Pumpkins and gourds were carved, holding more lights within.

«This way.» The butler called gruffly, midway through the stairs, turning slightly.

"Please wait downstairs and retrieve the luggage." Sebastian asked

"Yes sir." Finny nodded.

Mouser stopped on the first step.

"Do you want me to come or start?" The thief asked, glancing around.

"Begin when settled." Sebastian answered.

Mouser smiled, turning away, looking around, her expression turning from cunning to fascinated. It seemed she like that particular aesthetic of glittering lights in deep shadows, twisted spirals and silver. Laevateinn moved against her skin slowly, stirring discreetly.

The demon smiled slightly before keeping to his role.

The dining hall they were guided to was decorated in the same mishmash of styles, ideas and materials one would find in an illustrated book, keeping up with the peculiarity of wonderland. It was half expected to find something made entirely out of candy. At the head of a table a horned
chair covered in white fur waited for the lord.

«It is rare to have guests.» She was saying, sounding a bit more enthusiastic. «We'll serve a special dinner.»

«We're much obliged.» Sebastian nodded, politely, waiting for the social cues.

«Wolfram.» Sieglinde called as she was being sat, the skirt arranged. «Prepare everything and show the servants where they can sleep.»

«Ja» Wolfram nodded and left the room.

Sebastian pulled the chair and waited.

I was thinking… Ciel sat down, his glance at the girl just short of staring. Her feet look like they have been bound. Peeking under the lace the shoes and feet were tiny, much smaller than they should be. And with her being carried around by a servant it was logical to think they were useless. I remember Lau saying that in China they have the peculiar custom of binding young girl's feet to keep them small and also make them unable to walk. But that was China. Half a world away from them. But why would this happen in Germany and to a Lord?

«Hey, you.» Once more she tried to get the Young Master's attention.

"Me? Ha?" It created a flurry of half-formed mumbles and panicked glances. Unfortunate to see that the Young Master had not yet been able to keep his coherency when addressed by a lady to whom he was not familiar. Although in this particular instance the ungentlemanly fluster could be attributed to the language barrier.

«I'm terribly sorry but the Young Master isn't that proficient in German yet.» Sebastian amended the situation, smiling.

«I see.» There was disappointment in her answer as she returned to a doll-like stance, sitting still with her hands on her lap, silent.

1 hour in silence went by. No polite chatter. Not even an inquiry about the weather.

"Hey. Say something!" It was finally too much for the Young Master. The hushed whisper was filled with frustration. "Aren't you good at speaking with ladies?" Grimacing Ciel glanced at the girl.

"If you say so…" Sebastian muttered in answer. However it was harder to charm someone when there was no reason to do so. Aimless tossing of flattery could have a detrimental effect. Especially if the charmer was unsure of what he was looking for.

A loud gurgling growl cut the tension. Sieglinde tapped her stomach, sighing, calm and unembarrassed.

"My body is telling me that I should take in some food." Matter-of-fact. No polish, no attempt to disguise.

«Mr Wolfram is indeed quite late.» Sebastian sidestepped the matter, taking the clock from his pocket, glancing at the time. At a normal household the table would already be set and the Master and guest called to gather for a drink before the meal. «Maybe something happened.»

«Indeed he is later than usual.» Sieglinde agreed, nodding, still ignoring her growling belly.
«May I take a look at the kitchen?» Unfortunate but if things were not progressing smoothly it was his duty as the Phantomhive butler to make them.

«Fine.» She agreed easily with a nod.

«Well then please wait a little.» Grinning Sebastian left. Of course abandoning the Young Master to his panic of not being able to communicate would encourage him to concentrate on the language studies. And it was amusing.

Wa! What can I do alone?! Staring at the open door in horror Ciel gaped, scenes of disaster crossing his mind.

«Hey …» Shuddering he turned when the girl spoke up, the tangled German words flooding his ears. «Name… black haired… man…?»

If I listen carefully I can make out some words… the realization brought in some relief. um… black haired man… Sebastian? Well of course it had to be. Question deciphered he began to form an answer, fishing around his memory for the words.

«Sebastian… my… butler… understand?» to his delight she nodded.

«Where… your… parents…» Sieglinde asked after a short pause, words lost between what Ciel understood.

«Parents?» he repeated the word slowly before it fit. «Parents… don't have… died.» he built the answer and shook his head. That was met by a sad, sympathetic look. Shuddering Ciel took a deep breath. Sebastian come back immediately. His head kept ordering.

«Lord Sullivan.» Mouser walked in the room smiling. Sieglinde looked up, eyes drawn immediately to the tray she carried. The boyo almost jumped off his chair, eye wide in fear. The thief smiled. «Dinner should be ready in less than one hour. As it is a bit late we though a snack would not harm your appetite.» On the tray was a small assortment of Funtom fruit-shaped marzipan candies.

"How much?" The boyo asked sourly.

"I'm keeping a tab." Mouser answered before turning her attention to the dolly and answering the questions about the sweets that caught her eye.
Chapter 165

«Excuse me.» Sebastian called out politely as he entered the kitchen, glancing about. It indeed looked rather archaic compared to what he had seen so far of the human world. Like being thrown back in time. Stone ovens, heavy pans. Rustic tables. Everything seemed made to last.

«What do you want?» Wolfram was standing by the sturdy worktable, surrounded by a scale, weights, ingredients, measured and unmeasured. He was no more friendly than he had been so far. Not unexpected.

«It was taking quite some time so I thought maybe you needed help.» Even if he had taken the time to show the servants their accommodations and helped them get settled, which was doubtful given the man's disposition and vocal opposition to their presence, dinner should be well underway. A regular household had the non-perishable ingredients out and about as soon as tea was served to shave some time off prep work.

«No I don't. It's fine.» Contrary to the clear state of delay Sebastian could see the other butler simply shook his head and continued the measuring. «I have just finished measuring the ingredients in accordance to the recipes.» A couple of books were indeed open on the granite countertop behind the burly blond butler.

«I… I see.» Sebastian hesitated. True it was effective to simply measure things first but at this time… «Well Lady Sullivan seems to be quite hungry.» The young girl seemed to be the key to make the man do anything needed of him. It was not until her interference and orders that Wolfram had moved. So one might as well use that play. «You may want to be fast.» Polite advice bordering on the chastising. Not that the German language conveyed much of that. Not at that time. It would be most unhelpful.

«The young lady… then I have no choice.» Pride overridden Wolfram sighed, turning to Sebastian. «Lend me a hand then. I'm going to prepare maultaschen.» Well at least he had a define idea of what to make. «Knead the dough for the bread.»

«Eh?» The request however caught Sebastian by surprise. Bread? At that time? At least the oven was lit.

«What?» noticing the hesitation wolfram turned, placing the carefully measure flour on the table.

«Nothing.» Smiling reassuringly Sebastian took of his tailcoat, ready to start. «Leave it to me.» Usually when making bread you put the dough in the oven and then prepare the rest of the meal while it bakes. Not to mention that bread had to be left to proof to develop flavour and structure. But not even the flour was mixed with the first bit of water. Dreading the signs Sebastian hung the coat, taking a quick look at the recipe books and the planned dinner. «I'm sorry to ask but have you already prepared the soup?» Or at least left the base broth to simmer… there were no pans on stove. No pots.

«No, why?» Wolfram was mixing the filling carefully pouring into the bowl each of the separated measured ingredients. «I'm going to make once I finish this. I'd get mixed up if I did everything at once.» It seemed the very notion of multitasking within the different times that different dishes took to be prepared boggled his mind.

«…I know it may sound presumptuous but may I help with that as well.» It actually took the demon a few seconds to get over the urge to murder someone for sheer incompetence. His answer
was an affirmative but it barely registered as Sebastian rolled his sleeves and got ready to take over that kitchen. *I should be used to this kind of human after working with those three idiots. Maybe having Mouser, Agni and Snake come in… housebroken, to coin her jest… created a perspective of not all human being ineffectual. Tanaka is sterling example as well. But this… this is a new type. He's not doing anything useless but yet he still manages to be absolutely inefficient. I never imagined there might be someone who prepares a meal one dish at a time. At this rate dinner is going to be served well past midnight.*

"Oh Sebastian. Do ya need our help?" Bard asked as he, along with Finny and Meyrin seemed to be exploring the area, stumbling into the kitchen quite by accident. Or perhaps hunger. Late as things were Sebastian was sneaking some of his less human abilities into the process. The broth was simmering and the dough rising.

"No. It's fine. We had a long trip. I'm sure you are tired." Smiling brightly to cover yet another wave of annoyance Sebastian continued to work. "Don't worry, go rest and don't do anything unnecessary." Incoming disaster averted and shower with compliments about niceness the demon set off to make sure dinner could still be served at an appropriate time.

«Maultaschen and wurst soup. Eisbein made from ham hock and for desert rote gruzte.» Sebastian announced the name of each dish as he placed them on the table, taking them from the cart and from the butler turned carrying slave.

It was almost properly set.

Pieces were mismatched yet looked right to the untrained eye. A few were askew. A few bits were even upside down. Wrong orders sneaked right, left and front. Mouser really didn't say anything when they arrived, crossing spoons stepping back. Almost but not quite, it seemed. And it was deliberate.

«Oh… this looks good.» The young lady whispered, growing increasingly more animated at each dish revealed. «This meal is gorgeous. Good job Wolf.» She praised her butler happily, grabbing a fork and knife in a very definite attack hold. Like she was about to stab the food as if it was about to make its daring escape from the plate.

«Well that butler lent me a hand…» Wolfram admitted grudgingly, mumbling the words, tilted down to speak to his lady at eye-level. Even so he stood a bit too tall for that.

«It's the least I can do seeing you are accommodating us.» Sebastian answered politely, putting the main course in front of the boyo, a shade too boastful to be polite. «How could I be the Phantomhive butler if I could not provide some assistance.» Mouser made a little mocking sound, rolling her eyes with a smile. Sebastian glanced at her, stepping back.

«Let's see…» Fork and knife speared down the hock and little hands along with silverware became a blur of activity, shovelling food down fast and merrily. «So good! I've never tasted bread this soft!» between chews and bites Sieglinde mumbled happy compliments, comments and the occasional happy munching silence.

"How is she eating…" Scandalized to his Victorian core the boyo couldn't help but stare.

"She certainly does not seem to mind guest's impressions." Sebastian answered neutrally, sighing, shaking his head slowly, imperceptible.

"I want to make a point of saying wolking down for the sake of the dog theme going on here."
Mouser answered, chuckling discreetly, glancing at the window. There were lights dancing in the distance.

"Behave." Sebastian instructed stiffly.

"For how long?" Teasing she bumped his hip behind the tall back of the boyo's chair.

"Until dinner is over." Sebastian palm stopped her next bump into him, pushing her hip back into a respectable distance.

The Boyo finally found the strength to stop gawking and eat. Or perhaps was simply hunger that forced a prioritization of sensibilities. Dinner proceeded in partial silence due to full mouths and lack of language proficiency. Of course it would not be true to the boyo's magnetic predisposition for misfortune to all things around him if the main disaster of the night were sauce stain on a dress and cravat.

Echoes of running steps following the rustle of too many layered skirts whispered through the corridors, along with a huffed sound of irregular, running breathing. The doors were pushed open, hard and carelessly, slamming against the wall, groaning, creaking back. The angry one from the village stormed into the room, eyes wide in a panic.

«Lord Wolfram… it's terrible!» She shouted, addressing the butler first, sounding winded and frightened, approaching the table, bowing, trying to get her breath back.

«What happened Hilde?» Sieglinde let go of the fork and knife, staring as the butler asked the questions, rushing to aid the woman lest she fell due to lack of air.

«The werewolf has appeared!» She shouted after a few gulps, keeping the bow. «She has been badly hurt. Please Lord Sullivan. Please save her.»

Mouser frowned. Now she addressed the girl. It did smell like blood around the woman but…

«Hurry wolf.» Sieglinde called out, grabbing the man's arm as he scooped her up,

«You wait here.» Wolfram asked as he headed towards the door.

«No.» Sebastian tapped the boyo's shoulder. His attention had been split, understanding that something was happening but not knowing enough of the language to understand what. Emergency was all the boyo had gotten from the hasty exchange. «Please let us accompany you. We would like to see the dangers of this forest.» The demon requested. The oddity just kept growing. But it would be wasteful to allow that opportunity to pass.
Lanterns and torches created a dome of light in the crowded square. The wind whispered and swayed the flames, carving shadows around, in every face, in every object. The torture items of times bygone regained their looks of foreboding menace. Every look was of fear. Eyes wide, lips trembling. Some tears. But they were in silence until Wolfram announced their presence and demanded to see the wounded. Pleading and weeping rose to a loud wail and reaching hands.

A woman was laying on plain carpet, bleeding from deep slashes on her back, groaning in pain. They crisscrossed her skin and spine, blood moving over her skin, pooling on the wounds and dips of the body. Remarkably she was rather quiet for such an injury.

«This wound…» Sieglinde was gently placed down, near the woman, reaching out to check her vitals immediately before turning, squinting to see the injuries in the flickering light. «This has never happened! Sinking their teeth into my villagers…»

«My lady stop the bleeding.» Wolfram offered a flask, assisting readily.

Mouser frowned, glancing around, taking in the surroundings. Nothing was out of place but for the light sources. Had the woman been moved from wherever?

Lighting a cigarette the thief studied the weepy faces. Red, not swollen. Grim and glaring. They were not closing ranks around the wounded. They were watching and letting it be seen.

If there was an attack why hadn't they taken measures? Surely a village settled in such conditions would have safeguards if their guardian turned on them. Even an angel running a con had made sure to place rules around the myth for when an attack came, why and how to proceed in that event. Also why wait for the girl? Anyone could mop off the blood and bandage up the wounds. No need for magic or medicine. Just water and clean fabric. Or just fabric really. Stop the blood, keep it from flowing and keep moving.

Sebastian shifted a bit, placing the boyo between them, observing. He sensed no immediate threat but at that time it was still sketchy from where danger could come from. It was true the timing was very convenient but coincidence was as common as premeditation.

«This will sting.» Sieglinde murmured before pouring a bit of the liquid inside the roundish glass bottle over the wounds. It had a strong smell, verging on the alcoholic. Predictably the woman began to cry out in pain as soon as it touched the torn parts of her flesh. The scent of antiseptic herbs such as calendula, Echinacea and yarrow lingered. Sieglinde chanted something in a low, even tone, hands moving above the slashed skin as the concoction soaked into the gashes. «Where is your talisman?» the lady spoke up as she surveyed her work, accepting a piece of fabric to clean the wounds and spread her concoction.

«She said she would be picking herbs nearby so she left it…» One of the women answered the girl's urgent tone, bowing slightly.

«Fools!» A flash of anger became concern and worry as Sieglinde was almost in the verge of tears. «I told you so many times to keep the talisman with you at all times…»

Amulet… Mouser tilted her head, peeking at the same round piece of carved metal everyone seemed to be wearing. That keep it with you all the times could make things hard but if she could nick one to examine… Lae prickled her suddenly, drawing blood, flowing into her palm, first has a
dagger's handle, twisting to form a blade with jagged edges along an inner curve.

*Cut not mauled.* The bladeling appraised.

Curling metal took the blood that lingered against the healed pinprick, rewarding himself with a taste. It snuggled back into a bracelet as soon as he felt she had given his warning and shape all due attention.

"You think so?" Mouser answered his voice, blowing smoke slowly.

The woman was screaming in pain so her spine had not been severed. Even a grazing blow from something that should have been rather big, if they guessed from the wounds, would have been enough for more damage than cuts. Any beast able to wield those claws would have snapped the woman with the impact it took to dig the claws. Not to mention the lack of attempts made at the throat. Also why now… even with the whole amulet story…

«It might still be near.» Wolfram took charge, standing, shouting instructions quickly in a sharp, clear tone. «Make more fires, keep the lights burning.»

*What is this…* Ciel stared at the wounded and the Lady with a concern. *Could there really be a werewolf? That's preposterous…* sight and belief… Shaking his head the boyo glanced at the demons. It was not truly evidence, now was it…

"What do you think?" He asked, voice low.

"I can't really say much from wounds alone." Sebastian answered, shaking his head.

"Lae thinks they were made by a blade." Mouser whispered back. "Or at least a weapon."

"Shall I search the forest now?" It was the logical conclusion of that event.

A woman had been attacked while picking herbs in the forest.

The werewolf had appeared.

But she was merely injured instead of suffering the deformities and death that had befallen others.

The werewolf should still be about.

"No. We can't make any suspicious moves. We have yet to gain their trust and making a wrong move could compromise the entire…"

«It's the wrath of the great wolves!» A shriek cut through the crowd. A woman in a dark robe stood there, waving her arms and crooked cane. Yet another witch-like nod. Her skin was parchment-like with heavy scarring and wrinkles. One eye was blind, milky white. Mouser tilted her head to peek under the hood. Like lye tossed in the eyes… Murmurs followed her statement. "They have been angered by letting these outsiders in, disrupting our forest." She announced, the amulets she carried around her neck and waist rattling. "Outsiders leave!" crooked, long-nailed and wrinkled fingers pointed towards the trio.

Instinct drove Ciel to step back.

Sebastian showed no reaction.

Mouser smiled, taking the cigarette to her mouth again.
"This happened because she did not have her talisman!" Sieglinde straightened as best she could as the other women took the wounded away. The crowd had thinned due to Wolfram's orders. More and more light gradually filled the night, making the details of the village, the inhabitants and the old babbling hag clearer to frailer eyes. «They won't attack if you have the talisman!»

«Have the wolves ever laid their claws on our flesh before?» The woman turned her long nails to the young lady, slashing them through the air to punctuate her statement. «Are you protecting these outsiders Green Witch?» The accusation brought murmurs and shock. Like some sort of grand betrayal was taking place. «Do not forget Green Witch!» the hag's tone dropped and trembled in warning. «The cruelty your ancestors have experienced at the hands of outsiders!» That widened the girl's green eyes. How many times had that warning been issued. How many times had she been reminded? How many times had they used that excuse? «You cannot trust them! Don't forget this! Do not forget the debt owed to the great wolves!» She drove the point into Sieglinde's mind once more, turning, glaring. «Foolish outsiders! You have angered the werewolves! It's all your fault!» The hag targeted Ciel, pointy finger right in front of his nose. The boyo stepped back, startled. And not understanding more than the accusing tone most likely. «Your fault!» She hissed, rattling the bones and the cane. «Leave if you don't want to be torn apart by the wolves.» With that final warning she turned, ignoring them.

"How about that for suspicious?" Mouser scoffed as the hag shuffled away, mumbling curses and doom portents.

"Very much so." Sebastian agreed.

«In any case do not leave your houses tonight.» Wolfram continued after a moment of heavy, suspicious silence. «No one is to venture into the woods.» Glaring he picked up a sadden witch. «You saw. Now let's return.» He growled, trudging towards the manor.
They were quickly ushered back into the crooked witch's manor, guided without delay to the room that would belong to the boyo. A very pointed way to tell them to stay out of the way and out of trouble. Of course it mascaraed itself beneath the ideal of comfort and safety for the guests but it was rather obvious that Wolfram just wanted them to be corralled and under surveillance. Shame they had no intention of obliging their host's need for staying put.

Walls and floor were stone. The curtains were thick, dark blue. The ones flanking and covering the alcove had silvery stars embroidered in them. The bed's wrought iron headboard curved along the wall topped with a starry dome. A chandelier dangled from the high ceiling, the candlelight spilling through the area. It was not enough to illuminate the whole room so small lamps were placed on side tables and hung from single chains. Sconces on the walls around them supported three candles each to aid the effort. Two armchairs with a low table between them were placed over a plush rug in front of a wide fireplace.

"Make it strong. It will be a long night." The boyo instructed, sitting on the bed. It was not as big as his room but for a guest he was rather impressed with the size. Less impressed with the situation but that should be straightened out momentarily.

"Certainly." Sebastian answered, adding a bit more leaves before pouring the water.

In the silence while the tea brewed Mouser's pencil was the only sound filling the room while she sketched what she had surveyed so far, marking the locked doors time had not allowed her to sneak into, keeping a side list of things she wanted to personally inspect.

"Please drink it straight then." The demon poured the strong black tea carefully, taking the cup and saucer to the Young Master, stopping mid motion, glancing at the door.

"To think there would actually be victims of werewolves…" The boyo murmured, glancing outside. Through the window the many lights Wolfram had ordered lit still glowed. "But it's different from Klaus inform…." Before he could blather an éclair was used as gobstopper before Sebastian requested the boyo's silence. It was clear that while he was annoyed he had partially understood the need.

Amused Mouser replaced her plotting with some books as Sebastian crossed the room more silently than his shoes should allow and abruptly opened the door, allowing in with a yelp a messy pile of dress and floating balloons that had clearly been glued to the door.

«Well, well master Sullivan.» Sebastian approached, smugly, voice mellow. «All by yourself without your servant?» his arm went around Sieglinde's waist, picking her up, closing the door softly while a flustered girl attempted to explain how.

«With this hexenballoon I can walk through the castle by myself.» It was a fairly simple contraption of gas-filled balloons connected by ropes to a wide belt-like buoy around the girl's hips.

«I see…» Sebastian murmured, examining it for a brief second before closing the door and smiling, pinching the girl's cheeks in one hand. «However I cannot approve of a lady that would stand outside a man's door eavesdropping.» Mellifluously he taunted, grinning, releasing the balloons, rendering the witch helpless.
"I would take so much offense to that if I did not know any better." Mouser murmured, opening the book to keep up with the adventure now that the heroine had seemingly made her escape into a castle in the moors. The way things were going the master of the house was the master of the beast and had just scored a bride. Now to see if it was one where there was a rescue or a relentless fall.

«Can I ask what business brings you here?» If one of the people they needed to interrogate came to them so easily there was no logic in squandering an opportunity.

«Business?» Untangling Sieglinde seemed to gain a bit more confidence, smiling smugly, trying to match. «You are the ones who have business with me, don't you?» She announced it. Mouser looked up from her book, eyes narrowing slightly. «I am a witch. I can see though your thoughts completely.» Smug and proud she announced that skill, defying.

«Oh?» Sebastian seemed amused, keeping her upright, calling the bluff. «You know what to do then.» The Demon challenged, placing her on her tiny feet, stepping back, watching. «I would not want to be rough with a lady.» Sieglinde could stand, wobbly and unsure but on her own two feet nonetheless.

«Since you have arrived I have had this premonition…» The little witch started solemnly, adopting a grave look. «That tonight I would have to destroy the key to the secret chamber I have protected for 11 years.» A little tremble sneaked into her closed fists as she faced the boyo. «Ah… I was prepared but I can't calm my heart.» with that and a couple of mincing steps she flopped backwards into the bed, startled the boyo and baffling. «Come!» She called out in all seriousness. «I didn't think my first time would be a threesome but this is all experience gained.» Sieglinde Murmured with blushing cheeks, taking a deep breath. «Please be as gentle as you can.»

Mouser cracked up laughing, the book falling from her hands as she curled forward. First because of the situation, then the words and then the absolutely startled and slightly appalled expressions on the males present in the room. Lae excluded. Lae was as amused as his mistress. Lae like the petty vengeance on the mistresses' covenant. He didn't like being told to leave her wrist when they mated.

Startled by the unexpected sound Sieglinde sat up on the soft covers, shuffling to keep straight, looking for the source. The light pink dusting over her cheeks deepened into an almost painful to look at red.

«A… foursome?! And with a woman too… this is… well…» she mumbled, eyes widening. «This is more than I was…»

«I'm not participating darling.» Mouser spoke up after a few gasps, trying to bottle it up, leaning on the armchair to scooer her book back. «Feel free to ask for advice. I have extensive knowledge on how to play the tall one.» The thief settled back into the chair, reopening the book, searching for her lost place in the narrative. «However your attention should turn to the Young Master. He looks rather confused.»

"What?" Ciel managed to squawk out, scooting away from the spread out skirts.

«I see…» Sieglinde nodded solemnly, taking the suggestion. «I thank you for your offer.» She turned to the boyo, appraising his very bewildered look, deciding on what to do next. «Are you troubled about the construction of my clothing?» It was the logical conclusion to be reached. Their garments were very different, after all. Mouser snickered into her book no longer searching for her spot while Sebastian was still frozen in indecision. «First you undo this button…» Tiny hands accompanied the words, explaining.
"Nonono… wait a second!" Understanding and panic dawned on the boyo as he waved his arms about, trying to stop the scene unfolding. "What is happening? What are you trying to do?"

While the words did not translate she understood that he was trying to stop her. Unfortunately for the boyo her understanding of the situation was slightly different. A little sly smile appeared on her face, eyes narrowing.

«Oh you want to take this fortress by yourself then…» Sieglinde murmured softly, her voice dropping into a slow purr. Mouser snickered. Sebastian coughed, covering his mouth, regaining a neutral composure. «You are more a man than you look.»

"What is she saying with that face!?!" Panic was starting to set now in a mix of situation and lack of understanding. The boyo was looking from the young witch, to Sebastian to Mouser.

"That the young master is the type that wants to undress a woman by himself." Sebastian answered, staring at the boyo calmly, partially translating, deciding that his own amusement was a bit more important at that moment. There was a chuckle coming from the chair as Mouser responded to his rerouting.

"Well I do recall that Girlie was in her undergarments in the Campania after we left her alone with the boyo." Mouser spoke up, putting the book down, trembling with contained laugh, grinning. "It seems to be a plausible assumption."

"What are you saying!?!" Bristling the boyo scooted further away.

«Or are you the type that remains dressed?» The delay in the boyo's reaction made Sieglinde jump to another conclusion.

"My, my, young master. Already and at this age?" Sebastian teased.

"What do you mean at this age?" Mouser scoffed. "He's already a late bloomer."

"I don't know what she is saying but there is some kind of misunderstanding here!" Faced with embarrassment from every side the boyo began to shout in fluster.

«Wait…» Receiving no attention Sieglinde started to have her doubts, staring at the boyo. «Could you be…» Faced with a sudden dawning probability based on the pre-pubescent features of the boyo the witch made a grab for it, bring forth a sudden silence and a very bug-eyed boyo. «Well you're a proper man at least.» Sieglinde considered with a final nod.

"Stop fooling around!" The boyo shouted in outrage, the sudden flapping of the arms sending Sieglinde out of the bed in a whooshing mess of flipped over skirts and dragged coverlet.

«Master Sullivan are you alright?» Sebastian contained his laugh while making sure the pouting lady was unharmed. She turned, sitting, shoving skirts away from her legs, rubbing the back of her head

Mouser was curled over herself on the chair, having a fit of giggles, tears welling to her eyes.

«How unrefined, disgracing a young lady so!» Sieglinde shouted, turning against the boyo, hands fisting. «You… girly-boy!»

"I can't understand what you are saying you molester!" The boyo shouted right back.

"Now, now, you two…" Sebastian interfered, chuckling lightly, carrying the tray of sweets from
the cart, presenting them between the arguing parties. The boyo showed only annoyance. Sieglinde
was immediately drawn in by the display of macaroons, Florentines, eclairs and caramel sauce,
following the treats with wide, bright eyes. «Having a sweet time in bed if fine but don't you think
it's about time we had some sweets right here.» The demon defused the situation, allowing tempers
to cool down. After all they still needed her cooperation and information and it was proven the
young master's charm was not quite up to the task.
«Men are always overflowing with lust.» Sieglinde quoted, picking up a Florentine, munching contentedly. Explaining the reasoning behind her behaviour was no less befuddling than the events had been. «That's what the book said.» But if her guideline was a book there were simply many things that could go wrong when applied to human beings and their reactions.

«Well… there are some like that, true but…» Sebastian admitted with a small nod, still in search of some bearings.

«You have to take into account taste and age.» Mouser stood and stretched, approaching the bed. Those words imparted a solemn look, as if she was ready to soak in whatever information was being provided. «As in you are a baby.» Sieglinde puffed her cheeks, half offended. Mouser smiled, cupped and pressed them until she deflated. «Those who would be interested, you would not want to meet, trust me sweetie.”

«I don't understand.» Tilting her head like a curious owl the girl reached for another treat.

«Good.» Mouser let go and stood next to Sebastian. «Any question?»

«Not at the moment. I see how my approach may have failed to account for those variables but it seemed quite the simplest way to gain proximity.» Sieglinde mused.

«In my view no amount of proximity is worth…» Mouser stopped, grimacing. «I am tempted to say you'll understand as you grow older but frankly this may be a matter of experiences.»

«There are only women in Wolfsshultz.» Sieglinde fidgeted, glancing at the confused and wary boyo and at Sebastian, returning to Mouser. As if she was the comfortable thing to look at in-between studious glances. «So this is the first time I've seen the real thing.»

«That is exactly it.» Mouser agreed. «Limited experience equals limited understanding.»

«Meaning whatever strategies I use to find a solution may not be suited to the initial problem.» Sieglinde continued the thought.

«Is Mr. Wolfram not a man?» Sebastian pointed out the logical flaw on the lord's reasoning.

«He's more like a guard dog.» Just a servant. Just someone who had been with her for so long that his gender no longer registered.

«I see.» It was not new information but she seemed to be very amenable to answering. «Speaking of guard dogs… everyone in this village seems to be very scared of these great wolves.» Sieglinde's expression immediately fell into sadness as soon as that was mentioned. Sebastian continued although his tone softened into the likeness of curiosity and sympathy. «What are they?»

«Do you know of the witch hunts?» Sieglinde the Green Witch asked very softly.

«Yes.» Sebastian nodded.

«All too well nowadays.» Mouser muttered scratching her arm where nails had been hammered in one interrogation. Everywhere she looked that day had been filled with too much information about things she didn't particularly cared about at the moment.
In the past witches were seen as the cause of trouble and were killed by being submitted to torture in these witch trials. The torture devices on the plaza are from that time. Were they now? Mouser frowned. What she said... witches were not killed by torture. They were tortured to admit they were witches and then killed. Sure, some died while being tortured but sometimes that meant they were not witches at all. The purpose of a witch is to drive away misfortune, protect the people with spells and heal the sick with herbs. That depended on the area however that was part of the job. However in time they were declared heretics and had to flee for their lives. that fell in line with the general knowledge. One of them offered her legs to protect her companions and formed a contract with the werewolves. She was called the Green Witch. My ancestor. Starting to get into the German mind frame the boyo seemed to be able to discern the flow of the conversation. That is why every lord has to be submitted to this through the generation so they cannot walk. Sieglinde pulled her skirt a bit, showing the tiny crippled feet.

Mouser and Sebastian exchanged a look.

Contracts could be interchangeable through blood relations if the task was left unfulfilled but the transfer rarely, if ever, requested for a sacrifice to be repeated. Some demons even were sly enough to keep the task from being done and feasted on a few generations before resolving what they had been called for and agreed to do.

But why would a wolf want just a small pair of hams? There had to be something more or the exchange wouldn't be worth it. Unless it was a very hungry werewolf but that was just a ridiculous thought.

Why did the werewolves attack the villagers? Sebastian pried at the sudden main event of the evening, the thing that had never occurred before. Isn't that against the contract?

It has been so may hundreds of years and so many generations since the green witch that performed the contract. Sieglinde reasoned, voicing the doubts that she had been fighting with before sneaking into the boyo's room, eyes dull and concerned. Maybe her blood just runs too thin.

So then... the village is no longer under the protection of the werewolf but has become its hostage. The demon turned the narrative to its next facet, distorting the view that had been held so far, pressing it gently, presenting the story as a valid, solid conclusion, engaging her curiosity and doubt. Correct?

It may be so. Sieglinde seemed to have the same doubts and they would only grow as time passed. More so if they were properly nurtured. I have never left this village and I don't think I ever will. There was sadness over that fact, something brought to the surface rarely. You will return to the world out there tomorrow, right? Please... I want you to tell me about the outside world. I want to know about all I don't know.

Sebastian waited, weighting the options. The boyo was staring, still deciphering. Mouser glanced outside. The open curtains still gave the room an unblocked view of the lights in the village.

"I believe her previous actions were a way to attempt a friendlier approach." Sebastian made a short conclusion for the boyo. He already knew an adjustment was needed to their approach but the orders still needed to be issued for action to take place. When it was convenient to wait. "And as her will is absolute in this village so I would advise for the young master to play nice in order to further our investigation."

"Fine." The boyo sighed, agreeing, extending his hand. Just now... sorry... let's... friends... And in broken German he attempted to mend the fence so he could exploit the gratitude.
Sieglinde was staring at the hand with a puzzled look, still tilting head right and left with the owl-like curiosity in her big eyes.

«In the Young Master's country people extend and grasp their hands as a sign of friendship." Sebastian explained, reaching out, picking one small hand and pressing it against the boyo's palm for a firm shake. «Like so.»

«I see.» Excited with the new bit of knowledge her shake was almost hard enough to dislocate the boyo's arm. «Ah, that's right. I'll give you these.» Friendship affirmed she reached into a pocket in her skirt and produced enough amulets for the group. Mouser smirked lightly. Who knew... no need for nicking. «They are amulets against the werewolves.» She explained the purpose of the thing, offering them by the velvety ribbons, the big metal part dangling and clicking against the next big circle. «You should wear them on your way back.» Happy with a mission fulfilled and the gratitude she turned her blushing face to Sebastian, fidgeting. «Now will you teach me about that "sweet time in bed" you mentioned earlier?»

«How much have you read about it?» The thief chuckled and sat on the duvet.

Sieglinde started to go through the general outline, gesturing.

«Ah yes. I did say something like that.» Sebastian answered, coughing as the German chatter grew more and more awkward for the listener. "What shall I do young master?"

"I can't do much with a child." The boyo huffed, annoyed. «Just have her play with toys or something.»

Mouser saw the chance. Sebastian didn't waste it either.

«It seems the young master wants to play with toys.» Sebastian intervened on the interval of the conversation as they young girl stared at the Young Master, waiting for translation.

«What?» Startled and torn between curiosity and horror Sieglinde stared, hand on her chest. «That is pretty extreme right away! I don't know if my body can take it.»

Mouser simply laughed, standing once more, taking the amulets to the table. Might as well start playing with them.

"What is that reaction?" Ciel shouted, catching half of the problem, glaring at his butler. "What are you doing?" Sebastian acted as if nothing was wrong as he refilled the tea cups. "She is definitely misunderstanding something again!" Half panicked when Sieglinde leaned expectantly over him the boyo scooted away on the bed until trapped against the headboard and pillows.
"Finally she's asleep." Groaning the boyo collapsed at the edge of the bed, as far away from the ruffled skirts as he could while still being comfortably splayed on the mattress, jacketless, exhausted by Sieglinde's insatiable curiosity, questioning, prodding and poking.

Sieglinde was still looking like a doll, her hair freed from the buns, the pearls that had adorned the netting safely inside Mouser's pockets, nicked while the thief had decided that the pinned hair was uncomfortable and undid both hers and the girl's, both gaining the advantage against Ciel in the cards. Not that it was particularly hard. Mouser's playing cards were marked but she had offered them the clean deck although English had permitted her to tease about Bard's preference for the erotic nudes of the spare while keeping the girl out of the joke. They were also unmarked. Women in underwear in playing cards were enough to trick the focus out of some.

The bed was covered in toys, doodles and games.

Attempts at explanations of modern items such as cars, electricity, phones, simplistic drawings showing how the world outside was.

Even the thief's stuffed rabbit had been offered to the wearing down attempt.

Everything was novel.

Everything was followed by hundreds of questions that grew more and more specialized and accurate the more the subject was presented. Not only a curious mind but a fast learning one as well. Calling the witch a genius would be no understatement. Calling her hopelessly naïve wouldn't be wrong either. Sneaking questions into the conversation wielded interesting results on what she knew, should know and what was not known on the timeline she had given them for Wolfschult.

"You worked hard." Sebastian's tease was not registered through the exhaustion. Could work as a praise as well so maybe that was what the filter registered. The plates that had held the sweets were empty and being placed in the cart neatly. The tea pot was drained but the girl had taken no sip of it. Not taking any risk with making her even more stimulated with black bitter and strong tea.

Mouser retrieved her toy and hugged it briefly, poking its bunny nose with a cooing sound, before making it vanish somewhere, somehow.

What the girl knew she had shared.

Unfortunately it was not enough to avoid the need to run around in the hunt for answers.

And in a village that was alight with alert that had to be done with a careful touch.

"But we could talk rather easily even if the sentences were broken." The boyo noticed after a few panting moments to collect himself, keeping his voice low under the threat of spoiling the delicate sleeping balance. "The words were still recognizable." Sitting straight he frowned, arms crossing, keeping the pride in his accomplishment fairly low key. "She was easy to understand unlike that man who sold us the carriage."

"Yes. It should be so." Sebastian stated plainly, glancing at the door.

Mouser frowned.
"What did you notice?" She murmured.

As languages went and after the dialect had been recognized Mouser hadn't been paying attention on what language she was speaking other than the shifts between boyo and witch. It was fairly automatic in her head so perhaps she should be paying attention to keep anything she should not say in a language that no one else would understand. But looking back she had indeed been using plain German. Actually it was turning less stiff every time she spoke and heard it.

«It seems the young lady has disturbed your rest.» Wolfram entered the room with barely a knock, all cold disapproval and stiff spine, eyes scanning the contents, searching for more than his charge. Such a suspicious guard.

«She just fell asleep.» Sebastian informed, keeping the propriety, straightening. There was nothing to be seen. Just what was expected.

«Forget what you heard from the young lady.» The Green Witch's butler advised, picking up the little girl easily, adjusting the massive amount of layers, cradling the sleeping body, heading for the door, pausing and glaring, all menace and doom. «Once dawn breaks you are to leave. Understood?»

Mouser chuckled as the door closed with a quiet click and the steps vanished in the distance, standing, snapping her fingers. One of the offered amulets floated up next to her, as if dangled by the ribbon, following as she stood in the centre of the room. She stared at it for a moment, poking the metal with a claw. Lae stretched out, tendrils sliding over the surface, filling the etchings, returning, questioning.

It could not be more obvious that the man believed they were poisoning the little girl's mind. While true to an extent they had to wonder why so protective other than the usual duties of a family servant, even if he was one of those bound by an oath. And if the village had existed for so long how come there were no more males? Who would keep the bloodline going if that original deal had been so important… It made less and less sense for the place to be able to keep itself for more than one generation. Two tops if Wolfram was the one available for baby production.

Iron. Figures… But it was too big, too thick. Protection amulets were usually small, discreet and made from a single piece so there would be no loss of alchemical proprieties and the imbuing of mystical properties was made easier. Either steel or iron were the traditional choices as they had the idea of protection within them. Or from crystal. But crystal amulets were frailer. This… it had a seam.

Not that it mean anything. She did her explosives from what was available without a care for symbolism or properties. Unless shrapnel was involved. Then it had to be a metal able to withstand the explosion.

Sebastian was helping the boyo into the cape after getting the jacket, preparing for the chill of the night, tiding up once more as he went through the room.

The plan remained unchanged despite the new information at hand. It was after all just the story of how the village had come into existence and their mission was more focused on what was happening in the present. And it was unlikely the werewolf would be too far after the attack even if some hours had passed by them.

It made a little noise, almost under her perception even as a demon.

Mouser frowned, leaning her ear against the smooth back surface.
The runes were impossible to read.

Maybe because they were of German origin…

They differed from the ones the Cait Sith had sent her and the ones her memory…

No.

There were bits she recognized from several memories. And two she actually used in her explosives. And explosive runes in an amulet of protection was a bit more suicidal than expected.

Crooked beyond meaningless but still could be local variation.

Several books on wards, protection and runes popped open all around her. Better to look at it as a whole before smashing it to pieces.

The thief stood, stretched and lit a cigarette, walking from book to book, checking their indexes and looking for the proper pages, calling others as needed. There were notes on the edges that helped or offered insight and lateral thinking to the issues depicted. Several handwritings. There was an advice to sew spells to undergarments so the skin contact enhanced effects.

A cold breeze blew through, rattling some of the pages. A few books were now showing different information. A wave of her hand returned the information that should be there.

"Have fun in the forest boys." She called out as Sebastian and the boyo left through the balcony. Her job was to hold down the fort, deflect suspicions and dissect that little trinket.
Chapter 170

For a place that should have been in high alert there was remarkably little in the way of security beyond the still glowing lights of torches, oil lamps and candles. The inhabitants were bolted inside their houses as instructed. Inside there were no lights, no sounds. The place gave off an empty, abandoned feeling.

No one was even patrolling the handful of streets and the borders created by the houses and the gap between village and forest to make sure there was no actual threat still lurking. What kind of predator abandoned easy prey?

Of course given the effects of the rumoured curse it seemed the most logical course of action on the villagers' part. On the other hand the attack that night had been close enough to be physically scarring and yet there had been no traces of the deformations that had distressed the monarch enough to send the watchdog in a murky request of «just go and see». And if it was indeed the first time it happened it was also consistent to think that there were no actual plans for such an event.

So light a light and cower in its glow, choosing the darkness under a comforter, hoping the monsters could not see you there.

The artificial brightness did make it harder to cross the village unseen but roof-hopping till the edge was still an option, an option they took after a simple glance down the balcony, even if the Young Master kept complaining about height and motion.

From the edge of the forest until they were deep enough to light a lantern, again for the Young Master's sake, was a bumpy, careful journey because of the roots and the cloak that kept tangling on them. For the purpose of avoiding a sick master the delays were simply piling.

"Watch your step Young Master." Sebastian advised, hoisting the lantern up to spread the range of the Young Master's impaired vision, reaching out to hold the cloak and guide Ciel on the path that could be faintly discerned.

At first there was nothing different from the forest they had seen while heading towards the village. Thick, lush, green, hard to navigate, easy to get lost in.

But as soon as the lights had completely faded, as soon as they were deep enough to lose sight of the buildings, the difference was startling, abrupt, localized.

The trees they could see in the swaying lamplight were dead, leafless and gnarled, withered. Underfoot the vegetation crackled and cracked, dry, weak. Heavy, thick fog hung around, enveloping all. It stunk. Avoiding a comparison with London's smog was increasingly harder. Of course it was the immediate target of the Young Master's complaints.

It's too quiet. The atmosphere is heavy. Sebastian frowned, appraising, staring ahead. It was worrisome to find such an amalgam of effects. I can't sense life. There was a prickling burning sensation gathering the more he stood still, the physical effect joining the foreboding.

"Young master stay by my side..." The butler turned, ready to discuss what they needed to gather to advance on their plan, stilling in surprise, staring, eyes narrowing in confusion. "Young Master?" There was a slow, steady trickling of clear tears from the Young Master's exposed eye, even if nothing on his expression denounced any emotions that would trigger tears.

"What is this?" Alerted to the odd action the Young Master caught the tears on his gloves, growing
concerned, confused.

"What did you do…" Sebastian scolded, tapping his hands away when instinct told the Young Master to reach up and rub. "Don't rub your eyes!" He asked, trying to see. It could be dust. A splinter. A bug. Humans were frail enough for any of that to provoke such a reaction. Emotions however, considering the young master would be moot. Unless he was crying in frustration.

"I don't understand…" The Young Master seemed to be certain of the same. "It just keeps flowing…" Accepting the tissue to take care of that Ciel sniffled, the tears provoking more, the discomfort growing as his vision grew blurry. An itch was starting to be felt along with a shiver.

Sebastian flinched, a sudden intrusion cutting through the dullness of the fog. On the edges of the dead trees, amidst the thick blanket of flowing gas, barely lit was a wolf-like thing standing on two legs.

"A werewolf?" Even if his eye was blurry the Young Master noticed the target as soon as he followed the demon's glance. The furry figure dove, vanishing from sight. "Let's go Sebastian!" Finally seeing something tangible the Young master was eager to follow and resolve the issue.

"Wait." Reaching out Sebastian stopped such recklessness in its tracks, receiving a confused and slightly angered look. "Something is wrong with this forest. I have a bad feeling about this." Such a statement was enough to give Ciel the perception of how deeply wrong something felt. It was getting harder to breathe and his face felt hot. The tears that just wouldn't stop, cold. "I will go after the werewolf. Please return to your room."

The agreement was reached unexpectedly fast.

Sebastian returned the Young Master to the Green Witch Manor, leaving him on the balcony before doubling back and hunting for the sighted werewolf.

"Already back?" Mouser peeked from the room, attracted by the noise, sneezing abruptly as the Ciel turned away from the view, walking in. "Boyo you smell like a fart." She teased, keeping the window open, returning to the amulet. The books had been replaced by lock picking kit. The iron shell was pried apart, revealing a circular brass box, the source of the muffled clicking. "Are you crying?" The thief noticed before starting, snapping her fingers, producing rose water and a soft cloth. "Allergies?" She asked, turning back to work as he sniffled, sitting on the bed.

I've been in the human world for a while now but I have not felt such foreboding in a longer time than I care to remember... Sebastian raced through the forest, trying to find the spot where the werewolf had been sighted. The fog was low, gathered on the ground. It almost looked solid, just sitting there heavily. Looking around was also as if everything as dusty, covered in a layer of… whatever it was there was a peculiar smell in the air. Just what is... as he searched for clues something wet tricked down his cheek. The demon stopped watching as transparent drops dripped on his glove. Tears? I'm... crying? Frowning in confusion he stared.

Nothing was around that could cause a demon to shed those. True a covenant opened a path to some emotional exploits but unless Mouser was involved any other emotion had no weight on him beyond survival, need and greed.

The pale drops suddenly became red.

Blood.

The curse the man described.
The bubbling skin, the swelling… The ones that see the werewolf are cursed… were the words he had used to say what had happened. In that sense the woman had been only hurt because she had not seen.

And if his body was reacting like that…

Then… the young master…

If he was affected a human body would be…

Racing back the demon burst into the room, searching for the Young Master.

"Sebastian…" the answer was immediate and fearful. The young master was showing the same signs.

A grinning shadow fell on them. Mouser arched an eyebrow over red eyes and smiled, fangs nipping her lower lip, arms crossed, long claws tapping on her forearms, markings spreading on the skin that was showing.

Sebastian looked up at her, holding the Young Master, trying to see a way out.

"I am going to rip that little girl's legs off, shove them down the doggy's gullet, get a cure for you and make a shrug to match the feather dress." She whispered, turning towards the door, reaching up. "Wait a tic would you…"

The boyo threw up, agony growing. His body was burning. Sebastian could feel the heath though his clothes. The bubbling skin seemed to be filling with pus. Whatever he felt was more agonizing that what he was experiencing and seemed to be consuming his insides too.

"Mouser…" Sebastian called, picking up the boyo. There was fear in his voice. Her claws stopped on the doorknob, hand twitching, glancing back, annoyance covering what could pass for concern. "Just tell me where she is."

"Fine. She claims she is a witch and witches cure." The thief crossed the doorway, all markings vanishing into what a human would look. But the grinning shadow remained beneath her feet as they ran to Sieglinde room carrying the severely ill boyo. "If she can't we'll go with my plan." Which pretty much amounted to razing everything to the ground until she stopped feeling upset about seeing what was hers harmed.
Chapter 171

Sebastian followed the grinning shadow that danced quickly in front of them, showing the path to the witch's room, its owner standing to the side, watching with dull red eyes as the young master's condition worsened and the blisters growing and filling, the breathing increasing its tempo and harshness, laboured, and the cough bringing traces of bile and blood.

The superficial progression of this curse seemed to be about even on both. Mouser narrowed her eyes slowly, the cat-like slits contracted. Internally they seemed to be progressing at very different rates. As the exposure had occurred at the same time it could only be attributed to the demonic nature of one. But for the mask to be affected as well...

Despite that obvious discrepancy Sebastian was feeling no less urgency as his fist collided with the massive double doors of the room. It was actually surprising that he had enough restraint to keep the farce and not punch the door in. And to just shout for help and waiting for the girl to open, calling out.

«Lord Sullivan please help us.» Using titles and all.

«What is this?» A sleepy little girl opened her door, peeking, rubbing her eyes. «Are you sneaking into my bed...» the same lustful curiosity reared its head as she looked at them before her eyes widened in frightened recognition. «Your skin! You went into the forest, didn't you?» She immediately recognized the symptoms. Which was both odd and reassuring. Odd because according to her no one had ever been attacked. Expected because there was knowledge of the so called curse around them and the forest-werewolf connection. And reassuring because if she knew and if she was a healer the chances of there being a cure or a dispelling formula were greater.

«I am very sorry.» through the urgency Sebastian picked up on that and used whatever connections the short previous interaction had forged, taking it a step further to ingratiate himself and the boyo on the Lady's sense of duty, pity, curiosity and budding friendship. «I am willing to take any punishment later but please save the young master.»

Before she could answer the door of the room right next to her opened and a pyjama clad Wolfram dashed out, attracted by the commotion. It was not usual for a servant to sleep right next door but given Sieglinde's legs there really was not much practical choice in the matter.

«My lady what is going on?» His eyes widened in recognition. Now that was stranger. If they only knew from stories how would he know it from seeing even if the effects were as striking as that... «You bastards...» he muttered under his breath, angered.

«Wolf prepare the purification ceremony.» Sieglinde overruled his mood by ordering him about, picked from the floor, the pair showing the way to the room Mouser had dubbed laboratory. In the hours before she had been there and nicked a few nice bottles of components from the packed shelves. An enormous cauldron surrounded by columns and drapes occupied the centre of the round room, mounted on top of a furnace. Curling stairs gave access to it. «Prepare the large pot.» the little witch kept ordering, left on the work table, gathering powders and liquids. A scale, pestle and mortar, containers, burners, plates and distilling apparatus occupied the space in front of her. She worked as she ordered. «Hurry. Time is short. Take off your clothes and throw them in the oven!» Sebastian did so quickly, keeping an eye on the worsening state of the boyo. «Hurry and get into the pot!» The fire under it was going strong. «When did you enter the woods?»

«About 15 minutes ago!» Sebastian answered, holding the boyo above the lukewarm water. The
Mouser pulled the nearest chair, watching the table, lighting a cigarette, taking note of the amounts and the mix frantically being poured, ground and measured.

«Oh… curses… it's going to be tight…» She even swore innocently. Mouser thought with a slight smile, her very bad-mood-shadow grinning along, flickering on the walls unnoticed. The boyo did look like he was about to die from the inside out. Sebastian remained unaffected. Poisons concentrated enough to affect a demon… The thief frowned, letting Lae nick the exact came amounts of ingredients from the bottles and packs for later experiment. She had worked on the ones that would give her an edge in battle by refining Snake's snakes poison. Either by using the ones that paralysed or the ones that dissolved tissue… the heart of the matter was that the concentration and refining had to be ridiculously high and even then the effects were temporary and easily solvable. Some demons would be immune. Lae had showed that her poisons were delicious for him, snacks that boosted his abilities. «Wolf boil the water! And bring me more purification herbs.»

Mouser boosted the flames a bit, discreetly. They were unusually high for an oven that would burn on wood alone. At least one that was not built like a forge. Sieglinde climbed to a little ledge on the edge of the cauldron, throwing the herbs Wolfram had brought into the water. The scent was mild. Almost like… soap.

«Keep your heads under water as I recite the chant. Don't come out until I say so.» The little girl waited until her orders were fulfilled, taking a deep breath. «Nornir ye three goddesses of Fate bring me the blessing of Urdar-Brunnr. Be our witness, oh goddess of fate. Forgive the sin, cleanse the body. Sól of the Sun and Máni of the moon, enlighten and cleanse them.» Mouser scoffed in her chair. Wolfram glanced at her, trying to appear grim. The returned look had him squirming discreetly and looking back at the witch at work. While Nordic mythos was far from Mouser's area of expertise there was someone in her head that had experience with the area. And to curse and cleanse in the Nordic pantheon one would likely call on Hel's mercy. Death, plague and pestilence were her realm after all. To call on fate moon and sun seemed… cliché. «It's safe.» She called out, gesturing for them to surface.

«Now what...» Sebastian asked. The itching and burning on the skin had stopped. The growing of those fluid filled lumps seemed to have decreased if not ceased.

Wolfram brought a pitcher and a funnel.

«You have to be purified from the inside out.» Frantic Sieglinde explained, giving the funnel, eyes lingering on the contract mark of the extended hand. «Here. You have to swallow and retch this medicine until what you spew is clear.» The girl explained.

"Excuse me young master…" As time seemed to be more crucial than ever Sebastian followed suit with the instructions. For his own sake or not it was a rough thing to do. Predictably the boyo choked on the way in and in the way out.

Mouser blew smoke slowly.

It was a thoroughly unpleasant process that part.

At least he was not vomiting in the water.

Last time someone had shoved a funnel down her throat was… oh… right. Charlotte with the same happening to her as soon as the retching stopped. Poisoned negotiations. Having to poison oneself
to poison the target was a bad idea they had sworn to never again. Removing the taste of bile has been almost as hard as stomaching the poison for the thirty minutes or so the bloke had taken to die and the hours of getting it out of the body. They had cut it a bit close too.

Removing clothes. Cleansing herbs. It was literally just a bath. Witch meant whatever they had encountered and smelled like farting rotting garlics was airborne and not exactly curse-like. There was a cantrip spell called miasma and while its purpose was concealment and sapping energy from an enemy it could easily be amplified through adding of poison and other effects woven into the spell. But that… that looked like what factories did when the chemicals exploded. Down to the making the guts surface to make sure they hadn't swallowed anything bad.

«Aren't you feeling nauseous?» through the process Sieglinde noticed that Sebastian was neither showing signs of internal damage or the same weakness the boyo was displaying. Perhaps because in her eyes he was an adult and by extent less frail.

«I'm fine. Please help the young master.» Sebastian stated, shaking his head.

«Then do it again.» Sieglinde instructed after a quick survey of the patient's condition, gesturing Wolfram to bring more of the solution.

In pain and disoriented the boyo was starting to both squirm and lose consciousness. The thief sighed. For his own good indeed but rough handling on someone with his kind of past was bound to bring bad things up. She had enough experience with that herself.

But it was clear that whatever that curse was stood on the more alchemical side of the scale if not outright on the grandson of the crackpot.
Pain blurred perception into a shapeless twist, leaving nothing but torment.
The place melted away as his sight grew dim, an itchy, dry, burn taking over the flowing tears.
Motion only heightened the nausea.
Voices faded and mixed, nothing but noise, pinpricks without logic.
Fabric was harsh, grating and chafing the skin as it blistered.
From cold air to warm water did nothing for the mounting fever.
Sensation and fear.
Reduced, trapped, choking and cold.
Pleading, silenced.
Falling, fleeing, fading.
Darkness and oblivion were a relief... for a while.
Memories lurked beneath.
Echoes of distress tangled through the battered body.
The nightmare had no trouble gripping Ciel's mind through the harm and haze.

It started with the cold and rough accent of the streets, the smell and the despair.
Shackled.
Curled away, against the bars that opened to the walls, small, as small as he could.
Faceless others experienced the same despair.
Others had moved beyond the limit, languishing.
Empty eyes.
Listless bodies.
Powerless.
No longer willing or able to resist or rebel or even react.
Painful, rough.
Force-fed, kept like cattle.
Dead kids were left there until feeding time, dragged off with laughs and complains for all to see.
When live ones were dragged away they came back hurting. Sometimes they didn't come back.

A few were still new enough to care and fear.

Hope faded fast for everyone.

Father couldn't come.

Tiny hands grabbed the bars, scared, feeling tears on his cheek, watching as other went through the same.

Mother couldn't come.

It was still so cold…

No one could help.

Through the ordeal there was only a spot of warmth, a smile in a mirrored face, a hand held, a promise made.

It was warm, driving the cold away every time he reached out, reassuring a spark that...

Was taken away, screaming, hands reaching out, calling for him, fear finally gripping his heart...

Snuffed out by a bloody dagger strike

The scream tore through the tangled memories

The Young Master's shout was sudden and abrupt, startling most of those present in the room with the sound and sudden motion. Ever since the treatment he had been unmoving under the covers. The servants had all gathered in the room both in worry and in the agreed upon protocol for defending the boyo.

Meyrin jumped from the chair, next to the window, hand pressing on her chest, trying to calm the startled heart.

Bard snorted, the snore cut short, straightening and searching for a threat.

"Young Master!" Sebastian turned, holding the water and wet cloths they had been using to lower the fever, allowing a relieved sigh out. "Ah. I was truly worried for a moment." He admitted sternly, placing the bowl down, approaching. It would have been dissatisfying to have disease and poison end the deal.

"I'm so glad young master!" Finny looked up, holding the boyo's hand, starting to simper.

Snake peeked, nodding, his expression baffled but concerned.

Mouser stood from the chairs by the fireplace, stretching, walking to the bed.

"I think I lost a few years there." Bard was smiling again, hands on his hips.

"Yes indeed…" Tanaka agreed, the frown he had been sporting while they bandaged and nursed the boyo gone.

"How are you feeling Young Master Ciel?" Meyrin asked in a gentle tone, relieved.
"Ciel?" The boyo mumbled the name in recognition, eye moving, arms waving in the air aimlessly.

"Young master? What's wrong?" Sebastian frowned and reached out, trying to grab hold of the boyo before the flailing upset any of his blisters.

The touch was light. The boyo however shuddered and snapped, pushing Sebastian's arm away, scooting back, colliding into Finny whose hand was still holding his. But instead of the extreme reaction he clung to the gardener, spooked.

"Ciel! No… don't hurt Ciel anymore…" He mumbled, eye wide, panting, sweating, disoriented.

"Oh bugger…" Mouser murmured. She knew those reactions. Most did not endure.

"It's dark… where am I? I'm scared…" The boyo was mumbling, curling over himself and into Finny, agitated.

"Young master? What's wrong? It's not…" Tanaka stopped Sebastian's reaching hand. Mouser covered his mouth before he blabbed. Confused the demon stepped back to assess the odd situation.

"Who's there? I can't see…" The boyo kept calling out. However his eye seemed to be reacting, tracking whoever made a sound.

"Could he be…" Sebastian understood most of what was happening.

"I'm afraid the Young master's…" Tanaka was also seeing it but tried to keep the truth quiet for a little longer.

"Someone… turn on the lights…" Shaking the boyo was pleading, eye closing, tears falling.

Mouser sighed. Better to intervene. It was habit.

"Boyo… It's dark because you were hurt." The thief spoke up. Noticing the flinch to the accent sneaking into her voice she changed it, crushing the cockney into a smoother tone. "We are keeping the curtains shut because we don't know if your sight has been harmed." The shivering ebbed a bit. Finny tried to hug him. It seemed to be helping. Mouser smiled and nodded at the gardener, sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at the light of noon that came through the window. "You don't want more pain…" She whispered, understanding, sweet. "What if light poured in too brightly and harmed your sight even more?" The shivering stopped. The lies were making him feel safer. That even if he had lost his sight they were taking care of him. "Can I touch you boyo?" The thief asked after a moment.

"No." The answer was small but quick.

"Fair enough." Mouser sighed, unsurprised. Some clung. Some shied away from all. Having been holding Finny's hand when awakening had forged a tether to cling to. There was no reason to push it away yet. He was reacting and responding. Not begging to die just yet. A breakdown was never pretty. "You don't need to be scared now." She said, smiling to everyone. "Do you want some water?"

"No…" the same short shy answer now that he was calming.

"I am not shoving it down your throat boyo but it would be good if you take a few sips." She poured a glass and handed it to Finny. "You must be parched and burning. Just a sip." Moving lightly she aided Finny, leaning against his back. "Take the cup to his mouth gently and tip it. Let
the water touch his lips." The boyo drank as Finny was trying to do what he was told with as much finesse as he could muster. "Finny pull the covers a bit more." Taking charge she shifted things a bit.

It was just another broken child who would either fight through or die wallowing.
Meyrin was able to hold the sobbing and tears until the group left the room and the shivering weepy mess of a boyo within, closing the door silently. Finny was staying behind as a guard and reassurance. With the boyo asleep he should be able to handle the new responsibility.

"Dammit stop crying. It's bad luck. He might get better." Bard bristled at the display, trying to dispel the fear through the forceful statement of what they did not know. Meyrin rubbed her teary eyes, glasses out of the way, squinting, taking a few deep breaths.

"But we can't take care of him while he's like that. Says Keats." Snake relayed the snake's thoughts on the situation, glancing at it before looking down again, uncomfortable.

Attempts of basic care had been semi-thwarted by the constant fear. Between Mouser's guidance and Finny being tolerated it was possible, if painstakingly slow. But the blindness was what was weighting down their thoughts the most.

"He even rejected Sebastian." Tanaka sighed and added his doubts and observations.

"Just what happened to him." Meyrin whispered, putting her glasses away, taking the tissue Mouser offered her.

"It's beyond me why Finny is fine." Bard grumbled, retrieving his cigarettes.

"Finny was holding his hand." Mouser nicked one and exchanged lighter with the chef. "It may be as simple as that. He felt safe when he awoke to that contact and created a bond. In my opinion he is rather lucid despite the sniffing and snivelling." Not begging to die yet at any rate. In her experience the boyo was still salvageable. Nothing she hadn't dealt with before.

"What shall we do Sebastian?" The former butler inquired wearily. Even if he had his own opinion Sebastian was the one that was officially in charge of the household in case of the master's inability to lead.

"If the young master orders me not to touch him I can't go near him." Sebastian broke his silence carefully, opening the watch, checking the time. "In any case let's wait until lord Sullivan gets up so we can discuss matters." Closing the clock he looked around, assessing the state of the household staff. "You should be getting some rest as well." The group looked haggard, tired and possibly their emotional state was nowhere near optimal. And they should not forget they were in possibly hostile terrain.

"What about you?" Meyrin asked, rubbing her eyes, managing to curb her tears.

"I have matters to attend to." Sebastian stated dryly, turning away.

"Sebastian." Mouser called, slowly. "Wait."

"I would prefer if you didn't come." The demon murmured with his back turned.

"Would you now." Her reply was barbed and ignored.

The servants followed the pair with a concerned, dubious look before returning to their rooms, in a gloomy silence, leaving the boyo to Finny's care.
The foreboding feeling from last night, that heaviness that each breath had drawn in, was gone. Still the debacle made him cautious. With Mouser following Sebastian was not willing to risk harm to his covenant even if she had followed against his wishes. She had barely spoken to him after the treatment, quiet, keeping her shadow grinning. It was not a favourable sign.

"The strange miasma is gone." Sebastian announced, considering the air quality in the area that had poisoned them. "But there is still no sign of life." Mouser nodded and advanced, showing no signs of discomfort beyond a small sneeze as she stepped on the brittle dead leaves.

"There are no corpses about." She kicked the ground, watching the undergrowth crumble as if burnt. Dust bloomed and fell, heavy. "I've seen birds drop from the sky with smog... the smell... "She paused, turning, finding Sebastian examining the deflated bumps that had bubbled with pus beneath the glove, hand closing into a fist after the fabric was replaced, the frown in deepening. Clicking her tongue she approached, holding his hand, unfolding the fingers until their palms were flush. "It's like rancid garlic or like dodgy bottle of relish at the bottom of the cabinet..."

"There is no way a demon should have been affected by something as a miasma." Annoyance followed the statement, prodded by the look of concern that was now fighting with the aggravation in her eyes. Sebastian would have preferred to see neither of those. Mouser was still looking fine. No tears. No blood. No darkening, blistering skin. She sneezed again. Smiling slightly he rubbed her nose with his handkerchief.

"True." In befuddlement it took Mouser a bit longer to refocus on the job that had brought them back to the scene of the poisoning. "Miasma is basic." Overly dramatic demons even used it to make a grand entrance and render humans sluggish, less likely to flee. "It can be mixed with poison but the damage comes from long exposure. To harm a demon it had to be concentrated to an extreme extent. And that had to be the work of either a very focused witch, demon or a scientist." She examined his skin, rolling the sleeves, fangs responding to anger. Lae bristled in response. "I made a few poisons from Snake's black mamba able to affect a demon. Temporary but seconds can be crucial..." But its effects were under the skin. This was... Surface. A damaged mask...

"The question now is what exactly is this werewolf..." Everything was mismatched and tangled. Reaching out he plucked a few samples from the curling, blackened branches. "Anyhow it seems best if we stay away from the woods until the young master recovers." Sebastian pocketed the twigs and looked around once more. Under the sunlight it did look very different. The absence of the creatures spotted last night. The absence of marks made by that creature. It was deliberate erasure. "It seems this mission is ill-fitting for us."

"Will you be delivering that?" Mouser asked as they returned. She was feeling odd, unable to think through a tangle in her mind. She was angry and concerned, cornered and nursing a growing need to break things. It was not unusual. Loss meant something had been taken. And it meant she had to kill whoever had done it to make herself feel less slighted. But she hadn't lost anything... Sebastian was there, harmed but alive. The boyo was struggling but she had not killed him. Yet. He hadn't asked it of her. Most did after a few broken sobbing days. Most wanted out after they looked inside... She still wanted to rend things apart. Lae was not helping, encouraging her to call him and shed some blood.

"For the Young Master's findings to be fully justified we need the human and official perspective so yes. Sebastian admitted. "I will be gone for an hour at most."

"I want you." Murmuring the thief looked away, frowning, growing angry again.
Sebastian said nothing to that, taking her hand as they walked, holding it firmly.
Chapter 174

Upon his return to the assigned rooms Sebastian found himself face-to-face with a snarling devil dog. He closed the door quickly, staring at the carved wood surface, sighing, looking down, resigning himself to face the growing legion of his covenant. It was unlikely that she had summoned them deliberately but they most likely had deemed the situation as perilous based on the tense reactions of their mistress. Mouser had fallen prey to the past. Meaning she was balancing on the edge of a murderous spree, a drinking spree or just a long nap in a huff.

There was not enough in that time-warped village to even start to get her tipsy.

The people within had to stay alive for a little longer.

And sleep would be troublesome when Sebastian needed her advice in regards to the Young Master's condition and to manage the group confusion lingered.

The door was pushed open, the raspy sound ignored, palm firmly pressing on the snout to push it back as he entered, scanning the room. It was an oddly large space for servants and certainly for visiting help. Now it was filled to the bursting point by the four dogs in full furry form. All of them were glaring. More teeth were bared when the demon closed the door behind him, standing straight, hands going behind his back.

Mouser was leaning against the belly of one of the bent-eared Cerberus, reading. Her course of action seemed to have remained undecided in the time he had been gone. Sebastian hoped. She was also skilled at hiding corpses and now with those dogs at her beck and call feeding remains to them was also the quickest, easiest route to keep any assassination hidden. From humans or him if the thief so decided. She looked up blankly and closed the novel. Her eyes were brown, quieter. Her shadow was gone. The dogs stopped their growling now that Sebastian had her attention, putting a show of respectful behaviour, sitting around the bed, still scowling.

"Progress?" Mouser asked, dissatisfied. A muzzle came near her hands, taking the book, placing it on the bedside table. Another part of the Cerberus balanced a glass on its nose. Pluto was to one that fetched the bottle and poured. A little scratch under the chin seemed to be all the reward they wanted.

"Of a sort." Sebastian retorted without approaching. "There is nothing to be done outside for now." He waited a moment. "Now… I believe you claimed to need me?" He pressed, attempting to change her mood.

"Mistress is upset." The dog she was using as a pillow retorted, snarling, lowering its head for confrontation. The one with the straight ears balanced the cigarette case on its face, teeth bared to wrinkle the snout for balance. Pluto used hellfire to supply the light. The third part of the Cerberus took the glass, head tilted to keep it straight between the fangs.

"Am not…" Mouser sulked, sitting straight, waving the lit cigarette, glancing around, less listless than she had been when Sebastian arrived. "Go home." She stood, sighing. In a blink they bowed and were gone. "I believe what I said was that I wanted you." The thief continued, approaching barefoot, cigarette vanishing in flames, ashes tossed to the air, tiptoeing, hands sliding into the tailcoat, pushing it off, purposely letting it fall and crumple, diverting his attention from tidying with a tug on the tie.

"I understand you distress." Sebastian retorted in a whisper, leaning down, sweeping her hair away
from her cheeks, breath brushing against the shell of her ear, near the silver and gold lining it. "But I do have to point out that I am indeed alive so there should be no issue."

The pain of his blistered flesh being rendered off by the silver tendrils of Laevateinn made him regret the smart comment for a brief flash. It had held back, cutting what was needed off Sebastian's chest, just a small piece that started to heal right away. It had also sneaked a bit of blood off of him.

"Do not use my own words on me, dearie." Mouser snickered, having harvested the compromised flesh needed to make her own investigations, tapping the sharp edges of the bladeling, convincing him to let go and go back to sleep. It vanished from her wrist, curled as a bracelet near the book. She could not do the same to the boyo but what remained on Sebastian should be enough to poke about. Mouser returned to undressing his shirt, lapping at the wound as well, helping it along as the demon's arms went around her, pulling her off the floor. "But it's true you are." Arms around his neck Mouser snuggled, sighing. "Your blood feels a lot more bitter than usual…" She mumbled tip of the tongue touching her lips. "Lae…" She started to call but frowned, stopping, thinking.

"Has anything changed?" Sebastian sat on the bed, keeping her on his lap.

Thankfully the dogs had been washed enough to lose that upsetting, unrefined pong.

"Nightmares and screams." Calming and settling, seeing his condition improved and the wounds vanishing a soothed Mouser closed her eyes, nuzzling.
Breakfast for dinner was not a very traditional choice yet the circumstances were less than ordinary. And a proper British breakfast should be enough to impress the young lady's appetite with quantity, quality and variety.

Sweets and savouries with a selection of milk, tea and juices. And of course breakfast food took comparatively less time to cook than a regular meal, be it lunch or dinner and certainly less than tea due to the absence of decorated cakes. Time factored heavily in Sebastian's decision of feast after the busy night and restless day. After all he had to keep to the standards the Young Master required even if the contract was in a state of suspension.

"Would this sway you?" The demon asked, setting the table with the dishes that would not be compromised by temperature shifts, readying the table for a dazzling performance, stepping back.

"Everything tastes weak." Mouser glanced at the pastries she carried, her growing inability to taste food just a lingering sadness. The ornate platter didn't match other pieces but everything seemed to go even as they differed. It looked pretty and quirky. "But this looks very tempting even if there aren't enough sweets for my former taste." Placing it at an angle to the girl's chair made it look like a vast feast was being paraded over the off-white linens. "So... what if she doesn't have the answers you want?"

"Would you be able to supply them?" Sebastian turned slightly, catching the heavy steps in the corridor.

"I do have nicked the means." Mouser smiled and took her place near the door. "I have always thought a diary was a bad idea." But it could cost them time they didn't have if they were unable to tap the source for ready answers.

Lord Sullivan seemed enthusiastic and impressed as her butler carried her into the dining room where the table was fully set under gleaming lights, brighter than she had ever seen them, and Sebastian had amped up the charm to a sickeningly sweet level of solicitude. As bribery went that was looking none too obvious. Of course she could also be unaware of what it was in the first place. Softening a target for interrogation could be done in several ways. Not everything had to be violent and fast even if it was conveniently handy.

«We have caused you a terrible inconvenience last night.» Apologetic, respectful, regretful. Missing all the sincerity in the world but convincing to a fault. «It is not much but as an apology I have prepared you breakfast.» And the pretence seemed to be quite unnecessary as the Lady was concerned for she only had eyes for the pretty food in front of her plush seat. Wolfram was also caught in the same daze although his motives were not quite as gluttonous. If there was to be yet another butler competition the victor would be clear. «Please enjoy.» Sebastian encouraged as he poured tea and placed the brew on its proper place, filling a plate.

Accompanied by praise, hums of delight and questions Sieglinde made short work of the food before her.

Halfway through it Sebastian began weaving his questions and the description of the events that had transpired after she had treated them and retired to her chambers.

«I see.» Reclining on her chair while enjoying the last bite of the maid-of-honour the young witch turned her demeanour into seriousness, thinking calmly. Clearing the table Mouser watched the
reactions as Sebastian's back was turned, preparing the second tea to finish off the meal perfectly. «So the miasma got into his eye.»

«Can it be healed?» The tea cup was placed in front of her on the now empty space. The plate was taken away as it was discarded.

«I cannot tell until I have examined the damage.» Sieglinde seemed to be making calculations. Possibly the time of exposure. Last night she seemed very concerned about that. After a few seconds her eyes focused on Sebastian, watching, taking inventory of the damage the surface showed. «He won't let anyone near him?»

«Almost.» Sebastian stood by the left side of the table opposite to Wolfram. Mouser vanished the cart on the corridor, pretending to go to the kitchen, listening at the door, counting the time before returning. «For some reason he is only allowing our gardener close.» As she joined them the demon turned to her to complete the picture. 'Mouser seems to be able to talk him down of the panic but not much else.»

«I have been with several kids in this state of panic.» The thief shrugged, noticing the big green eyes growing shrewd.

«So he prefers the in-between hard muscle and soft flesh…» Sieglinde murmured with a befuddled grunt.

«I would say that he likes them a bit forceful but not enough to get to a coercive state.» Mouser answered. «Never seen much of an initiative taken, you see…»

«I knew he was odd…»

«Lord Sullivan?» Sebastian tilted his head, confused and knowing they were getting very off course.

«Oh, nothing, nothing.» Coughing to clear the subject Sieglinde turned to the questions asked. «The werewolf's miasma weakens the heart and brews fear.» Mouser frowned. It was actually called miasma? But the weakening should only be physical, fatigue. Creating fear through magic was much the same as creating it by talking or manipulation, a work of the mind. Shortcuts included pain, memories…recollecting the effect of the angel's threads left a chill on he spine. «There might be a reason why he only lets the gardener near.» Conjecturing Sieglinde reached for the tea.

«If that is true then the Young Master may simply be rejecting "adults".» Sebastian sighed, reaching the logical conclusion to the effect the girl was describing.

Mouser shrugged, having reached that assumption sooner. But that was due to simple experience. Adults seemed to have always been the problem.

«Why?» Yet there was someone who had not experienced anything to cement that knowledge.

«The Young Master has been through some trials in the past.» The evasive answer would not be enough for most but Sieglinde didn't seem able to find a way to pry.

«What is the miasma in the forest?» Mouser took over the issue, doing her own nosing around.

«It's an evil aura the werewolves emit.» Well… if her dogs were going to parp poison it better be usable. Sieglinde looked serious though so the source of emission might not be that… base. «Humans caught in it are cursed to become as grotesque as the monsters themselves.» So…
disfigurement, poisoning and mental scarring. Seemed more like a weapon than a concealing method or a protective cloak. «The only cure is the secret ritual and medicine of the Green Witch. I have received it from my ancestors as part of my duty.» And that was what had been done last night.

«That's why I told you not to go into the forest.» Wolfram shouted, breaking the sullen silence he had kept, slamming his hands on the table, the empty tea cup falling from its saucer. «I warned you time and again.» Straightening he charged towards Sebastian, grabbing the front of his shirt, shouting. Mouser's eyes narrowed but she didn't interfere, hands behind her back, fingertips touching the handle of the dagger within her sleeve, feeling Lae grow over it, flush against her palm, begging. «Why did you go? The werewolves don't want to hurt people!» They don't? Smiling the thief tapped the demon weapon. He was amused too. There was no way of knowing that, now was there? Not for sure if things were as they said. «Why can't you understand that?»

«Wolfram stop.» Sieglinde pleaded, perturbed.

Wolfram gritted his teeth, glaring, letting go, stepping back reluctantly.

«Why you ask?» Sebastian returned order to his clothes, smiling a bit, taunting, challenging. «Well I have seen Grim Reapers, Angels and Demons but I have never seen a werewolf.» The dogs came close but they were all demons by nature. «I was curious about what kind of thing it would be.»

The statement was met by very confused stares.

"That is so close to being a lie that you must be squirming in your orders." Mouser snorted.

"Perhaps, but you cannot deny that their reactions are amusing." Sebastian snickered behind his glove, returning to the business at hand. «The heart of the matter is that you are the only one that can cure the Young Master.»

«Indeed I am.» Sieglinde confirmed with a nod.

«Then…» Kneeling in a formal bow Sebastian made his request. «Lord Sullivan please save the Young Master. In exchange I will do anything you wish of me.»

«Well then Sebastian.» With a little haughty finesse Sieglinde accepted the offer, setting the terms. «Until Ciel is healed you shall be my butler.»

Wolfram was shocked. Sieglinde was pleased. Sebastian was serious. Mouser believed he would be a good way to make sure the girl was where she should while she looked for what they wanted out of the situation.

«Lord Sullivan you can't. You do not know these people.» Suspicion and jealousy. He should be easy to work into shape with those feelings whirling about and the focus on the girl. «That man is…»

«It's not everyday someone from the outside reaches us.» Sieglinde retorted. «I have a lot to ask. This is my decision.»

«Young lady…» Ignored Wolfram looked down.

«I'll have him tell me everything about everything… everything.» her little smug smile opened a lot of possibilities and made it obvious what she was thinking of asking. Mouser chuckled when she noticed a slight blanching on her demon's expression. Incredible how fast he went prudish when on duty. And how fast he discarded that when riled, interested or needing a sensuous touch to smooth
a situation. «Anyway wolf… Sebastian is more capable than you. You should learn from him as well.»
"NOOOOO!" Panic was the immediate response the Young Master went into as soon as Sebastian reached out, announcing his presence. The pillow was swung in the demon's general direction. Despite the pain the burns surely generated he was standing and shouting. "Get away! Don't touch me! Don't touch me!" the fabric ripped at the seams, sending a flurry of feathers in every direction.

"Young master you should not this worked up." Sebastian stepped back, attempting to put a stop at the tantrum. "You are recovering…" His words however only seemed to increase Ciel's agitation.

"Shut up! Get out!" The order was tense and fearful but an order nonetheless.

"Understood." Deterred by the terms of the deal Sebastian left the room, closing the door audibly on the way, stopping in the corridor. "No change then." He murmured, resuming his way to attend to the daily chores, brushing pillow feathers from the tailcoat, stopping in front of a mirror. The blemished reflection was not to his taste at all. "I don't really understand how fast humans heal..." the demon murmured to himself, staring, placing a gloved hand on the flat surface. "but it should be better by now." Deciding for the sake of aesthetic he brushed the palm over the reflection, clearing the burns and wound away from the surface. "I can't be unsightly when serving a lady." He continued, smiling back at the grinning reflection of Mouser behind him. "That should do it."

"Perhaps. But it isn't that easy to wipe away the fear from a little boyo is it..." Mouser answered, arms crossed. "you are being too pushy. That will only make him dead faster."

"You still believe he will?" Turning the demon finished the preparations of his look.

"Deader than a dodo. You can kill him, I can kill him, he can kill himself, whatever is in the poison can have a sudden side effect and kill him." Mouser shrugged. He was displaying lots of the signs but still on the edge of gone. It would take very little now. Another scare. A moment of doubt. Push away or bring back. It was both a choice and a sentence. "That is why you are being so hasty. You want to crack through the fear and get the contract back on track. Or... Yet..." Death or doom if she was feeling dramatic. Damned the boyo was anyhow.

"Even so you are caring for him and dealing with the..." Sebastian gestured, unable to clearly categorize what the Young Master was displaying. "Is it belief, hope, practicality?"

"I don't like letting those that are mine die alone." Mouser sighed. "Have a little patience. Time hasn't run out and that stubborn streak of his may bark at you at any moment. If not you'll have your fill."

"Under baked. Under seasoned." Muttering in annoyance Sebastian caressed her hair, braiding the fringe, tucking it behind her ear with a silver pin.

"It is still food." Mouser chuckled, feeling less inclined towards aggression now that the wounds were gone.

"Well then." Sebastian accepted her thoughts with a nod. Indeed it would be food but that was the mindset of someone who had gone hungry one too many times. "Ah... time." The idle thought brought him to his watch. "I should prepare the morning tea."

"Go, go... I'll try to undo your mess until Finny gets here and I can go back to poking about." Mouser turned and walked up the corridor, into the boyo's room.
"Good morning everyone." The usual greeting. Even though the setting had changed nothing else seemed to have. The answer was the same, the readiness seemed unchanged. But there were other people in the kitchen, women in outdated garb glaring at Sebastian as he walked in. The suspicion was unchanged. Perhaps even heightened. That could mean that Wolfram, standing right next to them, had reported the night's stroll into forbidden terrain.

«The village women help preparing the food and in taking care of the young lady.» Wolfram supplied. Those had been the people walking into the manor and away last night, around the time they had been making preparations to head out. Mouser perhaps knew a bit more about them as she had been monitoring the area.

«I see.» Politely the demon bowed. «My introduction comes a bit late but I am Sebastian and I will be serving as Lord Sullivan's butler for a while.»

«I'm Hilde.» The blonde stated with a sneer.

«Grete.» The one with the dark hair had a cold and haughty tone to her voice.

«I'm Anne.» The youngest stuttered.

«Very well.» Uncaring but feigning the interest needed Sebastian straightened and completed the trite niceties needed to manoeuvre amongst humans. «If you have need of any aid please ask.» that done he sorted his thoughts and clapped, capturing the Phantomhive servant's attention. "Well then. As for today's duties. Bard prepare for lunch."

"Leave it to me." Bard answered promptly, standing from the bench, stretching.

"Snake polish the silverware." It looked rather haggard.

"Understood, says Emily." Snake answered for the female around his neck, looking down shyly.

"Meyrin change the linens."

"Yes."

"Finn will be taking care of the young master." It came as a shock to the gardener that had begun to give his standard cheery response before realizing what was being asked of him that day. "At the moment you are the only one whose touch he tolerates so you are the only one who can take care of him." Caring for a sick person involved lots of touching for bandaging, fevers, feeding and helping with motion. So there was no other way to go around the Young Master's sudden onset of touch aversion. "For now make sure he can eat and keep his breakfast down. It's a light meal so it should not be a problem. If he doesn't eat try offering some warm milk with honey." From him those should be the only instructions he needed. Mouser would no doubt supply the rest before leaving.

"Milk?" Finny mumbled, puzzled, eyes darting from side to side.

"It used to be something the young master found comforting." Sebastian considered. "I will be taking care of Lord Sullivan as agreed." The old man took a sip of his tea. Finishing up the morning briefing Sebastian issued the last instruction. "Tanaka the same as usual would be fine. Please begin."

Last instructions supplied he began to set his own counter space for the preparation of the lady's
morning tea.

Doing so under the massive glare of Wolfram however was rather annoying

*I rather feel like he may bite at any moment.* Sebastian mused as worked. It was rather reminiscent of the bunch of glower dogs from a few hours ago.
Morning boyo." Mouser called, entering the room, voice calm and low. No need to startle the little pile of covers huddled under one of the draping sides of the canopy. He would be needing air in a soon as seconds or as late as in a minute. "Sebastian is gone now." She gathered the feathers, making them float and follow her into their torn cover, tying the jagged edges and gripping it, putting the destroyed pillowcase on the table, finding her unfinished work with the amulets. For later, she decided, stashing them.

"Truly?" The boyo peeked, wincing. He was reacting to the light but didn't seem able to see the room as it was. However his eye was following her motions. So the damage seemed to be partial. From a distance it didn't look damaged. Having seen people blinded by poison, steam and other unpleasant things tossed at the eyes Mouser was fairly sure that it was not as serious as what was going on inside. Eyes were frail and infected easily and when they did it was very noticeable. The only thing she could see was a blank stare and that was easily attributed to the ordeal.

"Yes." The thief stated, still frowning, examining, placing her tellers, adjusting the glasses carefully, focusing on the boyo. Fear with no form or name. Just fear. Seemed too generic for that reaction. Situations where fear was the sole thing usually were not the hardest. They were self-inflicted, without basis or actual substance, drawing from past or imagined events. Was he scared of everything or didn't know what he should be afraid of? Pain was a big part of the swirling mix but as far as her trick could tell her it was the only current solid foundation of the whole fit. "If you want I can make sure he will not return unless you call." Experience however made it all too plausible. Source was gone and head was doing all the work. And of course being in actual pain due to the injured body did no favours.

"I don't want him. Keep him away." The boyo sobbed.

It was not Sebastian the teller said he feared now that the name had been mentioned and the fear found a focus.

It was what was tied to the summons.

Pain again but this time more remembered than felt. Fear of it. Of feeling it again.

"Of course boyo." Mouser took the glasses off, blinking, cleaning the lenses before tossing them back to the luggage. Agreeing quieted him right quick. "Finny should be arriving with breakfast."

"I don't want any." The mumble was faint and unsure.

"No one will force you." Mouser reassured him, knowing from the previous times food or water had been brought, mentioned or offered that he had developed that aversion. Vomiting would do that. "But you need to eat at least a bit to prevent stomach pains." And using the current fear as a form of coercion made it very easy to manipulate. Saying pain could be lessened or kept away would always work for those who were desperate to believe and escape.

There were no more signs of the morning conflict. It would not be good for the other servants of the Phantomhive household to see how grave the rift was at the moment. The false promise had quieted most of that fearful agitation and telling him what was to come barging in and what would keep painful experiences away was enough.

There was no answer from the boyo. His bandaged hands twisted the cover, ready to pull it over his
head and scuttle for the curtains and headboard as soon as something spooked him. At that point sneezing mice could do it.

"Do you want me to stay until Finny arrives? Protecting you from anything that comes?" Mouser offered when he flinched at the sound of the door as she readied to leave. A little nod, filled with hesitation. Shouldn't be too much of a delay... "I'm sitting next to the bed." She placed the chair where she said she would, watching for any panicked signs. None. Good. It increased the chances he could be pulled out of that sobbing state without the need of a knife to the heart "Do you want a story?"

The offer gripped the boyo's attention almost immediately.

It was as close to cute as he ever gotten without being deliberate about it.

Smiling Mouser searched for the right tale to ensure a compliant mood.

«Young lady it's time to awake.» Sebastian announced as he and Wolfram entered the Green Witch's chambers. The young lady sat and stretched, black hair loose around her, eyes gleaming in excitement. The whimsical theme that permeated the castle seemed to be as thickly applied there as everywhere else. Ignoring the gloom of the other man Sebastian proceeded with the usual routine, preparing and pouring the tea into the cup, offering it. «Today's tea is a Ronnefeldt's Ceylon blend.»

«I've never heard of this...» Little hands held the cup and saucer wrong, eyes narrowing as Sieglinde sniffed the mix, curious. «Is that the name of the leaves?»

«I hope it's to your taste.» Sebastian bowed his head slightly.

«It's good.» A single sip perked her up. The enthusiasm returned. «I've never had wake-up tea before.»

«It's a butler's duty to see to it that the master has a refreshing start of the day.» Stating the standard answer only seemed to increase Wolfram's annoyance. Seeing his lady getting increasingly dazzled by the newcomers he was so much against was a growing annoyance.

«Wolf take note.» She ordered chirpily, only increasing the angry animosity.

One of the women arrived as she was finishing the first meal, carrying one of the ornate heavy dresses in her arms, bowing, smiling for the girl.

«Well then lord Sullivan let's get you dressed.» Hilde asked as Sieglinde scooted to the edge of the bed, legs dangling, swinging against the mattress.

«Today I want to wear clothes from the outside world.» She announced much to the shock of her butler and the villager.

«Well... aside from the clothes of our maid and secretary...» As the master's request was made Sebastian had to acquiesce or at least make it look like he was giving it actual thought and attention. Meyrin's and Mouser's clothes would be too plain and ill-fitting. «The only items that would fit and boast enough quality would be the young master's clothes.»

«That will do» Undeterred Sieglinde nodded.

«But those are a man's clothes!» Hilde shouted in shock. «Lord Sullivan you should not.»
«Why not?» Sieglinde pouted.

Sebastian sighed before noticing the quality materials around him.

There was another solution that could be presented.

And if they wanted to keep to a decent schedule he needed to act and have it done as soon as possible.

«Young lady would you let me take this cover?» Sebastian requested, leaning and grasping the fabric. It felt pliable and thin enough to be turned into an outfit.

«I don't mind but what for?»

«It will be just a moment.» Permission given he took the cover and walked out of the room. Finding the first empty area and getting to work, cutting, sewing and pleating. Assembly took five minutes. The fit was a bit loose. But as the Young Lady stood on wobbly legs in front of the mirror doling out amazed praise and the objectors stood to the side in stunned silence Sebastian took his bow and smiled. «I am glad you're satisfied.» At that point ingratiating himself came first.

«How did you make this in such a short amount of time?» Slowly she turned and watched the layered skirt bounce.

«That is a trade secret.» Sebastian smiled. «It is nowhere near what a more refined and skilled tailor could make but…"  

«No. It's light and easy to move around in. I like it.» The immediate reaction placation and praise told the demon the method was working smoothly.

«Very well.» Sebastian nodded and picked her up. Instead of taking her as a doll, one-armed as Wolfram did, Sebastian lifted her in a smoother way, bridal almost. Sieglinde's expression showed that it had been the right choice to impress. Wolfram's bitterness was a nice bonus to have. «Now young lady it's time for breakfast.»
Another dazzling display of civilized sophistication added yet another layer to the careful edification of trust. Just by accommodating whims and offering new sights and thrills was enough to ingratiate himself to this new master. Sebastian noticed fairly quickly that it was much easier than expected. For all the "must not trust strangers" education Sieglinde Sullivan had received was offset by a hunger for knowledge and new things that was tangled with the deep gullibility bread from a sheltered upbringing. What did she know if it did not come from a book?

«I can't believe how beautifully everything is laid out.» The little witch was amazed even before she was sat down, looking around. If anyone else was carrying her the balance would have been precarious. Sebastian ignored the squirming with ease and delivered Sieglinde to her plush chair, glancing at the setting, satisfied all was done correctly before stepping back, waiting. «Wolf can't do this by himself.» Eyes gleaming Sieglinde stared at the food and silverware and crockery before her stomach reminded her why things like that were used for. «Well let's dig in.» Enthusiastic she reached for the innermost fork.

«Please wait a moment.» If Sebastian was to take on the duties of a butler for someone else the master should be trained as well. his gloved hand stopped the motion to grab the bigger fork and start shovelling food in the uncouth way he had previously witnessed. "You are using the silverware in the wrong order." The polite information held none of the disapproval other less than polite beings would be faced with. It was not the time for strictness even if he was taking on the role of the tutor. Again. Amusingly enough he did feel the urge to fetch his glasses to make the transition. A quirk that made the role easier to take on.

«Order?» Puzzled Sieglinde repeated, staring like an owl, head tilting left and right for a few seconds. Then she flinched and leaned back when realizing how close he was to her.

«Yes.» Satisfied to have her attention Sebastian continued. «Silverware is to be used from the outside in.» Mousser had a very interesting reaction to those lessons. They had involved stabbing motions while using the tools in the polite order he was demanding. After the fish knife occurrence. In any event prudence made the demon step slightly out of range. «When eating the hors d'oeuvre please use the outermost fork and knife.»

«Isn't any of the fine if I can eat with it?» Pouting the girl stared at the tools. Now she was looking rather annoyed at their presence.

«No, young lady.» Assertive Sebastian loomed over her, close to scolding but not quite harsh enough to be said he was out of place. Not by British standards anyway. «A Lord should place more value on dignity.» Sebastian stated, sighing as if he regretted the harshness. It was not a fraction of what was needed but this was not the time. «I realise it is rude, perhaps even disrespectful and out of place, but your table manners need work. A lady of your statute should not be seen acting in such a manner.»

«How dare you!» Wolfram was incensed. His quick temper and ever present predisposition to violent reactions was very telling. Storing the information for later use Sebastian straightened and faced the glare with cold grace and disdain, making sure to imprint his beliefs. Or a version of them at least.

«Coddling a charge and delivering undue praise is not a butler's duty.» The Green witch's butler shrunk back into silence. «Sometimes it is necessary to be unsympathetic and strict in order to keep your Lord from disgrace.» Changing into a smile for the Lady Sebastian readjusted the forks to
"I can't stand it." Bard was complaining loudly as he chopped. He had been doing that while preparing lunch for as long as Sebastian had been gone. Met with no answer he just kept ranting until Meyrin walked into the room, leaving the trays in the sink.

"What are you talking about?" She asked, cleaning her hands, joining the group at the table.

"That bastard Sebastian." Bard restarted the complaints now that he had a fresh and interested audience. "Being all uncaring while the young master is sick."

"I feel the same way. What a cold-hearted guy says Wilde." Snake nodded along his snake's and
his own opinion glancing up. "We're sorry Silk."

Mouser shrugged, leaning against the doorway smoking. The day was sunny. No traces of the heavy morning fog. The garden in front of her was filled with less poisonous and more edible plants than the front yard. It was also an overgrown mess that was not tended. Just allowed to grow and raided when needed. The outside gave clues but they were not as interesting as the inside. Hollow walls. Locked rooms. A constant, heavy hum under their feet. The map was coming along. The stolen hints were piling in her room, ready for sorting.

"I'm seeing it as keeping a roof and a doctor on a leash while the boyo behaves like a scared toddler." Mouser joined the conversation snuffing out the butt on the stone wall next to her, walking back in.

Finn had gone into the room to help the boyo start the day and keep calm. She had left him sleepy from the story but the knock on the door as Finny had failed to speak up so the boyo could rest assured that it was not someone a bit more black had made him dive for the blanket fortress of warmth. Apologies had started to make it right.

"You say that but…" Meyrin mumbled, unsure of what to say. Shaken trust.

"Don't you think Sebastian has a plan?" Tanaka spoke up after a calm sip of his tea.

"Old man?" Bard stopped his ready enraged answer.

"But isn't taking care of the young master at all time a butler's duty? Says Oscar." Snake spoke for Oscar, also sharing the confusion as he de-stringed peas.

"Is that so?" Tanaka considered. "Worrying about the young master is not all that a butler has to do. There are other duties to consider." He nodded towards Mouser. The thief shrugged. It was obvious the old man knew why they were doing that. "As a butler you should make sure the master is perfectly healthy."

"Meaning not getting common colds when temporarily insane." Mouser mumbled with a chuckle, walking out of the house. Maybe it was time to explore the village a bit more thoroughly while there were too many people to interfere in the house.
Chapter 179

The Young Lady did not seem to have an area designed to be the study or a reading room. Wolfram guided them back to the room and brought out a round table and a chair. There were blank papers stacked next to her along with a feather pen. A few leather-bound journals were placed rather pointedly on the surface. The butler then stepped back as Sieglinde was placed on the chair and began to make demands of the new resource.

«Teach me you language.» The barrier seemed to have been rather bothersome for the lady. By ear alone was hard to start the process. Habit eased the issue but it was unlikely the little witch benefited from centuries of experience or a handy cheat.

«By that I am assuming English, correct?» Sebastian specified calmly, watching as the other man looked increasingly less comfortable. A single language was caging in a way. How could someone ask for anything if the language barrier was too great? When she had visited and if the Young Master lacked the barest of basics there would have been no way of avoiding a misunderstanding.

«It would make examining Ciel easier as well.» Interestingly she was cunning enough to use the perceived care as her main weapon of negotiation.

«Yes, indeed it would. Allow me a moment to prepare then.» As Sieglinde nodded, certain of victory Sebastian left the room and headed to the quarters that had been given to him. Mouser looked up from one of her books lounging in bed. "Were you not investigating?"

"Funny how people here burrow behind their doors." The thief answered. "Surprisingly big locks. Yet they are not hiding they ain't... " Tilting her head. She had wandered the village, feeling the vigilance on her back. But it was clear that what they hunted was not there. Nor beyond it. "How is the new master? Obnoxiously demanding?"

"Less unreasonably expectant." Sebastian considered while discarding the Young Master's study books. They were fit for learning German and would be of no use to do the reverse. "Wolfram however seems uncompromising. Would you..."

"Ask Sieglinde." Mouser gave him the map of the manor. All that she had seen was marked. All that was hidden was pinpointed, waiting for the moment to be looked into. "She has him tamed. And most likely will do what you ask of her if you smile. What are you looking for?"

"A book in English with less scandalous contents than these things you read." Sebastian picked up one of the Doxy series looking rather put upon. "And less involved than the other things that pick up your interest." The other book was part of demonic knowledge. Less than appropriate for other reasons. "Perhaps this would appeal to her interests." The Almanac was a household presence. For the sake of appearances it was also part of the luggage whenever they travelled. Just in case there was a suspicion or an inspection. A butler caring for a young master was expected to know how to deal with minor injuries and ailments. "Will you be checking on the Young Master?"

Mouser found her clock, consulting the time, sitting back down.

"In a bit." Just giving him a chance to eat without having adult supervision. "Do you want anything done meanwhile?"

«I do not have any English texts suitable for the exercise other than this and as a starting text it
may prove to be too complex.» Sebastian returned and donned his glasses, presenting the Family Physician's copy to Sieglinde Sullivan, ready to take on the tutor role as usual.

«What kind of book is it?» Interest unbroken she stared at the covers, mouthing the letters silently as she read the title, frowning, trying to grasp its meaning on her own.

«It's an almanac of English folk remedies.» The demons explained, caught by surprise in the expansive and enthusiastic response the Young Lady exhibited, snatching the book from his hands, opening it and starting to scan the pages and its images. Satisfied he waited. Of course such a thing would appeal to someone whose perceptions of witchcraft were solidly crafted towards healing and aiding. That she knew nothing of the medical revolutions and debunking of folk beliefs in the modern human world outside contributed for the fascination.

«Sebastian what is this magic elixir.» The turning of pages stopped and Sieglinde turned to open book towards him, pointing at the drawing of the bottle. It was quite clearly labelled but of course she would not be able to interpret what the words actually meant.

«Its opium tincture.» The demon answered plainly.

«O pee… it sounds a bit obscene doesn't it...» before he could explain the girl frowned and stared.

«It is mostly used as a cough medicine, anaesthetic and sleeping draught.» While her reaction to the sound of the words was amusing it served no purpose presently. «It is made from poppy seeds. The tincture is called Laudanum as well.»

«Oh… I see.» Name, origin and uses clarified she returned to leafing through the pages,

«What is this?» Another etching caught her attention.

«It is about a folk remedy for sore throat.» After a quick read Sebastian explained although he doubted the efficacy of that particular one. «It says to wrap bacon cooked in oil around the neck. Claims there is medicinal value in bacon.» Keeping the derision from his voice he waited. Better to have her get the excitement out of her mind before settling for the lesson.

«In bacon? I have never heard about this before.» Shocked but believing in the words of the book she turned to Wolfram. «Wolf! Get some bacon I want to try this!» Looking down the Green Witch's butler nodded and walked out.

The outside was growing more and more enticing for the Young Lady year by year even without that sudden affluence of outsiders into the village. That new butler was willing to impart any knowledge the Young Lady asked of him, no matter how trivial or how critically pernicious. Neglected duties, the attacks as warnings... that sick little brat delaying their departure.

«Wolfram.» Hilde called him in a curt tone, followed by the other two women. «Do you have a moment?» It was not a request he could refuse. They walked outside in silence. There she turned in clipped, harsh and stiff tones. «Why did you allow those outsiders to stay? They are nothing but a bad influence on Lord Sullivan.»

«As if I don't know that.» It fell in line with his thoughts but being told that stung. «But when she gets like that no one can stop her.» It was the only justification he had for how the Young Lady and himself were acting.

«Don't come running to us when this bites you back on the ass.» Unconvinced the women retreated with a warning, leaving him in the garden, staring down, looking rather conflicted.
Mouser watched quietly from the boyo's veranda, unnoticed by the people carelessly speaking under it smirking slyly, gathering that extra bit of knowledge. It didn't look like the women came to help because it was requested of them by the butler. If anything he seemed to be in a lower tier. And the concern he was feeling mounted but he still chose to defend the girl and showed his inability to stand up to her. In a small way perhaps but it was exploitable.

The window was closed to keep the chill in the air away from the boyo who was still under the covers, reluctant to face Finny or the bowl of porridge.

The thief blew smoke slowly, turning the cigarette, checking the ember before looking beyond the village. What next then... She considered, sitting on the stone to finish her smoke in peace. Above was done. Below had been harder to reach. Maybe it would be easier to let the dogs hunt through the woods. With the healing process observed and the ingredients stolen she could deal with the issue if they were poisoned in their mission.
"Young master won't you eat?" Finny tried again, rattling the spoon in the honeyed porridge, sitting by the bed. The young master was still under the covers, curled in a lump in the centre of the bed, slightly out of reach. "Just a little?" He attempted to persuade as the fabric moved.

"I don't want it. I don't want to eat." The Young Master whimpered, out of view, flinching when Mouser entered the room, closing the veranda door. He grew quieter, listening, trying to separate the sound and work out what was happening.

"Boyo you need something. We talked about this." Her voice stopped the new trembling, recognizable and unthreatening. The thief sat by the gardener, patting his shoulder, reassuring him he was doing a good job.

"But I don't want to eat..." Ciel repeated, voice muffled.

"I know..." Mouser sighed. No one ever did.

"Then how about some warm milk?" Finny remembered Sebastian's advice regarding the Young Master, reaching out for the small porcelain milk pitcher an empty cup.

"With honey?" Peeking out the boyo asked.

"Awww. Good puppy." Mouser murmured chuckling, helping Finny with the pouring as he got the honey and the dipper.

"Let's put a lot of honey and make it really sweet." Finny announced cheerfully, the breakthrough fuelling his spirits. "Okay" After a generous amount of honey being stirred and mixed he picked up the cup. "I'll blow on it to cool it down for you." Heeding Mouser's advice about the temperature he did what any other child would do to a hot beverage. Unfortunately his lungs capacity created gale force winds splattering milk all over the boyo, making him shout in surprised and mild discomfort. "AHHHH sorry!" Panicked he almost dropped what milk remained in the cup. Mouser chuckled, giving him a washcloth, retrieving the cup, watching "I'll clean it up right away!" Before he could touch the boyo Finny froze, staring, looking conflicted before starting with little movements, arms shivering. I need to be careful with my strength... gently, gently... coaching himself Finny worked. "Does it hurt? Nervously he asked, continuing his task.

"No." The boyo answered. He was allowing the touch but was also very still, frozen in place. Mouser glanced at the wet spots on the nightshirt. He needed to change but suggesting that would not be good. Getting him undressed would be worse. The weather was warm. It could wait until it was time to change the bandages.

"Do you still want the milk boyo?" Mouser asked. A little nod followed the question. "It's no longer too hot to sip. Hold out your hands." The boyo did as he was told. Avoiding his hands Mouser did the transfer, letting go when she felt satisfied at the weight shift.

Carefully he started to drink. It was progress that he was now willing to eat something. And that he was doing it on his own. Mouser tilted her chair back, sighing, stretching.

"Young master." Encouraged by the progress Finny tried to push a bit. "After this let's go outside to get some fresh air." The outside was what made him feel good. Maybe it would do the same for the Young Master.
The suggestion didn't drive him under the covers but made him grip the cup harder as he curled over himself, head hanging low.

"Don't want to." Shaking his head the boyo wheezed out, compacting himself further into that little ball of misery. "It's scary outside."

Mouser frowned. Wasn't the inside what had scared him a while ago? The outside was also to blame?

"Scary?" Finny murmured, surprised. "Young master?" The tears jumpstarted a tirade as he tried to make the boyo feel better any way he could. "It will be fine. If scary things come I'll get rid of all of them. I'll protect you no matter what. When you gave me this name… that's what I decided." Pride, protection, devotion.

"I'm not worth protecting." The boyo murmured sombrely. Mouser's eyes widened in reaction, surprised. If he admitted to that his pride was indeed in tatters. "Not me… not me… rather…" Who? Taking note of the event she kept watching. The Phantomhive household had secrets. From itself, from each other. Usually it didn't bother her as long as it didn't get in the way of job and money. But from time to time it was interesting to hunt down what they tried to keep elusive. For fun and profit.

"Young master…" Finny lost his cheer, staring. The memory was still very vivid. The laboratory, the experiments, other like him in scratchy gowns and shaved heads. The alarms, the panic, the doctors rushing beyond the glass, this breaking, shouts beyond the door above. That same door being kicked open and the metallic sound of something he could identify as a gun from the learning. The doctor sobbing in anger as he aimed. A gunshot, a second blood, death as the others fell. He heard the words the doctor was babbling. And something triggered. pain, fear, anger, instinct, the need to run, crushing everything, everyone on the way, seeking survival, coming out to something dark that was called night. The two figures inside the secure area of the research facility meeting his astonishment with an odd language. The advance of one stopping and the words from the young master that he didn't understand. Now he did. That moment, those words had changed his destiny. And for that...

"Not me it should have been… not me." The boyo continued his weepy whimpering.

Mouser sighed.

"Boyo... Never put anyone in front of you unless you're using them as a shield." The thief murmured. One could wish to protect someone but they should never do so at the expense of oneself. It did not help with the sobbing but at that point she doubted anything would. As with others he just had to run out of tears and energy. It would happen eventually, along with some kind of decision. Or lingering indecision.

"Young Master..." Finny also tried to end it as well, his own eyes welling up with big fat tears. "Don't say that!" Vehemently he tried to defend him from himself. "I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. I couldn't do anything but destroy. But you taught me how to grow things, how to keep them alive. You made me from nº 12 into Finnian." Ciel was quieting, listening. Finny brushed his tears away, trying to keep his voice sounding optimistic. "You are just a bit scared from being hurt. It's fine." Reassuringly he tried. "I'm sure Sebastian will do something about it."

Mouser reacted too late to keep the damage from being done.

"Sebastian… no..." the agitation, the screaming and squirming returned as the boyo held his head, shaking. "I don't want him here... Ciel... He..." Mumbling, trying to look around, moving too
"Young master?" Finny stepped back, startled, tearing up again.

"It's all right boyo." Mouser called out. "I'm still keeping him away." The thief spoke softly, grabbing the cup before it spilled on the bed, standing. "I did promise."

Quietude returned. Finny looked slightly guilty, staring at the calming Young Master.

The knock on the door sent the boyo diving for the covers once more.

"Who is it?!" Ciel asked in a whisper without peeking.

"I'll have a look." Finny stood, trying to make amends. "Ah Se..." remembering the fuss the previous mention of the name had stirred Finny quieted himself with both hands over his mouth, allowing Sebastian and Lord Sullivan in. Mouser sat back down and sighed.

"Lord Sullivan came to see you." The gardener announced.

"Sullivan..." Fear assuaged Ciel murmured.

"Yes. How are you?" Sieglinde spoke up softly, placed on the chair Finny had left empty.

"Lord Sullivan you're speaking English?" Amazed Finny clapped.

"I am a witch." Proudly the young lady announced, chest puffing out. "Though it is still far from perfect."

"Finny can you clear the dishes?" Sebastian asked in a hushed whisper, receiving a nod.

Finny did as asked quickly and competently. The sound of the dishes and door made the covered bundle agitated.

"Finny is leaving. I am still here with Lord Sullivan." Mouser assured him. "Just us. Nothing to fear boyo."

"I came to change your bandages." Although she arched one curious eyebrow at the obvious omission Sieglinde said nothing about it, speaking calmly and professionally in a careful tone derived from the new language and the state of mind of her patient.

"Will it hurt?" The boyo asked in a shy, pitiful voice, wanting to know and scared to know.

"It will hurt more if I do not." Sieglinde answered with cold precision, waiting.

"Mouser?" Peeking, still looking like a puppy, the boyo asked. Help of not she was a stranger.

"She is right. If the bandages stay too long they will stick to your skin and it will be very painful to pull them free." As mercilessly as the witch-girl Mouser gave her assessment. "It may even create new wounds. The sooner she changes them the better. It may hurt but not as much as later would."

A little nod agreed to the treatment. The boyo sat up, pushing the covers away, sitting straight and still, waiting.

"Can I touch you?" Aware of the situation she asked. Sebastian opened the box, placing it on the bed, near Sieglinde.
"Yes…" With his permission Sieglinde started, pulling the bandages away from his eye first, staring in silence at the very obvious mark there. Again she said nothing, undoing every piece of bandaging, taking off the stained night shirt with the boyo fumbling, flinching and whimpering through the process.

"You're healing quite fast." Despite the concern and doubt in her eyes as she worked with salves and bandages Sieglinde managed to inject some pep into her speech as the work was coming to an end. "That's what a young man should be like, full of vitality."

"Feeling better boyo?" Mouser asked as Sebastian picked up the girl, moving the covers around Ciel without touching him. "I'm taking Lord Sullivan back. Finny will return in a bit. I'll tell him to bring some candy. How does that sound like?"

Still looking down and pitiful the boyo nodded, silent and unsuspecting as they left the room.

«Thank you for seeing the young master.» Sebastian broke his silence towards the pensive girl on his arm as the door was safely closed, standing on the corridor, waiting for any concerns to be addressed before she spoke to the rest of the easily worried staff.

«It's fine.» Dismissing the importance of her actions Sieglinde crossed her arms. «Moreover I want to ask something.» Her gaze was sharp and inquisitive. «I didn't want to bring it up in front of Wolf last night but you... you are devil worshipers, are you not?»

With the contract marks so visible during the cleansing bath and the dressing of the wounds there was no way the matter could be avoided. Still there were worse conclusions she could have reached about it.

«What?» Sebastian asked flatly, analysing the situation.

«Define worship..." Mouser chuckled.

«No need to hide it.» Sieglinde spoke reassuringly. «Witches were accused of devil worship by the inquisition as well. But we did not condemn it.»

«No... Not when it's a key to power.» Mouser nodded along.

«Do you know of witches?» Sieglinde shifted her interest to Mouser.

«It is a fairly recent interest of mine but yes.» The thief explained. «You still haven't defined worship." It was kind of an iffy spot because in prostitute talk that was a whole 'nother thing. And Charlotte had used it often enough to see Mouser squirm in disgust. It had taken a while for her to stop feeling bothered. And in the unfortunate implications of the euphemism fell lots of the things she and Sebastian had done.

«I saw a devil's symbol on your eye and hand.» So her definition just involved marked. So it was a case of self-worship if Mouser took into account her own mark right at the bottom of her throat. «Am I wrong?»

«It is a bit different from devil worship.» Sebastian decided to explain.

«Meaning?» Sieglinde frowned, staring.

«The Young Master was kidnapped by a certain organization that indeed worshiped demons. He was used as a sacrifice. I met him while the summoning ritual was taking place.» The light version would suit the moment. Also it would explain to Sieglinde in further detail why the boyo behaved
as he was behaving.

«That's stupid. How can that be?» Unfortunately the little witch took offence at the story. «There is no way amateurs could summon demons.» Full of conviction she protested, fuming.

Only witches and warlocks had that ability in her mind.

«You do know that is not always the case. Demons are quite fickle. Whimsy even.» Sebastian tried to correct the young lady's world view, blindsided.

«As if you could know, amateur.» She moved her arms in aggravation, almost falling from Sebastian's hold. If a summon fails you are cursed.

«You do understand that from a demon's point of view that would be the perfect trap?» As the demon accused of knowing nothing about demons stared at a loss of words, Mouser spoke up. «Summons are indeed crafted so anyone can summon a demon if the sacrifice is enticing enough.»

«By your own admission you are no less an amateur than he is.» Arms crossed again she leaned towards Mouser, pouting.

«And I can paint a circle on your wall and drag one here right now just to prove you wrong.» The thief taunted, smiling.

«And what will you sacrifice?» Challenging Sieglinde smiled back, supporting her belief.

«I have to sacrifice nothing when its already bound to my will.» Mouser shrugged.

«And you were not cursed?» Surprised that the game had shifted Sieglinde scanned Mouser, looking for any odd signs.

"Well... I was forced to take multiple baths but I would hardly say that was a curse.» And if there was no need to confirm she could backtrack all that as teasing. Maybe show a few of the human-made books to make her believe it was a hobby and the discussion had been purely theoretical.

«You must have witch blood then...» Settling back into her world view Sieglinde decided that she was correct about the events of the summoning that had placed the mark on Ciel and Sebastian. A failed attempt to summon a demon by amateurs, carving the symbol haphazardly in an attempt to bring forth the dark power. «So Ciel was forced to take the symbol into his eye. How cruel.» Calmly, thinking it over she nodded, satisfied with the conclusion. «Were you sacrificed as well?»

«No I'm...» True to fashion and bound to tell no lies, nor seeing the need to do so when asked directly Sebastian was about to clear the misunderstanding when she rose her hand, asking him to not speak.

«No. I don't want to know.» Sieglinde sighed, calming down. «It is undoubted a sad story and I should not force it out of you.» Shaking he head, thinking carefully she moved to the next question. «Do the others know?»

«No. This is a secret between us.» Sebastian smiled a bit, asking sweetly and underhandedly for cooperation.

«I see. Then I'll keep it too.» Smiling back Sieglinde promised.

«Thank you for your consideration.» The demon nodded, starting to walk down the corridor towards the dinning room where tea should be ready to serve.
"Ciel's wounds are healing well." With a teacup and cakes Sieglinde started to explain the situation to the group. "Emotionally he is terribly unstable but suffers from no memory loss."

"Will his eye heal?" Meyrin asked, anxious.

"His eyes are unhurt. The blindness he is suffering is probably a psychological effect due to the shock."

"I told you his eye didn't look burnt." Mouser murmured. Bard had also thought the same after he had been able to quiet his aggravation and the service had slowed down enough to talk about it. But the wounded eyes he remembered were from shrapnel, gunpowder and fire. It was a lot less clear when the whole face was a bloody mess than when someone shoved a cigarette in a bastard's eye.

"He will be fine as soon as mind and body heal." Sieglinde reassured them sipping the tea, back straight, pinkie finger away from the handle. Sebastian's influence no doubt.

"I'm glad." Finny sighed.

"It really is a relief." Meyrin let go of the edge of her apron, rubbing the eyes under the glasses.

Tanaka allowed himself a discreet sigh, serene.

"Ciel needs proper nutrition and rest. Through that should be able to leave the bed soon." The Swiss-roll was placed in front of her, a hearty, thankful slice.

"Really? Then we should head back to the manor as soon as he can. He'd be more at ease at home." Bard considered, speaking to the servants, giving off energy and enthusiasm.

"Yes." Sieglinde agreed, her fork stopping, looking down, saddened. "That would be for the best."

"I'll give him the chef's special stamina dinner." Bard turned away from the room, announcing his intentions loudly as he descended through the corridor. "Meat. Meat is what he needs."

"That's right." Meyrin answered, picking up the empty plates and rushing to follow the chef.

"I'll bring him the sweets." Finny grabbed the tray Mouser had been preparing on the side of the table opposite to the afternoon tea spread.

"I'm going to bed." Mouser grumbled. "Call me if anything needs a knife."

"Let's bake some scones. Says Emily." Snake joined in the conversation when they closed the side corridor door.

"Just don't increase the workload…" Sebastian murmured, knowing he would not be heard, straightening, arms behind his back, staring at Wolfram. There was an immediate glare returned.

«The preparations for meat dishes take some time.» Wolfram spoke up, deciding to play his role as a butler and attempting to remind the outsider of his role as well. «You should help out as well.» He asked of Sebastian spitefully.

«But…» Sebastian glanced at the Young Lady.

«I'll be reading so don't worry about me. I'll be looking forward for dinner.» Sieglinde held up the English book, bright and excited once more.

«Understood.» Dismissed Sebastian bowed and left.
«Excuse me.» Sebastian called out as he finished the task of marinating the meat and preparing the base of the soup, turning to Wolfram with an empty bottle. «We are out of white cooking wine.» Startled midway through painstakingly accurate measurements the Green Witch's butler glanced at him, grumpily before scoffing, turning back to his task.

«The cellar is down the stairs all the way down to the right.» The information was given in a very clipped tone as he added a weight with the tweezers to the plate.

"Snake can you accompany me." Sebastian asked, touching his shoulder, waiting until Snake had placed the potatoes on the table, hurrying to catch up, confused but unquestioning.

As with most basements they needed to carry their own light. And once in the stone corridors Sebastian turned left to the suspicion that had been left unexplored. Mouser's maps had notes throughout the sketches. Things like "servant passage". "Hollow wall". "Blocked passage". "Locked hidden door", "switch found" or "switch not found". "Bookcase hiding door, how bookish"."XV century according to Grizel". "XVI century according to Caoimhe". "This time right now according to meself". "Blondie says XVII". "Bloody lock broke my pick so I broke it with nails. Found toys. Claiming them". "Magic error, science fact". "Book. Book. Book. Looks old, paper smells new". He had also come into possession of the hit list of the things that would be worth money and that she was planning on nicking as soon as no one cared. That was possibly a delivery mistake.

"The cellar was to the right, wasn't' it, says Oscar." Snake stopped on the bottom of the stairs, watching the wrong turn, puzzled. "Black? You're going the wrong way..."

"I said we were out of wine." Sebastian paused, looking back with a smile. "I didn't say I was going to get some." Amused he elaborated, continuing. Snake didn't seem to understand what was so funny about the misdirection.

It didn't take long.

"A dead end, says Oscar." Snake and Oscar agreed. They fumbled a bit when Sebastian gave them the lantern, holding it high, staring as the demon approached the wall and started tapping and brushing his palms, pressing lightly. Mouser had left little claw marks on the brick that was the switch but he was looking for things that her inexperience might have missed. She had not opened the place.

It did sound hollow. More than that it was an echoing type of empty. So there should be a space behind that. A space much wider than simply a corridor or a room to hide wealth.

"Black what are you doing? Says Oscar." Confused by the odd behaviour and slightly nervous about the lack of understanding of the situation Snake tilted his head as Oscar stuck its tongue out, undulating on his shoulder.

It was indeed the marked brick and there wasn't much to add to what was known just by touch and echo. So it was time to move into the more practical way of doing things. Whatever gears managed the structure opened without a sound, just a gravelly, low rumble. The bricks receded a bit and parted in the middle, the once tight seam opening like a sliding door. As expected what was behind it was deep. More stairs, going down into the darkness."I can't see anything in the dark." Snake murmured, approaching. The light expanded the range of what could be seen. But it was not
enough. "It looks quite deep. Says Oscar."

It did not smell as if it had been left closed for too long. But there was the scent of plants, of water.

«Hey.» Winded and irritated Wolfram appeared as if summoned. Glancing up before turning back Sebastian decided that it was just so. There were secrets that guarded themselves. There were others that had to have wards and guardians. And one would not guard something if it was not essential or valuable. So the path was set. «Just what do you think you're doing? I said the cellar was down to the right, didn't I?» Placing himself between the opened stairway and the guests, slamming his hand on the mechanism, convincing the path to close, glaring, growling. The perfect watchdog as it were.

«I'm very sorry.» Sebastian used the empty words to acknowledge the reprimand without a hint of remorse, smiling, irritating the burly man further. «This is such an enormous castle...» and just as he was looking placated Sebastian struck once more. «What kind of room could be down there?» Under the pretence of innocent curiosity it was fairly easy to ask even the most prying of questions without them looking too offensive.

«It's none of your business.» Still maintaining the menace Wolfram spat out as the brickwork slowly returned to its place.

«Understood.» Sebastian nodded slowly, turning, grasping Snake's shoulder. "Let's go Snake."

Snake shivered when the air moved swiftly around his neck, startled.

"Next time I see you down here you're done for." The butler snarled pointedly, the crossed arms twitching, as if ready to do so right there and then.

"Certainly." Sebastian smiled back, amused, walking towards the cellar to complete the task that had given them an excuse to descend.

"That is some threat..." Snake whispered, following Sebastian, looking down. "Says Oscar." He completed, touching the bared neck, shuddering.

"There are lots more." Finny announced as he held the freshly baked tray of scones, having given one to the young master after it cooled down enough to be handled.

"I'm full." Ciel murmured, holding the too hard, too dry scone, feeling as if all the moisture had been taken from his mouth. That it was warm was the only saving grace of that bite. The candy had been good an hour ago. His stomach wasn't hurting. It wasn't too cold anymore. But it was itchy under the bandages. Finny was there. Finny was strong enough to keep him safe.

"But you only ate one..." The excitement deflated quickly. Instinct sent a shivery awareness down Finny's spine, making him react, stand and turn, eyes widening when he saw a big furry creature standing behind the window. "Werewolf?" He shouted as the glass shattered as it broke through. "Young master!" The fright had made Ciel scream, unseeing, just aware of the danger. The charging creature shook glinting shards away from its fur, turning, charging towards the bed, claws outstretched.

Finny dove for the young master, defending him from the vicious strike, his back slashed, the claws cutting through fabric, drawing blood.

"That hurts..." resistance, strength, reflexes... the experiments, the pain... Finny lowered his voice, cradling the Young master, keeping him safe, moving swiftly against the aggressor, kicking him
back. The boot connected hard with a cracking sound.

It crouched, staring.

"What's going on?!" as the call came from the corridor it lunged away, through the balcony.

There was a loud, sharp howl outside as Sebastian entered the room followed by the others and that German butler.

"There werewolf attacked us." Finny shouted, still hugging the Young master, realizing that he had not stopped screaming and struggling, crying. "He left through the window."

"What?" Sebastian stopped in the middle of the room, frowning.

"I'll catch him!" Bard grumbled, taking the handgun, ready to jump out as well.

«Stop! He emits miasma! You'll be cursed as well.» Wolfram shouted, trying to stop them.

Bard only looked confused.

"He is right." Sebastian admitted. "Don't go after it Bard. It's poisonous." It was as good an explanation as any.

The cook tskd, biting his cigarette, walking to the balcony, crushing glass under his boots.

Meyrin's hands were twitching as if searching for a trigger, for a rifle. If she had had one at hand...

«What happened here?» waddling in a panic with the help of the balloons Sieglinde entered the room, looking around, spooked.

«Young lady...» Wolfram's tone changed, turning softer. «The werewolf attacked.» he explained with a quick bow.

«Here?» Confused, insulted and frightened Sieglinde looked around, slowly. Ciel was screaming, clinging to the gardener. Sebastian and the other adults were unable to approach. The broken window was a poignant mark of an unheard of breach of contract... Determination clouded her features into a harsh mask. «Wolfram! I need to prepare for the green witch duties.» the order was firm and inescapable. With a sigh she turned to them, calm, appeasing, using English to gentle the blow, to reassure the guests. "It will be fine. I am the Green Witch and I will protect this village no matter what."

Mouser heard the commotion and rushed outside, seeing the famed werewolf for the first time, its human-wolf-like shape staggering towards the forest, coming from the boyo's room. There were screams, words inside. And there was a big kerfuffle to deal with.

Smiling the thief snapped her fingers, the circle rushing to life beneath her feet, searing hot, bright but brief.

Pluto howled as he was pulled from wherever he had been lounging, slamming his front paws into the stone of the path, leaving claw marks deeply into them. Shaking his whole body the hellhound rested his big head against her shoulder, tail wagging, waiting, happy.

"See that runaway mutt?" Mouser petted his ears pointing towards the shadow that they could still see. "Get it, kill it and bring the corpse. Don't eat it yet." Pluto nodded, sniffing the air, ready to dart. Mouser gripped him by the scruff, causing him to wait. "If you start bleeding stop the hunt
and come to me. Immediately if not sooner. It may be extremely poisonous even for us." Gently she let go, straightening the fur. "Understand, pet?"

"Yes Mistress." Pluto murmured, darting into the woods merrily.
Chapter 182

"Young master… come out already." Bard called, trying to sound positive. The sobbing continued, muffled by the fabric. The man's voice only seemed to increase the sound and the frantic attempt to crawl deeper into hiding.

"You still have to rest…" Meyrin tried too, a bit more frantic, waving hands. It did not good either.

Snake nodded along, having no words to help, focusing on sweeping the floor.

Tanaka watched as useless as all others.

"I hate this place! I want to go home!" The Young master was shouting, hiding in the curtains of the bed, terror encouraging him to lash out without actually leaving the protection of the covers.

Hours. It had been hours since the creature had fled and they still had been unable to erase the after-effects.

"Calm down Smile, says Goethe." Snake tried, perturbed by the sudden worded shouting, his voice soft and shy as usual, turning, gripping the broom helplessly.

Finny was panicking while trying to keep still so Sebastian could redo the bandages over his wound, glancing back.

"Well… what to do…" The demon sighed, finished, keeping calm, turning towards the Young Master. If he refrained from being hasty maybe something could be worked out.

The instructions that had been set stated clearly that every order was absolute. But how to correlate that snivelling brat with the haughty Young Master that usually knew what he wanted and tolerated nothing less than absolute obedience and flawless performance.

Disappointing.

Sebastian closed the medicine box and stood. Perhaps it was time to forget the advice of others and simply act.

"Boyo..." Mouser called out, entering. The soft purred tone brought an abrupt end to the wailing. Most would not see it as a threat. But it was very much there. A 'be quiet or else' to those that could recognize it. The bundle was deathly still, as if that could avoid detection. "I once told you a story about a girl named Madeline." The thief sat down, tugging the covers, dragging the boyo to the centre of the bed, unravelling the cocoon. The tone remained soft but shifted to lose the hidden edge. "Do you remember?"

"Thank you." Oddly the boyo's answer came with an unseeing glance of calm towards her. The frightened stillness was gone. Between her coaxing and Finny's ability to touch they were able to restore a bit of peace. Whoever Madeline had been and whatever parallels Mouser had created seemed to be enough for the moment of respite.

"True. Now go to sleep." No protest. Just a shiver and sniff. "Finny will stay here. He probably needs rest too."

They could leave now. And for the sake of the gained peace that was what the group did. Of course some of them were also just sick of the cries.
"Finally we got him to calm down." Meyrin murmured outside the closed door, slumping, exhausted. Mouser placed her arm around her waist, propping her up, patting the shaking back.

"How will we get him back to normal?" Bard voiced his disappointment, groaning, arms crossing, groaning in the end, looking back in dismay.

"Who is Madeline? Says Emily" Snake asked, still holding the broom and now the pan filled with the last glass shards. To make sure he had got it all

"There were two. One is alive, one is not." Mouser answered, shrugging, keeping Meyrin on her feet.. "I'm unsure what story he chose." Everyone seemed in dire need of sleep.

"An eye for an eye is what people say..." Sebastian considered. "Maybe we should try to shock him once more?" A last resort measure but after that day's attack it was looking like their time was running short.

"Please don't." Tanaka intervened, concerned. "Rest is best for the wounds of the heart. The Young Master must be in turmoil." Concern covered the old man's features. It was not often that he felt or gave voice to those concerns but the situation was too frail to keep his peace. "At times like this we should not lose our heads of rush thing. We just need to watch over him."

"While true it will do him no good if he wakes up dead." Mouser commented, frowning. "And we still have to consider the job. So break him. Either free or for good I'd say."

"But what kind of thing could turn that young master into this?" Bard grumbled eyes still fixed on the door. "I don't like the occult. Even though they're saying its magic it doesn't sit well with me."

"You know as well as I that you don't need magic for that." Mouser quipped, dismissive. "Just pain. That's why torture is effective."

"Yeah..." Bard sighed. "I... I would agree then. A shock may be for the best in this situation. Either way we run the risk of losing the Young Master."

The group quieted as steps echoed through the corridor, Wolfram's massive figure stomped down, towards them, carrying Sieglinde, once more wearing her green and black dress of centuries back. As expected he still looked displeased. The young lady looked down, eyes dull.

«We are going to the village gathering to discuss this werewolf incident. Don't try anything.» Barely pausing the Witch's butler barked out his warning and continued on. Sieglinde glanced over his shoulder, sad and torn.

With nothing else to be done they turned away to leave, to rest.

"Sebastian?" Bard called when he failed to follow.

"This is quite beyond my area of expertise." The demon admitted, sighing. "So just this once we will have to wait it out." They were not the best parting words but they did match the hopeless mood as the group walked away, dismissed, without a job to do, turning the corner without even whispering amidst themselves. Rest seemed to be all they could accomplish.

"That was quite an admission of defeat." Mouser poked, approaching, looking up, examining his face. There really were no marks left. "Especially from you. Why is that?" Stepping on a small bench called from the kitchen she pinched his cheeks until he looked annoyed before resting her arms on his shoulder, slightly above eye level, smiling. "Because you actually can't or because you have not focused on it?"
"Throughout these years I have had no cause to delve deeper into the human progress beyond what would directly affect the Young Master and the household." Sebastian grimaced, returning the embrace, arms around her waist, kicking the bench away. "You?" She fell without a thing to support the height, clinging, tensing, gasping.

"Useful is useful." Mouser relaxed against his frame not before delivering a slight kick to his shin. "I picked this, that and the other when, where and how I needed it. Take me to the ritual room. I have something interesting to show you." He supported her, turning away from the door beyond which the boyo still whimpered. "You had a werewolf attack. Two people were in contact with it. Enough contact for a clawed back. And yet both are left unharmed by the thing that supposedly emanates from the creature."

"Indeed there was no miasma in the room." Sebastian acquiesced to her logic. "Even so Wolfram made a point of stressing the issue when Bard showed the intent of pursuing."

"I sent Pluto after it." Mouser admitted.

"So it is dead." Sebastian smiled. It was a reminder that just because the master was useless the investigation was not moot. He had his own progress to discuss, did he not...

"Quite. And not even defensively was there an emanation." Logic created by the tale they had been told dictated that there should have been miasma in every instance of the events. But nothing had happened. "My puppy is quite unharmed as well. Proud of himself. Waiting for us to finish the investigation to munch on his catch."

"A cadaver may be quite more informative than any of the living beings around at this point." Sebastian turned towards the empty corridors of the Green Witch's quarters.

"Black!" Panting and running steps echoed in the halls, stopping their progress. Snake turned a corner, breathlessly, stopping, staring at them, head tilted. Emily's tongue moved on the air, tracking their scent. "Oscar came back. Says Goethe. An absolute scoop for you, old boy! Says Oscar." The three snakes around his shoulders and neck moved, excited.

"Oscar did?" Mouser murmured.

"Good work sneaking in there." Sebastian praised the servant snake's good job, following. It was a more immediate information. At least a more visible one for the rest of the household. And they were in dire need of progress. "I sent it into one of the places you marked as hollow. There was a passage. It was... guarded."

"I see..." The thief chuckled. "Can I taunt you with what I know now while we sort this out?"

"Refrain from taunting or I will send you away into the village to eavesdrop."

"Not much of a punishment there."

"Yes, I know."
Empty, fear-filled darkness.

He could feel the growing anxiety, the vice crushing his already torn heart, his now shattered mind wilting into that lonely, shapeless void of doubt.

Growls echoed.

Shouts.

Memories... sometimes they surfaced, quickly muffled, drowned in shadows.

Paralyzed in blackness he withdrew further, shutting away the sights, the sounds.

Please let no fear come through...

Please help...

Please stop the pain...

"How unlike you to be brought to a standstill." He spoke up, the voice abrupt in the hollow, echoing, the sound startling, finding the hiding place, breaking through the secrecy, the barrier, the defences that the poison had weakened, stripped of his shield, defenceless.

"Please don't..." He pleaded, looking up.

The landscape had shifted. A chess set of black and white illuminated by glass stars falling from thick curtains.

"It really isn't like you at all." He was there, facing him, looking sure. "To be brought to a standstill." A smile. Always a smile.

"I'm scared." The clothes had changed too. They were elaborate, alike, darker.

"What's so scary?" He asked, head tilting.

"It's dark. I can't see anything." What was he answering when he could see?

"Then why are you just standing there?" Dismissing the answer He hopscotched from white to white, brightening the starts at each jump. "I know everything about you so I'll tell you why." Each tap was sharp. The sound hurt, made him flinch. "You are scared to look at it." He accused, stopping in the white, right before the black knight. "The proof of sin beside you." Blunt. "I'm sorry..." Seeing the doubtful, hurt expression there was something that shifted."I said something hurtful, didn't I?" Ignoring the rules He crossed the chequered field, reaching out to hold his hands. "If it's that bad why not stay here forever?" He asked of the one that stood before the disheartened boy in front of the black king.

"That's..." trying to find a reason, trying to justify his state... he drew a blank, frustrated.

"Why do you hesitate?" He asked softly, catching the look, leaning until their foreheads were touching, tone softening, gentle. "Nothing will hurt you here." Reassuring He whispered, holding his hands a bit harder.
"But I'm..." the fear and hesitation hadn't left.

"I know..." He whispered, understanding. "Think about it." The suggestion brightened the board, erasing the shadows. Even those that should have remained or darkened. "Think about it. Take as long as you want." Temptation took the form of safety. It was a painful, strange feeling. Duty and desire clashed within the fear, longing, nostalgia and the faded drive for vengeance.

«Isn't the werewolf angry?»
«It has to be because of the outsiders.»
«They are men.»
«And staying at the witch's manor?»
«Attacks will only increase if we allow this to continue.»
«Please protect us lord Sullivan!»
«Please banish these people from our village.»
«Lord Sullivan! »

The women had gathered around the village square as expected. They were tense and had not waited for their Lord's arrival to start exchanging opinions. It was already a storm of words and voices when Wolfram descended from the manor. Their moods and opinions seemed to have remained frozen to the newcomers and her choices.

Under the light of fire and torches Sieglinde Sullivan sat before the iron maiden's open spiked doors, looking around, listening to their fears, their, pleas and accusations. Only after a few minutes had they noticed her presence and started to direct their woes at her. As the Leader she should have considered them, the traditions, the situation, the dangers. They were scared. The attacks, the outsiders, the oddities going on... It seemed to be too much for them.

«Why do you hesitate green witch!» The old crone shouted, cutting through the crowd, incensed, demanding the answer Sieglinde was hesitating to give even as the demanding murmurs grew, the agitation fluttered about. Her hands clenched over the folds of her skirt, looking around, taking in every face, every expression. «Are you truly at peace when your villagers will perishing because of those outsiders?»

«Of course not!» Startled Sieglinde shouted to the crowd, gesturing, trying to quiet the crowd so she could ease their fears, attempt to convince them that the outsiders would not bring harm... and yet she was seeing so many things that had never happened... how could the arrival of those outsider of their village be unrelated to the increased attacks? How could she be sure...

«Instead of dreaming of the outside world you should focus on your duties and finish the ultimate magic.» The old woman continued. Her wisdom was the guide of the Green Witch, and had been so for a couple of generations. So her opinion carried weight, sometimes more than Sieglinde could muster. But she was right. It was her purpose in the village, birthright and heritage. The werewolves were angry and the magic would appease them. «Then the wolf's anger will surely subside.» Her thought's and the crone's speech aligned. But it was still painful to be forced into the decision.

«I know...» Torn and pained Sieglinde raised her voice. «Very well.» She announced. The
murmurs quieted and all eyes turned to her, expectant, concerned. «Tomorrow I will make sure those people leave the village.» Decision reached and announced, no matter how hard it was for her to relinquish the pursuit of knowledge, the curiosity about the outside, the hope of seeing more of the world.

In the confusion of grateful noises, Sieglinde looked down, saddened as happiness soared around her.

Wolram stared, watching things return to their proper course.

Hilde huffed by his side, arms sternly crossed, glaring at him.

«Wolfram.» She snapped harshly, commanding his attention. «You have not forgotten your duty, have you?»

«Of course.» The Green Witch's butler answered, stern and sure of his answer and duties. «I am the young lady's... no.» He stopped himself, staring at the small girl in the crowd that was asking for her blessing, conversing and walking away. The crone was gone, advice spent. «I am the Green Witch's butler. Those are my duties.» And the duty superseded his charge.

«As long as you keep it in mind.» Hilde shrugged. «We shall leave the sending off of that lot to you.»

«Ja» Wolfram conceded,
Oscar swayed on top of a three-legged stool, facing the expectant group, tongue wagging, waiting for Snake to transmit his big discovery. If anything the creature's expression could almost be described as excited, happy, proud. Hisses formed words and, in that translation, the big scoop filled the kitchen with exclamations of incredulity and shock.

*There are werewolves in the basement.*

"So Sullivan is in league with the werewolves?" Bard asked, scoffing, demanding more of the snake that was now gulping it treat. It stopped, undulating, tongue sticking out a few times, as if considering his answer.

Everyone seemed as disbelieving as the chef was, cynics and Tanaka excluded. Those considered all options before reaching the conclusion.

But a snake had less reasons to lie than a human would, even if the expression forked tongue gave a very unsavoury view of the species. Also despite its training and bond with Snake there was only so much it could actually recall and recount.

"That girl was doing something while surrounded by the werewolves, says Oscar." Snake reiterated, standing, shyly looking down and away as he relayed the news. And there was little he could do to hide his own prideful look. Like a proud parent.

It was a job well done, especially for such a hastily decided chore.

"What is something?" Meyrin mumbled, looking around, crushing her apron with nervous fingers, frowning, voice low, careful, looking around to make sure.

"Some… thing. And a thing." Snake explained as best as he could, fidgeting. "Says Oscar."

"Well we can't get that much from a snake after all." Bard sighed, trying to calm down and think through the report, raking a hand through his hair, puffing smoke, chuckling dryly.

"How rude!" Snake spoke up, straightening. Oscar was taking offence, backed up by the others snakes that stood around his shoulder, protesting. "We remember everything way up until yesterday, thank you very much." He continued, flustered and genuinely attempting to protect his friend's honour and abilities, sounding so very much affronted. "Says Wordsworth."

Sebastian refrained from speaking as worries and ideas were exchanged around him.

Considering all Mouser seemed unsurprised, sitting on the table, cigarette in hand.

Likely her own discoveries were directly linked to the snake's breakthrough.

In a way he was also expecting a similar outcome.

Too much leading down a single path under a surface that discouraged a deeper look.

"But Lord Sullivan was worried when the Young Master was attacked. That didn't seem fake." Meyrin tried to salvage the lady's reputation, still frowning behind her glasses, thinking back.

"She was shaken when the villager was attacked as well." Sebastian agreed, sighing, leaving the matter unresolved. "So the werewolves may truly be acting against her wishes." In the story of
them being a protectorate of the creature it made sense if the witch needed to pay some sort of protection fee and as that was lacking or amiss they would lash out.

It did not clear Sieglinde Sullivan from suspicion but it ameliorated the burden of her involvement.

"So… shouldn't we go into that basement to see for ourselves? They are out now…" Bard suggested, action as usual guiding his options.

Not one villager around to make sure one was where they should not be.

"When we opened the door before there was some kind of charm on the entrance." Sebastian interjected, placing precaution before the answers. "There might be something like magic working to warn for intruders."

Mouser tilted her head slightly, smiling. That was part of her job, correct... Locks, wards, alarms, charms, something like magic. Things she could break into or break apart.

"That's why he came so fast. Says Oscar." Snake's face lit up as he made the association, smiling a bit, petting Oscar, understanding.

"Well… there are ways around it..." Sebastian checked his pocket watch and considered the current options. It was a perfectly good chance, as Bard had pointed out. "When Wolfram returns could you keep him occupied for a while?"

The request should not be that hard to manage.

The language barrier ought slow things down enough to give room for whatever may happen.

"What will you do?" Meyrin asked, staring, concern growing again, with glasses and glassless glances at the door.

"How could I be the Phantomhive buttler if I couldn't sneak in unnoticed." Sebastian merely smiled and put the watch away, turning to leave. "Mouser..." he called out, heading towards the basement entrance.

"Aye, aye... I know." The thief smashed the butt of her cigarette on the table, hopping off, stretching. "Will I need my picks?" She asked as they descended into the basement.

"Perhaps not." Sebastian considered, voice echoing in the darkened stairs.

"This place is constructed oddly." Mouser hummed, as they reached the base of the stairs and began to follow the corridor, walking ahead, speaking softly, hand brushing on the stone, tapping every five steps. "It isn't like London where you see weird angles and you know they were stretching the house, adding rooms, tearing down walls..." Smiling she stopped as they came to the place where the secret door was located. "Here you can see they were hiding seams and made it so from the bare bones. It's fairly easy to find after you look." Tapping again she nibbled on her lower lip. "So you said stairs, right?"

"Yes. Straight down." Sebastian considered, examining the flat wall. "About the ward..."

"It only summoned the guard-dog after the door was opened, so don't open the door." Mouser shrugged. "Any thief knows to avoid an alarm. Easier if you know where and how they trigger." She flattened her palm against the masonry, taking a deep breath, slamming her fist through the rock. "Found a hollow." The thief murmured, stepping back, shaking the dust from her hands.
"Well then..." Sebastian agreed as no alert seemed to have been given, removing the stone from their way, stacking it to open a path. Indeed the side-walls were hollow, crisscrossed by iron and wooden beams to add to the structure. "In the end all it took was a bit of force." Bypassing the defences and walking out, into the stairway that had been darkened in the first investigation took very little time. "My, my..."

They came into a round-domed tower-like thing plunging down deeper into the ground. Likely to the depths of the chasm outside. A delicate bridge took them to a cage-like structure set on a pillar. An elevator perhaps. It was such an odd contraption.

Mouser tilted her head and followed the path of the water that a fountain poured from the top of the structure to the plants below.

Poisonous plants like the ones outside.

Dark walls with bright highlights.

Copious amounts of flickering light.

"That fits the theme..." She murmured, lighting a cigarette, looking up and around.

"It is a rather wondrous sight to behold." Sebastian agreed, moving around, looking down. The sound of air bounced around, moving through the arches along with the whisper of water. Quiet, evoking serenity, solemnity.

Rather obviously that that was the only way to go.

Picking up a distracted thief he hopped off the bridge.

It was also the fastest path towards their goal.

Mouser did curse him on the way down, gripping his coat, complaining on unsteady legs as soon as they reached the chamber at the end and he allowed her back into upright position. Her attention was diverted towards the glass and metal windows of spiralling figures of the new chamber, a greedy, scheming look crossing her eyes for a second before she looked down, approaching the glowing circle that occupied the centre of the chamber, crouching, touching it gently, trying to see if it faded under her touch.

There were no werewolves there.

There was no scent of miasma.

There was nothing but an empty chamber, closed, illuminated and sombre-looking.

"This is the magic wand then." Sebastian stared at the elaborate wand on a pedestal at the centre of the candle-lit circle. "A type of calcite perhaps..."

"Wands are rather on the nose as tools go." Mouser considered. "And you look around and everything is..."

"The Theban Witch scrip." The demon pointed out as he stared at the ground. "It has been a long time since I last saw it..." It took a bit to remember the lettering but it was very legible. It also didn't seem to fully follow some of the scriptural particularities of the alphabet.

"The coven does favour runes and because of that so do I... but encryption was a big part of any
magical script far more than it's..." Mouser stopped speaking, staring, eyes narrowing. "This reads like alchemy..." Unusual for the scrip.

"Could this be..." Sebastian murmured, committing the circle to memory. "What were you about to show me?"

"I'm not sure we have the time." The thief glanced up. "It seems their meeting ran short for some reason."

"Likely they agree we are a very pernicious influence." Sebastian jested, extending his hand.

"They are correct." Mouser laughed, taking it.

A warning did lessen complaints when doing stunts that her head still saw as life-threatening. Still the elevator did look like something that would be fun to try. Mouser considered, looking back
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«We're back.» Although it was a statement after the fact Wolfram announced as he walked into the kitchen through the backdoor accompanied by the women that helped in the daily chores of the manor. The Young Lady was in her room, reading, safe, the meeting over, the decision made. He felt relieved in knowing that soon they would have nothing to interfere in the village. «We brought the food supplies for tomorrow.» placing the baskets down it took him little time to notice the glaringly obvious absence in the idle group of foreign staff. «Where is that butler of yours?» his already grim tone only turned gruffer as he approached the blond man, glaring. While he did neither flinch nor step back there was a wary and bewildered look behind his frown. It was rather evident after, in the way he turned to look and talk to his own

"Wait how are we supposed to stall if we can't even talk to them?" Bard shouted, innerved, annoyed at being spoken to in a clearly derisive tone and not understanding a word of it. Contemplating the hypothesis of failing Sebastian was not good either.

"If Finny was here he could understand a little..." Meyrin suggested sharing the stuttering panic.

«I asked where is the butler.» Repeating, albeit slower, made no difference whatsoever in the result.

In any way the time needed to be gained, Bard considered, biting the cigarette. If they had to resort to hand signs and mimicry so be it. Unfortunately no good lie was coming to mind either. Humming, aching and repeating well was all that kept happening.

The need for pantomime was postponed by the panicked shriek of the youngest of the women. As she walked by Snake, Oscar perked up and jumped from his shoulder-perch, digging headfirst into the amply displayed bosom.

Slithering and wriggling in much to the shock of the onlookers the snake vanished into the bodice.

Needless to say panic escalated and spread. Considering the position it had curled itself into there was also a bit of fuss on how to proceed. Or even look.

«Don't move.» Sebastian ordered quietly, steadying the frightened and blushing girl, reaching down, under the heavy skirts to find the animal. «It will be bad if he bites you.» Oscar likely had no intention to but the warning kept her from fussing and making his job any more complicated or awkward for the onlookers. Gripping the snake and pulling it away left a faint woman limp on his forearm making a sound of whimpering distress and mortification. A huff marked Mouser's disappearance outside. He could hear her snickering, clicking a lighter to life. "My my." He commented, shaking his head, stepping back, leaving the girl to stagger into a semi-upright position. «It seems one of our servants has caused some confusion.» Sebastian apologised, keeping the protesting creature under control, bowing his head slightly, turning to leave. "Oscar needs to cool his head outside. Snake, come." Using English for the other's comfort Sebastian waited for a moment for the young man to catch up.

«We'll have you leave tomorrow.» Wolfram confronted the butler, leaving no room for protest or appeal, glaring. Sebastian acknowledged the order and threat with a slight nod, still catching the murmured, bitter end. «We cannot allow your presence to anger the werewolves further.» Clearly...

«I understand.» Out of formality he answered, closing the door after them.
Mouser smiled as they approached her, a new cigarette lit, taking her eyes away from the glow on some windows. She had placed a lantern under the trees, slightly secluded.

"Oscar you're the worst, says Emily." Snake spoke on behalf of his lady viper, arms crossed, tapping his foot. Oscar wriggled, head lowered, still held by Sebastian. "what?" the young man stopped his sermon and considered what Oscar was saying before relaying reason for the lechery. "I didn't coil on her to get a feel. I just wanted to smell her. And it was yet another scoop! That woman smells like a werewolf. Says Oscar."

"I see… so that does mean…" Sebastian considered, glancing at Mouser.

"Yes. It does go along with what i got there." The thief mentioned, gesturing towards one of the lights, feeling satisfied. If things were progressing there was no need to keep it so secretive.

"I'm sorry to disturb your conversation." The new voice startled the group somewhat. Unusual, considering the senses gathered in them.

A horse? Confused they stared at the smiling horse that was indeed standing there with a big, unsettling grin on the edge of the light, amidst the greenery, right under the canopy of the first row of trees that created the edge of the witch's garden.

"Do excuse me." The voice spoke up again, a man in a white uniform and big, tinted riding goggles covering his eyes, stepped out of the woods, greeting them calmly and quietly, producing an envelope from his breast pocket. "I'm here to deliver a letter from the Queen." Said the Queen's Horse Master John Brown. It could only pertain to the samples Sebastian had sent for analysis. However the timing of the arrival was as baffling as the speed of delivery of the original request had no doubt been for the other humans involved.

"Thank you for coming all this way Mister Brown." Still there was no need to show that he knew everything was not truly regular. Simply play it off as efficiency. "Did you come by horse?" Polite inquiry and curiosity. Why would the creature be there otherwise.

"Of course not." Protective and offended for the beast that was biting, chomping and nickering on his head with none of the affection it was being shown, Brown hugged its neck, a slight change of expression making its way into the usually absolutely still features. "How could I let my beloved horse face such a terrible road?" That was kind of what a horse was bred for but no one bothered to point it out."

"Is that so." Sebastian selected the neutral acknowledgement, keeping his eyes on the man. Mouser stared too, eyes fixed on the fact that she could not see John Brown's eyes. And that lack of information was making her restless. And itchy. Lae kept poking her wrist, responding to her prickliness. Oscar hissed and hopped to Snake, coiling around his shoulders again. "I am glad you were not affected by the werewolves' miasma." Still polite but questioning. Now there was less randomness in the appearance and disappearance of the threat. So he asked yet another outsider to the woods to make sure. Information was too valuable. And the tilt of the man's head was showing want of understanding to them he had not found the obstacle.

"Thank you." He too chose the plain politeness to keep the conversation flowing, letter still held up but unmentioned. "By the way where is the Earl?" A direct delivery from the Queen's staff had a few rules that differed from regular correspondence, post or servant of the palace. It had to be given to the Earl of Phantomhive. No proxy. A few exceptions.

"I am very sorry but the Young Master is not feeling well at the moment." Which could range from
the current insanity of weepiness to mild food poisoning.

"I shall deliver the letter to him." In case of absence Mouser or Sebastian could hold on to the letter until it could be opened by the boyo. Smiling politely and reassuringly Mouser presented her position as the secretary as a reason to take it.

"That is troubling." There was a slight tremble of doubt as Brown considered his course of action, staring at the letter. "This is urgent so read immediately was the message attached. Then I have no choice." He offered the letter. Mouser took it, cigarette suspended on her lips waiting. "In this situation can I ask of you to read the contents? As it is urgent."

"Very well then." Mouser slid a pen knife from somewhere in her sleeve and cut through the seal, pulling the letter and the results, skimming through the lines, chuckling, smiling slowly.

"Excuse me." Sebastian leaned over her shoulder, reading too. It was something they had just seen. "This is..." his expression changed to surprise for a brief moment before the same amused and satisfied expression settled on his face.

"Well then. The message has been delivered." Mission accomplished Brown turned away, patting the horse's neck. Oscar kept hissing, low and angry.

"Watch out for werewolves." Sebastian taunted his goodbyes, smiling,

"Thank you. Tell the Earl to take care." The answer was deadpan, the sentiment lacking but perfectly pleasant at face value.

"Go back to the kitchen and move along with dinner preparations." Sebastian instructed Snake. Mouser lit another cigarette, looking up again. "Make sure Oscar apologises properly." With a shy nod Snake walked away, petting Emily who was hissing back at the other two snakes for some reason.

"I am growing vey paranoid about not seeing people's eyes." Mouser murmured, tossing yet another spent butt into the ground, stepping on it, glancing at the path the Queen's Horse Master had taken. "What colour are angel eyes?" Angela's had been purplish falling into grey and ashy but there had been an underlying white glow to them as well.

"At this time suspicion serves no practical purpose." Sebastian answered.

"Just because he is bound to the one that holds the leash of your leash holder does not mean..." Mouser grumbled, stopped by a light caress on her lips. Gloveless, hot, the pad of his thumb followed the curve of her bottom lip, a smile appearing on his teasing face.

"There... that is when your freedom will make things easier." He cupped her face and tilted Mouser's head, bowing to press his mouth against hers, a light brushing touch, a sharp nip at the end, a tempting tease in a purred sound. "Now, about your dog's discovery..." he broke his own spell oddly, the low voice not matching the pragmatism of the words.

"Yes..." Mouser sighed, stepping back, shaking her head slightly, clearing it, glancing at him with suspicion before shrugging and straightening. "We may need to go in a roundabout way to do this now."

A window to the corridors served them well.

The once locked door opened to Mouser's touch, revealing a grinning devil dog in human form attempting to look innocent as to why the dead werewolf was missing a leg.
"Well it seems we are finally ready to advance." Sebastian considered after a glance, his face serious as Mouser scolded the dog lightly, attempting to quell her laughter.
"My lady?" Wolfram knocked on the door. There was nary a sound coming from the Green Witch's room. Knocking again produced no effect so he opened the door, stepping inside, finding the young lady immersed in that foreigner's book. His scowl deepened for a second before he attempted to make his presence known once more. Sieglinde's head shot up when she noticed his presence, tilting, curious, as if trying to regain her bearings. «It's almost dinner time.» He announced, returning to his butler duties.

«Yes…» Sieglinde murmured, putting the book down, hand lingering on the cover. «Thank you…» She murmured, looking down, staring at the thing still before biting her lip and looking up with determination, taking a deep breath, staring at him. «Wolf... I really can't go to see them off?» The Young Lady asked, her plea determined but still filled with sadness and longing. Hungering for knowledge, for what was beyond the borders. Of course such things would be hard to control…

«No.» Tersely Wolfram stated the refusal. «You cannot.» In an attempt to make the refusal seem much more reasonable he added the thing that she had been raised to know. «It is dangerous in the forest with the werewolf in a fury.»

«But…» She tried to reason, still holding on to the hope of going.

«Please understand young lady.» Wolfram attempted to once more smother that spark of unruliness, approaching, face stony, voice steady. «If something were to happen to you…» It was the thing Sieglinde knew she should dread. Disappearing, failing to complete her duty, endangering the village.

«I know!» Sieglinde shouted, frustrated, staring at him with fury in her eyes before catching herself, sinking back down into the chair, looking away, down, towards her clasped hands, the book abandoned on the table. «I know…» Murmuring, tears flooding her voice, staining her eyes as her fingertips brushed the English book, hands gripping the volume, pulling it towards her chest as she looked up, pleading, still clinging to hope. «But... only for a minute…» She attempted to bargain. The tears made Wolfram flinch as much as the Young Lady's broken voice. «I want to see the outside world. I want to know more about the world they live in…» Want, hope, wishes… As she grew what she should do was being left behind for what she wanted to do. As she grew close to imploring Wolfram gritted his teeth, withstanding the conflict. «Wolfram don't you see…» She was indeed seeing. Seeing too much. Wanting to do too much. And that was unacceptable.

«No.» Wolfram's hands closed into tight fists as he repeated his refusal. There was no other answer to be given. «You cannot.» Sieglinde was staring at him, stunned, tears running down her cheeks, falling into the pages of a book she should have never been given access to. «Even if you ask I cannot allow you. The Green Witch must remain in the village.» Resigned and refusing to cede the butler looked down, gritting his teeth, grimacing. «We were wrong to let them in.» It had been his opinion all along but now that the influences of the outside were manifesting in this obsessive wish to see what was beyond the forest… things were drawing close to a precarious tipping point that would never otherwise had occurred. They stood to lose everything because of… «I will bring you dinner to the room.» Attempting to leave no room for argument Wolfram turned, walking briskly towards the door.

«Wolf!» Sieglinde pushed away the chair, trying once more. It was the only chance she felt she would ever have to persuade the man. If he left he would be able to treat her request as if she had never brought it up. The clatter of the wood and fabric didn't make him turn. Tottering on her bound feet the little witch tried to give chase only to fall, unsupported, unable to walk.
Sieglinde's distressed cry brought Wolfram back immediately, kneeling by her side

«My lady! Are you hurt?» He asked, reaching out, aiding her to her knees, eyes darting over her, trying to see if the stone floor had harmed her in any way.

Sieglinde still had tears in her eyes but they were not from pain.

The words she used to reassure him that no harm had come to her were drowned by the sight of those small broken feet.

Guilt, regret, sorrow, concern, caring and protectiveness lead to a tight hug, confusing the Young Lady. She muttered his name in confusion, not returning the embrace, frozen.

«I'm sorry…» The words were dragged out, tinged in pain, raspy, so hoarse that he could only be holding back tears. Recognizing that, knowing that feeling of helplessness Sieglinde's arms went around the burly man', patting his back, trying to reassure him as the plea for forgiveness continued to flow from his mouth, even through gritted teeth. "I'm so sorry my lady… I…" He bit down the words that wanted to pour out, keeping quiet, keeping the little girl in a tight embrace.

«Wolf don't cry.» Gently she caressed his hair, reassuring, her voice changing, gentling, forgetting for a moment her own wishes in favour of the needs of those she had been taught to protect. «I'm not going anywhere.» To stay, to be safe, to keep working on the green witch's purpose… «I will complete the ultimate magic and protect all of you.» As she should.

«…Ja.» the long pause, the deep hesitation, the tremble in his hands as the hug continued went unnoticed. It took quite a while for him to regain his composure, step back, pick up the young lady and return her to her chair, allowing Sieglinde to keep reading as he left the room to fetch dinner.

After all that he felt that it would be unwise to keep allowing contact with the outsiders.

The odd conflicted mood had not abandoned Wolfram as he made his way downstairs to prepare. Away from his Lady's room, the look of sadness still gnawed at him. He had assured Hilde he knew his duty towards the Green Witch and towards the village. But at times like that it also made him feel like things overlapped with the duty to his lady, something that had grown as the years had gone by. But at a time like that things would demand a certain…

«Such a grim face.» The dark-eyed woman murmured, smoking near a window.

Wolfram stopped, startled, keeping it from showing as he turned. How… how had he missed that someone was standing there? There was something deeply unsettling about that one, Wolfram considered, staring. And knowing that only made the fact he had failed to notice her presence completely more eerie. He should show that they were unwelcome, make sure they would leave. Intimidation should be easy.

Uncaring she stared back, smiling sweetly.

Barely concealing his flinch Wolfram attempted to answer.

«The situation is dire, largely because of you outsiders.» He scowled, nodding, asserting his words.

The woman had the gall to chuckle, shaking ash into the night.

«What is your duty?» She asked, head tilting.
«I am the Green Witch's butler.» The response was automatic, stiff.

«Are you now...» She shrugged, rolling the words slowly, snuffing out the cigarette with a hum, pressing the butt against the rock. Blackened nails glinted in the candlelight. «Do you think your duty is clear when you say it like that or are you trying to wrap your mind around the duty they say you do in those words?» Confusion crept into his face. She clicked her tongue sympathetically. «I'll make it easier to understand. Do you serve the title or the girl? Do you protect the legacy or...»

«You talk too much.» Wolfram grumbled bitterly as her words lodged into the doubt and guilt brewing from the earlier conflict. It was best to cut her off before anything else could be... dragged.

«So do you.» Lightly she straightened her clothes, making sure no ash had settled on the fabric, stretching, winking. «But I doubt you realize it.» Softly she petted his arm, walking down the corridor, away from him. «Don't fret. We will leave. And we will make sure nothing is left behind.»

«Is that a threat?» The man's voice rose up, growled, angered.

«Why would I make threats?» The woman whispered, stopping, turning, smiling.

For some reason that only made his twisted foreboding increase.
Mouser reviewed the list the dogs had given her with the progress of the pilfering of the items she had marked as valuable and as wanted. Unfortunate but the crystal chandelier had shattered. Minor loss. It was pretty and it had gold inlay but it had proven not be worth the effort. Metal was easier… the weaponry was delivered to the rooms and the need for urgency stressed although the how and when were left vague until the next piece had been placed.

It was an all would die or most would die thing.

The boyo was asleep, seemingly with no nightmares. But progress had not been made either. As with any deadline… Not much time left now. Do or die as Bard said. Funny expression that. She pocketed her list, stretching, closing the door after her. There was a bit of tension in Finny now released. He was starting to get jumpy.

"Did he eat Finny?" The thief asked, occupying her chair, finding the tray, eyes narrowing. Finny shook his head, worried. "You can go to you room now. Your back must be hurting." Smiling the thief settled, reaching for a book she had left on the nightstand. "I'll watch over."

"Yes… I'm kind of sleepy…" the gardener returned the whisper, rubbing his eyes with a small thankful grin, standing.

A knock on the door startled the boyo into wakefulness.

"It woke you up, didn't it?" Finny noticed and was quick to soothe the boyo. "I'll go take look so you can go back to sleep." The boyo made an incoherent mumble, moving a bit, propping himself against the pillow, listening as Finny's boots crossed the room. Mouser hummed and lit a cigarette. Someone was impatient. "Sebast…" the gardener started to say the name, catching himself before he could frighten the boyo. "What?" Only to be confused when Sebastian walked into the room.

"Finny. Will you leave the room for a while?" The demon asked coolly. The voice was enough to disturb the little bundle in the sheets as Finny tried to think of any words that stopped that invasion. "I have some important matters to discuss with the Young Master."

"No! Go away!" The boyo started to panic and thrash about.

Finny rushed to stand between Sebastian and the boyo.

Mouser tilted her head, shaping the smoke into a ring absently, staring at it, frowning.

"Did you not hear me? Please leave." Sebastian asked calmly, stopping nonetheless.

"Please wait." Pressured and starting to feel that things were not quite right Finny opened his arms, trying to act as a shield. "The young master still isn't…"

Unwilling to put up with any more delays Sebastian grabbed the gardener's wrist, yanking him off balance and fragging him towards the door. Finny struggled, spooked at first and then gathering whatever determination he could muster, digging his heels, pulling back. Amazingly strong or not it barely broke Sebastian's stride. In no time Finny found himself on the floor, in the corridor, looking up at the butler standing by the open doorway.

"Thank you for taking care of the Young Master. It will no longer be necessary." Sebastian stated, closing the door. There was no loud sound. There was no angry banging. Just a soft, calm, definite
click and the sound of the lock turning.

"I was going all out but he didn't even flinch..." Finny mumbled, distressed, confused, staring. "why? How..." The young master... he needed... standing the gardener ran down the corridor, frightened.

"Mouser... you promised." The boyo called out, frightened, returning to the safety under the covers as Sebastian's steps approached the bed.

"Boyo... you know I lie." The answer was painfully obvious and only augmented the simpering. "But it is still in your hands." The thief added as Sebastian stopped, placing his hand on the back of her chair, staring at the bundle, face still a mask of pretty much nothing but flat annoyance.

"We have received a letter from the queen." He began the report, staring at the shaking bundle. "And it seems we will be thrown out of the village tomorrow morning." Two pieces of information to work with. They failed to impart the proper sense of urgency and purpose. "Brooding over your fears and regrets, curled up in a blanket is not what you should be doing right now." Voice growing sterner Sebastian added. "Come. It's time to get out of bed." Such a common phrase, one used so many times.

"No... I don't want to." The boyo managed to murmur through clattering teeth, curling even more.

"Oh?" There was a smile creeping into Sebastian's voice. Not a very good one. Mouser glance up. His face still looked flat. "Very well." Shadows shifted and slinked about, the darkened tendrils slithering from him. Her attention shifted back to the boyo as the darkness drew closer. Some of ribbons curled around her leg. Mouser's markings reacted as well, her appearance shifting in places, responding. "You will abandon your position as the Queen's watchdog?" Sebastian asked, voice growing soft, whispered as the darkness grew, blocking the growing dawn outside. "Then you will not experience hardship. No one will blame you for not wanting any more pain. The servants would still treat you well. However..." Angered, voice finally reaching the depths of his nature, Sebastian stated, red eyes glowing brightly red, fangs appearing clearly. "Abandoning your revenge midway is a breach of the contract."

The darkness gripped the boyo, yanking him away from the covers, binding, bounding, keeping him from struggling or screaming. Reaching out, gripping the boyo's scared face Sebastian tugged him closer, staring at the frightened look with scorn.

"What an utterly boring end." He considered, voice frosting over with ennui. "I feel sorry for all the people that became victims to your boring existence and pitiful attempt at revenge." The fear didn't fade. If the usual boyo was there the complaints about the rough treatment and dismissing words would never end.

"No you don't." Mouser mentioned, burning the remnants of the cigarette in her palm, shaking the ash away from her claws, watching it vanish into the darkness that slithered around them.

"Pitying someone does not have to be meaningful." A chuckle broke through his fangs as the demon answered his covenant' correction. She was watching the process with red eyes as well, showing little inclination towards protecting or advocating the Young Master's weakness. Good.

"True... but you don't feel sorry." Mouser scoffed, absently petting a tendril of darkness with her claws, watching the movement around her grey-marked fingers, smiling, tilting the chair. "You feel disdain."

"Also true but I doubt this is the time to argue over semantics." Sebastian turned his attention back
to the squirming prey.

"Maybe not." There was a little laugh accompanying her words. Lae had grown on her wrist, placing himself over the marks on her skin, awake, aware. "But then again you had all that discourse about making polite conversation with dinner guests and still be able to keep what you are chewing hidden." Amused the demon looked back at her, finding narrowed eyes. "Speaking of which do I get anything?"

"Your first meal should not be scraps of this half-baked soul." Gently he reached out, gloved hands tracing her lips, cupping Mouser's face gently, lifting, abandoning the contact with a lingering caress.

"I am also not hungry yet." The thief sighed, admitting her youth. "Show me."

"Well seeing you are going to disappear anyway all of this makes no difference." Turning back to the boyo the darkness increased, engulfing, absolute. "It was not the end I was hoping for but it might be enough to feel full."

*Am I going to die?* Ciel understood what was happening through the terror, barely able to summon the strength to struggle. *I haven't carried out my revenge yet.* Revenge, returning… making them pay… but now… *Even the devil has forsaken me…*
"Have you decided?" He asked, standing tall on the white, looking from above at Ciel's curled form on the dark square at the core of the chess game. The other pieces stood around them, silent, lit by stars. "Stay here forever or..." Silence met His prodding. Sighing, reaching out, a gentle touch on his head before He reached down and embraced Ciel. "Silly... your really are a fool." Despite the chastising the words felt gentle, soothing, as did the hug. Ciel looked up slightly, facing Him. "No one asked you to take revenge."

"I know." The answer came slow and listless, muffled and careful.

"If you know then why do you seek revenge..." He stepped back, leaving him, leaving the mirrored image of luxury and pride to a bloodied, cold eyed reflection of a painful past, of a dagger through the chest, of a cry that was answered by darkness. The surrounding changed, decaying, shredded, tattered, stars losing their glow. "...with the power gained by sacrificing me." With that Ciel was back in the cage, back in the chain, back in the pained body that had preceded the ritual, cold, hungry, hurt. "Because you made that choice. many more were sacrificed." Pawns, bishop, queen became people. People he had known. People he had used. People that had been swept off the board. "Did you want me to forgive you?" He asked, close to sneering.

"No..." Ciel's answer was given in a shaky, uneven voice, hesitating, frightened.

"Did you want to leave your weak self behind?" Madam Red asked in her sure, direct voice.

"No!" Growing sure, prodded, confused but steadied Ciel gripped the bars harder, shaking his head.

"Did you want everything to be yours?" Joker spoke up next, head tilting, a silent Doll staring on.

"NO!" Louder Ciel shouted, hunching, knowing what he was supposed to be doing, to be saying.

"We understand." Another voice Ciel had not heard for a long time spoke up, standing behind his cage, causing him to whirl around, to see. "You wanted revenge for us, didn't you?" Mother... Father... they stood together, embracing, smiling.

"NOO!" Ciel shouted.

"Then..." The same voice cut through the scream, the memories, the questions, asking its own as it had once done. "Why is that you made such a great sacrifice with even your soul at sake to make a contract with me?" the last piece, the knight that had not changed its shape finally turned, familiar, recognizable, asking.

"I made a contract with a demon because..." Reaching up, fingers trailing the bottom of his marked eye, Ciel murmured, hesitating for the last time. "The reason why I wanted power that could not be defeated by anyone..." his voice grew stronger as he stood within the cage, causing it to shatter. "I am not so noble that I would stake my life for someone else's." Taking a step under the eyes of those fallen pieces made the bloodied vision vanish. "Nor am I so forgiving that I would sit by and allow someone to trample me." The pair that had the face of his parents was banished in the next step. The rags became fine clothes as the figures faded. "I am selfish and self-righteous." Madam Red disappeared in the next step, as his drive grew, as the path cleared. "I am human." The last two were gone as well, leaving him in full formal dress, a lord ready to face the enemies he sought. "That's why. I... to clear my own shame I used your power." There. That was a reason. And he was
no longer afraid to look at the proof, to look at the deal, to the goal. "Not for anyone else! For myself!"

The shout shattered the rest of that cocoon, bringing him back to pain and darkness, to a struggle to even breathe. It took him a few moments to piece together the events, to recall what had led to that bind.

"Sebastian!" Anger, ire and command broke through in the shout. There was a stillness now in those swirling tendrils of darkness, the difference between a prey struggling in fear and something struggling to fight. It made it no less a prey but it was certainly more exciting than lacking a challenge. "You bastard! Let me go right now! That's an order!" As demanded as he was back on the bed, the darkness receding into Sebastian's form. "That is a terrible way to wake someone up. Horrible behaviour towards a master." Complaint in rage seemed the best way to proceed and a welcome sign after all the snivelling.

"Yes, well. Do excuse me but you were proving impossible to rouse." Sebastian twisted the answer into a proper greeting, bowing respectfully. "Good morning My Lord." Resuming the usual.

After a short smile as the boyo sat up he kicked Sebastian's shoulder. It didn't make him budge or do anything other than glance sideways.

"You really tried to eat me just now, didn't you?" The boyo asked, aggravated, glaring.

"No, no. I was only 90% serious." Sebastian's answer was chirper and smiling, full of a reassuring tone that fooled no one.

"The rest of that was disappointment." Mouser completed. "Mornin' boyo. All you needed was to feel death coming to ya, right?" Standing from the chair, unmarked, Lae back into a bracelet she went to the windows and opened them so light came pouring in.

"So it was a done deal for you." Still unable to let go of the annoyance of almost becoming a nibble Ciel continued to prod for a satisfying justification.

"Mr. Tanaka told me not to take drastic measures so I kept it off my mind while you were carrying on in behaving like a frightened child." Sebastian explained, making sure he was as polite and insulting as he could manage at the moment. Mouser snickered, straightening things around the room before settling at the foot of the bed. "And with time running out I just unconsciously decided to deal with it."

"Yes…" Dragging the word said it all about what he thought of the chain of events. "«Unconsciously» deciding to eat your master." Annoyed he pushed against Sebastian's shoulder. "Damn demon."

"Yes. Because I am so." Sebastian admitted to it easily, standing.

Mouser flopped backwards on the bed and tilted her head to glance at the boyo, staring through glasses.

"Did you remember why?" She asked softly before grimacing, the frames flopping down on her forehead due to the position, rolling to look up more easily, steadying the glasses on her nose. "Some did not want to die back then. They thought they did. They asked. But as soon as they felt the blade near they snapped back. They fought. They found rage through the fear and sorrow. And most of them wanted to play the game."
"Revenge." The boyo murmured, staring back.

"Plain, simple and through no proxy. With a little help, true, but…” Winking the glasses vanished.

"Can you now tell why you were rendered into that sorry state?" Sebastian went to work on the bandages, checking the extent of the damage by himself and deeming it minor now. Concealing the contract mark was the last thing done.

"That…” The boyo hesitated, thinking. "Bring everyone in. It's best if I explain it only once." He ordered, finally settled and resolute.

Good thing too.

With dawn time was ticking steadily away from them.
A heap of concerned eavesdropping servants of the Phantomhiove household fell through the doorway, collapsing in pained groans on the floor and on each other, as soon as the door was opened by the butler on his way to fulfil the Young Master's request. Tanaka was able to avoid the lurch and tumble by staying a bit behind the group although the old man could not avoid the wobble of a misstep.

"What kind of servants would listen in on their master?" Sebastian scolded, staring down, marking his displeasure. The boyo looked absolutely startled. Mouser chuckled and lit yet another cigarette, frowning, finding the box empty as she hid the lighter. Patting the seams and hiding spots she counted two more fags and one of Sitri's all-tobacco sticks and… well she could always ask the dogs.

"No we couldn't hear a thing." Bard groaned, moving smiling bashfully, fearfully, trying to disperse the mood. "Finny said you were acting weird." He looked up, elbow digging on to Finny's wounds, making him complain, flailing on the bottom of the pile.

"What a short temper, says Bronte." Snake murmured blushing slightly under his scales.

"Sebastian don't be angry!" Meyrin pleaded also pressing on Finny.

"What a loud lot you are." The boyo was able to get his bearings and spoke up.

"Young master!" Finny surged, tossing everyone away from his back, to heap on their own, groaning over the sudden bucking, rushing towards the bed, arms outstretched, weeping. "You're back to normal!"

"Stop right there." Grabbing the battering ram by the scruff Sebastian stopped the momentum, scolding Finny, hoisting him up, away from the ground, leaving the legs dangling still in a stomping race. "We just managed to make the Young Master healthy again. Do you want to render him back into an invalid?"

"I'm so sorry." Realizing the impulsiveness of his actions lead finny to a sobby hiccup of an apology, rubbing his eyes, stopping.

"Finny." The boyo called, extending his hand. "Thank you for taking care of me. I'm fine now." Gently Finny took it, pressing his forehead against the bruised and bandaged fingers. "Everyone please come here." There was a long pause as the boyo fidgeted. Mouser stood and joined the line-up. "There is something that must be said to you." Formally the boyo started. "I am sorry."

That plain, unembellished, humble statement brought a state of disbelief to the group. A loud, long silence crawled into the wide-eyed stares that were fixed on the now blushing boyo that gripped his nightshirt. He very much looked like he was dragging the words out. Understandable given his nature and the underlying idea of the statements he needed to proclaim.

"Through my carelessness I have cause suffering, confusion and worry. And that is why as the master of the household I must ask for your forgiveness."

"How can you say such a thing, young master!" Meyrin stammered, fidgeting with her glasses.

"Please raise you head." Bard shook his hands, not knowing what to do when confronted with such a display of not-haughtiness.
"You can't help a curse, says Emily." Snake added, looking down. Emily was shaking her tongue on the top of his head, leading the conversation amidst the group of snakes.

"That's right." Finny agreed, nodding hard.

Mouser arched an eyebrow, blowing smoke slowly, glancing up and then out.

Sebastian wasn't saying much either.

"No." The boyo continued as the complaints and encouragement grew quieter. "Even that me up until now was still me. As your master I swear I will never have you seem me in such a sorry state again." Admission to a weakness and refusal to adopt an easy excuse. It seemed the experience had indeed forged something useful. "So that's why I ask … please serve me again from now on."

"Yes my lord." Prideful the group straightened and use the phase in near unison. "Says Bronte." Until Snake had to specify which of the snakes made the statement, clipping them enthusiasm of the others into an aggravated squabble.

"That's no way to end it." Meyrin murmured.

"You ruined it." Bard was a bit more direct.

"By the way…" The blush was returning, harder. The boyo grumbled, again in the terrain of word-wrestling. "I know it's sudden but as your master I have an order for you." Taking a deep breath he spilled. "Please forget how I was until now. Immediately."

Roaring laughter followed the statement

"Ah young master that will be quite hard." Bard chuckled, rubbing his head.

"At you age is fine to act like that." Meyrin was sweet and reassuring.

"I will value all the memories." Finny covered his hear with a smile

"I took pictures." Mouser revealed. "I have this cute one of him cowering in the corner of the bed with the curtain over his head." There was an aww moving through the ranks as she showed the compiled images of his child-like scare. Now that the fright had passed all of those were classified as adorable instead of exasperating and dread-inducing.

"Mouser!" the boyo shouted, both annoyed and embarrassed.

"Also as your secretary I will have to go through the situation to appropriately calculate how much is owed to the household seeing that most of us went above and beyond their contracted duties in this time of sickness." The thief hid the pictures and smiled, approaching the bed.

"Are you blackmailing me again?" Frustrated Ciel groaned, crossing his arms, sneering.

"Whatever gave you that impression boyo?" Innocently she blinked those big brown eyes.

"A reward for faithful service is indeed expected in these situations." Sebastian supported his covenant's claim, returning from the attempt to conceal his amusement at the public display of embarrassment of the Young Master. Tanaka voiced an agreement in the background.

"So that means you have memories of what happened during this time?" Meyrin noticed the nature of the request through the teasing and turned to the Young Master, serious.
"Yes. Though I would prefer to be rid of them." The boyo answered, nodding sharply. "I wasn't exactly acting because I was truly feeling it..." he continued, attempting to explain, joining the words slowly, frowning as they came together a bit more tangled than he would have liked.

"Meaning?" Sebastian pried, waiting.

"I feared even the littlest thing." Ciel explained. Maybe it would be easier that way. "It was like I could not control my reactions and only fear could come out..." It was not working. "I can't really put it into words though." Giving up the attempt the boyo allowed his statements to linger, reverting into a silent state of calculation.

"That happens a lot on the battlefield." Bard, however, understood. From those thoughts the actions now seemed familiar. "Even a well-trained soldier can snap and panic when badly injured. It happens a lot. So I think it's rather normal you became like that." Putting it into the perspective of the battlefield, taking the idea of the curse away and what was left was a human reaction to pain.

"True." Sebastian acquiesced the information. It was no longer new but it confirmed much of what had occurred. "When you fell into this curse your appearance took quite an impact. I wonder if the aim was also psychological."

"Aim?" The word caught the boyo's attention.

"Please read this." Mouser offered the letter that had prompted the need for action.

"What is this?" The boyo red the first page carefully, frowning. "C4... is it a code?"

"It was an emergency so I had to make the decision myself." Sebastian informed him of the new developments. "The Royal Family was informed and offered a sample to analyse. Both of a plant from the forest and the cure."

"I see." Pleased the boyo grinned. "So this is the true identity of this curse."

"Indeed." Sebastian nodded. "And Lord Sullivan acted according to the werewolf's wishes and is trying to complete the ultimate magic."

"Hum... there is more." The second part of the letter was written in the Queen's usual style. The contents made the boyo scoff. "She's as absurd as ever. «It will give me great pleasure if the little witch could come for tea with me» she says." Throwing the letter on the covers the boyo groaned. "As if that's easy!"

"Well... royal requests are on a separate level of selfishness it seems." Sebastian shrugged and waited.

"There is no time left." Morning had already come and he remembered they had been ordered to leave. "Let's prepare... Wait for instructions but start packing as if we are obeying their request."

"Yes sir." The group nodded in acknowledgement and began to exit the room.

"Sebastian I need to get dressed." Standing, legs still wobbly the boyo sighed. "Report what we have learned and prepare some strong tea. I need to stay alert."

"Yes my lord." Sebastian bowed.

"I'll go make the tea. We need to move faster than he can hop jobs." Mouser grumbled, leaving as well.
At the moment it was not only dressing but changing bandages, getting weapons, starting the plan, filling in knowledge blanks.

Sebastian was far less ahead on his preparations than she was.

Thompson walked by the corridor with several silver trays, bowing to his mistress before vanishing from sight.

The thief walked into the kitchen and grinned at the frowning women, noticing the lack of Wolfram, heading towards the pot and stove.
Chapter 190

«The last bit just won't go right…» Sieglinde murmured, staring at the papers as dawn was steadily creeping under the curtains.

She had found sleep elusive.

The conversation, the lonely dinner…

That had cemented her determination. An idea had sparked as she stared at the darkened ceiling, prompting her to jump off the bed and start experimenting, thinking, forcing her will through the tangles of the spell.

Formulas, incantations, theories, ideas, doodles were spread around her, cascading from the table to the floor where she had found a more ample working surface. Ink stained everything from her hands to the furniture, dripping and splattered in her hast to write.

Lights were lit, sneakily done after Wolf had prepared her to bed. A few candles had turned to dead puddles of wax. Sieglinde had barely noticed. As long there was light to read and write by her focus remained unwavering.

If her duty was what kept he in the village then if her duty was fulfilled, if she completed the ultimate magic the werewolves' anger would subside. The village will become peaceful again. And they can come back... and I could venture out... Learn, travel, explore...

Piece by piece the edges softened, fit, clicked and became one, seamlessly, providing her with the guiding thread to lace with the base magic her ancestor had cemented in the deep chamber. Each page she filled increased the spell's completion, its power and reach. Each letter made her vision of peace, of people coming in and out clearer.

All that was needed was for her duty to be done.

Stilling Sieglinde stared at the papers circling her and the flowing spell traced on it, seeking errors, seeking flaw, seeking anything that would make that magic fade and fail. Searching for anything that would force the people she knew away, searching for a perfect thing that would keep them able to return.

«My lady…» Wolfram called softly, knocking, noticing the light, walking in with a frown. While it was not unheard of for the lady to wake up and experiment about he was unsure what had brought that sudden need to work. The butler was more or less dreading that her promise had been in vain.

«Wolf…» Sieglinde murmured, dazed, eyes sparkling, excitement and hope filling her features. «I did it!» She announced, stained hands leaving prints on the floor and nightgown as she turned, beaming. «I need to get dressed…» mumbling, mixing her words, trying to stand and move fast Sieglinde asked. "I'm ready for my duty!»

Startled Wolfram called the women, waiting as dress and hair were arranged. She barely ate, too keen on continuing, on completing the secret she had just uncovered.

Carrying Sieglinde down as soon as she was ready Wolfram decided to keep his doubts quiet. The young lady was excited, biting her lip, hands clenching an unclenching. The outsiders were preparing to leave as asked. That soothed some of his concern.
The walls parted with a bit of a hiccup. He thought nothing of it as they advanced down the stairs and reached the first chamber and its caged descent.

Werewolves were waiting, upright, surrounding the circle, next to braziers of blue fire, watching as he placed the Green Witch down and she began her ritual. Greetings were announced to the silent figures. Small unsteady steps brought Sieglinde to the wand, dainty hands picking it up in reverence, whispering as she started to place the glyphs that would create the Green Witch's ultimate spell.

Silently they watched as she chanted and used the formulas she had been taught from a young age to appease, to create, to change.

As the spell's chain was completed in the hissing of the crystal's writing the ritual, words that had never been spoken before echoed as Sieglinde held the wand high, standing straight on her own two legs, taking a deep breath.

«The contract formed in ancient times will be completed now by me, the descendant of the Green Witch, Sieglinde Sullivan." She lowered the wand before her chest, holding it horizontally in a steady, single-handed grip. «Werewolves! Witness its completion!» She asked, walking a path to the pedestal once more, putting the wand back, the effort of those steps taking almost as much energy as creating the magic itself. Wand returned to its place she resumed her spot at the top of the circle, arms opening wide, encompassing the room, the bright writing on the stone. "This is the ultimate magic!" She announced before sighing, energy leaving her legs, «It's done." Sieglinde murmured, her consciousness fading to exhaustion. «Finally done.»

«Are you awake?» Wolfram's voice reached Sieglinde as she came to. Sieglinde blinked. The butler was placing a tray with water and a cup next to her bed. It seemed he has called when he had noticed her agitation.

«Wolf?» Murmuring Sieglinde sat up. Her hair was free from the buns and netting but she was still fully clothed. Frowning, rubbing the sleep from her eyes she tried to remember why. 'I completed it...» Elation came to her in those words. «Then passed out...» Embarrassed she recalled the second part of that momentous event.

The light that poured from the windows was low, dark and reddened. The day had been lost. Concerned Sieglinde frowned, thinking. Had the outsiders left? There was still time, there was still time to invite their return, her accompanying them to the outside world. Her duty was done, surely there was a way...

«Young lady...» Wolfram murmured proudly, kneeling down. «Thank you so much for your hard word.» he took her foot and started to unlace the shoes, pulling the ribbons free. «Please. Change into your bedclothes. You need to rest.»

«Now we can have some peace.» Sieglinde sighed, agreeing. Maybe there was still time. He said nothing about them having left... maybe Ciel was not well enough to travel yet. Even if they had agreed that the outsiders had to leave that they would not be so heartless as to make a sick young man travel through the woods... even if the werewolves' ire had been calmed now.

«Indeed.» Wolfram murmured, staring at the small shape of her crushed feet.

«You're making that face again.» Sieglinde murmured with a sigh, frowning. «Do you remember?
The day I was named the green witch?» She asked softly, wordlessly asking him to look up, to look at her.

«How could I forget.» Guilt was the main emotion he felt towards that event. He had crushed her feet with his own hands. The pained screams of the little child were not something he could easily forget.

«Don't make such a gloomy face.» Sieglinde reassured him, smiling. «I am proud of these feet. This is proof that I am a descendant of the great Green Witch.» Sighing she looked out. The sky was dark. The first stars were staring to pepper the firmament. «I'm happy I managed to fulfil the witch's duties at last.» pride mixed with nostalgia, with the stories she had been told, with the vague memories of her past. «I don't remember her face but... do you think the previous Green Witch who gave birth to me... would be happy?»

«Of course my lady.» Earnestly Wolfram agreed. «Everyone is very proud of you.»

«However...» using the courage that admission of pride had given her Sieglinde ventured, daring to voice her desires once more. The situation had changed from last night's conversation. «Now that I have completed the ultimate magic what should I do as the Green Witch?» She asked, enthusiastic, hopeful. «That's it!» clapping as if the idea had just bubbled to her mind she smiled, shouting in glee. «I can leave! Go outside! Learn many things! The village will benefit...»

«You can't.» Wolfram shouted, angered, standing, hands clenching. «You are the Green Witch. I am you butler.» When those words left his mouth he stopped. The Young Lady was staring at him, shocked, sadness coming back to her eyes, dulling their bright sheen. And the chilling smile of that unsettling woman came back to the back of his mind along with the whispered words last night. Do you serve the title or the girl? Those were her poisonous words... what had... What could... «We cannot leave the forest by law.» Decisive he crushed Sieglinde's request, shaking the doubt away. Taking a deep breath the butler took refuge on his duties, resuming a dispassionate monotone stepping back, ignoring the young lady's expression of broken sadness and teetering on despair. «You must be tired. I will send the women to aid your nightly preparations. Please rest.» he left without a look back.

Sieglinde's head flopped down with a sigh, eyes stinging, dreams scattered, hopes lost.
Chapter 191

Witching hour.

It seemed fitting to be tapping at the witch's window then, as the night deepened and the rest of the world quieted. Less chance of being spotted too. Not everything was done solely for the dramatic effect. That drama was laced with purpose always seemed to be a stunning but useful coincidence. Although it hardly ever was as accidental as people would like to believe.

Quite a sloppy work from a security standpoint too, just assuming that the height of a tower would be enough to deter a motivated enough thief, assassin or ill-intentioned individual.

The sound was soft and subtle on the glass, muffled by the glove.

It was not the time for grand displays.

Not yet anyway.

There were plans for it as the main plot proceeded.

The village believed them gone.

It had not been a hard ruse to set when something else had clearly gripped their attentions. That could also be a reason for the lessening in their security and vigilance.

The Phantomhive Household had left Wolfshultz before noon in the two carts that had arrived in. However they had not crossed the forest or left the edges of the town.

There was just a little thing to do before that.

«What is this?» The sleepy voice of the girl came from the inside of the room as they stood just outside the great window, balanced on the ledge. Careful steps punctuated by the thump of the wooden crutches approached, fuelled by curiosity.

Ciel frowned, keeping from looking down and breaking the persona needed to lure Sieglinde into their hold. But that was taking far too long. Even with Mouser prowling the grounds around the Green Witch's Manor, making sure they would remain undisturbed on the way down there was no real security.

Sebastian held him easily, without looking any different than he always had. Ciel suspected it was as much as a front as anything else. But there really was no time to do some guesswork around intent and actions when on the job.

"Good evening Lord Sullivan." The demon was the first to extend his greetings as the window was opened and the stunned girl stared as the pair under the moonlight, sleepy eyes becoming sharp in focus and the brightening in wonder. Good. They hadn't lost their sway when it came to the girl's interest in them and the outside.

"How did you get up here?" Common sense prevailed over the fascination as she pulled the windows open, crutches falling on the stone floor with a clatter. "If you fall you'll die!" Frightened by the thought, by the simple possibility Sieglinde reached out, pulling them in, eyes wide. All the while wincing in pain as she balanced on her own feet. She staggered back, looking for support, gripping the curtains, waiting.
Ciel was placed on the floor in front of her, smirking smugly, adjusting his cape, straight and proud, attempting to erase his pathetic self, the one that she had witnessed, the one that had whimpered in fear. It should be easy. He was dressed to impress after all.

"Why are you surprised?" Ciel taunted, chin upturned. "If you're a witch you can fly through the air on a broom."

"Ciel! You're back to normal!" Elated Sieglinde smiled, clapping, surprised and relieved.

"Yes, thanks to you." The Young Master performed as he should, nodding. "I wanted to see you before we left."

"You don't need to..." Sieglinde started, smiling, welcoming, friendly before stopping, her expression turning smugger, slyer. "Oh I see..." She murmured, chuckling, touching her chin in a pensive manner. "This is that «paying with your body» thing the book talks about, right." Glancing beyond her, under the pillow where their presence was hidden from Wolfram were two books in English. One very innocuous and standard. The other less so. Sebastian chuckled, recovering his covenant's salacious volume of would-be literature. "Well well.... Interesting..." The young Witch seemed more interested in her interpretation of the visit than on the stuttering and blushing Young Master's attempts to dispel the notion.

"It may be better." Sebastian teased, silencing Ciel before his offence could alert the castle, one knee touching the floor so he was at eye level with the young lady. "We offer you what you want most." Sebastian presented the terms of their offer in a soft voice, conspiring.

"What I want most?" Baited the Young Lady's expression changed, eyes turning greedy, curious and yet remaining so very innocent.

"The world beyond this forest." Sebastian completed. Showing the promise as both enticing and mysterious, full of potential. Each word was whispered back in reverence and longing. The little vulnerable girl in her nightgown hesitated, staring, torn. "You can gain knowledge and experience things you never dreamed of or could do if you stay." He continued, seeding hope and doubt. That was his job, after all. "What do you say?"

"But I am the Green Witch..." Sieglinde murmured, the old beliefs still anchored in her mind. Even if she was feeling bitterly betrayed by never being allowed to leave. Even if her purpose was done now that the magic had been perfected and completed even... "The village law says..."

"I see..." Ciel interrupted before she could justify her hesitation, turning away, staring outside. "Nothing to be done about it then." He closed the offer sharply, shaking his head, smiling ruefully, turning back. "I apologise. Offering you such a strange thing was not to your taste then." Sebastian responded to the silent order, turning away, ready to take him down, out of the window, away from the village. "You should close the window and get some sleep. In the morning this will have been nothing more than a dream." The Young Master advised. "Thank you my friend. Goodbye." Only then did he turn back with a smile, responding to the Sieglinde's gasp.

Doubt had settled.

Just a little push.

"Wait!" Springing into action, stumbling Sieglinde reached out, grabbing Ciel's cloak, answering, breaking, falling. "I'll come. I want to learn more!"

"Well then." Sebastian took charge then, finding the day dress, preparing it. "Please get changed."
He offered his help, readying the little witch for the world. "A debutante should be in full regalia when she steps in the new world." It was common sense. "Come. Give me your hand." Sebastian offered his hand along with the Young Master, flanking the Young Lady. "We will escort you." Trusting she took both of their hands, taking a shaky step forward, the edges of the bow trailing the stone.
"Where are we going?" Sieglinde whispered, looking up, at Sebastian's face as they delved deeper into the castle, down the stairs, shivering, anticipation and fear tangling, melding. "This is not the outside. We are going deeper into the castle." And they seemed to be heading towards the sanctum. How could the outsiders know... Nervousness crept into her mind for an instant. Instinct may have been telling her something was off but the curiosity and the offer were still too much to overlook.

"We have to go through this to reach the outside." Ciel answered, smiling, looking over his shoulder for a moment, hardly breaking his stride, the light swaying as he walked ahead, sure of his step. That was indeed a long way from the frightened young man she had tended to.

That odd smell of burning herbs and ash reached Sieglinde's nose as they reached the base of the stairs, making her frown and sniff the air.

They were indeed heading towards the Green Witch's inner Sanctum.

There was no way around it.

And they were not the first to arrive.

Mouser sat on a pile of bricks, the heavy things clearly removed to form the gap right next to where the entrance was guarded, leaving a hole that sunk deeper, probably as deep as the stairs lead. She was smoking quietly, the cigarette dangling from her lips, curled over a book that rested on her crossed legs. Looking up she smiled in greeting, spitting the cigarette to the floor, crushing it under her boot, hiding the book in a duffel bag, slinging it over her shoulders.

"That was faster than expected." She kept smiling, checking her clock, closing it with a snap, shaking the dust away from her clothes. "Shall we?"

"Don't tell me..." Sieglinde began, concern growing, agitated, suspended on Sebastian's arms.

"Shh." Sebastian murmured, placing a finger against his. "If you raise your voice the werewolves will find us." While it was a warning the teasing was very clear to those that knew better. However the girl seemed to heed the warning out of habit, nodding sharply in agreement. Or maybe she just didn't want to lose their help.

This time when crossing the bridge there was no sudden yank and an abrupt fall.

They used the elevator as it should be used.

Mouser smiled, looking around, growing giddy, feeling the prickle of Lae against her wrist.

Stonework surrounded them. It would be hard for a human to see it in the twilight, leaving the impression of plummeting in the dark until the stained glass gleamed through. Everything had been thought out for effect. The boyo managed to conceal the awe as he stepped out of the little cage and looked around, scanning for threats. Likely he would miss everything not clearly pointed out but it was nice to see some caution.

"Is this the magic circle?" He asked, skirting the borders of the writing.

Suspicion came clearly into Sieglinde's features. She avoided looking at it, she grew tense.
"The duty of the Green Witch was to create this circle magic, correct?" Sebastian asked, catching her off guard into plainly admitting.

"How do you know?" She stammered, wide-eyed.

"A snake told me." Sebastian teased, chuckling.

"You can speak to snakes?" Starry-eyed the girl forgot about the suspicion in face of the marvellous admission. "Are you a warlock?"

"I am not." Sebastian tilted his head, smiling. "Simply a hell of a butler."

"You have amazing talent…" Charmed Sieglinde sighed, touching her rapidly beating heart. "I want you fabulous bloodline."

"Stop chattering and attempting to turn my butler into a criminal." Ciel interjected, annoyed.

"Would you care to rethink that boyo?" Mouser laughed, walking around the room, staring at the stained glass and at the crystalline clusters behind them, sniffing the air discreetly. Clear, clear, clear… metal, oil and humans.

"No. I just heard myself." The boyo groaned, shaking his head. The wording was unfortunate. Most of what they did was indeed criminal. "What's this magic then?" He asked softly, turning, putting on a pretence of friendly curiosity. "Is it connected to the fact that you can't go outside?"

Sieglinde took a deep breath, conflicted.

Then she relented.

If they were going outside maybe they should know why she had once remained.

"I have told you about the werewolves' miasma, a magic that harms humans…" Sieglinde began the retelling of the story she had told once before, revealing what was missing from the first tale, hidden out of fear and caution. "And yet long ago a great amount of that miasma was present in the atmosphere, sustaining magical beasts." Now that was an interesting perspective if one didn't stop to consider the implications on human life. "However as people prospered the magic was lost." They had. One less loophole for the very smart girl to explore. "It was also the reason why witches' lost their powers." And another clause closed to her inquisitiveness. Why could she not fly and cast spells? Without the miasma no magic. Simple. So recover powers by creating miasma. Two birds, one stone. "The wolves, having had a similar loss, asked the witch that had made the contract to create a new source of miasma to protect us both." And there was the truth that giving up a pair of hams was not enough to appease a magical beast. Of course that when explained that way it seemed as mutually beneficial as a great beast protecting an isolated village. "Following through with this request was the Green Witch's duty." She completed the tale with the missing part of her role in the village, gesturing towards the glowing circle that covered the ground. "This is what I was able to do, what I gave them. This is the formula to activate the magic. Once cast it will create a denser miasma than anything ever seen before. Any person that comes into contact with it would die instantly." Mouser chuckled. If she believed amulets were enough to stop that she would be mistaken. A barrier was needed, as tight to the body as possible. Or a way to disperse or gather the cloud in a swift manner. In the story she seemed to be forgetting the village itself as it would sit amidst the poison. Or maybe she had been lead to believe that with her witchy powers back it would be simple to cast whatever else was needed to keep them safe. "The miasma in the forest is but the remnants of what the wolves could muster for our protection."
"I see." Sebastian's tone turned grave, mocking, sharp. "That is what you have been taught." He stated, placing the little girl on the floor, stepping over the circle, heading towards the altar.

"What do you mean?" Confused Sieglinde murmured, head tilting, eyes widening when his gloved hand hovered just above the wand. "Stop! If anyone but the Green Witch touches that altar…" Fearful she stumbled. Ciel stopped and supported her.

"What happens if someone does touch it?" The boyo asked, very softly, very gently.

"Misfortune…" Sieglinde's answer was hushed as she watched. Sebastian picked up the wand and tossed it to Mouser. The thief smiled and twirled it, causing the crystal at the tip to glow brightly, holding it aloft for a second, eyes closing, as if she was too going to cast something. "What?" Confusion tinged her features when no disaster occurred and the pedestal was easily pushed aside, revealing a lever contraption within a perfectly round hole. "What is this?" The witch approached with Ciel's aid, staring, completely baffled.

Mouser touched the wand to the floor, causing it to react and chime, amusing herself with the effect, seeing the stone react with the crystalline tip, scribbling, as Sebastian pulled the lever. The groan of metal cut through her antics as gears and cogs changed one of the windows into a nook with a heavily fortified metal door. Very secure-looking. Very industrial with its displays, gauges and buttons. Not so secure as it was not locked. Playfully as if she had been the one to make it appear Mouser pointed the wand, tapping the metal, pulling the door open, flourished it pointing from the empty inside out to the chamber and took a bow, discarding the item, shattering its tip, sending pieces of chiming crystal everywhere, the remnants staining the rock with glowing stains, peeking down, sniffing the air again.

"Lady Sullivan this is the entrance of the real world outside." Sebastian announced, standing, flanking the way.

"You can still go back if you wish." Mouser offered, grinning, arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

Ciel left her in the circle, joining the demons, looking around, glancing over his shoulder, waiting for her answer.

"I will go forward." Sieglinde steeled herself. Now she wanted to know. Why were things not like they had been? Why were those things in the sanctum? She had to know. And she had to go. The outside world… It was so close…
The second hidden elevator behind the heavy door was less an ornate thing of wonder and more of a heavily constructed box with a little blinking light on a grid that showed that the only way to go was down. Then to the depths they chose to go. The feeling of descent accompanied them from the moment they sealed the path back into the Green Witch's manor and pulled the lever. It was not too noisy either. Could not be or its presence wouldn't have remained a secret for that long.

Sieglinde was growing nervous once more, fingers dancing on her lap, lips pressed thinly, eyes fixed on the novelties, on the oddities. It was still edging, skirting the idea of a world crumbling around her.

Ciel stared at the light, unmoving, eye narrowed, arms crossed under the cloak, keeping an appearance of calm.

Sebastian kept to the current duty, supporting the witch, waiting for whatever came next.

Mouser yawned and swayed, waiting, stretching, tiptoeing, heels clicking back down on the metal. Going to the job site was always the boring part of any mission.

Their stop opened into a wide corridor.

Electric lights and exposed wires were pinned to the bare rock of the vaulted ceiling bathing the area in a cold, harsh light that barely wavered, barely changed. The walls were reinforced by metal plates and thick iron bolted bars. It was still rare for electric to be the choice of light but it said something very interesting about the origin and purpose of the complex didn't it... Also of the money behind it.

Echoes of footsteps moved through the still air.

Sounds of life and movement were faint but easily found.

A few metres into the path and doors started to flank each side of the path.

Left, right, left right until it came to a curve.

A secure complex dug under the old-looking village and manor.

Sieglinde hadn't said a thing but her eyes were filled with fearful confusion now.

There was little danger in taking the lead at the time so the boyo was allowed to do so, the light he carried adding to the corridor's. For all the appearance of security and solidity some of the doors were open, ripe for peeking. Yet most of those glances showed nothing different from what one would expect to find in a hidden den.

"Come here." The boyo called out in a hissed whisper, finding one that was not as mundane as the others, pushing the door, entering a room that seemed out of one of those Verne novels. The French ones. Part map room. Part communication centre. Part ship-control. Part mad scientist laboratory. Machines hummed under the hanging lights, beeped, showing white lines and dots within darkened glass screens. The central one, opposite of the entrance and occupying the whole wall was a detailed map of the witch's village and immediate surroundings. Dots shifted positions on its surface in five second intervals, within the clean white lines that suggested the placement of the houses, streets and trees.
«So many flashing pictures… is this magic?» Shock and awe returned Sieglinde to her native tongue.

Mouser approached the big picture, ignoring the smaller screens and the round beeping trackers, nibbling her lower lip with a grown fang. That was very familiar goal-wise the thief though, reaching out, nails touching the smooth surface, feeling the difference, the warmth of the electricity powering the dots, the cold, rough feeling of the lines painted over the glass.

"Some of the dots are moving… is that the map of the village?" Ciel was confused as well, placing the lamp on the table, looking around a few times, as if trying to commit it to memory and unwrap the logistics.

"I see… humans have really interesting ideas." Sebastian considered, interested, amused, entranced. "Like your mirrors." He turned to his covenant, approaching, free hand touching her shoulder. Sieglinde still on his arm gulped, confusion so evident it was painful to watch.

"I told you the method is irrelevant." Mouser smiled back, placing her hand over his, stepping back. "Usually the result is what is sought." Nodding, pleased the thief surveyed the field, counting. This made it very easy to prepare. Easier than it had been. "You use what you can. Magic, science, people… whatever you call your tool, as long as it is useful." Sighing she stepped back. "However they chose the reverse of my method, tracking targets through a fixed fixture instead of monitoring the area. In that they act more like you and the contract seal."

"What do you mean?" Ciel huffed, slouching against a panel, avoiding the buttons, levers and sliding levers.

"I believe this luminous map and moving dots might be showing the current position of the villagers." Sebastian elaborated.

"What?" That simple statement shocked both of the children.

"No way… how could you do such a thing..." Ciel started before regaining his composure, thinking back. The tapping of Mouser's claw on the screen as she peeled away the image of Wolfshultz brought back another tapping sound. Her claws on metal as she pried into… "…the amulets."

"Yes." Sebastian nodded. "Those amulets are probably transmitting some kind of sign."

"Which is interesting considering telephone and telegraph still rely on electric pulses transmitted through lines… yet here it's either something that this was custom-made to detect or a new kind of transmission system altogether." Mouser considered. There had been a lot of dead time to read up on tech-advancements while at Weston. Even if before her line of thought was to cut the wires before making a burglary in a house with a phone. Still fell in the same area.

"It was right to leave them behind." The boyo grimaced. "If you keep the amulet with you you will be able to avoid the werewolf and the miasma." He repeated, shaking his head, staring at the screens. "I never thought that there would be something this advanced behind all that."

"Also it means that they can detect whoever enters the area by the lack of registered sign." Mouser tilted her head. "Those." She pointed at another part of the map where no lights appeared. The edges of the forest. "I think these are like regular bell traps. Triggered and a guard comes if nothing shows here."

"Like the door." Sebastian agreed.
Mouser nodded, looking down, playing with the buttons, eyes following the movements of the village, smiling.

"That can't be!" Sieglinde spoke up, frightened, aware of the implications. "Those amulets were prepared by the elders after a special offering and prayer on the full moon…" She attempted the mystical explanation that had always been given as a form of protection woven into the amulets.

"Amulets of protection are done on the new moon. " Mouser murmured softly. "Passive magic implies hidden moon to shelter in shadows. Amulets of defence as active magic rely on the full moon for its symbolism as a shield." Absently she flipped a few switches. Some machines stopped working. Pleased she continued.

"Someone is coming." Sebastian spoke up as a stunned girl tried to figure out what the answer should be.

Excited voices speaking in German walked by the door, approaching and fading as they hid.

They followed, carefully, hidden, keeping out of view from the owners of the voices and keeping them from being glimpsed. The single corridor lead to a massive metal door that spanned its width and height. The seal was tighter in this one, locked even after allowing passage to those before them. Mouser tapped it a few times and began to work on the locks, getting them to wield in no time, pulling, pushing and twisting the wheel into releasing the bolts.

It lead to something familiar to most of those that inhabited the East End. It explained why the fig smelled like London. Why there was such a thick smoky fog coming from the depths of the pit surrounding the manor. Machinery. Pipes. Steam. Engines. Storage containers. Industrial all the way to the marrow.

Fear, confusion and overwhelming disappointment had rendered Sieglinde into silence, the look behind her eyes broken and empty. It was starting to sink in that she had been deceived. It was starting to sink in that everything was wrong. Everything was a lie. Everything was not. Now… would she snap against it or would she break and fade?

Forward was the only way and the noise of the machines was not quite enough to drown the excited chatter of voices just ahead, giving them the perfect guide towards the next stage in revealing the hoax.
"What is this?" Ciel murmured quietly as they wandered the premises.

There was very little that could be said to avoid the overwhelming fact that that was a factory. Not with the metal walls. The modern box elevators lining the back wall. The pipes running through the floors, the walls and ceilings. The massive upright tanks they connected to. The great number of sealed canisters arranged in clusters all around the room. The electric lights, bright, clear, unimpeded by the steam that usually befouled the factory's air. Even if the smell that would usually be associated with the mist was still around, acrid, sour. Fuel, coal, grease, smoke, steam, hot metal, fire, sweat, a heavy, familiar stench to anyone growing up in the east end of industrial London. Or just really close to the Thames. The hum of the small equipment was drowned by the churning of the the bigger pieces of machinery.

"Some sort of factory." Stating the obvious was needed when one of parts of that infiltration party was woefully unaware of what a «factory» even was. Sebastian did so knowing this, low voiced, moving carefully, making sure Sieglinde's view was unimpeded.

"There's an elevator too." Ciel continued in that line of reasoning, staring at the wall they had found after a bit of walking, before giving the order, pointing inwards. So there was a direct way out within possibility and possibly reach. Mapping it out before heading in was easy, quick and discreet. No need to frighten Sieglinde yet. The environs would suffice for now.

Wandering towards the voices whose words were broken in the noise could be discerned through the it fairly easily brought them to a wide open area at the core of the plant.

Gasp of shock had to be covered as peeking around the structure showed a big furry gathering of werewolves talking to each other in German, their tones, words and gestures displaying nothing but excitement and expectation.

Their loud demeanour came to a halt when the old crone from the village took centre stage at the top of the stairs that lead to the second tier of walkways weaving through the complex.

«Look! Our Green Witch has finally accomplished her duty.» The woman's raspy voice boomed, as theatrical as it had been in their first encounter. «A miasma denser than ever condensed inside this vial. This is going to change history.» But the tone and wording were very different. And in that stark difference, in that divergence of purpose, in that lie that was slowly being revealed, Sieglinde crawled out of hiding with a look of absolute shock and fear, knocking over canisters in her haste to confront her.

«You! What does this mean!» The echoing sound of the metal, the pained sound of the little girl's voice brought the wolves gaze towards them.

Their surprise was short lived, turning into a rushing race towards Sieglinde, a clear attempt to examine and make sure the little witch was unharmed.

Each word, each action, each sight only made it more and more obvious that a deep betrayal was ongoing.

«The green witch!»

«Get her!»
«Are you all right?»

«Give her a suit!»

«What's happening up there?»

«Her values?»

«Green, no issues.»

Wolves swarmed, speaking at the same time, exchanging words, questions, ignoring anyone not in a dress.

Which gave them a little perfect chance didn't it.

The blade sliced cleanly cleaving the snout in two. Sebastian pushed it forward revealing a plain face, a blond haired regular man, panicking over the sudden exposure and reveal. The demon grinned as the mask fell before a stunned and increasingly confused Sieglinde.

"What do you think my lady?" He taunted softly, pressing the blade to the bared neck. "The world is so full of surprises."

Mouser snorted derisively, drawing the blades, slashing them outwards, shooing away the wolves, giving room to the boyo and the witch. They moved hastily, some stumbled. She didn't follow. Not yet the time. Prowling lightly, creating a line between them the thief waited.

Confusion swept through the ranks.

The outsiders had hostages.

The outsiders had weapons.

And the outsiders were unravelling their hard work in raising the Green Witch, peeling away the masks, baring the truth as a beast would reave through fabric.

«A man?» Sieglinde murmured, paling, eyes wider and wider, tears gathering in their corners.

"He was hiding a gas mask in the snout of the costume." The boyo stated, taking the moment to pick up the broken thing, holding it aloft, showing it brusquely, starkly. "Such an elaborate farce." Facing reality was harsh. And he was determined to make excruciatingly clear. "Men in costumes and the miasma is a chemical weapon created in this factory." He pointed with the light towards the tanks, shouting. "A poison gas. Werewolves and curse were all lies told to deceive you." Like dropping an axe on the bared neck of a victim on a chopping block.

«No... it can't...» Tears that had been forming started to drip down her cheeks as the understanding battled with belief. And the will to keep believing crumbled. «but the magic I created...» the little voice, squeezed through a throat thigh with sorrow was hard to hear above the factory noise but the crone caught on.

«Indeed what you have created was no magic.» The woman abandoned the booming voice and took on a scholarly tone, walking down from her perch, approaching. Not one of those fuzzy costumed people tried to stop her or objected to the truth speaking. The masquerade had run its course. Now it was the time to show what was behind and make the choices. «It is more amazing than magic.» The twisted, broken smile showed nothing but excitement as she showed the ampule of poison. «When this liquid vaporizes all living things it comes in contact with die.» Not news
there. Just another box to tic in the "we already knew" list. Also it was nice of them to give them the information freely for the upcoming queenly report. «You should be proud.» Pride was indeed dripping from her voice as she stared intently at the liquid and then at the girl that had formulated it. «You created the most powerful poisonous gas in history.» Something moved in her eye, some sort of recognition or memory. But in the end it seemed the woman was not all really there. «Right... I should name this historic chemical weapon.» Excited her voice rose along with the ampule for all to see. «Sullivan letz waffe ideal nebel... sleine...» She called out, a cackle starting in the wake of her words before she cradled the poisonous parcel to her chest. «No... Sulin it will be called sulin!»

«What I created was... not magic but poisonous gas?» Sieglinde whispered, shoulders shivering, a sob catching before spilling into sobs. «I... didn't create something to protect the villagers but something to be used as a weapon to kill people?» Incredulity, pain, fear. The cackling in the background was not helping the girl's state of mind. «Does it mean that everyone was just deceiving me...» What was hurting more? What she did or what they had done? Mouser tilted her head, lowering the blades for a moment, looking back. If this ran the usual course when a girl fell from grace in the headmistress's eyes there would be pleading... «Please... tell me it's a lie... please...» Ah... yes. There it was. But she had to admit it was much easier to break someone when they hadn't to rely on hearsay to poke at the lie and see it shatter along with the victim.
"Please… tell me it's a lie… please…" The broken sniffling words were deep and wrenched

"They were lying. All the time. Every time you asked. Everything that you saw. Pretty much all that you knew" Mouser answered sweetly, turning the blade, winking at one of the wolves that had attempted to move closer, freezing him on the spot with a smile.

"I hardly think she was asking you." Sebastian mentioned, smiling.

"It was a rather open request." The thief mentioned grinning.

«Why are you crying Sieglinde?» The woman stopped her joyous cackling abruptly, staring at the girl, confused, walking towards her, unimpeded. Mouser shifted her weight slightly, eyes narrowing. Not the time yet. «It's because of your wonderful intellect and the perfect environment that allowed you to concentrate on research that you were able to create the ultimate chemical weapon.» The tears stopped, turned into a stunned silence. The red eyes were turning fearful as the girl through about the village, her life, finding the new shapes, the new shadows, the new meaning. Some oddities became clear. «Why would you be sad?» The same question. The same puzzled tone, The single minded lack of comprehension. «You changed history!» Triumph and pride. Then her look softened into something that could have been a smile. «You're my loved one, all I have left of the person I lost that day You should stop crying my dear daughter.» That revelation was as much of a shock as anything else.

The boyo looked as if he was doing some math, glancing at Sieglinde, at the woman and then the complex, eyes narrowing.

Sebastian remained quiet, keeping the blade against the man's throat, making sure that the life he kept hostage would render the others immobile.

Mouser grimaced, exchanging one of her blades for a pistol. If the crone was the mastermind as she was demonstrating and, as she was showing signs of being the one in charge as well, striking her down would be the fastest way to bring on the mayhem.

Lost in her thoughts and memories the woman prattled on, doing their job for them, unravelling the story, the backstory and the cover-up, making Sieglinde's tear stained face grow more and more still as her big brain tried to process the sheer level of betrayal and lies she had been fed.

«Thirteen years ago I was part of a military project to perfect a poisonous gas that for twenty years could not be mass produced. Too unstable. But we had to find a way to use it.» Patriotism?, hunger for knowledge? Greed for the money not only the government but also the black market would pay for weaponry? Who knew? Who cared as long as the babble served their purposes. «Before long a genius scientist found that safe way to synthesize it making the project successful. Everything was going well...» grief clouded her face, voice growing quiet, reaching up, touching the scars that crossed her face, blinded her eye. «However... one day an accident occurred in the production factory. He lost his life and I was left horribly scarred.» The trembling hand fell away with a shudder. Anger replaced the feeling dominating her tone, the words spilling vicious, curt, short and shredded. «His brain was a treasure for this country. We couldn't stop grieving over the loss. But his genes had grown inside me and came to life again. The new-born child showed signs of genius soon. By the age of three she could read and... she understood the synthesis of mustard gas.» Detached pride. As if Sieglinde was nothing more than a successful experiment. Now the question,, had genius not bloomed would there have been anything left in the mad bitch for the
little girl? «My beloved's brain had returned. I contacted the government and set a project in motion. The training grounds of a genius who could create the ultimate chemical weapon.» Full disclosure. Good. Mouser chuckled, keeping her aim, waiting. The more they knew the more they knew what and how to keep quiet. «The necessary conditions to train a genius are an environment where she can focus on her research and a reason to keep the motivation high. First of all we isolated her from the entire world and the things that would impair her genius such as ethic, common sense, entertainment, pleasure...» Anything and everything that could lead to questions, to going off in pursuit of new interests. «Then we created a world around her, a place where she felt she belonged. That was the purpose of the village. The special role of the green witch. The mission of protecting the villagers from the werewolf. Wolfsschlucht was created. It's because you were here that you could focus solely on research and could develop a weapon in less than ten years. The plan was successful, Sieglinde.» Such pride. Such lack of understanding.

"This makes me feel all warm and nostalgic about my upbringing." Mouser scoffed, cocking the gun.

"The one where you had to steal, lie and kill to keep from whoring yourself out?" Sebastian mentioned, shaking his head, motioning her to hold fire for a while longer.

"Yes." The thief nodded. "They were really honest about it all. They knew I lied. I knew they lied. And I can still walk on my own."

"So your comparison is that it was less damaging." The demon processed the information, wording it carefully.

"Perhaps." Her head turned towards the doorway, frowning for a second. "I see... It had to be completed, right?"

«My Lady!» Wolfram burst into the scene, frantic, out of breath just as Sieglinde's fear and disbelief, the plea for it to be all untrue was turning into anger. He was quickly able to deduce the course of events, stopping behind the armed wolf-costumes, growling, glaring at Sebastian, the very obvious thorn in his side. «You bastard.»

«You deceived me too! Liar!» Sieglinde shouted, covering her face, crumbling to the floor, sobbing.

"You crushed your child's feet and manipulated her into making a weapon." Taking the role of protector the boyo capitalized on his current position of the one that had not lied so much and crouched, cradling the girl, pulling her up. "Is that what a mother would do? Children are not their parent's tools!" The shout was followed by a shot upwards, shattering the light fixtures, creating the first peal of chaos as the boyo picked up the little witch, fleeing in the stunned confusion.

Sebastian disposed of the hostage, covering the escape.

Mouser attacked, pulling a few away from the area, taunting others to give chase.

«Sieglinde!» Seeing her prized darling taken away the crone shrieked, reaching out, dragged off to a safer spot by men who tried to reassure and refocus her.

«Stop shooting!» Wolfram ordered, concerned, trying to get his bearings, to control the men. «What if you hit a gas tank!»

That turned the confusion into a chase.

They barely noticed they were a handful of furry bodies short.
«I'll go after the lady! The rest is up to you!» Wolfram shouted as the parties faced each other, crossing the factory, running towards the doors. They let him go. There was still use in that big dog.

"Sebastian! Take care of them!" The Young Master ordered as the escape route plan was executed perfectly, reaching the elevator, making it go up, safely sealed inside along with the little prize.

"Yes, My Lord." Sebastian acquiesced, standing in front of the now closed doors, turning to the ones that had given chase, adjusting his gloves for the more physically demanding job.

Mouser grinned from the top of the walkways, leaning down on the rail, waving happily, finally allowed to play free. She was positively buzzing with bloodlust.
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There was no way to breach through the elevator once it was locked and ascending. It was a security feature. While it made sense it was nothing more than a nuisance now that it was being used by the enemy. So Wolfram gave the orders and headed up, in an attempt to cut the escape where the exits converged. He had to run. There would be a very steep price to pay if he was unable to undo what had begun.

The alarms were blaring throughout the village now, warning everyone about the security breach. The pretence of a place trapped in a past due to witchcraft and werewolves was to be promptly abandoned and the protocol followed.

If he could just make it to the surface section before...

«Wolf what's happening?» Hilde still in the garb of the part appeared, as the stairs spiralled upward. In the haste he shouted a quick recap to answer her bewilderment and concerned demand.

«Hilde! The Englishmen have kidnapped the lady.» He shouted barely stopping, trying to bypass the woman, to continue on his mission. But the break in his stride left him panting, trying to catch his breath, to finish telling what needed to be reported if the wanted to assemble effective countermeasures. «Also she found everything out.» He shook his head, pained at that admission. It was quite condemning but he could not keep it from being told. «They must be in area A23 now. Let's go!» Fuelled by fear and haste Wolfram attempted to move out once more.

Hilde's eyes narrowed slightly, noticing the growing agitation and the implications of those actions. Her voice snapped, authoritative, harsh, uncompromising.

«Lieutenant Wolfram Geltzer.» Those three words coupled with the whole aura of authority made him snap into attention. Turning and approaching Hilde narrowed her eyes, staring him down coolly. «I hope you did not forget that your duty is to dispose of the green witch in case of an emergency.» Wolf did not look away but his posture stiffened further, teeth gritting under the stoic façade. «That is your mission as the butler.» Hilde drove the point further in, advancing upstairs to change and brief the troops on what should be done.

«Ja.» Wolfram saluted and acquiesced. Dark eyes, a smile and a question... Shaking his head the butler of the Green Witch tried to focus on training and duty even as the poisonous hints of caring-born rebellion corroded his will.

Abruptly the lights in the village came to life. Alarms roared. People poured out of the houses and started to scout, to behave like an organized unit with a much more defined goal. Not one of them seemed to be moving out of the village yet. Still it should not be long until they did.

"It's getting noisy." Glassless Meyrin whispered, surveying the area beyond the stone wall. They were getting ready. The Phantomhive household was already beyond prepared. That advantage should keep.

"About time." Bard chuckled, blowing smoke, stretching, groaning into a crouch, looking up, waiting for the agreed-upon signal. If everything was buzzing so loudly then Sebastian and Mouser would have already allowed the Young Master out and started the war inside. The night flashed brightly with an explosion against the empty blackness. Pulling the goggles down Bard stood. "That's the sign" Like any good soldier he looked back one last time to make sure all was in place before following the main order. «Let's move out.»
They had been mapping the place. Trapping the place. Prepping weapons, tools and tricks. Impromptu as it were they still had the skill and experience to make it work. Otherwise they would not be worthy of their jobs.

Ciel lowered the flare gun and sighed, shaking his head. They had gotten out and he had dragged that limp bundle of weeping girl deeper into the woods, away from the cabin that concealed the elevators behind a wall of weapons and furs. It could be interpreted as a defensive hunter's shack if the girl was still in the world of magic curses and wolves. He had to give them credit for thinking and working out how the technology could be concealed or weaved into the story just in case. Still the lengths they had gone spoke of nothing more than green and blind ambition.

That reality was still proving to be harsh for the one whose life had been a lie, curled around herself on the forest floor, gripping her skirt, keeping the breath that had become ragged after all the crying quiet.

"If you leave this place countless people will try to use you." So now he just had to push her off the cliff to see if she could fly. "And you'll probably experience worse things than what you saw today." Sieglinde looked up, comprehending but unable to respond, trying to move through the haze, the sadness, the broken heart. "I believe it's time to choose..." The gun that had been concealed after being used in the diversaion came out again, pressed against the girl's forehead. "Whether you still want to go to the outside world or you'd rather... get it over with now." If she would rather just fall there would be no use in lugging useless cargo around even if it was the Queen's wish to meet the witch. Better to dispose of it and travel unencumbered.

"It's horrible that I create that sulin... I don't know what to believe... I don't want to think anymore. I want to vanish..." Even if her eyes were frightened and filled with tears, even if she recognized the weapon as a danger to her life... Sieglinde Sullivan just looked up and tried to reason. Not with him. With herself. First through the betrayal, the need to forget it or be forgotten.

"Indeed." Finding that Ciel pushed. Just a few words. Twist the feeling into something useful while keeping the pressure. "If you have no intention of using your genius it might be best it becomes fertilizer for the plants." Agreement first. No compassion but a semblance of understanding. He had gone through similar things. It was not hard to recall. Or fake. "If you die you won't have to listen to the pleas of the people you could have saved." Now to tug at the cord the village had so kindly placed and stretched. All her life had been built and shaped by a saviour complex. The idea of saving, defending, healing. All of that had been nurtured into a conditioned response that was easy to pull, pluck, tug and twist for the use of anyone savvy enough to spot the weakness.

"Save?" That one little word. So very simple.

"I thought that if you are able to create an ultimate poison you may also be capable of creating the ultimate medicine." Gentling his tone Ciel started the proposal, attempting to show the advantages, the promises, the world that was outside. "It would be like magic." Another words she had been trained to answer to. "People all over the world would be amazed." And another.

"A magical medicine?" Fascinated, curious and hopeful. Good. It was working. "Can I really do something like that?" Then the doubt crashed again, shaped by the events.

"Who knows?" Ciel shrugged. Time was ticking. Their location had been given away by the flare but that bit needed to be done before he could advance. The servants should be able to handle everything else in the meanwhile. "You certainly can't if you die here." It seemed she was wavering enough. "Green witch I will ask you again." Imperiously he called out, challenging. "Do you want to run away through death or do you accept the challenge of living?"
"I want to live!" Sieglinde challenged back, straightening, the hold her white fingers had on the dress thight with determination instead of fear. "I accept that challenge."

"That's good." Ciel put the gun away and extended his hand, waiting for the grip to be returned, smiling to look like he should. "Let's leave this forest Sullivan." He proposed, pulling her up, steadying her wobbly legs, staring to walk away. "Let's get away before they come after us." Parts of the plan should be revealed now so he would appear trustworthy. "We'll join up with my servants." As well as some of the dangers. An overly cheery and bright outlook often concealed a whole heap of problems. He had found that the hard way when purchasing properties. "The flare gave out position away."

"What about them?" Sieglinde looked back briefly, making an effort to walk on her own. "Sebastian? Mouser? What if they use the miasma I mean… the mustard gas against…" It was a very bad possibility that brought a frown to her face.

"Don't worry." Ciel grimaced. "My butler is very skilled." Not a praise. Just an assessment of quality. "And Mouser is a rogue." He stopped for a moment sighing. That had escaped without him meaning to. "You are to keep that to yourself." Ciel did not need the teasing from either side for those quasi-commendations.
The elevator closed behind Sebastian's back, a quiet, little sound before the gears took it up, towards the surface, keeping its cargo safely contained until they emerged. The departure of the Green Witch's butler made another piece fit. Wolfram could play a bigger part if their calculations came to the expected results.

All that was left down below were soldiers in masks, scientist in costume and a pair of demons.

The hiss and thunderous echo of the machinery did little to drown the shrieks of the woman that saw her most prized creation and possession slip from her grasp, undoing years of grooming and work.

"Get my daughter back fast!" Doctor Sullivan repeated, between panic and fury, authority ringing in her voice as she was dragged away from what would soon turn into a fight by a couple of dedicated aides, reasoning that staying was far too dangerous. Even so she was in command. Despite the madness of pride and loss that seemed to cloud her mind there was also a focus on the goal and simple calculation. Not all faculties were lost it seemed.

"Damn England... did they send a spy?" One of the men asked, weapons ready. From the sounds of the footsteps more were converging towards the factory. Probably in costume as well, all things considered. About thirty tried to form an armed barrier. Of course they fancied themselves as some sort of execution squad. Didn't even notice they were already short a handful of furry hides and that an overhead threat was smiling.

"I'm no spy." Sebastian was amused, surveying the area. Mouser yawned and stretched, waiting, blades ready. There it was. Audience gone. Time to play. "I'm just one hell of a butler."

The words lingered through his abrupt disappearance, seeding confusion and the start of a panic. The fear only grew as blades rained down sinking cleanly into their furry targets. Those with training dove for cover. Those without ran in circles and offered themselves as targets.

"Oh it's sturdy..." Sebastian murmured, rather surprised at the amount of survivors, drawing more blades. "So that's how you withstood a kick from our gardener." Also it meant that what they were manufacturing was prone to explosions, unstable or flawed. Or all three.

"Try the head, neck and joints." Mouser suggested, straightened, opening her arms, ready to join in. Blades filled the air around her, falling down swiftly, striking the spots mentioned as she hopped over the railing, grinning, going after the target that was both nearest and still alive. Wolves started to scatter, frightened.

Sebastian chuckled, watching her glee, the swift movements, the quick death of those around her, following, aiming for the head, pulling them by the scruff to reach the throats.

"Use the gas!" Survivors scrambled away.

Cries for help mingled with the whimpers of those that had failed to perish under the falling blades.

New arrivals hesitated both in shooting and in joining.

A pair of them was able to reach a valve, turning it with shaky paws, releasing a cloud of strong-smelling poison, cloaking the area.
Behind their masks there were sighs of relief.

«They'll be dead in no time...»

Understandable that they would say so. After all they had created and perfected that poison with a very clear and refined function and for that single deadly purpose. It was inconceivable that such a concentration and proximity could fail.

Mouser sniffed and sneezed, behind the blinding cloud, still amidst the carnage. They could call it mustard all they wanted for her it was like some dingy pub after cabbage night. Sneezing again she noticed something sailing pass her, cutting through the heavy smoky air.

So from the fog a mask-less dying fake werewolf was tossed, begging for protection with a breath that was growing constricted and bloodied. The vaporized poison was not the perfected version but it did its job. Very visual. Very devastating.

It seemed her bubble was holding up fine too... The thief thought as the smoke sailed around the shimmering surface of her pre-preparedness. The next sneeze however told her that either her nose was too good or shields needed to be scent-proof too instead of just harm-warding.

«Now I understand why you call it mustard gas.» Stepping out of the deadly cloud, dragging yet another dying male the demon smiled, unbothered by the skin that was bruising, blistering, the dripping blood and tears. It seemed to be very unsettling for some reason. «The scent was familiar but as the young master does not like it took me some time to place it.» And after the assault of spices in the curry wars there was also some component of being just tired of sampling/smelling flavourings.

«How is he alive!» The effect was rather fast and made the soldiers falter and drove the scientists into wild speculation. «Did England raise overly resistant soldiers!»

Mouser chuckled, moving. The blades sliced cleanly through the nearest snouts, undoing the gas barrier. Sebastian chuckled swiftly doing the same. By the time they noticed the poison was already deeply into their system, wreaking havoc, making them scream, cry, fall and beg.

«How could I be the Phantomhive butler if I couldn't withstand some paltry amount of poison.» Sebastian taunted, standing and adjusting his clothes, looking around, undoing the effects of the gas on the physical mask he wore. «Let's see...» With a deep breath the demon stole the poison from the air.

"Next part?" the thief asked softly, recovering a fan from storage, moving it a bit to help with the smell.

"Yes. You may start." Sebastian glanced towards the spot where the prey had fled. They had a bit of time still, judging by the unmoving state of the Young Master's position.

"Good" Tuning Mouser clicked her heel against the pooling blood. Two circles formed, calling the Cerberus and the Hell Hound. Howls filled the air. It would be amusing if they reached the surface to add to the confusion. The Cerberus split into three, all four staring at the demoness. "Start triggering the wards. I'll be at the Manor's gates shortly. As soon as I arrive start the fire."

Sebastian left her with the dogs, issuing orders, going deeper into the corridors.
Chapter 198

«Take the Sulin samples upstairs.» The box was clicked shut and locked after the ampules had been carefully and reverently placed within its padded interior. The waiting scientist, still in the protective suit, took them, carefully balanced before saluting and leaving. If he was going to be the carrier he would definitely need the insurance. Just in case. Just until they were in a secure place.

The creators of the mix they knew just how devastating it had been and how much more powerful the new formula was bound to be. Even in that tiny amount. Even without the proper pressure for correct vaporization ratio.

Between the orders, the securing of the samples and the rustle of papers the hasty retreat from the facility was proceeding in accordance with the specifications placed when the village, factory and program had started. Less than ten minutes was the rule they had to abide too. Any longer and they would be left behind for execution.

Professor Sullivan gathered the needed supplies methodically even as her mind dealt with the chain of events like everything had been for naught. Still, staring at what she held gave a boost to her peace of mind.

«The formula... with this we can mass produce it...» It was the most important piece of information to keep and carry seeing they would likely be losing the source of the advancement. Likely it would be the last breakthrough they would have in a while... Her beloved gone it was all she had. And as he wished they would use it. And so the country they served would

«Some people talk about things like love, preaching about the notion to an illogical level.» The male voice of one of the interlopers suddenly filled the small room where the findings were archived and catalogued. Steps followed a gurgling sound, the carrier executed before he could step out of the door. «Some can rationally sacrifice their own children for a goal while holding the same notion.» An amused chortle followed the words, a dark shadow blocking the exit. A dull sound echoed in the factory beyond it, reverberating, growing. As if it was crashing down. «That is why humans beings are interesting.» A soft exhale, deliberate, punctuating the words gently as the woman turned in a panic, understanding the situation in a glance.

Of course... An infiltration by British agents would end in nothing short of death be it delivered by the enemy of by their own for such a shameful failure. Focusing on the penalty for failing to follow the evacuation had clouded the notion but it did not make it any less grim.

«The gas alarm?» The machine by her side started to sound, wildly, urgent, demanding attention. The needle within its gauge moved, wild, wavering, following a spike that should not exist. «Why?» The understanding came with the first tears and the sudden smell. «mustard...» Professor Sullivan muttered, covering her mouth and nose, the effects already taking root, the tears gathering and falling. It was not the slow creeping growth of a leak. It was the abrupt climb of an explosion. That explosion. That time.

«Didn't you love this so much that you were ready to sacrifice the life of your dear daughter for it?» The Englishman taunted, watching as the effects took place, smiling politely as she struggled, the table creaking as the woman's weight was pushed against it by the failing legs. «This is to thank you for exposing the Young Master to it.» Sebastian approached, giving the statement blandly, amused, picking up the scarred, scared woman, holding her closer to the poison, mimicking a lover's hold as he would dip down a dance partner mid-waltz. Such terror in that eye. «How does it feel?» Sweetly he kept speaking, allowing the gas he had stolen previously to
permeate the air, the density turning that small chamber into a death room, remaining unaffected as blood, tears and blisters started to grow over the skin that had already had been exposed to such a state. «The scent of death created by your loved ones.»

With that final taunt he leaned in, breathing out what was left, pressing a kiss to those disfigured lips, forcing death directly into that body, stepping back, pushing the dead woman to the ground, stabbing the annoying machine that kept giving the wailing sign of danger. Grimacing, adjusting his clothes, the demon stilled when the grinning shadow fell on him. Tuning slowly to face his covenant he waited.

"The place if already ready to collapse." Mouser announced. "And brush your teeth before you come near me." Smiling she teased. Smoke was coming from behind her. Explosions rang out as the flames reached the tanks. It seemed her shadow as a manifestation of enthusiasm instead of anger. Good.

"Because you were as courteous when you kissed me after the little outing with that flamboyant redhead?" Picking up the formula he approached it to the flame of one of those burners, smiling, revealing the information he had kept back, letting go of the ignition source.

"Sebastian erases all traces of the chemical weapon." The young master had ordered as he got dressed, ready for the night's events, adding weapons to the usual outfit, making sure he could use them readily.

"Yes sir." Sebastian agreed, unsurprised. "What method should I use?" Mostly out of curiosity he posed the question. After all those events what would be the Young Master's choice?

"I'll leave that to you." Shrugging Ciel pulled the jacket's lapel, glancing over his shoulder mockingly. "I won't be around and there will not be any survivors. Feel free to act like a crazed beast."

"Ah..." Mouser chuckled, looking away, mischievous, nibbling her lower lip with a sharp fang. "You noticed." Red eyes focused on the flames growing around them, fuelled by papers, chemicals and hellfire.

"You think I don't know your taste?" Tucking the samples under his arm the demons approached, reaching out, holding her chin, tracing those grey smiling lips, pressing his thumb to the bottom one, leaning in closer. "I could tell right away." His whisper brushed against her ear, the movement of the lips sending a chime through the earrings she wore. There were a few new ones. One with a round diamond. A black pearl on a platinum ring. A white tear-shaped pearl set in gold filigree.

"It is a very valuable bargaining chip when dealing with poppet." Mouser answered, returning the gesture, caressing his jaw tauntingly before her eyes widened, looking uncomfortable, turning away, sneezing again. Sighing Sebastian took his handkerchief and helped her with that. "And should be easier for you to bear me kissing you after kissing her than having a big wet one smacked right on your pucker with all the hugging, shrieking and attempted murder that would follow." She rubbed her nose slightly and pocketed the kerchief.

"Very well..." Begrudgingly amused he conceded. "Shall we go?" He asked as the flames grew taller, engulfing all. Ah Young Master. Sebastian thought, recalling those words, the order and permission, as he walked through the factory, letting hellfire follow, joining the flames Mouser had set all over the place, allowing the explosions to grow around them. You misunderstand. At this time I find my amusement in playing the proper butler not in playing the beast. Mouser however loved the part of the monster. She was positively humming, looking up, counting, waiting to be unleashed. Judging from the movements above the people of the village were now ready to give
chase. However if that is what you ask then that's how I will act. Because I am one hell of a butler.
Pluto watched as the main group caught up to the little ones after the flare had flashed through the night. It was very obvious but the Mistress and her mate had planned for it. Even worked their positions so the otherwise damning giving away of position worked as a trap. He had already swept through the area where the boy and girl had emerged, destroying traces of their passage and setting off the ward. He had been left in charge of the outer ring, surrounding the village. If he did a good job Mistress would give him more treats than she would give the Cerberus.

The Phantomhive servants that were under their protection had been following the faint trail Pluto allowed to be seen and left behind, aided by the snake's senses when the humans failed. So far he had not needed to lend any help even if they were lagging behind, hindered by the darkness. But not one was looking back.

The devil dog was to stay out of sight. This was not the time to go play with Finny. Mistress had been very clear. He had to wait until their group was out of the affected area to complete his task in the woods. He crinkled his snout, huffing. The smell of others was starting to approach. The sound of an uproar rose from the village.

Finally they split into two groups and left the warded area. Standing, shaking his furry form and yawning the devil dog resumed his task, howling once in warning.

Thompson looked up as he disrupted the systems and broke weapons within the village, making sure calls were left unanswered or at least late in reaching their intending destinations. Smashed locks prevented groups from leaving and joining the growing chase-party in the manor. A handful had been able to move before he reached their housings, following the plan the humans had prepared for the moment where the village would be discovered and compromised. There were also a few humans he had to let pass before the grounds were closed.

Watching women in dresses, women in uniform and a handful of men gathering he decided that there was no longer any point in continuing. The disruption he had caused so far was enough.

Howling in response he left the village to join Pluto's task and see if the groups they had found stationed outside the grounds would be going after the Phantomhive group or coming into the village to erase all traces of its existence. Mistress was still down, below the earth, destroying the factory, roasting the bodies if the smell of fire coming from the deep moat around the manor was any clue. Maybe if they asked they could eat them…

Timber went through the list in his hands, making sure everything the Mistress had ordered taken from the place was gathered in the grand room that no one else had been allowed into. A lot of the items could only be retrieved now. Nobody was looking. Nobody would care as all of that would be levelled to the ground by flame and force. He had made more of an effort to have everything organized and neatly placed. It was after all a competition for attention and treats and the Mistress liked shiny tokens. If he performed well in gathering and fighting he would be the favourite.

Hilde and Wolfram found confusion and panic when they reached the main hall. Reports were flying. The alarms were blaring, both from the outside and the inside. Intruders seemed to be cropping up everywhere in the machinery. The fire alarm told them the Factory was compromised. The elevators were all damaged. The communication channels were damaged. There were weapons
missing or destroyed. There were locks that would not open. The samples seemed to have been taken away by the Englishmen along with their creator.

«Shit… what's going on!» Hilde grumbled, annoyed with the lack of discipline as reports were fired at her rapidly, without order. Everyone was waiting for a course of action to be set. But there were too many things to see to at once and not one of them was listed as negligible.

«Hilde… no… Major Hilde Dickhaut.» Wolfram called out, trying to help sort their priorities. «If the formulas were lost in the fire our priority is to recapture the Green Witch.» Sieglinde… he had to get to Sieglinde. There was still time. If she didn't leave if she was still within the borders there was still a chance. «Wouldn't it be better than just randomly using the gas?

«Yes.» Hilde agreed, reluctant, calming, looking around, counting seeing who was ready.

«Major.» Two of them were already equipped even.

«First special commando squad captain Anne Derwantz.»

«Second special commando Grethe Hilbert.»

«Ready for action.» Saluting they offered name and rank.

«We located the flare origin.» Anne spoke up, firmly. «We are also ready to operate the experimental weapon.»

«Well done.» Hilde nodded, accepting her uniform from one of the other soldiers that rushed to get ready.

«The new weapon? You are planning to move that?» Surprised Wolf asked, unsure of what to make of such an aggressive strategy.

«Yes.» adjusting the coat and cap Hilde turned, voice loud and sharp. «Our primary goal is to retrieve the green witch.» That gave Wolfram some hope. They were not being unreasonable as long as the area had not been breached. «However if she steps out of the forest kill her.»

Canterbury howled in warning as the group left, paws on the stone rail, looking up to the moon.

Mouser smiled and petted his head, watching from the balcony that overlooked the village. The third head of the Cerberus panted and wagged his tail, quieting down.

"Close the wards as soon as they leave the area." Lae slithered around her wrist merrily. The thief chuckled as Timber joined them in the balcony, approaching for his own pat of approval. "Let's go to the gates and greet our playthings."
Chapter 200

«Did they split up…» Leaving the village to pursue was a small group. The ones that had been able to equip, gather weapons and supplies and answer the calls. Dogs barked, spurred by the chase. They ran in circles now that a fork on the road had been reached, sniffing the air, the ground, pawing at the tracks. It did look like it. Also they could not be too skilled, judging by the depth and clarity of those marks. Wolfram gave the dogs a piece of fabric to sniff, watching as they darted away, following suit, no hesitation, no delay.

«The lady went right.» While obvious and urgent he had to wait for orders. The situation had changed. But he clung to the lingering hope that the extreme measures could be avoided by clinging to the formality and absolute wording of the order.

«Our priority is to retrieve the Green Witch.» Grete nodded and made quick arrangements, sweeping the unit, dividing them by skill, equipment and speed, issuing the commands needed. «The main squad led by Wolfram will go right.» They went quickly, catching up with the dogs, trying to keep up with Wolfram's desperate burst of speed. «The others come with me.» She snapped, following the second path, picking up the pace as well. It was as urgent as stopping the blood on a severed limb. There was a point of no return from where their years in that mission would be rendered moot. And failure was not acceptable for a soldier.

«Captain Hilbard was it wise to leave the squad with the butler?» One of the soldiers questioned her as the echoes of scream, explosions and gunfire reached them down the path.

«Do you think Wolfram is just a butler?» Grete scoffed at their blindness. Simply because he did not share an uniform and was called by his household position they believed him to be nothing more than a commoner with servant skills. «The butler of the Green Witch doesn't need to be a good servant. He needs to be an outstanding fighter.» Silenced by her stern scolding and certainty the soldiers followed, keeping the trail lit and in sight. Soon they should see their target...

"I can feel their steps." Snake whispered, glancing over his shoulder, eyes narrowing, spotting the light that swayed between the trees, hearing the sound of steps and dogs. His line of sight was slightly blocked by the frills of Sieglinde's dress and headdress and by the sinew body of Oscar as he peeked out of his clothes, tongue tasting the air, considering. "They're coming says Oscar."

"Snakes have amazing hearing." Bard huffed, running, looking back to make sure the younger man was keeping up, goggles down, gun in hand. Things were about to get intense.

"It's not hearing." Snake shook his head, slowing down, looking up. The surroundings were familiar. And ready. "We feel vibrations with our skin, says Wordsworth."

"They're here." Bard nodded, noticing the same. "Let'em dance." Stomping on the ground brought the snakes from the trees, responding to the vibration that had been agreed as a signal. Poisonous, constricting and generally scary the snake rain brought panic down on the soldiers, bringing them to a stop in a hopping, screaming, arms-flapping attempt to get rid of the slithering beings. "I had a bad experience with snakes in Arizona. But if they're on our side they are cool." Amused Bard continued, gesturing for Snake to get ahead. "I can't understand a word of what you say." A taunt was tossed casually towards the pursuers. The old soldier's eyes narrowed when he noticed Wolfram untangling. "I'll gain time. Go ahead and don't drop the lady."

"It's normal to get bitten if you cut in a girl's territory, says Emily." Snake murmured, hiding
behind a tree when shots came from the other side, calming his breathing.

Bard grimaced, also behind a tree, taking a few shots before crouching and going for his backpack.

"Well then… let's use this." Taking out the cans of marmalade and lighting their wick Bard took notice of the enemy's position and delivered the explosive. Snake could use the blast as cover to get ahead.

While the ploy was successful Wolfram was faster than anyone should have been, noticing the trap and abandoning his men without regret, weaving through the trees with a single-minded purpose.

He's fast. And he was able to avoid the trees, the shots, the fires, the blast, moving suddenly around the cook's cover, taking aim. How can he move like that? Bard turned and shot, riposting. Wolfram crouched and rolled out of the way, shooting, a few bullets grazing the target before he shot forward, drawing a knife. Like some wild animal?

The click of the German guy's gun told Bard that he had spent the bullets but the knife on his hand was still seeking blood.

A shift in his eyes changed the combat style, a kick pushing Bard away and an abrupt change of direction.

A salve of bullets hitting the trunk and forcing Bard into cover.

Some had survived the blast. And they still could fight.

"Bastard…" Bard grimaced, slapping cloth over the bloodied forearm, trying to keep the wound from leaking. "Snake! He's after you!" Bard shouted, glancing back, making a plan to deal with the group.

Teeth gritted Wolfram charged, slashing at the man carrying the Young Lady, both falling to the ground.

«Lady!» Quickly he reached her, cradling the small body, worried, relieved. She had not left the forest…

«Thank you for coming.» There was a gun right in front of his face. Shocking to be sure but not as stunning as the second realization. It was not Sieglinde in his arms. The smirking foreigner boy was wearing the lady's clothes to deceive him and the dogs. «Here's your tip.» He rasped in broken German, squeezing the trigger.

"We have time to prepare the terrain to our advantage." Mouser was saying as she opened a few of the trunks that occupied the carriages and distributed weapons and supplies after their supposed leaving of the village with a sick Young Master. The patrol that had been tailing them was dead a few yards away and Finny was walking around with the amulets to fake normality. Mouser was really suspicious of those things for some reason. "However so had they. Years of it. But that also means they can be cocky, believing to know the woods, the roads, the traps and outposts."

"Meaning that if we scramble them they will have a harder time in recovering because of complacency and the previous feeling of preparedness." Bard chuckled, handling the explosives, packing and prepping. The thief took his cigarette for herself, keeping it away from the volatile concoctions.

"I should find a good spot." Meyrin suggested, bundling riffles.
"I'm waiting for Sebastian's confirmation on the whereabouts of those rails." Mouser agreed but asked for time, displaying an array of knives and guns, picking a handful and dropping them by Bard. "Wait for a while longer so we know who has to go where later on. Successful or not on the other part what matters here is that we have a clean getaway. Boyo how many guns do ya need?" She glanced over her shoulder to the grimacing Young Master staring at her travelling armoury display. "Also this no bizarre doll and you are a piss-poor shot even if Sebastian says otherwise. Please aim for the larger target. Headshots are a gamble for amateurs."

Meyrin giggled into her hand, leaning a riffle against her shoulder, finished with the strapping of her skirt for extra mobility.

The Young Master scoffed at her taunt.

"Our priority is to get Sullivan out of this forest." He stated. Mouser shrugged. He was refusing to doubt the success of the main plot. "So Finny you will take her. As you namesake you will run through the forest faster than anyone else."

"He's slow because he is carrying a child take aim!" The soldiers after him called out. Bullets zipped by Finny, some grazing his skin, a few sinking into his already wounded back. Finny just kept going, running, steady, sure-stepped through the dark woods, following the shimmering ribbons that had been tied to the low branches as guides. Like his namesake the Young Master had said….

"It's dangerous. Keep your head low." The young gardener whispered to the trembling girl in his arms as he ran My name, that special name the young master gave to me. He could remember that moment. After being rescued, after going to that new country, called to that big bright place filled with the things they called books…

"I can't keep calling you subject number 12 forever." The Young Master had said in a quiet, understanding tone, watching him. Sebastian stood behind nº 12, waiting. There was no reason to trust him back then. How could a thing created in a lab know any better? He could have attacked… "You have nice blond hair." He had. It was growing. It felt soft and fluffy. So strange. As new as everything else. "A long time ago blonde hair was called Finn. The protagonist of this tale was also named that way because of his beautiful blond hair." The Young Master pushed a book towards him, over the table that kept them apart. It looked so pretty, so colourful. "He ran through the forest faster than a hare and was stronger than a deer. That blond boy rather resembles you, don't you think?" One of the illustrations… the drawing where his eyes were fixed, the picture of a free young boy running through the woods… "Finnian. That's the name I'll give you."

"Finnian?" Finnian murmured, grateful, surprised, taking it, eyes wide.

"A little grandiose but it sounds nice." Sebastian considered, amused. "Nicer than be named after a dog." He grumbled in a jab Finnian had not understood. Nor did he see the Young Master's miffed look.

"I'll give you this book." The Young Master said, holding out the pretty gift. "I hope you can learn how to read soon. Isn't that good Finnian?"

"Yes." Finnian helf the book against his chest, crying, smiling.

"Oh? This is the first time you've shown such a human expression." Sebastian noticed the shift on the so-far blank-faced boy. But there was something else to work on as well. "However you still
need to learn how to talk and behave like a servant and how to adjust you strength." The book had been crumpled against his chest.

Number twelve became Finnian but if the young master needs number 12's power... Finnny's eyes narrowed. If they were to get away he could not hold back.

"Lady Sullivan things will get a bit rough. Please close your mouth so you don't bite your tongue." He warned the Young Lady, taking a deep breath. And then he was running faster than anyone ever could, dashing through the trees, following the ribbons to the cliff that would cut off the pursuit. "Faster than a hare or a bullet. I'll run through this forest faster than anyone. Because I am Finnian!" Gleefully he took the leap, eyes reflecting the moon and stars. And he slammed down standing on the river, crying out. "Huuuu it stings.... My legs tingle all over..." He complained about the mild discomfort, standing there, waiting. They were the bait now.

The men chasing Finny crowded the cliff's edge, well in sight, taking aim. Meyrin exhaled and counted. About twelve... Faster than they could take aim she began to take them out. The knowledge of a sniper did not help them in the least. Job done. Fourteen shots. A couple of those men had to be disarmed before executed as they had a clear shot against Finny.

Something moved down by the creek.

Meyrin's eyes narrowed and she glanced at it, trying to catch sight of whoever was hiding down there.

It was a good idea using a different path. Grete watched as the group that had been lead by her fell straight into a trap. Men are really useless. She stood, guns ready. The Green Witch was within reach. All she had to do was take down that boy and get the target back to the village. I'll stop them here. Moving out of cover she took the shot.

"Finny!" Meyrin called from the trees above, aiming fast.

A blade was drawn, a taller figure standing in front of the blond boy, a sweeping movement crossing the bullet's path, slicing it in half, the chopped parts following harmless paths into the water. The katana swiftly flowed through the motion and back into its scabbard.

Tanaka had stepped out of the shadows of the woods where he had been stationed as back-up for such a possibility, standing in front of the gardener, gloved hand on the hilt of his blade in a resting hold. The woman was staring, dumbfounded.

"Finny go on ahead." Tanaka instructed. "Let this old man take care of her." He dropped lower, ready to draw and charge, serious, focused, fierce. "We will carry out any order the Young Master gives us." He challenged. "That is the policy of the Phantomhive servants."
Wolfshultz was compromised.

It had been an unlikely situation but the army had plans for every circumstance that could befall and threaten the Green Witch project, no matter how unlikely or outlandish. Dismissing a situation due to its low probability was a sure way to be blindsided. Professor Sullivan was particularly rigid and adamantly in the detail work that had gone into the project. Failsafe's, evacuation, retrieval, concealing... a wide array of eventualities had been thoroughly addressed.

The orders were clear in that incident: what could be salvaged should be retrieved. The rest should be destroyed and hidden. One group was tasked with the Green Witch's security. In this instance recapture and bring her back before she left the borders of the forest. Or execute her as soon as she breached the perimeter. The other group was meant to chase down and deal with the intruders. While they seemed to be employing more fire power than reasonable or necessary a chance to test the technology was not entirely unwelcome.

The missives and directions however were jumbled and delayed.

The groups that should have gathered swiftly in the centre of the village were coming out of the outposts without orders, forcing the other to wait, postponing the mission again and again, building a feeling of uneasiness and aggravation. The explosions and sounds of battle echoed, seeping from the trees. They seemed to have had trouble gathering to leave as well, short-handed and under-armed. But they could not start the task before the bulk of the forces was gathered.

The first place salvage should target was the manor. Starting with the library, documents and areas where the Green Witch conducted her research. Then moving below, into the laboratories. If the broken pieces of information was to be believed they would be unable to fulfil the second section of the mission. Fire and poisonous gas were raging beneath the ground. The main groups should have taken away the bulk of the information already but...

Fog and smoke rose from the chasm, rolled from the woods, settled in the village, clouding everything around them in darkness and white, swallowing the lanterns, dousing the old archaic flames that provided the light and right ambience to the place. From the square they could barely tell the contours of the nearest wall. It only added to the feeling that something was not quite right, that some vital piece of their orders had been tampered with. But they took pride in knowing that it was only a feeling. There was no reason to doubt the efficacy of their plans or the certainty of their orders. If something was off the communication officials would let them know.

Time was ticking.

Restlessness grew as they watched the last of the forces leave the place and the trickle of their own slow down to nothing with a few units still missing from the fold. They needed to act. So their commanders gathered conversed, exchanged information, compared what they held and ordered a course of action that matched both the brief and the circumstances.

All had to be done by dawn.

The gates of the manor were open, surrounded by tendrils of mist. It was thicker there, fed by the factory below. The path had been left open by the hunting party. They should post a guard in the factory's entrances and exits. It would be impossible to complete the task while the fire burned but as soon as it burned itself out protected troops should complete the assignment.
A figure, a woman in black clothes, stood on the bridge, waiting, smiling. That brought them to a halt, doubt stilling their motions for an instant, trying to see if it was friend or foe. A guide or an enemy. With all the odd orders and warning one of the women of the main group stationed at the village could have been tasked with guidance and updating the mission's status.

«Ladies and Gentlemen.» Mouser announced, amused, stepping into view, calculating the distance and the concealment of the fog, imbibing a showman's flare to her voice and gestures, taunting, crossing the bridge to stand in the way. They reacted, finally understanding that the woman was not part of their ranks, weapons ready, salve unleashed. The shots fired were slashed down by a silver twisted glaive, never reaching their intended target. She stared at Lae who had taken over her motions and formed the polearm, attacking to defend its wielder the practised movement was a mix of what she could do and the demonic weapon's guidance. The last time she had wielded anything spear-like... maybe that pitchfork when Lau had asked Jack to get rid of Chang. It had to look opportunistic. So a pitchfork in the back in the stables of the tavern after a night of heavy drinking and a few staged fights with the boys to chalk it up to drunken debt settling. "A bit too big for me Lae..." Mouser murmured, twirling it, slamming the bottom onto the bridge keeping to the show, taking in the baffled looks. Confusion. Fear. A weapon longer than she was tall was bound to be impressive and intimidating. She smiled once more. «I am so glad you chose wolves as the symbol of this hoax.» Merrily the thief announced, free arm reaching out, claws outstretched. Her four Puppies stepped out of the gates with a howl, flanking her, two on each side teeth bared, growling, chuckling. They were happy to be part of the plan. And the priceless looks of fear right in front of them were perfect. "Now... you are to kill everyone like a human would. I don't want to see bite marks, no incinerated humans, no pieces ripped out or missing, no crushed messes. You may slash, you may hack, you may shoot, you may punch. But keep it believable. And no snatching souls either. We don't need the attention even if we do have the audience" She paused for a moment, sighing, glancing at the forest that could not be seen through the fog, noticing the presences beyond the wards, smiling sharply. The boys had already changed their shapes and followed what they had been told to do, shrugging of the damage of bullets, ignoring slashes and strikes. "Yes. You may take a sip of blood here and there. I doubt it will be noticeable in the confusion. Now how about something more manageable..." Sheepishly Lae shifted into a pair of daggers, snuggling against Mouser's palms.

"I believe this is enough." Sebastian appraised his handiwork in erasing the formula etched in the floor, within a circle that would appear magical. His fist had shattered the surface into dust and cratered under it. It would be impossible to remake it from there. What was planned for the village would further muddle the evidence. "Oh dear... It's gotten so late. If I don't hurry I won't make it in time for breakfast." He murmured, amused, regaining the butler's demeanour. On his way back to the surface the demon had been making sure nothing was left in his wake. If all traces of that poisonous gas were to be erased he had to be thorough in the destruction of the facility and its formula. But the rest he could leave to Mouser. For now it seemed unwise to leave the young master to his own devices knowing his famously bad luck and tendency to attract the worst of the pursuers.
Superhuman reflexes were nothing that Ciel had not witnessed. Often in fact. How far out of human capabilities did depend on the mood but still it helped that everyone that had displayed those attributes was not human or barely within the definition. When someone that had been nothing but an ordinary, if trained, man showed those kinds of reaction time it did make things harder. And annoying.

The headshot should have been a clear and quick elimination. Ciel was smirking, smug and confident. There was simply no way of missing from that vantage point. However the bastard jerked his head sideways, snatching it out of the way of a point blank shot, hissing when the bullet grazed and snatched a chunk of his ear, returning fire with a heavy punch that easily threw the boy's lighter-than-a-ragdoll body out of his way, attacking to knock the gun out of his hand.

Stunned by the pain and the blood seeping from his nose and cracked lip Ciel was left without reaction as the enraged man pinned him down, fastening his hands to his throat, growling, blood and tears dripping from his face.

«If only you hadn't come the young lady…» Tricked and in the know Wolfram saw his chances of retrieving Sieglinde before crossing the limits that would spell her execution reduced to nothing. So he focused his grief on the obvious cause, one hand choking the life out of him, the other reaching for the gun, intending on returning the favour with greater accuracy.

"Smile!" Snake shouted, trying to move, flinching, bruised.

"Young master!" Bard moved out of cover, raising his revolver. Shit I'm not fast enough… He was too far, the angle was awkward and to make a good shot he needed… Time. Space. It was impossible to make it in time.

Ciel grimaced, struggling with what air he could still muster.

Cutting it close seemed to be one of Sebastian's preferred tricks to test the contract and the contractor. It could also be that he had run into complications but that was somewhat unlikely. But right about now it was a fairly unacceptable tardiness.

A blade came between them, abrupt, the movement barely registering in the Earl's flickering vision, shoving the pistol away, twisting until it was let go, pinning Wolfram into a stalemate. The hold on the boy's throat lessened but wasn't released.

"What's going on?" The new voice cut in, its owner staring down at Ciel, keeping the balance. "I didn't know he had a daughter."

"You…" Ciel murmured, looking up, finding a familiar face in an upside down state. One of his predecessor's associates. One that he had seen often in the manor, chatting and eating and looking cross with the world. And one of the people inherited in the Phantomhive network. While he had indeed given warning of his trip to Germany he was not expecting for him to get directly involved with the investigation.

"I never imagined I'd still be cleaning up after his mistakes at this age." Complaining the portly man that had became of the thin, frowning and aggravated person in his memory, balancing blade and gun, moving into a full tackle forcing Wolfram to back off and focus on the scuffle. "I thought I was finally free!"
"You haven't changed Diedrich." Smiling slyly Ciel sat up, freed from the choking hold. "Well… apart from your looks that is." Taunting could not be resisted.

"Whose fault do you think that is?" Diedrich grumbled, pushing back, dodging Wolfram's second knife, reaching back, drawing a gun parrying the blow with the barrel. "Also… Don't call me by my first name." His voice rose into a shout, pushing Wolfram back, their boots shuffling through the leaves and twigs as he gained terrain, pushing the man away from the group "I'm not your fag!" He stopped abruptly, twisting towards Bard "Now you, stubble!" The sudden order and implicit secondary course of action startled the Green Witch's butler into looking away. "Joking!" Diedrich grinned and used the breach, gaining room to move, shooting the soldier through the wrist and into taking cover behind the trees.

"Thanks Diedrich." Ciel stood, grimacing. In-between the bruises, the bare feet and the dress it was hard to tell what was the main source of pain and discomfort. "But why are you here?" While they had contacted there had been no orders, requests or reasons for the man to chase him down to South Germany. Even if the timing was close to impeccable.

"You ask that?" Fuming and keeping the gun trained on the spot where their enemy was hiding Diedrich answered, waiting for the two other guys to join them. "You just came close to a top secret military program. Like father like son I guess."

"If you are talking about the new poisonous gas it's already…" Ciel shook his head. They already knew that and it was being dealt with so why was he so agitated…

"No! It's not just that. In this forest the army is…" The ground started to shake. Diedrich ground his teeth together, gripping the boy's arm. "Get down!" The trunk nearby exploded. "Shit too late…" An explosion rang out as the shot found the ground, obliterating the trees around it, leaving a crater and the start of a fire.

"What's going on?" Ciel groaned, looking at the destruction.

"Young master are you all right?" Bard called out, dragging Snake with him. The blast had briefly separated them, forcing each person to dive for cover as best they could.

Following the explosion the ground started to shake. Trees groaned and cracked as something big approached. It was just a shadowed bulky boxy thing until it came into view. Some sort of vehicle, armoured, armed.

"A moving cannon?" Ciel shouted, startled.

"Don't be dumbfounded weaklings! Run!" Diedrich commanded, standing, pulling him along.

"What the hell is that? It's huge!" Bard was already running, doing the same guiding and pulling with Snake as the barrel of the massive gun moved, seeking the best angle to target the moving marks.

"It's the latest model of armoured land vehicle." The German connection of the Phantomhive Household explained as they weaved through the trees, trying to outrun the firepower. "A panzer."
Chapter 203

The Panzer advancing through the woods was a massive moving powerhouse. That much was true and in plain sight. Also it felt like overkill just to pursue a handful of threats. While in the spirit of criticizing stating that it was chasing them was a bit of a stretch on credulity when it moved at the speed of a fat man's jog.

Still it dominated and intimidated the field, advancing steadily through any kind of terrain thanks to the belts under the wheels. But it was clearly not without its design flaws. For one it took a long time to recharge after a shot of the main gun. Secondly it was slow. But neither of those posed much of an issue when taking into account its purpose.

Armed, armoured and made for destruction. Overrunning and clearing a battlefield with those should be easier, swifter. A cannon that before would be of use only at sea or on a stationary situation now could be deployed and aimed with precision.

It was a technological advancement worthy of notice and emulation.

Foot soldiers prevented any approach and provided cover as the main gun was inactive. That made its speed an advantage instead of an exploitable flaw.

Trees cracked and creaked before ceding, snapping.

Bullets fired back were deflected by the thick shell. Bard was particularly displeased at that.

So the group ran, placing between them and the behemoth whatever could shield them.

"Isn't England building them too?" Diedrich asked in a hiss as the bullets flew around them, forcing the group to remain pinned in cover.

"Apparently so but they are not complete yet from what I know." Ciel answered without looking. There were slight intervals in the shooting as the rifles reloaded. "To think Germany had already gone that far…" It should be reported along with his findings on the village.

"Hey stubble! The main cannon gets is and we're dead." Diedrich clicked his tongue as the infantry that protected the vehicle was forming a wall to its sides, interrupting the barrage. The thing had come to a halt. It was getting ready to fire, locking positions and taking aim. "We've gotta run! Now!" It was a slight chance, but still a chance to outrun the gun before it was deployed. "Son did you think you could make a clean escape?!" Complaining while fleeing didn't save breath but some things just had to be said.

"I wasn't expecting something like that!" Ciel barked back, pulling the skirts around his hips, hopping in pain as the socks ripped and nature cut his feet. The sounds of metal hissing told them a shot was not too far from being lined up with them. The return of the bullets was not making any easier to run, keeping the fear of being shot dead even before being blown up bracingly real to keep them moving.

"On the eastern side of the forest there's a military railway that was used to transport the building supplies for these bases." Diedrich reached back and pulled the Young Earl along, glancing hissing. "If the train is still going we can escape on that."

"We know. Earlier we traced our route with that in mind…" Ciel began to respond. A sharp pain shot up from his side, gripping his legs into stilling. Pained, unable to move he fell down, left
behind before the group noticed what had happened. Damn... my injuries... breathe... wincing he struggled, trying to get back on his feet.

"Son!" Diedrich stopped and turned, trying to make his way back.

"Young master!" Bard shoved Snake behind a tree and stopped, taking a gun out to provided cover.

The blast created by the explosion pushed them out of the way, pelted by debris, feeling the heat of the fire and smelling the scent of burnt wood. The roar was calming into a deep silence cut by pained groans and the falling of chunks of what had once been a forest. It seemed impossible for anyone to survive a direct hit.

"You're pretty battered." Sebastian assessed, picking up the slightly damaged body of the Young Master. Deflecting the blast and the shell had been easier than expected. Just a well-placed strike to make it explode before it reached the target and in an area where the blast would be felt but out of the ring of certain death. None of the injuries seemed a direct consequence of the cannon shot. It was within the contract. "You went as far as to dress up and this is the result." Playful in his chastising Sebastian surveyed the field, making sure they were still hidden within the fog and smoke. The infantry hadn't resumed their shooting. They had a moment before they tried to confirm the hit. "You should have left everything to me."

"Shut up. You should have come earlier." Spiteful, true but it was in accordance with the usual personality.

"Hurry up! We need to get out of here before they shoot again." Diedrich got over his relief to a surly annoyance once more, standing, forcing everyone else to do the same and resume their escape.

They didn't hesitate to shoot even though they still didn't know that wasn't the real lady... Wolfram pressed his back against a tree as the panzer drove by, stunned, silent, wounded beyond the physical. It's obvious that Hilde... no... the army... is planning to kill her.

A smile for him, innocent and wide, trusting.

A poisonous grin and an uncomfortable question flaying the edges of his mind, now confirmed, now true.

Standing, wobbling Wolfram made his choice, walking away, towards the only way out.

[Things I Keep Forgetting: 1 - Check this song by Epica: Another Me "In Lack'ech; If Mouser sang this could be her anthem; 2 – If Mouser ever got a Panzer she would act like Deadpool with a Zamboni, ignoring the gun in favour of running people over with it / If she got the plans she would sell them; 3 – If Mouser and Sitri nights out have a theme it would be Hittin' the Hay from Barnyard; this while Charlotte and Sebastian facepalm on the background. Mouser and Grell out on the town however would be to the sound of Uh-Oh We're in Trouble from St. Trinian's;]
Chapter 204

The wards that trapped and amplified the effects of the hellfire came down with an absent gesture allowing passage to an empty smouldering heap of burnt buildings and corpses. Mouser lit a cigarette calmly looking around, weapons put away, dogs prowling the area to scavenge for the last valuables they could loot. The fight had been exceedingly tranquil, aided by the disorientation of the weird phenomenon and the fear of the flames that had bloomed all around them and did no harm to those that slaughtered with ease. While trained they were neither battle ready or hardened, prone to mistakes, hasty. Overreliance on orders made it easy to work out their weaknesses too. As soon as one commander fell the group as a whole splintered and grew easier to target.

At first glance whoever came, in the aftermath, as soon as they began to question why no reports were being given from that particular facility, they would think the orders had been completed. Destroyed and hidden in the event of a breach. Then they would notice that the wrong uniforms graced the remains. Then they would panic because it would be impossible to know for sure what had been taken from the village and the true outcome of the conflict along with the numbers and methods. Possibly some parts of the woods and ruins would collapse due to the fire damage in the caves dug below further complicating the reconnaissance.

Heaping setbacks in every way seemed to be the best strategy to ensure their escape even if it was time-consuming. And lucrative. At first glance her score from that mission covered everything from precious metals to weaponry. As soon as she started to move them in the underworld there would be enough for... Frowning the thief sighed. She was no longer too sure what she wanted the money for. Whispers and common sense did tell her to leave it stored. Someday it could be useful.

"Boys. Pack up." She called, a shake of her head clearing the thoughts of future investments, endeavours and sparkly items. The mission was only halfway through. The spectators had left, their jobs in the area as done as hers. Pluto and the triplets hopped to her side, waiting. "The manor has been unattended for some time now. Go back and do some maintenance." They pouted. There was more prey to chase in the woods. It was an obvious and simple fact and that little exercise had not been thorough enough. Mouser reached out to pet their big heads, smiling, cajoling. "Think about it. It's not only the building is it? Pluto knows who creeps by trying to steal and murder the boyo. Very brazen aren't' they?" Understanding they left, bowing, howling, tails wagging, leaving her alone in the night. For the remnants there was no need for that kind of backup.

Mouser stretched and looked beyond the wreck. Traps had been sprung here and there. Groups had been prevented from chasing or doubling back to check progress. Not one of the groups she cared about had reached the train yet. It seemed they were encountering some resistance. Sebastian had re-joined the boyo. So had their spectators. But there should be no need for her there. If they had not interfered while four unchained demons slaughtered a village they would not do a thing when a demon in a contract acted according to the master's orders.

Pulling out a flare gun Mouser signalled the sky. As the bright flash shattered and sparkled she tossed the spent cigarette to the ashes, pulling a new one, lighting it as she made her way to the rails. It was stretching it and really on the edges of perception but there should be about twelve people in there. Clearing those and prepping the escape should be the priority now.
between us… He had already slashed a bullet. Point blank range was of no use as the movements of the blade and man barely gave her time to aim. And as soon as she was far enough to take a shot her hat was shot from her head, reminding her that there were more players in that group. The sniper… Looking up and around Grethe decided that there had to be another course to engage. I better retreat for now… Turning and diving for the cover of the woods she vanished.

Tanaka took a deep breath, sheathing the katana, sighing, tried. It had been a short battle but the focus and energy needed seemed so much greater than they had once been.

"Mr Tanaka!" Meyrin called out, running, leaving cover to join the group. Two riffles were crossed on her back and a third was ready in her arms. She came to a halt next to the former Phantomhive butler and aimed at the woods, ready for any other attack. "Are you hurt?" The maid asked softly, ready. Her shoulder relaxed slightly when she saw nothing nearby but the gun was still ready to be deployed.

Finny peeked from the trees on the margin behind their back with a scared Sieglinde curled against his chest. They had not moved far from the cover Meyrin's fire could provide, nor should they have. It was unclear how many Germans populated the woods so the group had planned to stay together where they could defend each other and their cargo.

"I'm quite all right." Tanaka answered, letting go of the hilt, smiling in reassurance even as the effort caught up with him, making his breathing pattern uneven. "However I'm not young anymore." He brushed off the concern with a jest.

"Do we run after her?" Meyrin asked finally lowering the gun.

The woman was gone and no one else was around at the moment.

"No. We should not chase her too far." It would be unreasonable to chase an enemy into the unknown. They had their route and it seemed to be clear at the moment. A flare brightened the sky, coming from where they had come. It seemed Mouser had secured the way back, making sure there would be no reinforcements to chase them. She would move on to the path ahead now. "Let's go." Tanaka nodded, encouraging them to resume their way towards the hidden train tracks.
"What about the sullin?" The Young Master lost no time in inquiring even as they ran, attempting to get out of the Panzer's range, fully recovered from his assault and near mauling. Or at least attempting to be as cool and collected as one would expect a little British lordling to be.

"It's here." Sebastian answered, showing the padded travel vase, barely looking back. "I took all the samples." He reassured the Young Master, leaving what had happened to the laboratory implicit.

"Bard! Snake!" Ciel nodded, understanding, reworking the plan. They could not lead that thing to their escape route. So it had to be dealt with now. "Go with Diedrich to the railway and get everything ready." Sebastian stopped, straightening, waiting.

"Yes sir!" They shouted in tandem, quickly, glancing back at their master, coming to a halt. "Says Oscar." Snake added in a small whisper. He jumped out of the way, hiding, ready to go, glancing nervously at the moving tank, his snakes hissing and coiling around his neck and shoulders in what seemed an attempt to be comforting. Bard stopped and cocked his gun, pointing at the moving Panzer, waiting for any of the infantry to peek so his shooting would have any effect.

"Diedrich you carry the sullin." The Young Master took and tossed the samples, almost careless, watching as the inherited German grabbed and fumbled, looking rather spooked as he knew exactly what he was holding on to.

"What! I drop this and we're dead!" The complaint was met by a blank look of disinterest. "Why are you giving me the worst job! Like father like..." Sour surly complaining was cut short by a dispirited vow of confidence from the young Phantomhive within a clear dismissal. Grumbling and knowing time was running out Diedrich growled and moved out, gesturing the help to follow, still locked in reluctance.

"Let's do something about that tank Sebastian." That smug command was received by a calm smile on the butler's part but it stopped Diedrich on his track, making him turn with a shouted objection. Stubbly clapped his shoulder causing the German Nobleman to turn, finding the same confidence on the cook.

"It's ok. The Young Master has a plan and our butler is superhuman." As overconfident as that sounded they seemed to hold no doubt about the ability of their butler. So the trio headed out, leaving the pair of master and servant to face the military-grade vehicle, its sea-worthy fire power and the defenders that clustered around its sides and back.

"Hey. You can put me down already." The Young Master complained, bristling as soon as he reviewed the current situation. Both the dress and being carried about were particularly undignified.

"I most certainly cannot." Sebastian answered in a prim tone, concealing amusement beneath the proper words and gestures. It could fool anyone that would not peek beneath the veneer. "Unfortunate as it is I have neglected to bring a secondary pair of shoes. As a butler I can't let my master go around barefoot." The Young Master seethed, close to hissing like a tea kettle. Just to drive the nail a bit further Sebastian continued his highlighting of the situation that had gone awry. Also you happen to be so petite that you can pose as the green witch. You can stay like this and look graceful, my lady." And yet another reminder of that other time.

"You..." Blushing fiercely in anger and humiliation the Young Master made his displeasure
noticed in a very sharp snarl. The plan had originated on the similar size and deception, decoys and sowing chaos on the pursuers. Yet in his pride to prove able to execute his own ideas the Young Master seemed to have forgotten the embarrassment he associated with dresses.

Mouser had said nothing but she was short enough to wear the dress with minimal amount of ankle showing and to the mistaken for either Ciel or Sieglinde when properly attired. She would also have executed Wolfram readily and probably blasted the tank into scrap as soon as it fired. But now the task came to him due to the Young Master's little miscalculations of his own limits. And sudden willingness to do things on his own.

"I jest." Brushing all that aside Sebastian prompted the order. "Well then Young Master."

"This is an order. Destroy the panzer." Proper formulation ensured a clear objective.

"Yes, My lord." And wielded focus on the task and target.

The crew guiding the heavy machinery finally spotted them revealing yet another thing the behemoth could do, throwing portholes under the man gun to reveal rapid-fire guns that started to pelt the ground along the salves fired by the foot soldiers. "I see…" Dodging, sizing the adversary Sebastian pondered the course of action, swatting a few of those bullets away from the Young Master's head. "It's able to attack from a 360 degree range." Stopping, pivoting and dashing to a swift kick dented the surface and slowed it down slightly but it was not the result he was expecting.

"What happened?" Ciel gritted his teeth, trying to get his bearings through the motions, noticing only the failure.

"The armour was a bit thicker than I thought so my restrained impact had little meaning." Meaning a shoe imprint inches deep was not going to cut it. "And with the infantry covering the flanks it's a bit annoying." Unperturbed the butler continued, manoeuvring the bundle in his arms, reaching cover, waiting.

"I don't think that its whole body is covered in solid steel." The Young Master reasoned in that breather, eyes narrowed. "If it was the tank would be too heavy to move. Parts of it must be thinner to make it lighter. Somewhere that does not need protection because a human would not be able to reach…" Above and below. It had to be. Nodding grimly Ciel grimaced. Sebastian. Get close to the panzer. Scatter the flies first."

Obeying Sebastian charged, weaving through the bullets, keeping his nonchalance, bounding over the tank, leaving confusion on his wake. The soldiers shooting scrambling, trying to regain their target as the tank kept going, unperturbed, unable of the quick manoeuvring needed to follow a target that had left its main weapon's range. The explosion that followed cleared the way, blasting the escorts and bits of them high and around. While it shook the metal and created a curtain of smoke there was no great effect on the Panzer. It was to be expected.

"Well it was a good idea to get these from Bard." Sebastian chuckled at the Young Master's comment while holding yet another can of explosives. They were fairly more incendiary than Mouser's runes. Probably the better choice for the kind of chaos needed. The demon stopped and waited as the tank turned sharply, trying to compensate and return to a threatening position, its main gun ready once more. "The hors d'oeuvre is over. Now to the main dish." Fitting that the puns had come from Chef-prepared incendiaries.

Sebastian charged, undaunted, jumping towards the target. The kick the main gun took twisted it into a curve. Unable to be fired the shell exploded within the barrel. Both that impact and his strike
shook the structure, pushing the Panzer back. Returning to the ground, leaving the Young Master safely there he used the confusion that was sure to be raging inside to jump on the top of the thing, punching through the softer metal, ripping a piece away, looking within, smiling at those confused and terrified faces.

«It's true. As the Young Master deduced the top is thin and soft.» Still smiling, knowing his fangs were showing slightly the demon tilted his head. «You look just like mice caught in a trap. My Mouser isn't here, she is chasing the discourteous pests that are scattered through the woods, but she would adore this.» Shouting in fear and rage the blonde woman shot at him, emptying the gun. "Little pathetic mice cowering and trembling inside a box.» Sebastian chuckled, dropping the bullets he had caught back into the tank, grinning through one that was held between his fangs.

«You… you are a monster…» Frightened, confused the woman whispered, holding the useless gun as she tried to step back in the tiny amount of room she had.

«My master decided to present you with some special supplies prepared by the household chef.» Holding up the last of the explosives, standing slowly, dropping it within as the fuse ran out. «By all means… enjoy them. » He whispered, leaving them to the blast and fire, retrieving the Young Master, taking him away from the dangerous area, watching, making sure no one was leaving.

"Now it isn't much like a moving land battle ship." The Young Master allowed a bit of humour to show as he watched. "More like a moving oven."

"Well you are quite correct." Agreeing the Demons chuckled, walking away.

Anne Drewantz. Born on March 25th 1864. Death on August 17th 1889 due to multiple lacerations. Remarks: none.» The Grim Reaper completed the recovery and closed the file, groaning, stepping away from the heath. «Demons may have pretty faces but what they do is ruthless." The ones in the village slaughtering everyone with glee. Hell Hound, Cerberus and the Soul Stealer, free wild and untouchable. This one being very polite while leaving death behind. However not one of them had bothered with the souls that were there, easy pickings. «What do we do now Sascha?» Calling to his partner revealed a sudden absence. «Hey! Why are you so far away? I was basically speaking to myself.»

«Sorry Mr Rudgar.» Sascha answered, apologetic, smiling, sitting on a branch, having an unimpeded view of the battlefield. «The documents sent by the English branch are just so enthralling. This is going to be interesting.»

«You seem really excited.» Rudgar sighed, joining him up there, leaning against the trunk, peeking at the materials that had been shared.

«Don't you see? It's England and Germany! I'm thrilled just thinking about what is going to happen.» Gleefully Sascha explained, almost hopping up and down on his spot.

«Surely not many Grim Reapers enjoy the job this much.» He sighed. Sascha was an odd one even if he was reliable with information and sorting.

«I know! I'm so happy to be a Grim Reaper.» Laughing in glee Sascha looked down, biting his lip. «What do you think will happen Mr Rudgar? I think that…»

«We can discuss this later.» Rudgar brushed that aside, concerned. «First we need to think about the demons here.» Meaning a thorough recount of collections after the job as done. The Soul Stealer already had an infamous reputation in the English Department having blackmailed them
with hundreds of souls trapped and released only if they acquiesced to her demands. Females…

«Well… he is with his master.» Sascha considered. The male had no better standing than the covenant. Reports had warned them that he had nearly managed to kill a Reaper. «I think we can safely ignore him.»

«That girl?» Masters usually didn't come in that young of an age.

«No. According to the file that's a boy.» At Sascha's correction Rudgar sputtered in surprise, staring. «He has an interesting background. He's from a family who takes on dirty jobs for the English royals. The Phantomhives.» Suddenly the boy looked over his shoulder, spotting them eye widening in recognition. The demon stopped, looking up, questioning. «He spotted us!» Surprised and confused Sascha blurted out,

«Isn't it because he already has a foot on the grave because of the contract? For people who are close to death it's easy to see us seeing we embody Death itself.» Rudgar considered, shrugging. Then he glanced at the supplied documents. «Or maybe it's because of his lineage.» He rethought his position grimly, standing straighter, balancing his death scythe.

«In that case it's even more interesting.» Sascha murmured.

«Sascha. It's almost time to collect the next ones.» Rudgar glanced at his clock, sighing.

«Yes.» The Grim Reapers vanished with a gleeful wave towards the young boy who just stared at the branch, confused by the blink-and-he-missed apparition.
Chapter 206

The station was deeply hidden within the forest, carefully placed and deliberately overgrown. Without prior knowledge or keen observational skill it would be near impossible to tell it was there at all. And as the small group approached it was very hard to say if it was still in use. True the train would be the fastest way to get away but if it was inactive the tracks would still provide a clear way out. And it was looking abandoned as they traipsed down the corridors, increasing the tension.

"Wait." The younger servant stopped, glancing down at the snakes around his neck and then to the distance where the corridor came to an end. "There's someone inside. I can hear six… no…. seven people. Says Oscar." Diedrich stopped and glanced from the doorway they could glimpse through the dark and the young man that fidgeted.

"You can sense that?" Diedrich turned, his voice matching Snake's careful whisper. Bard approached the door as a very uncomfortable Snake nodded shyly. "That son has some eccentric servants…" He considered with a quick shake of his head, turning towards the door, mumbling, gun ready, wordlessly instructing stubble on how to proceed.. "Though his father had different tastes." With a sigh he reached for the doorknob, finding it unlocked. Unsurprising, considering the location. There was nothing to secure at that particular spot. "You stay here and watch over this." He gave the locked box to the young man. No sense in taking something deadly and easily broken to a fight. "Anyway that means they are still using this place. This is good for us. We might be able to move out on a train right away." There was a little sound coming from Snake, ignored in the preparedness, as if he wanted to add something, eyes on what was beyond the door. "Let's go stubble." Diedrich ordered, opening the door, stepping quickly inside, ready to shoot.

"Yeah." Bard followed suit, taking aim.

They stopped on their charge staring. Under a few lights there was a train ready to depart and seven dead men with their throats slashed open. A lighter clicked a little flame to life, used on a cigarette. Diedrich lowered his gun after he noticed the cook doing the same, walking towards the woman with a companionable gin, taking advantage of the same flame for his own tobacco, moving on to check the steam engine. There was something vaguely familiar on that one…

"You gotten fat boche." Mouser stated, sheathing the blade on her forearm, opposite of Lae, teasing the familiar man. Old Phantomhive's right hand man. The German Sheppard of the Queen's Watchdog pack.

Bard was on the train already, releasing the unwanted wagons, prepping the furnace.

"You gotten girly guttersnipe." Snorting Diedrich addressed Mouser, finding some recognition in the smirk even if it was older and slightly unfamiliarly framed.

"Well… I always was a girl. Rather remarkable that you didn't notice back then. However given how I was it isn't surprising in the least." She smiled, blowing smoke nonchalantly. That bit was news to him. Moving beyond the now very shocked man Mouser chuckled. "Snake? Come in sweetie it's done."

"Don't dawdle." Shaking his head, clearing it from the new addition to the increasingly weirder collection of servants Diedrich began to dole out instructions. They should bolt out as soon as everyone was gathered. "Put some coal in the furnace."

"Snake did you send someone with Tanaka's group?" Mouser asked, looking around reviewing
what had happened through the little clues and what she could feel around.

Most of the work had been done by the time she had arrived and taken out those men. It was just a matter of making sure they had supplies for the journey, the maps of the lines and took of the breaks to barrel down the tracks, away from the hoax and into

"Keats." He mumbled, picking up a shovel, sitting on the edge of the train's platform, waiting.

It didn't take long for the group to catch up. The gardener was running, easily, not even out of breath, carrying the young lady that peeked shyly from the boyo's hood, confused. Tanaka moved slowly and Meyrin had the guns ready, covering the rear.

"Bard!" He called, happily, speeding his step into a jaunty skip, relieved.

"Finni! Everyone all right?" Bard looked over his shoulder, grease marks covering the charred marks on his face, elbow deep in checking the mechanical components of the train. The nod was all the answer he needed before stepping back and checking the group and the actions needed to continue.

"It seems that Keats was a good guide says Emily." Snake whispered as Keats slithered up his offered arm, snuggling with the others.

"Finni, Mouser open the gate!" Bard called out, pointing at the massive half-circle. "Meyrin, Snake check the oil!" Tanaka and Sieglinde were already on the train's wooden platform where coal would usually be stored, waiting for the escape to continue.

"Done!" Mouser called out after Finny ripped out the bolt that had kept the doors locked and they pushed the halves oven, clearing the way, revealing an unimpeded path out through the forest, cleanly cut through the trees, secrecy abandoned.

"Done!" Meyrin hopped on to train with Snake, done with the wheels, tossing away the empty oil cans, picking up the rifle again, crouching at the edge of the cart, ready to protect the rear, glasses away from her eyes.

"We're leaving now!" Diedrich called, releasing the breaks, starting the train down the tracks. It hissed, lurched and picked up speed.

"Get on Finny!" Bard called, reaching out, pulling the gardener into the control room.

Mouser hopped on the cart as it passed, looking back surveying the group. No one was too injured to fight in the event of finding something else down the road.

«Lady!» A roaring shout echoed from the entrance that lead back, down the path they had followed in their escape. Wolfram stumbled into the station, looking around, wide-eyed, desperate. Meyrin trained her gun on him, finger ready on the trigger. Mouser stopped her. Something changed. And there was something else there, skulking. It would be harmless with her there but for the puzzle to be done and settled it seemed like a good event to let flow.

«Wolf!» Sieglinde cried out. Hard to say if she was calling him or for him. After the debacle under the Green Witch's Manor it could go either way. The raised gun however hinted that maybe there was more loyalty to the army than could be grown between the soldier and the young girl. The fired shot however proved otherwise. It squarely caught the pursuer who had been smart enough to go around the main threats.

«My Lady…» Wolf whispered, dropping the gun, its job done, the last soldier downed, starting to
chase the train. Meyrin lowered the rifle. Mouser shook her head, looking, up beyond them, waiting, arms crossed, cigarette bobbing up and down between her lips.

«Wolf! why?» Confused Sieglinde shouted back, shuffling a bit in Tanaka's arms, as if struggling to approach but not wanting to do so, torn between hope and doubt.

«I'm sorry for lying to you all this time!» Between pained, tired pants as he tried to catch up the man managed to pick a side and state it clearly. «You can hate us! You don't have to forgive us! But...» His words were cut short by a sudden shot into his back, piercing him from side to side.

«Traitor!» An enraged, burnt soldier stood on the tracks, gun held on bloody hands, grimacing through red skin and a damaged eye. Singed hair, burnt uniform. Amazing how she had managed to come that far while that wounded. «Die Green Witch...» She roared.

The gunshot caught her cleanly between the eyes, sending the woman's dying body straight into Sebastian's blade as it plunged. Mouser lowered her revolver and smiled, feeling rather smug. Meyrin nodded, approving the shot. Not that it had been needed but the bitch had been annoying them for a while.

«Oh it seems some food escaped from the oven. I guess the fire wasn't strong enough.» The demon murmured, walking away as the wounds bled, moving towards the train where the young lady was trying to scurry towards her wounded protector.

«Lady! You are not a witch! You are just a girl!» He groaned, still alive, still moving towards his goal.

«Wolf!» She called out again, weeping, frightened, the weight and price of the night dawning on her with the first hints of daylight over the dark shadows of the trees.
In my world everything was grey.

Recollection came through the blackout, through the harsh shock of the pain, the searing burn of metal piercing his back, the images, memories of faded, dull edges and misty sequences, mingling with the last thing he had witnessed… his Lady wearing a distressed expression had never wanted to cause her.

My earliest memories and places were grey. I didn't even know colour existed. Days were the same, rigid, disciplines, one, another and once again.

«Fight you bastards. You will fight and die to protect your country!»

Words shouted, repeated again and again in the training, drills, every time someone faltered, along with punishments for those who failed to meet the standards.

Our duty was to protect the country.

The reason was not known to us.

Fight for the country.

But for all his accomplishments, for all the stages of preparation he had completed, for all the challenges he had overcome… he had been called away, given a mission that was more akin to a demotion than a fitting reward for a spotless record.

«Congratulations Second Lieutenant.» They had said. «Starting from today you have a special assignment. For this mission we are giving you a name. Lieutenant Wolfram Geltzer is what you will be.»

There were more words, papers, locations, name, past, orders.

None of it seemed to fit.

Despite my training being completely focused on how to kill people I was given the mission to watch and protect the Green Witch. A little girl, taken away for the same purpose, as the ones he had lived and trained with, to be of use for the country. And in case of emergency I would have to kill her.

This seemed like a joke.

I was trained to protect the country.

Not to do something like this. A domestic mockery, tasks his hands found unfamiliar. Confusion and anger had simmered though as he followed the new routines, answered to outlandish, childish, purposeless requests.

He had taken away her ability to flee as the orders issued. He had worked as someone who she should trust. But until the moment he had found a trail of scribbles leading to a bright drawing embodying the trust and love she had for him that task had only been an annoying, trying, tiring mission that seemed unrelated to the loyalty bred by training.

After meeting you for the first time I discovered the bright colours of the world and felt the desire
to protect something.

She had broken him, brought a soldier to his knees with a simple scribble of coloured pencils, a
grown man crying after finding untainted trust and kindness.

I found a reason to fight.

A reason no longer tainted, no longer conflicted by words spoken in the night and a doctrine
shouted and seared through pain and violence.

That's why I absolutely have to...

Shaking the pain Wolfram awoke, reaching back, for the voice that was screaming for him,
focusing on that familiar sound and on that familiar face when the darkness and mist finally
allowed him to go.

«Lady?» A single whispered word brought back the pain, sharp, biting, turning his voice into a
hiss.

«Wolf…» Tears dripped from her eyes, dropping against his cheeks, shattering. Little hands grew
stained as she gripped his, bloodied by the fight, by the wounds. Beyond her the foreigners stood,
smiling. A rumble beneath him betrayed motion. Glancing away as much as he could revealed that
the world that had been shaped for the training and use of Sieglinde's mind grew distant. «Don't
talk.» She shouted as his pained wheezes only made more blood gush to the surface, pooling on his
stomach.

«Mr. Wolfram.» The dark man that had in a tail coat that kept upstaging him spoke up, calmly,
sharply and decisive. «A butler is not allowed to die before their master. That was the knowledge
 imparted by my senior.» Tanaka allowed a little chuckle to bubble free along with the lecture.

«There are circumstances where that is indeed possible and an option but you would have to be
dying in place of your master.» Mouser teased, lighting a cigarette, storing the guns. "Either way it
is stupid. So boyo… it's still your turn. Show some progress."

"Sebastian heat a knife until it becomes red." Grimacing the boyo stood, hopping uncomfortably on
the bruised feet, seeing what had been done to complete the night's gamble. Sebastian nodded and
picked up the flat-bladed item Wolfram had used in his attempt to murder the boyo. The wider the
blade the more convenient it was to cauterize a wound. "Meyrin get all the cloth and water you
can." Impromptu medical procedures would not be clean nor simple. "Finny hold him down." And
the patient was less likely to be compliant. "Put the cloth on his mouth so he can't bite his tongue."
He paused for a moment, calculating. "Mouser stop smirking and get some light." He shouted.

«No… Wolf… don't die!» Sieglinde wept, holding the man's hand, lost in grief, having forgotten
all but the fear, the worry, the distress of that moment.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Ciel shouted, taking the knife, gripping Sieglinde, making her face him. It
was a harsh, brusque gesture but it was conveying the urgency of the matter. "You said it yourself.
The duty of the Green Witch was to protect the villagers, didn't you?" He pointed towards the
dying man. "He's the only one left." The only one who actually mattered considering all the lies
that had been going on. Still the point had to be made to seal in that truth. "In the wold outside
there is no magic or miracles." Not without some serious dealing and finagling but that she did not
need to know. Mouser smiled and laced her arm with Sebastian's, leaning on him. He was also
looking a bit proud there, watching the scene unfold. "You have to save him with your own hands."
The boyo demanded, giving her the knife, making those tiny hands clutch around them, issuing the
Sieglinde stared at the blade. At the wound. Wolfram was in pain, bound. A single misstep, hesitation, would cost him his life. She gritted her teeth, moth set into a line of determination, pushing the cape away from her shoulder so she could work, approaching the patient, assessing the damage, knowing how deep she had to cut to keep his from bleeding out.

«Wolf…» Angrily she called out, demanding, determined. «If you die now I will never forgive you!» The sound and smell of burning flesh mingled with pained whimpers. Sieglinde's focus didn't waver. She actually started to order people around to facilitate the task. "The bleeding has stopped." Sieglinde whispered after a while, letting out a deep sigh. The train continued his trek, uninterrupted, smoothly. "If we can get him to proper care fast he will be fine." She assessed, starting to show some cracks in her focus.

"You did your job perfectly my Lady." Sebastian nodded, encouragingly, keeping the ruse of kindness. Freed from the burden of being the medic Sieglinde broke down, crying, returning to pleading with the universe.

Mouser picked up the now cool and bloodied knife, dipping her claw into the congealing red mess, sneaking a rune into the bandaged side of the soldier. That should help somewhat with the healing.

"We can't take him to a hospital. They will find us." Ciel muttered, annoyed, arms crossed, looking back. This was the army, meaning the government would be alerted as soon as someone missed some kind of report from that outpost. "Give us a place to hide Diedrich." He asked firmly.

"I bet saying no will serve no purpose. Jeez… like father…” Diedrich complained, annoyed.

"I was surprised that you ordered me to pick him up, young master." Sebastian mentioned, sacrificing his tailcoat for the comfort of the boyo, approaching to discuss matters. Mouser sat down nearby, watching the trees go by, cleaning the knife, appraising its quality, claiming it for her own.

"In the outer world there are monsters worse than werewolves." The boyo considered, keeping his tone quiet, whispered under the sobbing Meyrin and Finny tried to assuage. "She will need someone to look after her." He mentioned, unwilling to move too many resources into that new charge. "Plus she is my insurance. To avoid that someone tries to kill me because I know too much."

"I see." Sebastian chuckled, shaking his head, amused with the reasoning.

"It also means he is getting better in appraising who can be of use and go through the extra effort to get them." Mouser mentioned, the knife vanishing from her hand. "And to make it look like encouragement and kindness." The thief smiled, approving.

"However why have insurance when you have me?" Sebastian questioned, genuinely curious. As a rule the Young Master rarely had qualms about using him to accomplish everything. Even if lately he had been striving to be slightly more autonomous. "You are such a worrier Young Master."

"Don't toy with me." The boyo scoffed, smirking. "You're the one I can trust the least." He glanced at the demoness who had opened a book filled with lists and numbers and seemed to be doing come accounting. "I'd trust Mouser faster than I would trust you."

"I'm afraid that touching faith would be frailer than you would know." Sebastian mentioned, smiling, amused.
"Not if I show something sparkly and offer the right deal." The Young master stated firmly and walked away. Interesting to see that had not forgotten how to walk gracefully while wearing skirts.

"Boyo at the moment you are so in debt in my books that I'm tempted to sell you out for profit." The thief murmured to herself adding, subtracting and making sure she knew how much she had to restock in the armoury. "And then stage a rescue to bolster your gratitude and my pay check."

"Please refrain." Sebastian asked reaching down, petting her head.

"And how much do you offer for that?" She teased, looking up.
They had to be somewhat grateful that the army had woven the path through hidden, quiet, hard-to-reach areas. It made escaping unnoticed that much simpler, especially when they kept damaging the path left behind and the communications that could alert someone ahead.

For some areas their speed was breakneck.

Others they slowed to a crawl, manoeuvring.

Diedrich hopped off in one of those slow places, headed away to warn his staff of their arrival, joining the train soon after, waiting, hidden under the shade of the trees.

As the sun approached its zenith they abandoned the piece of machinery to cut through the countryside. It was not too far from where Diedrich manor's terrain started. Sieglinde was carried in Sebastian's arms, silent, glancing over his shoulder, keeping an eye on the unconscious Wolfram carried over Finny's back, their pace slow enough to keep from jostling the wounds. The boyo's pace was also reduced due to the irregular terrain under his feet and the need to shove the skirts up to keep his legs mobile. Of course they had neglected to mention that if Sieglinde was being carried she no longer needed the shoes. Or if they were still faking propriety it would be too scandalous to allow the ankles to be on display.

So they arrived at the front door of a great big stone summer house in the middle of the German countryside a little after noon, tired, bedraggled and ragtag. Said doors were opened by an elderly man wearing a black butler's uniform and small glasses perched on his nose. There was a moment of silence as he observed the group before relying on protocol. Although something had to be said on his ability to transition smoothly from surprise to formality.

«Welcome back Lord Diedrich.» And then to a slight amused chiding that was rather familiar in the terms and tone used. «Oh dear. You look as if you have caused some mischief.» And it also made it sound as if the occurrence was not at all odd.

«Heinrich call a doctor.» Ignoring the undertones Diedrich stepped into his house and glanced around, issuing orders. «And prepare a bath.»

«Yes sir.» Heinrich bowed slightly but made no move to obey. Those things had already been taken care of as per the contents of the Lord's earlier message. The guest rooms were ready, the baths were drawn, the doctor should arrive shortly and the correspondence connected to the recent secretive endeavour was already arriving steadily.

«It's been a long time.» Tanaka greeted his peer with a smile and a bow.

«It certainly has.» The old butler smiled slightly, allowing a smile and a warmer tone to seep into his voice. «This feels rather nostalgic. Then I suppose he must be...» Turning to the young dark haired man allowed him to notice some similarities, turning to his master for confirmation.

«Yes. He's Phantomhive's son.» Master Diedrich's voice now sported that put-upon tone that only surfaced when faced with the deals of the underworld and his late friend.

Heinrich considered the circumstances. The Master had been restless ever since the young Earl Phantomhive had announced he would be coming to Germany. However the young man had a confused expression on his face, as if he was not quite grasping what was being said. Considering his age he could have just started to learn the languages needed for a gentleman to make his way in
"I'm honoured to meet you Earl Phantomhive." Greeting the guest and making him feel comfortable. It was a basic rule of hospitality. Heinrich chose the language the young man had grown up with to make his introductions.

"Oh the Queen's English..." While the words were whispered in surprise there was an expression of thankfulness crossing the boyo's face before he backed himself into manners and returned the greeting with the expected words of gratitude. "Thank you for your service."

"You do remind me of your predecessor." Heinrich smiled, chuckling slightly, amused.

"That is very awkward to hear when I'm wearing a dress." The boyo grumbled.

Mouser snickered behind his back, listening in. Sebastian was still wearing that vague smile, waiting for the instructions on how to proceed in the other household. The Phantomhive servants were looking around in awe. The foyer was grand and wide, decorated, giving a sense of grandeur and splendour.

"This is Weizsäcker, one of the castles owned by the Baron's family." Heinrich presented the place with a proud smile. The servants that had accompanied him to the place at the master's urging were starting to come, tasks within done, ready to assist with the distributing and managing of the gusts. "It's rather small compared to the main manor but please make yourselves comfortable." That last statement, said almost with joking indifference shocked the group

Injured and uninjured were separated. Tanaka and Meyrin volunteered to help around the household. Sieglinde looked lost, staring at Wolfram as he was carried away for more serious treatment. Sebastian was still occupied with the girl and would be for a while longer. Mouser pretended that the luggage had been sent there, pushing the trunks and suitcases in nonchalantly, dividing them and telling the servants to whom they belonged, winking at the boyo when she caught him staring and frowning at the aftermath of the game.

"Aren't you a rich boy." The boyo teased, huffing, heading for the stairs with a sidelong glance at his peer.

"You saying that heh?" Diedrich huffed, answering, arms crossed, both oblivious to the activity brewing around them.

Wandering the halls Mouser sorted through her thoughts, the events, snooping, sifting other's memories weaving a pattern, fitting them to see what was happening while making sure the threat was truly gone for a while within those walls. So far nothing. The group was treated, fed and calming. Wolfram was in surgery, Sieglinde was quietly siting on her bed, waiting. The boyo hadfallen asleep in the dress. Sebastian was helping within the house so when he boyo awoke they could just deal with the aftermath as quickly as possible.

First on her mind was Sitri's warning.

War.

Certainly they had seen a lot of preparation in English soil but not the kind of facilities they had just blown up. So either Germany was ahead or England was keeping its own military advancements scattered through the colonies, hidden even from the underworld. It was something to consider. Even suggest a bit more of digging. Surely after this mission the boyo would be curious about how much had been just about pinpointing and destroying instead of familial
concern.

Secondly there was the Reaper attention given to both the place and the Phantomhive household. Was it usual when a large amount of deaths were happening in one spot or could it be linked to the Undertaker. And thinking of him wouldn't it be worth it to investigate? Mouser had known him as the guy with the funeral house with the cookies and willingness to teach her little things about the human body. And parts of shared, slightly off, sense of humour. Diedrich had known him as part of the Phantomhive contacts. Could he know something else? And she could not ask. So the boyo had to, if he felt the need.

Thirdly… There was another threat they could not find. Faustus. Logic would put him away from England where she, Sebastian and the allies she had been getting were more active. Hell was also not an option now that he had been branded an oath-breaker. The same logic however would link him to a place where he had poured time and power to keep a soul trap going for years. And that would be the woods just out of Trancy Manor. If a pocket plane was anchored to the place instead of to himself… Either way it would be notoriously hard to detect let alone enter. Despite breaking and entering and the subsequent sneaking about to steal and stab being her speciality. If that suspicion was correct and he had returned to England to play dead hidden under a cloak of his own power, fuelled by whatever souls had been stored in that hole… Either way if she exposed that idea to Sitri it would make it easier for him to search. A master of secrets he could be but those did not just pop into his mind without a hint to follow.

And lastly there was the deal she had struck with Sebastian.

How much did she want him to do now to pay off the boyo's debt…
"It seems that Mr. Wolfram pulled through." Sebastian related the day's events and conclusions as he helped the now awake but still grouching Young Master to his bath. The manor's age and lack of use was still evident in the fact that the bathroom, while lavish and functional lacked the newer amenities of plumbing and running water. Also the lights. Candlelit was fine but sometimes there was need for more. "Something less to worry about." AS the intentions were to keep the soldier-butler on guard duty it was indeed a good thing that they would not have to find a replacement and groom familiarity. Or pay Mouser to do it and go both bankrupt and end up with a corrupted, uncontrollable green witch whose aim would be to unsettle the Young Master. However that statement was met with a disinterested, tired nod. "This may hurt a bit so please be patient." The hair would be tangled after the days spent in bed and the bruises had not yet faded. The Young master was in a much more brittle state than usual.

"I wonder how much of this case the queen was able to predict." Finally he spoke up, allowing the thoughts on the events to flow. "Did she really sent us to investigate a case of a plague or was she aware that Germany was hiding some military secrets..."

"Who knows." Sebastian kept whatever he had found to himself. It was neither the time nor the place. "A butler cannot possibly understand the way a queen thinks." It was both an excuse and an encouragement. If the Young Master came to his own conclusions it was easier to manage. No one to blame but himself. "However one thing is certain. German progress in weapon development was great. And now that technology is on England's hands. It is getting quite interesting, isn't it. Close your eyes." He requested, rinsing the hair, stepping back.

"What is so interesting?" The Young master huffed in annoyance, ready to get out as Sebastian returned the pitcher to its place, getting the warmed towels from its rack.

"Human beings change at such an astonishing speed..." He continued, casually, drying the tiny figure, smiling, close to chuckling. "...and yet you don't seem to get any taller."

"I don't want to be told that by a demon that's been the same for centuries!" The taunt pierced deeply enough to elicit a kick to the shins. As he was barefoot it surely backfired.

"The Undertaker?" Diedrich frowned when the subject was brought up. He shrugged calmly. "He came here a while ago." Casually he gave up the information, unaware of its importance or impact.

"What?" The shock of those words almost made the Young Master jump from his chair. Sebastian frowned behind him also sharing the surprise. Mouser's eyes narrowed but that information was no longer news. The servants had indeed mentioned something about an off chap with silver hair. "Why did he come to Germany?"

"He said he had something to do in France and then stopped by." Catching on the German baron sighed and asked for the details. After the story of the ship he frowned, shaking his head in annoyance. In that light he had allowed a threat to the Phantomhive household walk away while presuming that the alliance still stood. And that failure would be intolerable. "I didn't know he was involved in that sinking ship incident." It was all he could say, letting annoyance show through.

"France..." Ciel murmured. It had not been that long ago...

"I can ask Muireall if she is still in Paris but..." Mouser mentioned, shrugging. If she had to bet she
would say America. It was where the boat was headed and it was where the Osiris thing mentioned by the Phoenix guys had banked the experiences. And in that Sitri was the one to ask.

"I very much doubt he remained where he said he would go." Sebastian agreed with the idea but tracking an enemy was more complex than that. Especially one with that many factions after him.

"Do you know where he is now? The boyo asked, teeth clenched.

"No, I'm afraid not. However…" Diedrich hesitated for a moment, digging through the memory of that visit. He had been mocked for his weight and absence, taunting about coffin sizes as usual. But he had also seen something strange. Tears from the Undertaker, the smile fading into a deep seriousness as he stared at the picture of those school days, of a young Vincent. "Poor thing… even his bones became ashes. With such a death… it's just… but the Earl of Phantomhive is still with us after all. That was what he said. And he said it really quietly. Didn't even sound like the usual guy…"

"Still with us?" Sebastian stated, eyes narrowed.

Mouser tilted her head, staring at him, lips parting slightly, her fangs showing. Then she followed his line of sight, to the boyo. Inheritance, bloodlines… firstborn? What was known of the Phantomhives in the light and dark. What was known of their death and return. What were those two growing agitated about… what was she missing in the picture? There was something missing.

"He's always talking nonsense so I didn't really pay attention to what he said." Diedrich shrugged, leaning forwards, hunching over his knees.

"Does he mean me… or…" Ciel started, hesitating.

"Master, dinner is ready." Heinrich called out, opening the door after a couple of brisk knocks. "Shall I bring it in here?" the question followed a quick assessment of the room's mood.

"No, it's quite all right, we will be eating in the dining room." Standing, ending the conversation for the time being Diedrich began the journey towards the room, looking back to make sure they were following. "What are you going to do now?" He asked, conversationally, calmer.

"My job will be over when I hand Sullivan to Her Majesty." The boyo said with conviction, flinching slightly with each step. "We'll return to England as soon as the wounded are able to travel."

The doors opened to a ransacked table where Sieglinde attacked the food plates with abandon and the wrong fork.

"OH Ciel! I already started." Happily she called out. Mouser started to snicker at the shocked faces of Master and Butler. Diedrich and his butler were more forgiving of the spectacle, moving on to sit and start the meal with a little more propriety. "This is all delicious! You should try it too!" She continued to speak through bites and mouthfuls, extending the plate towards an overwhelmed Meyrin. "Seconds please."

"I don't think she is fit to participate in her Majesty's tea parties just yet." Sebastian murmured, very quietly, very shocked. Mouser's snicker grew to a hiss as she tried to contain it, turning away, covering her mouth.

"That is rather self-evident." In despair Ciel answered.

"I suppose when we're back in England I will have to teach her the proper manners of a lady."
Sebastian proposed, smiling. "I can't wait." The thief's laughter died right away.

"I leave that entirely to you." The boyo sighed and stared at the messy table. "Her Majesty is eager to meet her so be quick." He advanced to take his place and dine.

"Certainly." Sebastian bowed and followed, ready to assist.

"Oh the poor thing." The thief murmured in solidarity. Sebastian in teacher mode was... She shuddered. The boyo seemed to have a similar reaction. Sieglinde looked up, stopping abruptly, frowning, as if the chill has just crossed her spine as well.

«It's amazing how fast he is recovering.» They were allowed to go see Wolfram hours after dinner, as soon as the doctor considered he was stable enough to receive guests. Amazingly consciousness had returned to him already. The doctor was also impressed. Although the patient's recovery and resilience could have a lot to do with training, breeding, experimenting, speedy dealing with the bullet wound and a few runes still clinging to his skin. «He's strong and will be able to move on his own soon.» With that cheery prediction the doctor left them.

Mouser closed the door after him, walking back, cancelling the spell with a touch, replacing them, making sure they blended into the healing as if they were not at all responsible. Then she returned to the bedside, waiting for the closing game to start. It was very close to being done... Just a few adjustments to the ideas and goals.

«You... Sebastian wasn't it...» Wolfram spoke up after a short, sour silence of glaring. «Why did you save me?» Sebastian kept his smile as he placed the young lady on the chair placed by injured man's side, straightening, looking steadily down. She was silent, staring, not knowing what to say after all that had transpired.

«The young master ordered me to.» There was nothing more to it, quite frankly. » Absolute loyalty. Step one. Make it look like it from the one that had been masquerading as the perfect butler.

"It was quite irresponsible of you to try and leave some strangers to take care of her, as if your job was over." The boyo complained. Step two. Duty-bound.

"And as you had made your choice. You serve the girl." Mouser stated, repeating herself, feeding the last droplet of water to the seedling she had planted that night. Step three. Choice, free-will, free of conflict.

«Lady I...» Wolfram took the cues quickly, turning to the silent Green Witch that was also listening and taking her own answers from what was being displayed.

«You don't need to say it.» She stopped him sternly before her expression turned calmer, sweeter. «I am the one who betrayed you first.» Even though shock crossed Wolfram's features, as if he had not once considered that possibility of Sieglinde being the one doing him harm she continued, explaining why it was so. «I accepted Ciel's proposal to see the outside world and tried to leave the forest. I was about to abandon you all, losing to my own greed.» Mouser snorted and wandered to the window. Sebastian smiled at that reaction. Ciel just watched, waiting, trying to decipher, trying to see if there was further need to interfere. «Yet you protected me.» She began to smile slightly as the conclusion drew near. «I won't deny I am angry because you deceived me but I also did something bad to you so... we're even.» With a big bright smile Sieglinde faced Wolfram, accepting the events and what was to come.
«Lady… does it mean that you forgive me?» Wolfram hesitated and then mumbled, on the edge of belief.

"Yes. From now on stay with me." Sieglinde reached out, taking his hand, holding it. "We will see the outside world together Wolfram." Laughing, happy and free while binding him to her side Sieglinde reached out and embraced the man, mindful of his wound. His choked answer and returned hug was all that was needed to seal that pack.

Tasks done and manipulations finished two demons and a young boy left the room to rest and plot.
Chapter 210

Mouser was nowhere to be found. Although that was not an odd occurrence, not when she grew restless in unfamiliar surroundings, but it was indeed a bit troubling that she was not resonating with him at all. Slightly unsettling, Sebastian considered, still trying to perceive her presence as he walked deeper into the room, door locked, a frown creasing his features as he reasoned, deciding on how to rate and react. She could have left for England already or just trying to deal with a new issue or experimenting with something somewhere else. Or perhaps Mouser had abandoned him for the thrill and power seeking game that dazzled and consumed the attention of the newly created. Laevateinn had been left behind on the nightstand along with a few pieces of expertly crafted jewellery that had not belonged to her when the journey to Germany had started. So most likely it was a temporary escapade.

The demon sighed, experiencing a twinge of despondency, undoing his tie. The slow slithering release of the choking hold and weight of the silk through his fingers brought memories and a smirk. Dominance, ownership, the contrast of the dark colour against his skin… His own darkness biding Mouser… and how turnabouts was fair play with twisted knots learned from sailors and thugs that sometimes he replicated, hidden in the piece of uniform around his neck.

Breaking away from his roaming thoughts he focused on the remnants of the current tasks and the ever-growing list of details to address, making sure nothing was forgotten.

The Young Master was asleep and the area was secure. The servants were equally out of the way, finally allowed to rest and relax which in turn gave him permission to do so as well. The piece of fabric was folded and placed on its proper hook. Under the oval mirror of the worn and plain vanity, next to the basin, more jewellery dotted the surface, waiting for their greedy mistress.

The tailcoat followed, straightened with a few pats and stored. Removing it swiftly was a habit that had been smoothed into a flawless fluid action. After all some of the jobs required deft motions and a dexterity that was often impaired by the uncanny ability of fabric to snag on everything. Sometimes there was a caress sneaked into the motion, down his spine. Often there was a blade sliding through the seams, just shy of slicing into the skin. Ruined coats, tattered pieces through the floor and a laugh down the corridors when he failed to notice that a motion would destroy the black construction... Just a challenge, just a tease.

The new responsibilities were co-dependent on one another and already prepared to fulfil the bulk of the tasks they needed to accomplish on a daily basis with minimal intervention required. Beyond the preparation for the queenly tea Sebastian foresaw little hassle with those acquisitions.

The buttons of the waistcoat matched he noticed as his hands worked, undoing them. The clock was still in the pocket and the time had not been tampered with. Those items were shiny and some were actually silver. He had had to retrieve more than a few from the pawnshop. Whether that was a joke to keep him on his toes or a habit born of greed and need he was unsure.

As for the Undertaker news and leads did not mean they could pursue right away even if the passing of time cooled the trail further. It was still too sketchy for an invested effort. And the target proved to be both elusive and dangerous. Diving into a hunt could be detrimental to their other duties and obligations. Even if it now seemed like he knew something more about the original events than what he had once told them. Even after all that "compensation".

The shirt should be washed Sebastian decided holding it at arm's length. It still had the scent of fire and smoke imbued into the fabric. The demon's lips pressed into a thin line of distaste. His body
was whole but the recent ravages had been grating and somewhat taxing. Within the blow of the
death scythe was still creating some dissonance, meshing with the wounded pride of being
deceived by the Reaper twice, using the same trick no less, and the annoyance of the human-made
poison and the simpering of the Young Master's wounded state. And of course the frustration of
having been denied the completion the contract due to the master falling prey of an abandonment
clause, mixed with the aggravation of terminating said agreement with banal trickery. It went
against his aesthetics and what could pass as work ethic. And of course the loss of the source of
amusement derived from meddling in the human world. And the surprising advantage of his
covenant. If she was feeling helpful.

Meeting Diedrich reinforced the Phantomhive network. Recent events did hammer home that fact
that some of the ties were weakened due to the Young Master's overreliance on his wits and
Sebastian's versatility. Even if that was a remnant of the previous events everything was conspiring
to show that there was a need to broaden their reach through human means.

The shoes were left neatly parallel on the rug, not even scuffed by their rough path through woods
and coal.

A burst of familiar energy made the act of stripping into something more. The little gasp of
surprise and interest was a victory on itself as the demoness that had appeared on the bed stared,
very still, very suspicious of his actions.

Shirtless robbed him of a lot of teasing possibilities. But it also opened up a host of others.

Glancing over his shoulder, wearing a look of mild curiosity Sebastian appraised the thief, cautious.
In no way was he safe from aggression, especially if he pushed. She was in her nightclothes, ready
to be slothful, hair free. What was different in that picture was that the skin exposed was showing
her markings, the swirling grey shimmering and shifting as she moved, mistrustful, red eyes
narrowed. The claws on her hands were long and her feet were feline. Her triangular ears twitched
slightly, making the earrings chime pleasantly. So very close to being fully demonic even when
under no threat or duress. So what had she been doing? Whatever and wherever she had been up to
had not been an ordinary effort. So Mouser was already moving beyond the needs of the currently
incomplete mission.

"I'm afraid I have not prepared anything for your return." Choosing his course the demon adopted a
formal tone, greeting as a butler should. She frowned, the distrust remaining, and then her eyes
moved down as the metal of the belt rattled, as Sebastian's movements became slow, edging the
hem of the trousers', sliding over the leather, to the clasp, starting to unbuckle. "Have you any
requests?"

Mouser's caution gave no answer to the slow show of the fabric slithering down his legs, pooling,
picked up and neatly folded, each movements drawn from a different angle just for her. Taut lean
lines, a hint, a tendril of shadow shifting along, used to distract, to call her attention.

The prowling was back.

Undaunted the thief watched, eyes narrowing. Lae hissed and moved, growing, spiking. A glare
held it back, allowing the bladeling to quiet, recognizing, nestling into its velvety jewel box where
its silver tendrils shivered, curling over itself to nap.

Gentle fingers combed through her hair, letting the wavy, unruly locks fall through them as they
moved to the grey marks, fingertips just brushing lightly over the pattern, following it over her
face, resting right under the jaw, tilting her head up just slightly, just enough, lips touching hers
first, very slow, very light. She could feel him smile just before pulling away, staring at her red
eyes, his deepening, changing its colours to match, like dark blood pooling after a deadly strike.

"Not particularly." Mouser shrugged and relaxed. After her efforts in the construction of her own personal hell she needed a break and a snack. And he offered both along with a show.

Catching the relinquishing of her suspicion and the acceptance of his offer the demons continued on his path, exploring, caressing, following the marks, removing the loose clothes that kept him away from the skin, coaxing little pleased sounds from his covenant. The dark claws tore into the fabric under her as she tilted, leaving her weight in his hands.
From Germany to England. The plan was plain and simple. Fast trains. Fast boats. And back into the nerve centre of the empire where even the canniest of spies had a hard time in staying concealed. Tickets paid and in their hands in advance. As little time as possible waiting as they could muster. Blending in through disguises. Blond becomes black, black becomes blond for Sieglinde and Wolfram. Modern clothes, glasses hats and moustaches helped the illusion with minimal effort, hassle and maximum effect. Preparing thusly made sure that all they had to do was drive to the nearest station as soon as the big guy could walk.

Bright, sunny day. Made it easier to move around, check the surroundings and carry luggage. Also it diminished the chances of anything malfunctioning in the big steam-machine. Big train ready to go, blowing smoke steadily. Other passengers created a bit of movement around the group, bending them into the scenery further.

Mouser squinted and adjusted her hat after tossing a spent butt away, crushing it underfoot, looking around yet again, making sure they were as clear as they felt. The secrecy of the project was buying them more time than they had hoped. Sieglinde was now part of the Phantomhive network even if she had no knowledge of it. Science was a good thing to have, ready to be used. And it was more plausible to most minds. A few details to iron out but those could only be addressed after the Queen's meeting. Little things could change bigger plots.

A dazzled girl and a confused butler looked around, standing out but not too much, fussed around by Meyrin and Finny, charmed by in her innocent cuteness. Finny was also there to support Wolfram's big frame, just in case. They behaved like any other tourist, actually. Country mouse relatives visiting the big wide world beyond the farm, growing flustered and amazed by everything and anything.

Tanaka had already taken his seat, settled, comfortable and napping in the second class cabin. Bard toiled, carrying the luggage, strapping it into place with a jaunty, raunchy tune whispered under cloud of tobacco, walking back and forth along with the train workers.

"Thanks for the help Diedrich." The boyo was chatting informally with their grumpy host, staring at the train, watching the activity, clearly as eager to leave as the second lord was eager to have them gone.

Sebastian smiled amicably at the older butler and accepted the gifts, leaving to prepare the first class cabin.

Mouser left the boyo to guide their new protégé, picking Sieglinde up from her chair, receiving a look of confusion from Wolfram. Meyrin laughed, following, carrying the girl's personal bag. Finny retrieved the wheelchair.

«How are you feeling?» The thief asked, noticing the excitement as she was finally allowing herself to relax, understanding that the chase was now over. Mostly, anyway.

«Well enough.» Sieglinde was staring at everything, reaching out to touch the walls, the doors, the lights, the windows. «Is this the same as the one we used to leave the village?»

«Similar. Same technology, really, a bit more dressed up." The private cabin was plush and luxurious. But to that Sieglinde was used to. What caught her attention were the lights. The construction. The vibration underfoot. And the pretty sight of Sebastian smiling politely having
already set out a small army of treats. Tea would only be served as soon as the motion smoothed out. Mouser placed the girl on the plush seat by the window. If not set there she would just climb over whoever had claimed the place to stare at the world that had so far been shrouded in mystery. The novelty of all didn't seem to wear thin anytime soon. Wolfram sat down stiffly right next to her, sheepishly glaring behind the glasses. Although he could just be squinting in an attempt to force everything beyond the lenses into focus.

«Make yourself comfortable. We will depart shortly.» Sebastian announced. Bags secure, cart cleared, nothing to report. "Please join the others and be on your guard as well as your best behaviour." The demon instructed the maid and gardener, watching them leave after a gleeful acquiescence, glancing down at the thief that was already curling on the corner that would make her hard to spot for anyone entering the small cabin. "Any news?"

"None so far." Mouser looked up, already placing a book on her lap. "But I got a proposal."

"I see." Sebastian nodded. "Will you claim it?"

"Sounds enticing." She shrugged. "Perhaps."

"Next time don't bring your troubles to me!" Diedrich grumbled, arms crossed, grimacing, glaring at the hissing machine as it threatened to drown his words. But he was loud enough to be heard over the machine, through the windows and walls of the composition.

Amused the demon left to reclaim the Young Master.

"Next time? So I'm perfectly welcome again then?" The boyo teased smugly, waving, walking towards the door cart, noticing the all-clear signal, ready to claim the last word.

"What's that face for? Do not return!" Diedrich would have none of that, returning the taunt with a bristling shout, snarling. Then he stopped the boisterous behaviour, growing sombre, shaking his head, calm, grim. "You made it out alive this time but be careful." His tone softened as he continued, watching, stepping back when the train whistled, announcing that it was leaving.

"You too." The boyo whispered, slightly taken aback, slightly concerned, eye narrowing slowly, catching the concern and suspicion, as the doors were closed.

«This is London?» Wolfram grimaced, looking around in awe as he pushed the wheelchair with an equally astounded Young Lady. At each stage of the journey she had been amazed and curious, eyes bright and full of questions and wonder. The Mouser was the one that answered most of them, sweet and soft. That smile was still as shadowy and unsettling as he remembered. But it was as if only he could see the dodgy edge. Their conversations were twisted and wound up in uncomfortable places that made him rush in an attempt to cut them short. In that urge he was not alone. The woman clearly did it on purpose and manipulated the Young Lady's curiosity and innocence for her own amusement while also satisfying Sieglinde's curiosity and making every male within earshot feel awkward. «This is what queen Victoria is ruling over?» He whispered. The hustle, the bustle, the buildings and machines... Everything... Everything looked and showed worldly knowledge, casual power and pride. Everything the empire seemed to be displayed to their best advantage in the capital outsiders would visit. Was that what they had been trained to fight against?

«This is the capital of country where the sun does not set...» Sieglinde muttered in response, repeating the phrase she had caught in the trip, twisting her head, looking around, almost climbing out of the wheelchair and up Wolfram in an attempt to absorb everything.
"You two." Sebastian snapped sternly. They were drawing just a bit too much of attention while leaving the station. «Speaking German here will be suspicious. From now on please speak English.» The Phantomhive servants hailed a hackney and left for the town house along with the massive amount of luggage they carried. Mouser had found herself in the middle of a group of messenger-type people in which more than a few were not human at all. The Young Master seemed to be at ease in the more familiar surroundings, standing tall. As tall as he could anyway. Sebastian shook his head and observed. Thing seemed unchanged and yet that was just the surface reflection. Nothing was ever that static.

"Understood." Sieglinde answered to the request in a chipper way, switching at once.

«Huh?» Wolfram startled and looked lost, close to panicking, hunching to whisper, mortified, aggravated. «She can speak English but I can't speak at all.»

«Then do what you can.» Willing to compromise just that bit Sebastian nodded, ageing. The man did not speak that much in any event. "But in that case I shall have to strictly teach him as well at the manor." The thought left his lips idly as he waited for a decision.

"Well... Her Majesty will be expecting us and I want to have this dealt with in a week." The boyo tapped his cane, glaring at the dazzled pair.

Mouser joined them sorting through a bouquet of crumpled notes and a stack of reports, humming through the cigarette. Sleight of hand was sending more than a few to where they should be without onlookers noticing them gone.

"One week? Do you not think that is too soon?" The demon considered. There were practical concerns in that timeframe he was not sure human standards could meet. "But if that's the case you can trust me to do all I can." That being said it would be uncouth to look as if there was any issue in meeting the demand.

"This is an order Sebastian. Have her trained to be a proper lady by next week." Unrelenting the boyo set his order in motion, locking a purpose through the contract.

"Yes my lord." Not that the demon needed any more goading to make someone's life miserable.

"Poor thing..." Mouser considered, shoving the papers into her warehouse and producing a notebook from a pocket it had not been in at all. "Clothes, toiletries, shoes..." She stared to make the list, allocating funds, making a quick headcount of what could be considered basic as the group moved to hail a hackney.
Chapter 212

The luxury tailors at Savile row traditionally catered to gentlemanly taste but of course their go-to designer was everything but respectful of that. However she was not out of place either. The novelty of it all dazzled Sieglinde as soon as they helped her up the steps. Plush rugs, elaborate decorations, the latest pieces of fashion on display, mirrors and fabrics. Yet more new things. Even the scents would be foreign for her sheltered nose.

"Thank you for coming in."

"Welcome to Hopkins."

Two women wearing the season's least conforming trends greeted them, posing to showcase the unique style to the confused newcomers.

"It has been a while." Sebastian was unfazed, smiling, attempting to cut right to business. "We are here to order some clothes."

The loud steps of a one-woman stampede began to echo from the 1st floor. A flurry of fabric, measuring tapes, pins and threads burst through the showroom.

"I sense the presence of a young man!" It exclaimed, looking around in a dramatic pause, balancing a bolt of fabric. Meg, Augusta! I wonder who it is."

"As sharp as ever Miss Hopkins." Sebastian sighed and grimaces, ready for the struggle of dealing with their fast-working stylish but oh-so-aggravating fashionista. Mouser chuckled and made a little sneaking motion towards the armchair, settling.

"Well well..." Pinpointing her object of interest Nina Hopkins made a beeline towards the boyo, appraising his physique, ready to start groping, measuring and draping fabric. "Long time no see Earl. It's so rare for you to come for the shop."

"As usual it's refreshing to be ignored to such an extent." Sebastian toed the line between amused and aggravated, watching, stepping a bit away, sneaking towards his covenant as she had done to the chair. Mouser was not in a merciful mood and if he allowed the Young Master to seek any kind of retribution in a clothes-based bid for revenge he was sure she would not be anything close to mildly annoyed and easily pacified by monetary compensation and mild payback.

"What, what?" Senses sharply attuned to her interest Nina exclaimed, detected the newest person, standing in awe at the chaos, standing there gaping. "Why Earl, who is this young lady?" She asked in a sweet tone, approaching, reaching out, prowling around Sieglinde in adoration.

"She has become my guest and I must look after her." The easiest explanation for the events that had befallen them. "We need a full wardrobe as soon as you are able. Use whatever you have at hand as it is needed as soon as possible."

"I see." Hopkins' professional side finally emerged as she appraised the dress the little girl was currently wearing. "Certainly she doesn't seem to have anything for summer. Beside this may be quality work and fabric but it too plain." Sebastian flinched at each stab. Mouser snickered. "It's men's old-fashioned preference that forces a woman's chastity." Dissatisfied she stood and completed her appraisal.

"It was like that because it was an emergency." Pouting the demon justified his tailoring choices
under a bitter breath.

"She is scheduled for an audience with the Queen." Mouser took on his role, explaining the extra part of the request. "A tea party. We need a formal dress and a suit to match for her butler."

"Of course darling!" Casually sweet with the thief she stopped listing how plain the current ensemble was, appraising the young girl more in depth, considering the various angles and nuances of the request. "The debutante's first audience! Cheeks stained pink with nervousness! Yes! I've got it! My imagination is overflowing. A court dress of pure white is the norm but we will make it more! A long petticoat full of silk lace. Satin embroidered train for flair. Feathers threaded through her hair will be gorgeous! Emeralds or diamond accessories?" Without pause she whisked Sieglinde into her lair, leaving orders. "Meg, Augusta take care of the suit measurements!"

"She really is…" the boyo whispered, glad not to be the one under scrutiny.

"Unwavering." Sebastian supplied the word as politely as he could.

"Does your ego need soothing?" Mouser mocked, laughing at his half-snarled grumble of annoyance.

"Excuse this mess." Nina ushered the girl into the work study, clearing the tables, readying the work area. "A lot of choir's dressing orders just came in." Offhandedly she commented, getting the tape, the measure booklet and the sketch pad. "Now… what colour would suit your everyday wear…"

Sieglinde wobbled towards the fashionable pictures that dotted the wall. Women, men, boys, girls... the girls caught her attention, enthralling her in their style, forever captured in that display. Enticed, courage gathered the turned on her crutches and took a deep breath.

"Can I ask a favour?"

"The clothes will be proper, don't you think?" the boyo was growing nervous as time passed and they failed to return.

A bedraggled wolfram had already been thrown back into the main waiting area, his confusion increased by the chaos of having been undressed by two strangers and shoved back into his clothes just as quickly.

"The ladies that are granted an audience with the queen have the social rule of wearing their hair up. It's relief Lady Sullivan's hair is long. Next would be…" Sebastian considered, already planning the lessons, logistics and aesthetics of the presentation.

"Thank you for waiting." Sieglinde's voice came from the stairs, catching everyone's attention, smiling, walking in small steps, wearing a trendy flouncy dress. Frills and bows bounced with each movement. Vanity dictated the help-free entrance.

«Young Lady! What happened to your hair!» Shock brought out the German.

"Now the maid can live her life without worrying about my hair. It's a fresh start!" Sieglinde smiled brightly, playing with her new hair, loving the freedom. "How does it look?"

"Yes, you smell nice." Wolfram attempted to deliver some compliments in a broken tone.
"I think you mean you look nice." Ciel opted for correcting the language instead of commenting.

"But the social rule…" Sebastian complained, horrified.

"Just pull it back with cute pins and a headdress." Mouser answered mercilessly, pinching his arm. 
"You look adorable."

"Amongst young ladies this is the current style. Women's hair must also have freedom." Nina preached proudly.

"Even if it is fashionable you should have respected the social rule to an extent."

"Do we really need to do this Mr stiff?"

"It can't be helped now… Let's return to the manor." The pragmatically charged view over what could not be changed. Also deciding to avoid the confront and return home early influenced a lot of that choice as the boyo stood from his chair, tapping the cane.

"The formal gown will be ready shortly." Nina Hopkins ignored Sebastian as soon as Ciel moved, reassuring them about their orders and adopting a cutesy goodbye, flanked by her posing assistants, keeping the centre stage as they left the store.
"Welcome home everyone." Agni was ready with a warm greeting as soon as they entered the main hall of the townhouse. It was perfectly timed and executed. Not only him but also the other servants seemed to have gathered and made an effort to look and act presentable despite the long journey. Down to the echoed greeting and bow.

Sebastian felt rather smug about the display. It was proof that his training had sunk in.

Mouser sighed and closed the door, glaring at the bright outside for a bit longer before turning and smiling back at Agni. They had been followed. Not really sure why as the townhouse location was fairly commonplace knowledge. Breaking into the wrong house was a very foolish move, anyone would be aware and cautious... But they could be scouting for numbers. Who and why... Again.

"Ciel!" However that proper and civilized greeting from staff to master was cut short by the boisterous annoyance and petulance of Prince Soma stomping down the stairs. Spotting the Young Master, he charged, launching into a tirade, hands on hips, angry face with lowered eyebrows. "You went to Germany?" No doubt he envisioned a leisurely trip, filled with carefree entertainment enjoyed by every noble on a country jaunt. "Why didn't you invite me?!" Confirmed in the next complaint while he puffed his cheeks, moving from anger to huffiness, and looked around, spotting the new addition, calculating for a moment the meaning of the new feminine presence in the room. "Moreover I can't think of why you would bring back a new concubine..." Tilting his head Soma pouted. "True she is a different type from Lizzy..."

Cute enough to be approved. It seemed, culturally speaking, it was not as big of a shock as it would be for, say, the haute monde. A mistress was an accepted fact of gentlemanly life but it was impolite to acknowledge it even if she was accompanying him to the ball instead or along the missus. It made a splash and whispers but not openly. Unless someone was purposely trying to shred reputations. Then it was newspapers, penny dreadful, scandal rags, book clubs and tea salons. And of course the betting books of the gentleman's club.

"Concubine huh?" True to form Sieglinde smirked and leered at the increasingly shocked boyo, unbothered by the need of proper introductions. "Now I get why you brought me." Teasingly she scooted closer. Ciel was torn between fleeing and freezing.

"England does have a rich tradition of mistresses." Mouser joined in, snickering, lighting a cigarette, stretching, relaxing for a moment, leaving the outside watch to glance around, shuddering at the neatly organized mail that had been rerouted to the town house after finding the manor empty. It seemed to be getting worse with every outing. Indeed it reflected well on business but it was a bloody time consuming nuisance. "Be sure to get a house, jewels and anything that can be sold for a quick profit before he gets tired." The thief reviewed Charlotte's advice on the matter, nipping her lower lip, trying to be thorough in the list. Trading money for services was considered crude but sparkly goods were high in demand and a tasteful way to conduct a transaction. Sebastian hid a smile behind his glove while the conversation fed the chaos he had hoped to avoid. It was still entertaining to watch even in dismay. The Young Master either approached an asthma crisis or he was choking in outrage. "And make sure to gather as much secrets as you can in case there is ever a need to..."

Red and about to burst due to extreme embarrassment the boyo managed to bark out his denial as Sieglinde giggled and Wolfram looked absolutely lost.

«Blackmail and memoirs. Great money makers for a discarded mistress. More power over those of
loose-trousers." Mouser whispered in German after a long pause, closing the argument.

Meyrin was blushing, hands covering her cheeks, the raunchy talk always fuel for embarrassment.

Bard chuckled quietly, lighting a cigarette as well, letting go of the formality, stepping back from the brewing squabble.

Finn, bubbly and confused glanced at the group and Young Master, trying to understand if help was required.

"Lady Sullivan is a guest whose presence was requested by the Queen." Sebastian gave the needed information after a sigh. Tanaka had already informed Agni and by the look of things the rooms were prepared. Prince Soma of course would not have noticed. Nor should he.

"Anyway..." Soma was also left slightly bewildered in the back and forth between the ladies but it barely slowed him down. "Ciel's guest is my guest." Shrugging away his lack of understanding the prince turned a bright smile towards Sieglinde, making her eyes widen, a blush colouring her cheeks at the genuine warmth. "Agni let's make a feast." And the easy generosity and of course the pretty looks of the prince helped to her bashful reaction.

"Jo agya." Agni bowed and smiled, showing nothing but eagerness and helpfulness.

It made the mood clear up swiftly.

"Everyone must be tired after such a long trip." Sebastian took the chance for a show of benevolence, addressing and dismissing the servants. They would get in the way with misguided pity. "I will prepare the afternoon tea immediately." He informed Agni, heading towards the kitchen.

"Of course. I'll prepare the parlour then." Smiling the Indian butler took off on the opposite direction, ready to make the room presentable and comfortable. The two of them had no chance to use all the rooms of the place unless they decided to use one each day so most were closed and given a quick sweep weekly and a deep cleaned when their use was required.

"Much obliged." Sebastian smiled politely, appraising the area with a quiet look, stopping before the door that lead deeper to the servant areas. What else...

The group had scattered, their idle chatter still clinging to the air.

Tanaka bowed before taking his leave as well. He had been oddly quiet throughout the event.

The Young Master was on the run, followed by a Soma full of questions. The prince would be hard to evade and likely to corner him when he sought sanctuary in the study.

The guests were looking around, confused. Before he could add a task to the growing list Mouser took over, looking away from the window that kept taking her attention. Beyond the glass they still lurked.

«I'll see you to your rooms» She smiled, arms full of letters, using German for the man's benefit. Wolfram picked up Sieglinde, looking worried yet slightly relieved. The young girl smiled brightly, nodding. "Any questions so far?" The thief switched languages once more as they walked upstairs.

"How often does a gentleman get a concubine?" She picked up on the thread that had been cut short by the flustered boyo, trying to get a sense of why the new acquaintance had assumed such a
thing when spotting her.

"Depends on how deflated the ego, how icy the wife and how much they are trying to..." the thief shrugged and acquiesced giving the overall explanation of why brothels were a thriving business.

"Today's tea is Higgins Earl Grey." As soon as the three of some standing were seated Sebastian began the formalities, bringing in the tea cart. It was quite convenient to do that first, create a baseline for comparison after the polishing. Even if he was already fairly sure of how raw, untrained and uncouth the little lady was. Thirst for knowledge and eagerness to learn could not replaces years of refining, lessons and guidance. "It has been served with orange and almond cake, summer berry tarts, assorted..." The list went on, the spread clearly displayed over the silver of the plates and the white of the cloth. It had to be an enticing trap and from the bright, amazed look plastered over Sieglinde's expression it had been spot on.

Temptation would make failure all the more likely.

"Everything looks so yummy." Language and volume. Of course. The English the former Green Witch had been exposed to so far had been fairly informal if not downright vulgar. That would be unacceptable as well. Yet another thing to work on, Sebastian noted, keeping his list and dismay. "I'll just..." Shuffling on the chair Sieglinde leaned forward, reaching, targeting the cakes with eager hands. Both hands. While leaning over the teacup nearly knocking it from its saucer.

"Stop this instant young lady." The demon spoke sternly, snapping a crop over the grabby hand that had tried to take some sugar from its pot.

The cubes fell.

One plopped rather quietly into the tea.

The second one shattered over the embroidered tablecloth.

The little girl produced an indignant hurt huff, eyes wide, looking up, spooked.

"Young lady." Sebastian smiled harshly, no feeling, just threat, the crop whooshing and cracking, emphasising the sternness. "This is simply unseemly and deplorable." The scolding lilt was back into his smiling voice. The glasses too had returned.

Mouser shuddered and stepped back, almost turning on her heel and leaving just as she walked in with the first wave of paperwork in her arms.

The boyo hid a similar reaction behind an impeccably executed sip of the tea.

Soma openly displayed his distress.

Agni was fairly oblivious to the goings on, pouring for Soma and Ciel. All he noticed was a tutoring tone.

"Your lessons to attend Her Majesty's tea party have already started." So perfectly polite and chillingly smooth as he prowled, approached and assessed. "Yummy and such other expressions are not to be used. It is unacceptable language." One snap of the crop echoing in the air for emphasis.
"You cannot touch sugar with your bare hands." The tip cracked over the tablecloth, muffled but audible, inches away from the porcelain pot. "Either use the proper utensil or wait until questioned by the host or attendant." That part settled he moved on. "It is preposterous to reach out for any of the displayed items before it has been recommended. There is also an order to be considered when sampling a proper tea." He paused for a moment, watching the terrified reaction of his charge. Perhaps it would be best to speak plainly and prevent any misunderstanding, flight of fancy or attempt at weaving his words and goals into something else entirely. "You need to become a proper lady by the end of the week and this tea is quite simply the beginning of your lessons." Also to hasten the process some sort of reward-punishment system should be applied for maximum effect. And what was immediately available was the meticulously prepared display of scrumptious treats. Considering the young lady's quasi-ravenous appetites it would do. "Until you can do so this will have to wait." The cakes were relocated, just out of reach.

The indignant and frightened sob Sieglinde produced summoned her watchdog as it should.

Good to see that the bond was still active and of use.

Inconvenient at the time but he also needed the education.

«The young lady is crying. Return that cake!» The huffing and puffing demand made in a threatening tone could have worked on some. However it was laughably insufficient to even faze Sebastian. The implicit intent of physical harm conveyed by the grip on his shirt did bring out a smile and a change of target.

«Mister Wolfram.» The tone needed to be firm, prim and convey that the other man was being a foolish annoyance and an increasingly dim-witted pest. «If you have any complaints please relay them in English. Then I might, perhaps, listen to you.»

Eyes wide in confusion and eager to help Wolfram left the room, mumbling, in search of a dictionary to defend his lady's wants as eloquently as needed.

"Ciel say something!" Sieglinde pleaded, knowing doom when it approached.

"Yes." Soma took the girl's side, making sure Sebastian was in his line of sight and Agni was in the room. "He is being scary to the young lady."

"If we spoil her she won't improve." With the certainty cemented by Weston the boyo stated. Or just the bred instincts of a slave master. Hard to tell. "Mouser you went through this too?"

The thief had approached the table, placing the armful of documents down along with a pen. She had been watching quietly and cautiously.

"My experience is of little help to her." She decided to share glancing up at the demon's smile and the dark red behind the glasses that were so often the omen of doom. She smiled back. "Mostly because I jumped off a window and landed on a rosebush and Sebastian ended up impaled on the fence the first time we got into that particular scuffle." Sebastian had found out fairly early that keeping food from her was a bad idea. Giving food on the other hand produced favourable results. Also bribery. She liked bribes. As soon as he had learned that her greed had a very wide array of interest it became easier. However it never did lessen his strictness when teaching although it sweetened the rewards as soon as the glasses were off. She smiled for Sieglinde. "How much sugar do you take?" Overruling her covenant she eased the mood with one of the polite options of getting something at the table.

"Do you best." The boyo muttered plainly, taking the cake Sieglinde had been ogling much to her
Dinner brought out new shades of the ordeal that was polite society.

Rules for each and every interaction, each with precise timings and variations. And often a rule was changed without warning simply because the household hosting the soiree decided against it. It was a way for the host to keep being the centre of attention. And application of etiquette before the Queen had to be flawless.

Due to time constraints and the absolute lack of that kind of education Sebastian was being extra-specific, fussy and nit-picky. Although it could be hard to differentiate. From the sitting posture lecture to the way to hold and place the napkin when it crumpled. And the silverware. No stabbing had occurred so far but a few snaps of the crop had been made with precision as the young lady's fingers picked the wrong item. And he felt he was being quite permissive about the conversation topics and flow.

"Don't make noise while drinking soup." The critique started to grow more specific, verbal and frequent as soon as the more instrument-intensive courses were served, presented and portioned. Caution made Sieglinde wait until the others eating signalled that it was safe to do so as well. That caution and pause earned her a bit of approval. It was the way to avoid the host traps and to show respect. "That is more than a mouthful!" After the sloppy spoon-handling there was the butcher-work of the knife and the lack of size awareness. "Be more elegant and take smaller bits!"

Through the fault-finding and skill work they reached the end of the main course.

"Seconds please," Sieglinde felt encouraged by a full stomach and the lack of crop and interference during the last few minutes and asked chirpily, holding out the plate, targeting Agni who grew flustered and stammered an attempt to refuse gently.

"No, Mr Agni." Sebastian would have none of that time-consuming nonsense. "Ladies can't have seconds."

"How did that work out for you?" The boyo asked, stopping his dinner to sign some more paperwork. Anything to get through those hassles quickly.

"I stabbed him with the fish knife and ran away with the roast." Mouser gave him the pen again, head tilting, caught by the question as she returned from filing the previous batch, stepping back, smiling. It had been an in and out of papers but its volume management was being effective. "He found me four hours later and said if I was to stab him I should use the meat knife or the carving knife. Quite approved of the twisting of the flat blade to completely sever the artery and make a bigger hole." Sebastian paused his change of plates, utensils and review, glancing at the thief, eyes softening behind his glasses. She had smiled back then, undaunted. And jabbed her fingers into the still closing wound when he threatened to continue the filibuster about manners and restraint.

"Tomorrow let's eat pork!" Sieglinde took the distraction to turn to the boyo. "I wanna eat pork!" Then finding Agni as the most pliable she tried to place the request.

"Please refrain from ordering other people's staff about the running of the house." Sebastian destroyed that notion as swiftly as it surfaced.
Sadness flooded her face along with tears and trembling lips.

«The young lady…» Surging Wolfram charged in righteous fury to defend. He had been blending in with the wall, understanding little and trying to keep from interfering. There had been shuffling and angry sounds throughout the event.

«In English.» Sebastian asked without breaking his stride, readying the next course, exchanging an amused look with Mouser as she left the room with the paperwork and laughing.

Soma did not dare to champion a gentleman's sensibilities, staring at the plates.

"I'm more restricted here than I was back in the village!" Sieglinde screeched her complaints huffing, bouncing on the armchair, the irritable energy she had been accumulating spilling.

After dinner brought some quiet and peace in the small side room. And on the absence of the now dreaded butler of extreme rules she could finally complain in hopes of gaining support. Unfortunately Mouser was not there either. She seemed able to make them do as she wanted, somehow… now that was a skill Sieglinde felt was truly needed. Even that prince had left with the pale-haired butler. He had been talkative, truly doing his best to make her feel welcomed and yet...

"You can go back if you want." Her grievance was met by a cold, black-hearted logic.

It was technically true she could go back but nothing good awaited her. Choosing the lesser of two evils was what he was saying, aware that it was no choice at all.

"What colour is your blood?!" Shocked and saddened as well as starting to feel the growing frustration mingle with rage the young lady shrieked, arms waving, fists clenched.

"It's red." Utterly uncaring of her plight Ciel answered with a plain fact, looking up from the book that had so far been shielding him from engaging in conversation with his frustrated guest.

"I have had it!" Reaching the breaking point Sieglinde huffed, getting the crutches and standing, waving the long piece of wood towards Ciel, annoyed by the continued lack of response. "I don't need to rely on you!" She shouted.

"Then go." Shrugging Ciel closed the conversation, listening as she walked away, slamming the crutches, the door and her feet, whining loudly in German.

All went quiet, allowing him to return to his book.

Too soon though the door was opened.

Groaning and grimacing he put the book down, already with a scold leaving his mouth.

"What? Don't rely on… Oh?" Sebastian. The demon was smiling politely as ever, placing the after dinner tea on the low table, organizing the cart. "What do you want?" Of course that was not all he was there to do, not with that look.

"At least hear what she has to say." The consideration was not something he had been expecting to hear from that creature. Strange as it was also was coming from nowhere.
"And not be productive because of her grumbling?" Haughtily he answered, hiding the book that was pure entertainment. Mouser was not there to call his bluff. Sebastian made that face of condescending doubt but didn't point it out. "I leave handling her to you. I'm busy." Dismissing what was in essence his responsibility the Young Master reached for the tea and ignored Sebastian in favour of the air around his head.

"Indeed." Indifferent and amused the demon played his role and left. Was it really the time to point out that he could gain more favour if now and again he showed the girl a bit of kind understanding?
"Watching?" Mouser asked her voice low, turning, looking at her hounds. Smoke followed her gestures lazily, curling in the light wind. They nodded, three in unison, one off rhythm. Organizing the rounds of the underworld seemed less taxing than the polite industrial endeavours she had thought as soon as they boyo and guests were in bed and she was free to act on the rest of her duties. Still first came the manor's state and security. As was making sure intruders had been either fully eaten or properly concealed. They did not need the servants to see any of that on arrival, early next morning. Their well-meaning natures could hinder progress. Both here and there.

What the hounds reported was expected.

Not the first time thieves got greedy when the owners were out.

Every trip brought its own set of difficulties on return.

But matching that activity with the events in town and her recent information made the plain and banal statement very suspect.

"And you didn't give chase?" She reached the stairs of the main entrance turning, taking in the sight of the night-shrouded grounds. Finny would need some help with the gardening. Right now she did not see or sense any kind of intruders.

"They never crossed." Thompson murmured, turning his back, facing the way those intruders had been observing, staring like a dutiful pointer. He snarled, mask cracking to show his fangs. Towards the city, Mouser noticed, shaking ash away from the glowing ember at the tip of her cigarette.

"Not even to question those that could know something just because they live nearby?" She asked after a moment. The farmers and villagers under Phantomhive protection. Mouser frowned, puzzled as they shook their heads again. Why ignore any source of information when scouting... Either they knew the terrain or were waiting for the boyo's return. Both begged the question of why. Or how.

"Hidden" Timber continued sitting on the step, growling low. His eyes glowed, glancing around, betraying his frustration. Claws dug into the stone.

"Careful..." Mouser mused, taking a drag. If a gang was small they would indeed prefer not to interact lest they be remembered. Possibilities but little information to pin a motive or to do anything but speculate and investigate. "Have we met them or are they just wiser?"

"Downwind" Canterbury shook his head, recoiling, waiting for punishment. But he soon relaxed. Different mistress. Mouser crossed her arms and sighed, looking down. Smoke clouded her expression.

"So they were aware that we do leave security behind." The thief concluded. Little else could explain the way their recent almost intruders had acted. More careful than average. Cunning. "Any way to identify their nature?" More head shakes. Mouser crushed the spent cigarette. "Maybe the boyo finally rattled the links enough to come full circle." She considered, lighting another, exhaling a long silvery sigh. "Keep a lookout. Any odd movement is to be reported. Double the patrolling." They bowed and dashed away. Mouser grimaced. Something was truly amiss. No scent, no trails, no souls, no faces. "Pluto." The hell hound stopped and approached. "Go to
"Something stirred as we returned." Mouser began, taking her place on the cosy chair, stretching. Charlotte did the same, right across her. It had only been a few hours but most of the broken edges under the streets of London had been smoothed and smothered. A dwindling list of irregularities but none seemed to match the mystery sleuths at the manor grounds. "It was and wasn't in the information you sent. It was not incomplete, mind you, but it seems their actions were purposely generic. Something to merit a mention but no scrutiny." She frowned. "Am I making sense?"

"Yes, I follow." Nodding Charlotte agreed, considering, placing a few more files between them, on the coffee table. She began to sort and update accordingly. True job, hidden job, information broker. She was managing it effortlessly. And it only seemed to be getting easier by the day. "So it seems whoever is trailing the Phantomhive's activities is more familiar with the inner workings of the household than the usual disgruntled dregs." Mouser grunted, nodding, standing, starting to pace, shadow shifting, annoyed, brief smiles staining the walls before simply shifting into darkness. "You are unsettled. That's rare." Charlotte mentioned, stopping, sinking into the armchair, taking a cup of tea, sipping, watching. A slight shift of doubt crossed her features and she scanned the liquid, bemused.

"I feel I am missing something. A curve in the loop." Shaking her head Mouser hissed. "And it nags at me as if it's something I either knew or know and it's buried in my head..." She approached the window, eyes narrowing, reddening, pupils contracting into slits. "You have a spy."

"Yes. It's Bruno. Poor imp thinks he is being subtle. Sitri went back on errands and didn't want to leave me unprotected." Charlotte chuckled, amused. Unnecessary. Then she placed the cup down and levelled a sharp look at her friend. "Talk."

"Ah." Mouser snorted and sighed. "I am... unsettled, as you said."


"Sebastian got hurt. At least superficially. He knows I'm..." Mouser shook her head, scratching the glass, leaving grooves. "He's been making peace with gifts, sex, deals. I took advantage but it does not seem to lessen my unrest." Greed, hoarding, avarice.

"Did you kill the ones responsible?"

"Most of them."

"Most of them?"

"Two are assets."

"What else?"

"Let me recap then... The main goal of the boyo is personal. Revenge against those who destroyed his family and House. But the key is the Phantomhives. Who attacked and with what motive. That is not easy to narrow down and a lot of the attacks still continue from an astounding number of fronts but Sebastian's constant presence and the fact that the boyo is still here means that not one of the chain of events fully satisfy the conditions. Threads may be connected but none of them are too
near the core for it to start to unravel into the last descent. Tanaka knows something. And it's here I feel I'm missing what I once knew. The Watchdog, the Spider, the Undertaker, the underworld. My world. I knew the Phantomhives as the ones to avoid and their duties in my hunting grounds. I knew them on the streets but as nobles? Very vague information. The vulnerable side of the household was protected. Until that."

"Have you questioned the old man?"

"No. It would serve no purpose. Loyalty keeps him quiet. And that loyalty is to the family's name and legacy... unless..."

"Unless he was the leak. Willingly or unwillingly."

"The kidnapping of Lavinia Thorston. Just a maid's loose lips."

"That is one instance, yes."

"Sebastian knows more, if not all, but the contract keeps him silent. He can't actually tell me. Not directly as least. I've been using his recent agreeability to chip away at the secrecy by adding my own loopholes. If and when I can... And as the boyo waits there is no need for active search."

"Why not ask Sitri?"

"At what price?"

"I'll negotiate."

"Thank you then." Mouser sighed and returned to the seat, sulking. "If war is coming soon and the control of the underworld frays so it would be easier to use the black market to supply weapons and experiment on the illegal I would place my money on the Queen as the source. But that would come to Vicent Phantomhive having the backbone to say no to an order, to refuse to deviate from the assigned role, to use the underworld in the service of the monarch instead of leashing us." Claws played on the cup's edge, her eyes still, sifting through memories. Finding them more of a distraction than an aid she shook her head, straightening, moving on. "There are loose ends. Faustus. Undertaker. The first is personal, mine, related only through his hunger and betrayal. The second is part of the main puzzle and it only seems to tangle deeper. It forks and loops and knots. Am I overthinking?"

"Yes."

"Thanks."

"It was indeed a compliment. Does any of that need your attention right away or are you using them as a shield?"

"For what." Dryly she snapped.

"Sebastian." Ah yes. That was the face not many would notice.

"What do you mean?"

"Evee..." Charlotte shook her head. "Here." She gathered the files completed while waiting for Mouser's arrival. "You want to kill something?"

"Yes please." Mouser whispered. "But I see your point."
"Having fun, sorting your head... I want to come too." Charlotte smiled and her eyes shifted to a glowing red, showing her nails as they sharpened and curled.

"You must be so rusty." Mouser laughed, agreeing.

A thief hated to be robbed. Claiming, hoarding and viciously defending what had been taken was deeply ingrained. It meant survival even when Mouser believed that death was cheap and unavoidable. Perception and its shift were at the root of her current issues. And it did make her understand Sebastian's aggravation in the aftermath of the Campania's sinking. When one was significantly harder to kill it was very annoying to be anywhere close to it. Or to be robbed of one's claim.

So death was no longer an inevitability it was something very much avoidable. Just a superficial thing, something akin of a pickpocket. Quickly dealt with and the stolen items retaken...

Sighing she stepped out of the human world, from the gas-lit streets clouded in smoke and mist to her realm. Mouser had claimed that empty hellish space a while back, sneakily setting the borders as wide as she had dared and defending it when others took notice of the new presence. As her reputation grew, killing angels, tricking reapers, claiming hell hounds, bonding with the Coven and allying with Sitri, the pocket plane was left alone allowing her to focus her attention on shaping the emptiness to her taste.

It had started just as storage. So far there were only three defined areas in the abyss. The grand entrance hall had taken a clearer shape after the green witch shenanigans. Black stone floors. Great windows with broken arches crisscrossed by thorny curling shapes that seemed to slither away from it and support a dome steeped in darkness. Glass, gemstones and iron chandeliers rained from it glittering on the end of swaying chains. Twin spiralling stairs framed the biggest window to the void beyond at the end of the hall. They lead to the corridors upstairs. But there was only a plain weapon room, the first spot shaped, and her plush alcove of lush fabrics and glittering jewels. Twisted swirls, asymmetric and tilted windows and stairs and doorways. Thorns and spirals. A hint of chaos, a swat of madness. Black grey and silver. A magpie's nest, a dragon's hoard, a cat's den, a witch's sanctum.

With that last hunt the Underworld had been sorted.

At least until the next one got cocky.

Charlotte had embraced a bit wilder take on the way she fought. Claws out instead of guns instead of just ordering it done.

One last worry lingered.

That discreet pursuit that had been peeking through their return...

Maybe later.

If now had shown nothing they needed to set up traps.

The clocks did not work but Mouser was fairly sure it was deep enough into the night that Sebastian's tasks would be done. Before her he would have to go to the Underworld, replicating the
efforts Mouser had been performing. Her grey claws moved over the glass. Like quicksilver it shifted, thorns and brambles slithering away and showed what she was searching.

Glittering gems and exquisitely crafted jewellery were spread out amidst the household papers on the butler's desk. Someone was still trying to ease her unrest. And it was such an obvious lure too. Chuckling she reached out, stepping back into the mortal plane. Might as well take it.

Sebastian barely reacted when she apparently just manifested, sitting on his desk, legs dangling. Darkness shifted along, carrying trinkets, weaving them in her hair, linking earrings to her collection, placing a necklace around her throat. They were icy cold. The scratch of the pen on the accounting books continued. Attention divided but welcoming nonetheless.

"Here you go." Reports and closed cases appeared around, sorting themselves into their proper places. It took a bit of split focus to do the fine manipulation. "All done." Mouser smiled, confirming. Sebastian placed the pen down and stood. "There seems to be a loose end but we see no tread to pick." She continued as he walked around the desk, first inspecting the files and then turning to her.

"Your work is greatly appreciated." Sebastian whispered, cradling her cheek. There was something else in her eyes, different from the unsettled shards that had haunted her mood. The kiss first ghosted over her lips, a warm breath caressing before the contact. Then he tilted her head, taking it further, growing closer, darkness slithering around them in offerings and teasing. The cold brush of jewels and tendrils played with the heat of their lips. The tip of Mouser's tongue teased the seam of his mouth, nipping. But before she could play he pulled away, taunting, holding her still. "Yet mine moves sluggishly."

Laughter spilled from her. He was slightly jealous. Both proud and offended at being outpaced. Tenderly she mirrored his gesture, taking his face between her hands, pressing forehead to his, new earrings chiming amidst the older ones as she moved.

"Come along." The thief whispered, leaning back, tugging. "This is the start of my place." Mouser stated, letting go, the lingering touch of her hands following his jaw, his throat, claws tearing the fabric as they reached the shirt, brushing the skin underneath. While he could not exactly leave she had stolen him from the human realm. "Most of it is still empty void I claimed..." She turned, smiling slightly, her fangs showing, peeking behind parted grey lips. A seamless shift.

"Impressive." Sebastian praised, watching her move soundlessly on bare feet, tiptoes and claws making no sound. The tension seemed to have melted away. It was rare to truly see her at ease. Grey markings spread, her features matching her nature, gleaming, excited. No other demons occupied the space. Lae was not curled around her wrist. No one else had been invited. "The time and energy you spent in this seemed less than what would be need..."

"Millennia of shortcuts in your head are hard to navigate but when you are so accustomed to cheating finding the ones that work..." She cut his words, waving her hand. The glass became opaque, secure. The pocket plane was sealing itself, keeping him there. Nothing short of a direct summon from the Young Master could pry him from her realm. "Of course one use of this place is to be absolutely undisturbed." And as it was hers it twisted to Mouser's will, both being suddenly right next to the staircase that spiralled upwards. "How's this for progress I can share?" Slyly she asked, walking away, shadow flickering, teasing him to follow.

The den was soft, plush, luxurious and studded with gems. An enormous bed tucked between the decorated walls. Mouser's claws played with her glittering treasures scattered over the fabric, the floor, the carvings as she climbed and curled on the dark covers. Her attention had left him as she appreciated the new bribes, sinking into the bed, taking a few off her body to display.
To combat the distraction, plotting, the demon shrugged off his tailcoat, approaching. The gleam of rings on his fingers as Sebastian slowly pulled the gloves free caught her attention. The freed and bared hand cupped her face. Those red eyes filled with greed and impish playfulness followed the bright gems and polished metal. Black claws reached up, trying to pry them free while caressing and teasing.

Fangs caught the cloth of the second glove as his fingers traced her lips. Tilting her head she tugged it free, eyes shining again at the sight of more. Mouser pulled away, stealing several, smiling, following the bright jewels left on him, watching as Sebastian began to divest his body from the butler’s uniform, alluring, playing with fabric and shiny things, staying in the shadowed edge of the bed.

Mouser's head tilted. The light shifted slightly as her eyes narrowed, allowing her to see more, approaching. Reaching out the thief embraced him, will vanishing the fabric that was in the way, skin to skin. Lips followed the column of his throat, hands slipping downs his sides, slowly, the metal of the rings she was now wearing biting lightly, claws pricking the skin.

"I was irked, irritated." She whispered, reaching his ear, nipping. Sebastian returned the slow caress down her back, finding the spiralling marks, following their paths over her bottom, the curling path to the inner thighs. She arched and mewled, eyes closing. The distraction continued as his mouth covered hers, warm, sweet. But Mouser stopped him, pulling away, snuggling closer, arms around his shoulders, claws near his throat. "Your fault." Huskily she accused, snarling. Then the stern expression faded into a smile. Softly she mouthed his name although bound as he was no sound came out of her grey lips. Still through the covenant the pull was undeniable. "Mine." The harsh whisper was followed by a slow descent of claws over his back.

"Yes." Sebastian answered simply, bowing his head to place a worshiping kiss on the budding mark of his demoness, red eyes closing, fangs showing through the smug smile.

Blinking brought into focus the butler's room in the townhouse.

Sebastian sat up, bare, the claw marks that traced his back fading into whispers of memory.

Claimed and abandoned.

Chuckling the demon stood and walked towards the armoire, gathering the clothes for the day.

Pale hints of dawn were sneaking through the narrow windows.

*Capricious female* he thought fondly, leaving the diamonds that had completed the set of that night’s attempt to keep her appeased hidden amidst the weapons peppering the nightstand, avoiding Lae's attempt to draw blood. At least she seemed to have settled away from the edge of madness once more. It was still flattering to be the cause of those mercurial moods.
"On the occasion of meeting with Her Majesty it is essential that you curtsy." The ballroom was cleared and full of light that morning. Breakfast had been a slight improvement over the previous day's efforts. But it was still a very stiff and clumsy effort. Nowhere near the grace required or expected of a lady. Now they needed to work around the obvious movement impediment. I should be possible to produce an aesthetically believable presentation. "Mister Wolfram please support her." Aid improved a bit of her walking. The man was also grumbling encouragements in German under his breath. "Good." Sebastian considered. "Smaller steps. Three will suffice before you curtsy." The movement of gathering the skirts and dipping was wobbly but the stages and angles were correct. The expression of petrified fear however was appalling. And the attempt to smile pleasantly while offering her greetings was pathetic. "Draw back your chin so the teeth do not show when you smile." The demon instructed. "Again." He requested with a snap of the crop.

Sieglinde went through the motions once more.

The steps were steadier now that less were required and that he had allowed the chaperone to be a cane.

The curtsy was still choppy.

The expression remained terrible.

"How do you do Your Majesty..." She rasped out in accented English, the butchered sounds made worse by the stiff expression.

"Well that will do for now." Sebastian decided. There was more to address. "However the pronunciation was a bit off..." Not only on the greeting and she would be required to converse. How to fix those pronunciation mishaps... "Ah that's it."

The device could seem quite torture-oriented but according to the books it had proved effective in improving eloquence through close monitoring of the tongue's movements and careful correcting of each position and modulation. Granted that it increased the appearance of open-mouthed oafs but...

"Please use the mirror." Sebastian instructed handing out the round hand-mirrors to his much-shocked charges, stepping back. German... the sounds to work on would be... he found the list of what had been grating on the British language. "To help with the pronunciation you should be watching the tongue's movement. If you do it well we shall have a break."

A bit of an explanation and a bit of bribery.

It should produce some results fast with such a trick.

And yet hours of instruction went by with little progress on the rolling of the tongue to create the perfect sound.

Of course that increased the frustration of the girl that was so used to learning fast.

It exploded on a long shriek of curses and a girl stomping away with the crutches adding to the echo of rage.

"Such an amount of profanity..." Sebastian considered, keeping the butler from following. After all
Wolfram needed more training than the Green Witch.

"This is too much." The boyo grumbled, still fighting the paperwork.

Mouser sighed and picked up the finished batch exchanging it for a new one.

"Your own fault boyo." Mercilessly the thief sorted through the papers as he scribbled his signature every time it was required. "We need more people helming the factories, the departments, the stores and the storages. Everything has grown." And the recent and expected greedy schemes they had been weeding out throughout the year thinned the team that had supported and lightened the daily operations.

"Why can't you do it alone?" Ciel hissed, pen scratching aggressively while signing as soon as he read and approved the report. And the next. And the next. And the next... At least he kept making the effort to know what he was signing.

"I can forge your signature. I can run the operations. I can make the decisions. And I would demand appropriate pay for each and every stage." The boyo paled as soon as money was threatened away from his pocket. "Also I can keep up with my current duties as secretary, assassin, bodyguard and thief. Which also have a value to be given and calculated according to my efforts." Some of those were paid in separate as he had become all too aware. Ciel started to look slightly panicked. "I don't sleep. And I'm getting more and more unnatural... going on that it should be easy to handle." She smiled. "Or I can look for people to fill the gaps where we had to erase petty scammers." She suggested caressing the paperwork.

"And for that, part of what I pay them goes to you." Spotting the deceit within the offer the boyo shook his head. Mouser kept smiling sweetly. Ciel sighed heavily, making his choice. "Very well. As long as you are the only one stealing from me."

"Aye, aye boyo." She retrieved some more paperwork, leaving the rest on their proper storage. "About London's Underground..." She paused, listening.

"What's that?" The rampaging sound caught Ciel's attention as well.

The double doors burst open as the curiosity drew him to them, nearly hitting him.

Sieglinde, shrieking and complaining slammed right into Ciel, both tangling and toppling into the ground. The two were left sprawled on the carpet, the fall messy and hard.

"What is it with him?" Sieglinde however was ignoring her position on her back, complaining, slamming small fists on the carpet. The boyo grimaced in pain and complained through gritted teeth. "My helpless mouth has been forcibly spread! What the hell is he determined to put in there?"

"Language skills I'd wager sweetie." Mouser mentioned, sitting down, relieved to find the last of the documents, stretching. Next on the day's schedule was the part of business that should not be heard. And there was another storm stomping fast through the corridors.

"Are you alright?" Ciel asked, groaning, feeling the pain on his knees and arms, dazed.

The girl was also too busy complaining to be aware and tease.

Neither tensed.
"Ciel!" Unannounced as usual Lizzy walked in, smiling and cheerful, happy to have her fiancée back. "I heard you returned from your trip! Let's play…" Her demeanour changed in an instant as she took in the sight. Compromising. And oh so very misleading.

Mouser snickered.

"Ah…" Ciel finally noticed the scene composition, scrambling back, attempting to correct the assumption that was darkening her expression. "Lizzy… no… this is… the story is…" Stammering was not helping his case and he knew it but Ciel was also feeling unable to be coherent under the harsh gaze, the confused witch and the mocking demon at his back.

"Job in Germany you said…" Lizzy hissed low, heels clicking on the floorboards as she approached with heavy steps of doom. "I get it now…" She took a stance and sprang into action, striking, the frills of her skirt fluttering as she descended into a heavy kick aimed at Ciel's terrified lying face.

"Please wait my lady." The strike was stopped by Sebastian's forearm. Mouser was laughing on her couch, uncaring of the curled-up boyo's plight. Sieglinde was just looking up, blinking as she attempted to understand the chain of events. "Granted the Young Master has a bit of explaining to do…" Sebastian stated softly, calming the atmosphere as Lizzy hopped back, straightened and crossed her arms with an uncharacteristic frown.

"I see…" As the tale really did not have that much to it the explanations were smooth, easy and centred around the teapot. "I jumped to a wrong conclusion. How embarrassing." She was back to her usual self, covering blushed cheeks with her hands, head shaking, curls bobbing about.

The confrontation with the tank was less life threatening. Ciel considered, still skittish, survival instincts on edge. The tea cup was untouched and he was keeping all his body parts close to the back of the chair.

Sieglinde was working on her tea manners carefully, keeping an eye on Sebastian. She had been allowed a slice of cake. It was still under suspicion and untouched.

"But Ciel… Sebastian's strict lessons are too cruel." She did not question the need for those when the goal was to meet the queen but she did object to the strict regimen. "It's a wonder Evee didn't abandon him halfway through those."

"I really had no choice girly." Mouser sighed. "He kept dangling pretty things."

"As usual it's because you don't understand a lady's feelings." Scolding done Lizzy turned to Sieglinde "Let's make them fun lessons, full of encouragement."

"I… see…" The boyo wheezed out, trapped.

"That's it." Taking over the Young lady clapped her hands, clearing the air, coming to a decision. "Let's do this together."

"Yes." Soma had been nodding along, having found backup that was immovable. "That sounds fun." He turned his smile to the ladies, reassuringly. "Together lessons will be easier to do."

"Why do I have to do it?! Etiquette has different rules for men and women…" So engrossed he was in his annoyance and outrage he failed to notice the demons laughing behind his back. One very openly. The other with some decency in hiding the grin behind a glove. He no longer had the excuse of the job to hide behind.
"She is your guest and your friend. This goes without saying." Lizzy clipped that notion short and then returned to her sugary self, beaming at the younger and dazzled lady. "I'm so envious. The Queen's tea is every English girl's dream. I hope to be invited as well someday." She giggled. "Together we can work to become lovely ladies."

Not a terrible notion, Sebastian considered. After all she had gone through all those lessons herself albeit at a slower pace that ensure each action got ingrained into her mind and body.

"Together?" Faced with kindness, excitement and a girl whose age was closer to her own Sieglinde was in a state of awe and confusion mixed with hope and curiosity.

"You can call me Lizzy." Kindly girly reintroduced herself, glittery and cute. "Can I call you Sulli?"

"Ah? Yes!" Sieglinde was caught by surprise but nodded, barely managing the words, swept by the enthusiasm.

"Then let's decide what lesson to start with." Lizzy considered picking up the teacup as a lady should and taking her sip, quickly copied by the Young Lady in a burst of sudden improvement.

"Ciel!" Lizzy called out as the boyo wobbled with the trailing training tails attempting to do the path towards the curtsy. "More grace." She snapped and ordered with a strict look that favoured her mother. The boyo grimaced. "Be cuter." She continued with the instructions with a little head shake.

"Well it seems you have retained some residual skill from the viscount visit." Sebastian considered with a chuckle, overseeing the lessons to ensure they still adhered to the needed skills and structure.

"The what?" Mouser asked softly, looking up in suspicion, with the freshly arrived paperwork and late season events and invitations.

"DO NOT DARE!" Ciel snapped, immediately scolded, refocusing on the curtsy, seeding glares as Sebastian leaned towards Mouser, whispering, ignoring what had not been a clear cut order.

Soma was laughing rambunctiously at the sight.

Agni walked in with a smile and a tray of refreshments, placing them on the nearby table, joining the group, waiting for an order or task, encouraging as well.

"I have more skill than Ciel!" Sieglinde was giggling, reassured, sitting on her wheelchair.

"What was that?!" Ciel stopped and barked in anger.

And so the game of reassurance continued as did lessons framed in the female frame of mind.

"I am exhausted." The Young Master complained as he flopped into the bed, jacketless. "What…" He caught Sebastian's expression groaning, as the butler went through the motions of preparing for the night and next day. He said nothing. "Lizzy's scolding was thorough." Starting with the mission and going through the lessons and Sebastian's enforced behaviour. And, of course, not contacting on return. "What was that all about anyway?"

"As I said why don't you become slightly kinder?" Sebastian finally spoke up, head tilted. "It would
have prevented this chain of events."

"I learned all I needed alone." The Young Master mumbled still belly-down on the bed. "As fast and harshly as required."

"Because your sensibility differs from other humans." Sebastian dropped to his knee to be at eye level. "Yet it is cruel to wish that upon others." A demon had to know how the prey worked to achieve success but it was not a game he needed to disclose.

"Now you are the one giving me the harsh treatment?" The Young Master scoffed and glared.

"I don't mean to speak ill of you." Sebastian stated, pulling the Young Master up, untying the eyepatch. "But you should think of other's feelings more if you are of high standing and to become a true leader." It was a sure way to gain the upper hand and keeping it with the cushion of good graces.

"You say that but you don't understand human emotions." The Young Master countered. Sebastian smiled faintly. Humans didn't understand human emotions. The argument was actually rather frail regardless of species. "If I ordered you would do anything, no matter how cruel, like a beast."

"My, that's quite harsh, isn't it." So would any member of the underworld and high society with the right motivation. Often money and status. "But I still intend to be a faithful butler to my master."

"I don't mean to speak ill of you." Ciel echoed the butler's words with a mocking scoff.
Chapter 216

Time was up.

Tomorrow the meeting was to take place and they needed to make sure the guest knew what needed to be done for the best outcome for all those involved.

What training and guidance could accomplish was already spent.

Now they had to sharpen and guide her mind and manipulate her sense of purpose.

"What did you want to discuss?" Sieglinde spoke up as Sebastian and Mouser flanked the boyo on each side of the armchair, door closed. Between them, on the round table of the room most gentleman would use for after dinner gambling and Port, a lamp gave out a soft light. Tensing in face of the solemn mood Wolfram approached his Lady's side, mouth pressed into a thin, stern line of concern. After many fruitless diction attempts he had been instructed to refrain from any kind of conversation attempt when within the palace halls.

"During our escape from the forest you said you wanted to take up the challenge of developing a magical cure." Ciel began, slowly. Her expression changed as well, attention undivided. He paused, eyes narrowing, studying the girl. "Do you still feel this way?"

"Of course I do." Without hesitation Sieglinde reaffirmed her wish, sitting straighter, taking the look of the role she had been bred to perform. A drive to counterbalance the creeping despair that skirted the edge of thought if she remembered the past and deceit. And a reminder of the determination that had allowed her to break free of the forest, to allow her to keep thinking that her existence had a greater purpose. The project that created the Green Witch made it impossible for her to be any other way. A flaw that was exploitable and had been very much intended.

"Very well." Ciel nodded, sighed deeply reclining, allowing some of the tension to seemingly leave him. As if the doubt had been only about her resolve "Then I have a request." At her eager, attention-fuelled nod he continued, heavily, careful, voice low in secrecy. Hardly any need for that. A pair of three was patrolling. "When the Queen receives you tomorrow give her the formula for synthesizing Mustard Gas." Shock crossed the young lady's features as she tried to comprehend the request that simply sounded so different from what they had implied in the journey to the country. "England will then be forced to afford you every courtesy." Ciel continued, framing the request as if it was in her best interest. "After all they already know you are able to producing it." He reasoned carefully with a plain truth.

"But then... my lady would be forced to produce it again... against her will." Wolfram spoke up, careful in his words, downhearted.

"It is Lady Sullivan's burden to decide to use or be used in this situation." Sebastian intervened calmly. "She possesses a world-class talent and information. Those traits and possessions will allow her to negotiate the terms no matter where in the world she travels. Whether or not those assets are used to its full potential is up to her."

"And she is starting with an advantage. Influential connections when you consider the boyo here and that she fell into girlie's good graces. Sometimes you have to balance what you know with who you know and then how to use both." Mouser mentioned in agreement, adding to the information. "England is primed for negotiations and possibly more willing to be generous and complacent." As they already knew what she was able to do and had a fairly clear idea of the potential. "Other
places may not want or need to extend courtesy."

"I won't stop you if you want to become a doctor and live quietly in a remote village with Wolfram. Those are my feelings because you are my friend." Ciel ignored the running commentary even if it was adding to Sieglinde's understanding of the situation and choices laid before her. "Yet, and because I am your friend, I also know this... you will never be able to stop learning. Knowledge. Experiences. The more you gain the more you'll want to apply, to experiment, to create something wondrous"

"Knowledge..." Sieglinde whispered, enticed, understanding and resonating with his logic.

"But as it stands everything requires funding. Money, support, benefactors. It is very much in line with what was being done in Wolfshlutz. That amount of cash flow can only be provided by a nation." Sebastian picked up the thread with yet another halt in their lecture. It was needed to allow that cloud of thought, guilt and facts to flow. "I very much doubt your giant can gather those kinds of funds. Much too clumsy."

"My advantages are my mind and knowledge." Sieglinde repeated, understanding, biting her lower lip, hands clenching into fists, determined.

"That is where it starts." Ciel agreed, letting his tone grow lighter, knowing they had made their wants the only logical choice. "I know we share an interest. Mustard Gas is known and researched. Giving up its formula is an advancement of a few years, a decade at most. Yet you must never disclose information about SuLin."

The original request finally made sense to the girl.

Giving up the lesser secret to protect the great one.

"The lethality of SuLin compared to regular Mustard Gas is incomparable. If Great Britain were to put it to practical use... well... I am sure someone as bright as yourself could surely foresee the outcome of such an event." Sebastian reinforced the notion.

"And to escape only to end up in exactly the same fate but this time with full awareness of truth and consequences would be a very unfortunate turn of events. As your guard dog feared." Mouser played to the self-preservation as Sebastian appealed to the concept of war and horror.

Both tugged at her sense of duty and self.

"SuLin can't save a single person. Not even yourself." Ciel finished it with a plain and bleak statement.

"I understand." Sieglinde Sullivan agreed. The formula's true purpose and potential had horrified her. So it was really not something she was going to argue about. If negotiations provided her with the means to learn she would do all to dazzle with healing and protection. "I will take SuLin's formula, the ultimate spell, to the grave."

Cooperation secured the boyo allowed a bit of actually truthful advice to surface.

"Never forget this. From now on distrust everyone you meet. Every single one of them could be someone who would take advantage of you." Sieglinde was staring, absorbing the information. "That includes me. And in turn you must be prepared to take advantage of them."

"I would not put it past them to actually link it." Mouser mentioned. "Airborne poison that makes
pretty intact corpses…” She tapped the mirror, erasing her reflection to peek at the outside.

"The Aurora society?" Sebastian folded the cloths that had dried stacking them neatly. Her trickery seemed to be expanding its effects. There were still a few tasks to accomplish before he could turn in. The London errands had been effectively taken from his hands. But the number of presences of the household that needed to be treated with care had increased.

"Think about it. SuLin clears a field with an array of grotesque results. Physical, visual and psychological. The corpses are left behind by the fleeing terrified army. Some of them are affected to a lesser degree, hurt, scared, perhaps even maddened. Next battle they face the bloated, shambling comrades that fell to the gas cloud. They are further slaughtered until someone, possibly by accident finds out that they should target the head. Most will die. Some will escape, minds deeply damaged, unsettled. The rumour spreads. Whoever was affected will come back as an unthinking enemy. Maybe after they die. Maybe in their sleep. Maybe as they scream in agony. The army in desperation will kill its own, the survivors that languish in the infirmary, further damaging the morale. Maybe those corpses will not make it to the bizarre doll factory or whatever you want to call the process but they will be either beheaded or destroyed. Or experimented on." She chuckled, animated, clearing the mirror, tilting her head to the reflection. "What do you think?" Mouser murmured, turning to him, claws reaching out, aiding with the laundry.

"A likely concept." Sebastian admitted as they worked. Yet another possible connection. Even if the goal was not the main one or the Undertaker was only marginally involved it was still something that they should be careful of.
Chapter 217

Tea time.

The formal Phantomhive coach headed towards the Royal palace with most of the occupants dressed in formal wear. Sebastian sat outside with the driver, keeping a lookout, concerned about the rumours. Forbidden to smoke near the fancy clothes Mouser twirled an unlit cigarette, fidgeting on her seat, looking out, humming with a faint smile, boot keeping a locked briefcase in place. Sieglinde fluffed her skirts and kept murmuring the required greetings and etiquette staples. Wolfram was trying to occupy as little space as possible, new outfit creaking as he adjusted. The boyo was simply brooding, darkening the overall mood.

Two of the Queen's butlers, The Double Charles, waited in front of the gates, between the gate guards. The coach came to a halt. Security shuffled to keep the guests protected. It was more of a formality but the sight was meant to impress those that had never visited, impart a sense of weight and surveillance.

Sebastian descended first, standing before the group that greeted them, waiting a moment, serene. It was just a way to show they were unimpressed, unintimidated. Then he opened the door for the Young Master, bowing, keeping to the protocol. The Young Lady walked out next, helped by both to keep an air of grace. Also a decree from a lord that she was of station, to be respected. Wolfram was scowling as his frame squeezed itself out of the confined space. No one cared about the awkward man. The guards and butlers were trained on the nobility. Mouser stepped out last, eye narrowed standing near Sebastian, just waiting.

"You must be Lady Sieglinde Sullivan." Phipps stepped forth, impeccable in his uniform, unbothered by the chicken on his shoulder. Of course, it helped that the creature was quiet and looking dignified. "Her Majesty awaits eagerly for this audience."

"We'll show you in." In a bored tone Grey stated, hand on the hilt of his blade. "Follow us." The disappointment continued as he saw no threat nor entertainment.

"Yes." Sieglinde squeaked, back stiff, trembling in her white gown, gripping the bouquet a bit too hard.

"Is she alright..." the boyo mumbled, frustrated, under his breath, waiting as the guards adjusted and the doors to the palace itself were opened.

"The young lady is neurotic." Wolfram grumbled, starting to join in the panic of his mistress.

"You do mean nervous?" Shaking his head the Earl corrected the vocabulary flaw and his frustration. It was time to go in.

Aware of his duty Wolfram quieted and picked up Sieglinde, following as he had been instructed, keeping pace with the smaller figure.

"You're not coming?" Earl Grey asked noticing the two figures in black standing by the coach, unmoving. The doors were about to be closed and the guards returned to their posts. No one else would be allowed in.

"The Young Master has given me as task to fulfil." Sebastian answered with a smile.

"I have duties to address in town." Mouser bared her teeth.
"Well... why would I care." Grey spoke softly with a glare, turning away.

Doors and gates closed heavily.

Mouser lit her cigarette, eyes narrowing.

"I have a feeling someday he won't come out." She mentioned, getting into the coach, stretching on the seats, playing with the smoke.

"Then he'll beg us to come." Sebastian answered, closing the door, tapping the ceiling, allowing the man to return them to the town house, keeping appearances of normality. And the Young Master would also say it was an order, not a plea.

The depths of the ocean had long been known as the place to store secrets. Despite their many advancements over the centuries, naturally brought by curiosity or prodded by entities of various alignments and dispositions that was still one of the places they could not brave.

Sebastian stood at the edge of the jagged cliffs watching the ebb and flow of the waves, drying his clothes. The rift where he had left the SuLin would deter efforts for at least half a century if he estimated the human progress correctly. As it only had to be secure for as long as the Young Master lasted it should be of no further concern. And if the events unfolding in the palace progressed as rehearsed the creator of the weapon would be taken off their hands as well.

Yet still too many loose ends remained.

"Welcome back." Sebastian greeted the group as they walked through the great gates, opening the door of the Phantomhive coach. There was a second vehicle waiting nearby, nondescript but reinforced, staffed by palace people. He had already received an address to deliver the guest's possessions to. The German pair was to be taken to their new residence, fulfilling the agreement reached while partaking in the tradition of tea and conversation.

"Have you followed my orders?" The Young Master asked, giving him the hat and cane, stepping into the plush interior, sparing a quick wave to Sieglinde. It was merely to keep the alliance solid.

"Yes indeed." Sebastian answered with a smile, knowing the question was mostly rhetoric.

"Ah... I'm tired..." Ciel sunk into his seat, stretching a bit, as much as he could in the formal clothes and without looking too bad from the outside. "I want to hurry home and go straight to bed." The demand came as the door closed and the demon took the place opposite of him.

"It is said children who sleep well, grow well." Sebastian mentioned casualty, tapping the top, giving the driver the sight to go. Then he noticed the glare. "Do I have anything in my face?" Befuddled he asked, watching the odd reaction the casual comment caused.

"Nothing" The Young Master grumbled, looking away, returning to a grim silence.
Chapter 218

Sitri's American-style saloon was a novelty balanced on the edge of socially acceptable and the seedy underbelly. A curiosity for the rakes. A beacon for the gamblers even if the law disapproved. One of the many trial-places of various entertainments and vices set by Charlotte as the Reverie was being built, invested on, planned, adjusted, tweaked. That day it had been closed for her. Demon lord and demon friend had been vague in their contacts. Happy and giddy but vague. Not that it was in any way unusual. Just their way of doing business.

Stepping through the swinging doors of the Gold Digger attracted the attention of the whole room. A room full of male demons. Mouser paused, huffing, amused, understanding. The proposals and hints of their letters when not discussing the hunt, the secrets and underworld. The recent trip down under. Figures.

"So these are the scoundrels that want my mark." The thief teased, pulling the outer doors closed so no interruption barged through. There was too much there for a random person to see.

Sitri stood behind the bar, smoking, leaning over it. He had been chatting with an enormous tiger that lapped at a bucket of booze. Said tiger now sat on his hunches and stared at her with big bicolour eyes, mirrored. Amethyst on the outer side, sapphire on the inside. Still mMost had taken on a human guise to mix with the London crowd. Rich and posh, dock workers, Bblack, Chinese, Indian and white, broadening the hunting grounds. Unassumingly human with just a few odd traits to tell them apart. Others had shapes of beasts. A bob-tailed cat with green eyes and blue stripes cutting through the ivory fur. A jaguar-like beast of pink and black pelt with curled copper horns under its ears tapped its claws on the table. A four-eyed cat with orange fur and red swirls hummed a tune, sitting on the player barrel piano, slapping the hand crank when the music stopped. A feline of flame flickered, pale, grey, small, hiding inside the glass of a lamp. Black shadows with golden eyes moved from patch to patch of every darkened area available, peeking, looking more natural. An actual cat, undisturbed by the menagerie, napped on the gambling table half hidden near the small stage.

"I done did some siftin' an' sortin'." Pouring a drink Sirti called Mouser closer. "The young'uns has tails the old'uns has tailcoats. Minus Rufus here." the tiger chuckled like an old man with too much tobacco in his lungs. "They is all kitties 'cause..."

"I am to have a clowder" Smiling Mouser took the glass and downed it. As soon as it touched the wooden surface the jaguar hopped the counter and gripped a bottle, pouring, smiling smugly as others glared. "Thank you, Spots." There was brisling.

The obvious fawning that followed was baffling. Mouser smiled, watching carefully was smiling as they bent over backwards to please her. Except for Rufus. The tiger had taken a more protective stance, sitting next to her, glaring at the young ones and taking a lap from his drink from time to time, growling.

Sitri was chuckling through the drinks, the offering of cigarettes, lighters and trinkets.

"They is eager to get branded." he mentioned, noticing her vigilance.

"You have been wagging your gossipy tongue, haven't you..." Muttering she picked up the booze, scanning it with narrowed eyes before taking a sip. Nothing off about it.

"Ayup. That I has." Carefree he confirmed, stretching, grinning. "You is gonna need a boostin'" He
turned serious the demons stopped vying for her attention, stilling around them, watching.

"Thanks Sitri." Mouser shook her head and took another swig.

"I'll want names later or I'm nicknaming everyone." Taking their loyalty was easy, binding power to her, making sure of a strong link to her clowder. Their eagerness and want for power and security in the tangle of connections she had found herself in helped. It was just a loose link for the time. Information took precedence. The rest would be preparation. "So you found him?"

"I has." Sitri nodded. "You was right 'bout hidin' holes."

Right back at the Trancy Estate.

The chilly night wind made the trees rustle, just an unassuming, semi-tamed forest at the edges of the manor, made for the entertainment of the lord in hunts. Close enough for those who ran away to think they had found safety. Close enough for little boys to come and make deals they knew nothing about lured by the promise of safety, of power, of... anything to ease their existence.

There was no resonance, magical or infernal. It made sense for hunting grounds and it made even more sense for a sanctuary, especially after having it abandoned for a while, presence masked, on the run. It was where Faustus had settled for so long that the pull to return would be strong. Also, if there were old souls, half consumed, left in the webs within... Spider demons according to memories and Sitri tended to spin a complex, in-between realms, hunting, storing, skulking, surviving. Hiding away. And then returning and rebuilding. But he should have waited a century or two...

"Burn it down." Mouser whispered, scanning the trees, finding the locks. A threat, uninvited, an executioner. Of course they resisted. However...

Pluto stepped away from the group of demons following her, growling, taking a deep breath, unleashing hellfire. Under its assault the sigils started to crack and glow. The actual blaze was contained within the wards they had placed around the area that reacted to the blackened rose of the broken contract. No need to draw more attention than absolutely necessary.

The Cerberus stepped forth too and clawed at the weakening markings, ripping the mortal realm away, carving a path into the webbed den.

Lae hissed and curled around Mouser's palm, shifting into blades. The recently acquired clowder, whose collective power was seeping steadily into her followed, approached, eager to prove their worth, to upstage dogs and weapon, to show it to the female, Sitri and the connections found through them.

Crushing the rose as proof of a sanctioned execution stripped the remains of the outer defences and allowed them in through glossy swaying silvery webs.

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