The door clicked shut again, and Ciel was left alone with the nagging familiarity that had plagued him when he'd first read the newspaper article. He remembered the look of terror in the victim's vacant eyes, the same terror he had felt all those years ago during his captivity. Perhaps that was why this case was familiar- it simply reminded him of what he had suffered at the hands of his abductors. He took another deep breath. There was no reason to think there was any more of a connection than that. Still, a sickening ache sat low in his stomach. Why would someone be collecting souls?

Notes

This story basically has every classic sebaciel fic trope all rolled into one big adventure about
Ciel finally getting revenge on the people who killed his parents (my way yo). It's closer to anime season one canon than it is to manga canon. Mostly everything already happened (except for the angel arc/finale) but years have passed and Ciel is nineteen now (the canon splicing is relevant to the plot you'll see why later). Sorry I'll stop now and let you get onto the story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
The Stumbling Waltz

Chapter Summary

Damn him, Ciel thought. How does he always know exactly what to say to make me give in?

Chapter Notes

Words: 6k
Chapter Warnings: A couple passing mentions of gore/murder? Nothing else to worry about.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The night was cold and thin, sharp against the skin of the man who whipped through it, feet pounding frantically on the concrete floor as he fled the shadows that quickly swallowed the very air around him. He heard no sounds of footsteps beyond his own—no trace of someone following, no real proof that anything was after him besides the demons in his own mind. But he knew. He knew they were coming.

The warehouse was a good enough place to hide as any, he’d reasoned; it was so huge, the echoes so vast, that he could lose his pursuers easily within the rows of crates and dark corners. If they listened for him, they might think he had run a different way. There was a path to the back door; an escape route that only he knew—anyone else would get lost in the maze of boxes waiting to be shipped off. He could easily out-navigate any soul on this earth, even in the dark—or so he’d believed. It had never occurred to him that in such terror and haste, he could get just as lost as he’d meant to make those hunting him.

Turning the same corner again for the third time, he finally came to a stand-still. It seemed that running aimlessly was doing him no good. He needed to wait them out—find a place to hide until the threat had passed. He tilted his head up and listened carefully for any sign of movement around him—there was little else than his own harsh breathing. The moonlight oozed in from the broken windows, casting a dim and ominous shade of grey over everything around him. He felt to his right for the canvas cover he knew was there, stretched over an open box, long since emptied by scavenging transients much like himself. The edge of the cover came loose when he pulled on it, and he wasted no time crawling into the tiny space.

Once he had tugged the cover over himself, the last bit of light obscured, he wrapped his arms around himself and waited. He waited for the hairs on the back of his neck to stop standing on end. He waited for the pounding in his ears to quiet. He waited for his instincts to tell him that the threat had passed. He waited. And waited. And his mind still screamed in fear.

Get out, they said, the voices crying to him; the lives he’d taken were trapped within the confines of this box; within the confines of himself.

Get out, get out, leave! Mercy, have mercy!
The enormity of his sins struck him with a heavy blow, taking the wind from his lungs. Though he feared what waited for him outside his hiding place, the primal urge to flee was overwhelming. He flung back the canvas before he could stop himself, a rush of cold air meeting his sweaty skin. He stood, clamoured from the crate and found his bearings- left then right then right once more. He took off in a burst of manic energy, the voices like chains around his ankles, biting at his heels like rabid dogs.

Get out, get out, leave! Mercy, have mercy!

The door was there, around the next bend- he could almost hear the crash of the river on the docks, the sound of his escape competing with the screams of his victims. He rounded the last row of boxes, so sure that those chasing him had not followed-

They were waiting for him.

He halted and nearly fell on his face at the feet of the two shadowy figures that had been chasing him. He looked into their eyes, the eerie moonlight setting their pale faces awash in smugness. The man could feel his throat begin to close up in terror at the mere sight of them.

The master had a look of disdain set in his delicate features- disgusted by his prey. He crossed his arms over his chest with an air of such finality and power that the man had no choice but to shake in his boots. He could not tear his eyes away to look at the even more imposing figure at the master's side- the master commanded such attention that it was as though he had the power to control another's will.

"You are guilty of the following despicable crimes- the kidnapping, murder, and cannibalisation of six children, all of whom were innocent and powerless against your evil whims. Her Majesty does not tolerate the endangerment and harm of her citizens, especially those incapable of defending themselves."

Every word from the master's mouth dripped with malice and incomparable wrath.

"The law set down by her Majesty may deign to imprison you for your crimes, to have you live out the rest of your pathetic life in a filthy prison cell. They may even allow you a quick demise at the end of a noose. I will show no such mercy."

They had cried for mercy. The children had, when he'd snatched them from their beds. When he'd felt the life leave their precious bodies.

Get out, get out, leave! Mercy, have mercy!

"Sebastian," The master spoke, damning the man with a single word and the smallest wave of his hand. It was only then that the man looked to the dark figure guarding the master. His eyes flew wide, and he screamed a wretched scream when sharp red eyes dug into his soul.

The Creature moved toward him, and as it did so, the last remnants of light were siphoned from the warehouse- the only thing to be seen were the bright eyes, glowing steady, filled with dark amusement and all the terrors hell could hold.

The man watched shadows unfurl from around the Creature, darker than even the darkness around him. For a moment it was the flap of wings, but then the wail of wind as sharp feathers began to tear at the man's clothing. He cried out, arms trying to swat away the threat- his hands were cut open by them. He screamed for mercy, just as his victims had- like them, he was shown no reprise from the horror of his death.
The last thing he saw was hell, jagged-edged and gaping open before him, the fires of it undying and cruel. His eyes were torn away, and he fell headlong into the pit, wailing as he did, voice no longer able to reach the living world.

-Earlier-

"No. Absolutely not."

Ciel's pen hovered over the paper- he was mid-sentence in his letter to the Queen; it was supposed to be his progress report on the string of child murders he'd been investigating over the last week. So far, there had been no breaks in the case, he hated to say. Having to tell her Majesty this was bad enough; he did not need Sebastian pestering him about this "end of the social season ball" foolishness. He was nineteen now- far too old to be dictated to by his own servants.

"Sir, as the head of a noble family, you are obligated to attend certain social functions; you know this. The social season comes to a close in three weeks time. The final ball is to be held at the home of the Marques of Scotney, the family of your fiancée. For you not to attend would be a grave insult to Miss Elizabeth, as well as a black mark on the Phantomhive name."

Damn him, Ciel thought. How does he always know exactly what to say to make me give in?

"Who is in charge here? Last I checked, I am the master, and you are the faithful servant. I decide what I will and will not do." Ciel's pride would not allow him to fold so easily; though he knew he couldn't deny anything Sebastian had said.

"You are correct. I am your faithful servant; I will do whatever is in my master's best interest; whether or not he is aware of those interests is another matter entirely." Sebastian bowed slightly, and if Ciel didn't know any better, he'd think he was being mocked. Sebastian smiled when Ciel's eyes met his. "And at this moment, it is in my master's best interest to be reminded of his duties to his name and to his betrothed."

"Fine. I'll go," Ciel grumbled.

"Excellent. Now if you'll excuse me, it is time for me to begin preparations for lunch," Sebastian grinned, obviously pleased with himself. He bowed and swept gracefully from the room.

"Insolent demon," Ciel huffed indignantly, turning back to his letter. He wrote to the Queen (in the greatest stretch of the truth) that he was thoroughly investigating several leads and hoped to have the case closed by the end of the week.

In reality, all he had was a sea of unusable evidence. The bodies were wrapped in unmarked burlap sacks when they were dumped along the riverbanks- the sacks had been tied closed with the most common of ropes in the most common of knots. There were no similarities in the location or timing of the abductions- some of the victims had been found mere hours after they were taken- some were not recovered for days. Even the victims themselves were varied- different social classes, physical attributes, genders- the only thing that was similar about these crimes was the ghastly way in which the children were killed- their hearts had been ripped from their chests. But the fact that the killer had no specific preference for his victims made him nearly impossible to predict- and even more difficult to apprehend. Ciel was beginning to go mad with frustration.

He folded the paper quickly and slipped it into the envelope. As he closed it, there was a sting at the tip of his finger. He flinched, inhaling sharply at the bright spot of blood that blossomed on his pale
Sebastian was there in an instant, holding Ciel's hand in his, *tsking* at the injury as though Ciel was foolish for having sustained it. He had appeared out of thin air, which shouldn't have surprised Ciel- but it did. Sebastian had sensed his master's pain, from all the way across the house- of course. Such was their contract; though Ciel could not remember Sebastian ever being so attentive about such a minor thing.

"Honestly sir, I can't leave you alone for more than a moment without you managing to get into *some* kind of trouble," Sebastian teased- however, he did not sound too amused.

"You say that as if I was captured and beaten," Ciel tried to scoff, but failed. He was having trouble focusing on anything other than the way Sebastian was staring so intently at the paper cut.

"Your blood is a precious thing, my lord, and I would not have it spilled so easily." Sebastian took a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it to the wound, his hands easily dwarfing Ciel's. Ciel found he could not meet Sebastian's eyes, which searched for his.

For a moment, Ciel forgot that he was angry with Sebastian for being right about the ball. He forgot about the dreadful child murders and his inability to catch the killer- for a moment, Ciel existed only in the context of Sebastian's protective instinct and strong but tender hands. It was foreign and strange, this sudden feeling- it had come from nowhere without warning. Ciel didn't understand what it was, and it frightened him. But Sebastian had stopped the bleeding and let go of his hand- and the feeling vanished.

"Are you quite alright, master?" Sebastian asked.

"I'm fine," Ciel nodded curtly. Sebastian gave him a strange look but said nothing.

A knock came at the study door. Sebastian went to answer it, and Ciel sunk back into his chair, taking a deep breath.

"Sir, there is someone here to see you," Tanaka said, stepping into the room. "A detective Abberline. He says the matter is most urgent."

"Show him in, Tanaka," Ciel ordered.

"There's been another one," He told Sebastian as soon as Tanaka had left.

"It would appear so," Sebastian agreed.

A look passed between the two of them; it was one they shared often- a knowing and determined look, conveying thoughts and words that never needed to be spoken. Ciel thought of them as two instruments, perfectly in tune with each other. And yet, there was the strange expression on Sebastian's face a few moments ago that Ciel was at a loss to comprehend.

Tanaka reappeared not a minute later, ushering in the detective. The man was downcast, his shoulders heavy and eyes tired. He didn't even look around himself, to study the size and style of his surroundings. He looked only at Ciel and at the floor.

"Where?" Ciel asked before Abberline had even opened his mouth.

"An inn, sir, near the shipyards. A girl again, seven years old. Taken right from her bed. The mother said she'd only stepped out for a few minutes, and when she came back-" there was no need to finish the sentence.
"How long has the girl been missing?"

"Just over four hours, sir."

"One of the victims was found dead six hours after their abduction. We haven't got much time if we want to find this one alive," Ciel surmised. "Sebastian, let's go." He turned to Abberline, who suddenly seemed out of place in a room with the two of them. "We'll follow you to the crime scene."

"Yes sir," Abberline nodded and hurried out.

Sebastian fetched Ciel's cane and coat, quickly helping him dress as they made their way downstairs.

"I will not let this child die, Sebastian. We're going to stop him this time. That's an order."

"Yes, my lord."

The inn smelled distinctly of old fish and stale smoke; there was also an underlying stench of general filth that made Ciel want to vomit- how anyone would ever allow their establishment to fall into such squalor was beyond him. The siding on the house itself was faded grey and peeling off- there were cracks and shattered panes in the windows- at least in the ones that actually had glass. The front door was missing a hinge. The sign was so weathered that it was unreadable, Though Abberline had told him the inn was called *The Seaman's Refuge*. Ciel chuckled flatly. Refuge indeed.

He had imagined the place to be quite full of sailors and prostitutes- but by the time he and Sebastian had arrived, Abberline's men had cleared the building- the inn's owner and his patrons had been herded to one side of the street by said policemen- everyone in the crowd was a suspect in the crime, of course. However, as soon as Ciel stepped down from his carriage and laid eyes on the anxious and protesting mass, he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that none of them were guilty. The kidnapper was long gone- with his victim. Four hours was plenty of time for him to escape to any manner of places.

Abberline led Ciel and Sebastian into the main room of the inn, past tables with plates of half-eaten food and chairs left at odd angles, abandoned when everyone had been marched outside. Ciel breathed carefully through his mouth, avoiding as much of the putrid stink as he possibly could- he only hoped it wouldn't cling to his clothes and follow him home. The rickety floorboards creaked under his feet, and he briefly worried about falling through- especially when he nearly caught his boot in a hole where one was missing.

"Just up here, my lord," Abberline said, gesturing to a short hallway at the end of which was a particularly steep staircase. Ciel didn't hesitate in beginning the climb- his promise to save the girl burned fresh in his mind. Her certainly wasn't about to be stopped by a set of rotting old stairs.

As they approached the top, a horrible weeping echoed down towards them. Ciel steeled himself- crying mothers weren't his specialty, nor did he find them all that useful in the pursuit of information. Mostly they rambled on about their child, and when they were calm enough to speak coherently, they looked at him with skepticism and even disdain. Ciel understood this, to some extent- how could they possibly trust him, when he was so far removed from their destitution, their plight? It did, however, throw a wrench into the workings of almost every investigation, so his sympathies had long since been spread thin. Better to let Sebastian deal with such things.

"Sebastian, talk to the mother. Find out what she saw. Every last detail." Though I doubt there will be much- if she knew anything really helpful, we'd be chasing the bastard down by now.
"Certainly," Sebastian said, moving off towards the sound of sobbing that carried down the hall.

"Show me where it happened," Ciel told Abberline. Abberline nodded and ushered Ciel into the first door he came to- the one directly across from the top of the stairs- easy access.

"She was taken from here." Abberline pointed to the bed, pushed into the far corner of the tiny attic space. "He came up through the inn, as far as we can figure- there were any number of men in the building at the time, so he must have looked the part of a wandering sailor." Abberline lowered his head in reverence for what had happened. "We don't know how he got out. None of the patrons claim to have seen anything. Surely they would have noticed him carrying the girl- she wouldn't have gone without a fight."

"She might have, if she was already dead," Ciel corrected quietly. "Although, I don't think that's what happened here." He crossed aimlessly through the room, seeing nothing of interest in the way of evidence other than the cover from the bed was missing. When he saw the open window, he went right to it, leaning out and surveying the roofs around and below it. The air was fresher than inside, but still too warm for Ciel's liking. He leaned farther out, trying to get the smell of the inn out of his lungs. It was then that he heard Abberline greet Sebastian, who had apparently just entered the room.

"What did the mother say?" Ciel asked without turning.

"She went downstairs to get food earlier this morning; the child was still asleep, so she left her. She was gone for no more than five minutes, at which point she returned, and the child was gone."

"Did she lock the door when she left to go downstairs?" Ciel asked, the wheels in his mind beginning to turn through the haze of confusion this case had presented thus far.

"I believe so," Sebastian answered, his voice conveying that he shared Ciel's train of thought.

"And tell me, was the window open or closed when she left?"

"Closed." Sebastian was smirking when Ciel turned to face him.

"What does that mean?" Abberline was once again left out.

"It means that this is how he came in and out of the room." Ciel gestured to the open window. "He couldn't have come in through the locked door, so he climbed to the roof of one of the lower houses, and got up here." Ciel looked back at the detective. "He grabbed the girl, probably while she was still asleep, wrapped up in a bed sheet, and climbed back out. He didn't have time to shut the window behind him, so it remained open."

"Alright. So what does that mean?"

"He knew she was up here, in this room. It means he had to have been watching her for some time. We assumed he was choosing his victims through means of opportunity, but it is apparent to me now that he chooses them with purpose. Once we know that purpose, we'll know how to catch him." Ciel didn't miss the amusement in Sebastian's eyes- it was masking pride, something that was strange for Sebastian to feel, Ciel thought. He's proud of me- how sentimental.

"How many children has this man killed so far?"

"Six." Abberline looked more than a little bewildered as he answered the question. "This girl would be the seventh."

"Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live forever, Abberline?" Ciel asked, stealing a
sideways glance at Sebastian. "There are seven days in biblical creation. Seven is always associated with God and thus with eternal life."

Ciel could see the question in Abberline's face before it was asked.

"The hearts. He's consuming the hearts of his victims to gain eternal life. The younger the heart is, the better- young hearts are more pure; thus, he hunts children. They're easy to abduct, and their hearts are the purest of all humankind." Ciel imagined his own heart, twisted and black and broken-marked by one straight from hell. He knew that his heart was in no danger of being hunted- he had been caught already. He looked at Sebastian and saw this thought reflected in glowing red eyes.

Abberline looked rather disturbed at Ciel's thorough knowledge of such garish mythology. He remained silent, looking on at the earl and his enigmatic servant. Ciel had locked eyes with Sebastian, and it was as though they were conversing between themselves- there was a bond there, a bond that Abberline thought must come with years of service. Rarely had he seen a nobleman so attached to his manservant- rarely had he seen such attentiveness and whole-hearted obedience on the part of said servant. He thought that money must mean little to Sebastian- no money could buy such a connection.

"I know where to look for the girl," Ciel said suddenly, not taking his eyes from Sebastian's.

"Where's that, sir?" Abberline wondered. "Do you think she's still alive?"

"I know it." Ciel paced back to the window, looking out over London with an assessing glare. "She's still in this building-probably the cellar or in one of the other rooms. The killer wants us to look everywhere else, the river, the docks- he needs a chance to get away."

"But you just said, Lord Phantomhive, seven days of creation-" Ciel held up a hand to cut Abberline's sentence short.

"Sebastian, search for the girl," Ciel ordered. "On the seventh day, God rested."

Ciel let out a sigh, watching his breath cloud in the cool night air. The steam of it dissipated into the darkness beyond the streetlight under which he stood. Sebastian was not two feet away, perfectly hidden in the shadows. No human would know he was there, but for the lingering glow of his predatory gaze. Ciel of course, could see him rather clearly, even in complete darkness. He had always assumed it was their contract- he could almost always sense Sebastian's presence somewhere in the back of his mind- even when they were apart, there was a thread that connected them. They were tethered to one another- master and servant. Predator and prey.

Sebastian watched Ciel from his place just out of the streetlight's reach- he was once again awed by the beauty of his prey- a soul so broken, and yet so unwilling to give all the way in under pressure- a soul that was willing to perish in eternal flame so that it might have its deepest wish- Sebastian had never heard of a demon ensnaring such a soul.

The type of person willing to sell their soul was not often so truly willing to consent to the contract. Even when given freely, most souls would fear and fight and struggle against their inevitable fate. Ciel had walked, eyes wide open, into the waiting arms of Sebastian's offer. Not once had he second-guessed himself. Not once had he tried to find a way to escape. If Sebastian was any less of a demon, he would have thought it might be a shame to have to devour something so rare- so precious. For now, at least, he was content to have possession of Ciel Phantomhive's soul. The day would come, he knew, that he would finally taste of it.
"We should go," Ciel spoke, the edges of his voice bouncing back at him from the rooftops that surrounded them. They had been waiting outside the inn since this morning- Ciel knew the killer would return. The girl, of course, was alive, just as he had suspected. Sebastian had discovered her, bound and gagged and locked in the inn's cellar. The killer, she said, was an ugly man who had told her no harm would come to her if she stayed absolutely silent. She had obeyed, fearing for her life. None of this interested Ciel at all. What had interested him was the last thing the killer had said to her, just before he had sealed her in. He had told her he would come back for her.

"It's not working, Sebastian," Ciel had said, after the girl had been reunited with her mother. "Man may not achieve eternal life."

"Well, certainly not by devouring the hearts of children," Sebastian scoffed, apparently offended by the killer's lack of regard for the true facts of the occult. "If he had found a way to harvest their souls, perhaps-"

"That's beside the point. He must kill again. But he doesn't want to get caught. There's nothing worse than that in his mind." Ciel had watched as Abberline's men cleared the scene. "He doesn't want to get caught, but he will stop at nothing to achieve his goal; the compulsion is too strong now. He'll return for the girl, most likely tonight, after he believes the authorities are gone. And when he returns, no one will be here. No one but us."

Now, having waited for nearly eight hours, Ciel was not so sure that his own logic matched that of the killer's; which was to say, the killer had no logic. He was a monster- monsters did not think as men did. Ciel looked back into the darkness, right into Sebastian's eyes.

"He's here, sir," Sebastian said, pointing to the alley across the street. A man had just stepped out from it, crossing the street towards the inn- but just as soon as Ciel caught sight of him, he caught sight of Ciel. He froze in fear, and then was off in a flash, running back the way he came. His footsteps slapped hard against the ground, echoing back and giving away his direction.

"Sebastian, stop him." No sooner had Ciel uttered the order than he was swept off his feet and carried off towards the docks. He rolled his eyes at this- even though he was no longer such a frail child- almost as tall as Sebastian, in fact- he still fit easily into Sebastian's arms.

The air was thin and cold as it came fast against Ciel's face. Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes as he squinted against the wind- Sebastian was running full tilt along the rooftops, chasing the killer through street after street towards the warehouses on the waterfront. They were gaining, Ciel thought, when they suddenly slowed down.

"Sebastian, why are we stopping?" Ciel chastised, when Sebastian came to rest on the ridgepole of an old house, crouching like a gargoyle, dark hair thrown into sharp relief by the paleness of his skin and the milky glow of the moon. Ciel didn't allow such a vision to distract him.

"He's gone into that warehouse, my lord." Ciel followed Sebastian's stare to the most decrepit of the buildings not far-off in the distance- the roof was flat and caving in at one corner- the high windows were smashed and boarded up. Ciel thought it a fitting place for such a killer's life to come to an end.

"When we find him, do not hesitate, Sebastian." Ciel pulled the patch from his eye. "Send the monster straight to hell."

"Yes, my lord," Sebastian acquiesced. "You might want to hold onto me; this next jump will be risky."

Ciel wrapped his arms firmly around Sebastian's shoulders, forcing him to re-position his head so that
it nearly rested on Sebastian’s shoulder. He wasn’t surprised to find that it made him feel safe, to be pressed in close to Sebastian like this. As unsurprising as it was, it still made him feel foolish. Thankfully he had no time to dwell on such insecurities– Sebastian launched into the air, and Ciel closed his eyes. For a moment he was weightless, tethered only to Sebastian. They arched across the night sky, closing the distance between themselves and their prey. Ciel suddenly wondered what Sebastian’s life was like before their contract with each other. Did he ever have to go jumping from rooftop to rooftop with his master in his arms? It seemed unlikely. Somehow, it pleased Ciel to be the first.

Sebastian broke into a sprint as soon as his feet touched down. Ciel kept his hands securely joined at the back of Sebastian’s neck, unmotivated to let go until the two of them had come to a full stop on sudden ground. When they reached the opposite end of the warehouse, Sebastian jumped once more, this time from the edge of the roof to the road below. They had come to rest in front of a door, one that had obviously been breached many times. Ciel surmised that this must be a place where the vagabonds and wretches of the river district came to find shelter from London’s more treacherous nights. He had no doubt that this is where their prey would be found.

“You are guilty of the following despicable crimes- the kidnapping, murder, and cannibalisation of six children, all of whom were innocent and powerless against your evil whims. Her Majesty does not tolerate the endangerment and harm of her citizens, especially those incapable of defending themselves.”

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“The law set down by her Majesty may deign to imprison you for your crimes, to have you live out the rest of your pathetic life in a filthy prison cell. They may allow you a quick demise at the end of a noose. I will show no such mercy.”

“Sebastian,” The master spoke, damning the man with a single word and the smallest wave of his hand. It was only then that the dark figure guarding the child finally sprang into motion. Its eyes glowed with horrible pleasure at the wretched scream that was ripped from its victim.

The creature moved toward its prey, and as it did so, the last remnants of light were siphoned from the warehouse- the only thing to be seen were the bright eyes, burning steadily, filled with dark amusement and all the terrors hell could hold.

The master watched shadows unfurl from around the creature, darker than even the darkness around him. For a moment it was the flap of wings, but then the wail of wind as sharp feathers began to tear at the man’s clothing. He grinned at the magnificence and hellish beauty of his demon, the power over it swelling in his chest as the arms as their prey screamed for mercy, just as his victims had- like them, he was shown no reprise from the horror of his death.

“No. Absolutely not.”

Ciel’s hands hovered over the envelope on his desk- he had just finished his report to the Queen, detailing the chase of the culprit and his unfortunate and completely accidental fall into the River Thames, resulting in his death. Ciel was finally through with this frustrating case- he just wanted one afternoon of peace and quiet- but Sebastian insisted on trying to talk him into dance lessons for the ball in a little less than three weeks time.
To be fair, it wasn't the notion of dance lessons in and of themselves that filled Ciel with dread- it was the notion of being taught by Sebastian. He thought of the conversation a few days ago, right in this very room; Ciel's paper cut, and Sebastian's strange tenderness towards him. Ciel was of two minds about the feeling he'd had in that moment- a part of him wanted to feel it again, to understand what it was; a larger part of him feared it. And though fear was a despicable weakness to him in his own mind, he could not yet bring himself to overcome it.

"There's plenty of time to get someone else- you don't have to go out of your way to teach me." Or to torment me, Ciel reasoned. "That is true; but I feel as though you might not put enough effort into your education, should we find someone else to teach you. At least with me, we know you'll be trying to learn, even if only to get to the end of the lesson." Sebastian smirked. "I consider it my personal responsibility to prevent you from embarrassing yourself in front of the nobility."

"That was too bold Sebastian." Ciel scowled, but knew he couldn't win out. "Fine. If you must. But one lesson is all I will tolerate."

"Three," Sebastian countered.

"Two. No more. That's an order." Ciel glowered, throwing as many proverbial knives in Sebastian's direction as he could.

"As you wish." Sebastian assented, though Ciel could see the smugness in his eyes as he crossed the room towards the phonograph.

"Must we do this now?" Ciel rolled his eyes for what felt like the thousandth time that week. Sebastian ignored him, starting the music and turning to face Ciel with an unashamedly amused expression. To Ciel, the swells and dips of violins sounded less like a waltz and more like a funeral march.

"If you would do me the honour." Sebastian held out his hand. Ciel slowly rose from his chair, and though he felt ridiculous to the extreme, he could not deny the mesmerising hold Sebastian had on him- the pull he felt as he approached, and the strange but perfect fit of his hand in Sebastian's.

The feeling he feared rose inside of him once more, but he did not shy away from it- he could not shy from it- it surrounded the two of them in a cloud, and he wondered if Sebastian himself was at all aware of it. He found the courage to meet Sebastian's eyes for a moment, but found none of the previous tenderness there- only that devilish amusement. This caused Ciel's mouth to fall back into a scowl, and he took to staring at his feet as Sebastian began to step in time with the music.

It was disastrous at first, just as Ciel knew it would be. He stumbled through the steps, stepping on Sebastian's toes or kicking him in the ankles. To his credit, Sebastian remained very diplomatic, uttering not so much as a sarcastic word as he tried to guide Ciel into a comfortable rhythm.

"You're too tall," Ciel grumbled, gaze still fixed on the floor. This was no longer a feasible excuse, nor had it been for some time. Ciel barely had to lift his chin to look Sebastian in the eye. Sebastian forced Ciel to do just that, putting a finger to Ciel's jaw and forcing Ciel to meet his gaze.

"Look only at me. Do not think about what your feet are doing, master. Look only at me."

Ciel felt overwhelmingly entranced by Sebastian, and remarkably, he did as he was told. Sebastian's eyes glowed slightly in the hazy afternoon light that streamed through the window- the music lulled Ciel like waves against the shore- and he suddenly found that he was no longer miss-stepping- so
long as he was looking into Sebastian's eyes.

"Excellent work, my lord." Sebastian smiled; a true smile from him was an unusual rarity, and Ciel hadn't realised how much he'd come to cherish them.

"You're the one pulling me around the room." Ciel gave credit where credit was due. Sebastian hummed thoughtfully, and the two of them came to a stop.

"Lead me," Sebastian told him. "Lead me as you were meant to." He moved his hand from Ciel's waist to his shoulder, and Ciel moved his hand from Sebastian's shoulder to his waist. Keeping their eyes fixed on one another, they began to waltz again, the music coming to its crescendo and filling the room.

Ciel marvelled at the difference between following and leading- he was suddenly very aware of his own strength- rather than feeling light, carried on a breeze, he was tethered to the ground, hands having to hold tighter to Sebastian as he controlled every step they took. Leading the dance made him feel as though they were truly a unit- two bodies moving as one, minds and wills perfectly in tune. This thought swelled in his mind, cascaded into his chest and took hold there; though he was not aware of what strength this hold would have, nor what would grow from its seed.

The music died softly, until it was left as a single note, hanging mournfully above their heads. The phonograph went silent with a dull popping noise, which jarred Ciel from his comfortable daze. He did not notice that they had stopped moving until Sebastian stepped away; Ciel nearly expected a twinge of pain as their hands parted. He felt none and was almost disappointed.

"That was an excellent lesson, Sebastian," He said with as much stoicism as was possible. Sebastian nodded, eyes almost betraying a hint of his Cheshire cat smile.

"You danced superbly, master. I will admit that I am somewhat astonished."

"Bastard," Ciel gritted through his teeth, the air of disillusion having completely cleared. He walked back to his desk, expecting Sebastian to give some clever admonishment about Ciel's use of the English language.

"With continued practice, I expect your skill will only improve," Sebastian chose to ignore his master's remark, bowing gracefully. "If you will excuse me, sir, I must see to the dinner preparations."

"Fine." Ciel excused him with a wave of his hand, a common enough gesture, though it felt too dismissive, somehow, considering the dance they had just shared.

The door shut with a loud click, and Ciel's thoughts were once again interrupted. He was glad for this- he had no need for such foolish whims.

Sebastian stood in the dimly lit hallway, staring blankly at the wall across from him. He felt a slow smile spreading over his face, and he paused a moment longer to let his mind steep in the foreign, though not disconcerting, ideas that had taken root in his mind.

*How truly interesting this will be,* he thought, and strode away.

Chapter End Notes
07/30/15:

Soooooo apparently Ciel is a regular Sherlock Holmes when it comes to analyzing crime scenes (*winks at Book of Murder*). And no, the case in this chapter has nothing to do with the main story. I was merely laying the groundwork for the relationship aspects of the fic (exposition and all that jazz). The REAL case starts in the next chapter.

HERE'S THE THING ABOUT THIS STORY: I've been sweating blood and busting my ass to make this fic perfect so PLEASE, if you like it, subscribe, leave kudos (COMMENTS ARE EVEN BETTER), and MOST IMPORTANTLY! TELL PEOPLE ABOUT IT. IF YOU HAVE A TUMBLR OR FRIENDS IN THE FANDOM WHO READ SEBACIEL FIC PLEASE, TELL THEM ABOUT THIS STORY. I know it sounds like I'm a huge attention whore but if you've heard it once you've heard it a thousand times: encouragement is SO IMPORTANT FOR WRITERS. We are small self-deprecating cinnamon rolls who need love or else we dry up like wells in the desert and never finish things for the people who want to read them.
Where the Soul Sits

Chapter Summary

Sebastian did not immediately reply. He simply knelt in front of Ciel and put a hand to the side of his face, as he so often did.

"I had decided that your soul would belong to me, from the first moment I laid eyes on it."

Chapter Notes

Words: 10k
Chapter Warnings: GRAPHIC depictions of GORE. Ciel being a moron and denying his own feelings. Sebastian being a know-it-all. SO. Business as usual, then.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sun stood proudly over the rooftops of London, beating directly down on the crowded streets. Its merciless heat poured down on the shoulders of the city's inhabitants, all of whom seemed trapped in a state of lethargy. Sebastian studied their faces in passing, looking down on them from his perch on the driver's bench. Every face he saw shone with sweat, and Sebastian marvelled, as he often did, at European culture and its tendency to value modesty over practicality when it came to their clothing. It was times like these that Sebastian was grateful for his body's lack of response to extreme atmospheric conditions.

As the carriage drew closer to its destination, hoards of people flooded the streets, crowding around the very place Sebastian was driving to. He could see over the heads of the spectators to where they had been pushed back- in front of one of the row houses, several police officers were lined up, keeping the curiosity of the citizens at bay. Sebastian once again laughed to himself; for such a 'civilised' society, the English never shied away from a gruesome spectacle. They created them, in fact, for their own illicit entertainment. Today, the goal was to find whatever creature had created this one.

When it became apparent that the carriage could no longer continue through the crowd, Sebastian pulled the horses to a halt and stepped down from his seat. The people closest to him immediately backed away, the crime scene only slightly more interesting than the aristocratic carriage parked not twenty yards from it.

"Sebastian, why have we stopped here?" Ciel questioned, gracefully descending into the common rabble when Sebastian held out his hand. The master looked as he always did when juxtaposed against the lower classes- like a young angel, captured in lustrous marble by the great renaissance masters. Sebastian knew from experience that they would have leapt at the chance to have Ciel sit for them. The thought of his impatient charge sitting for a painting almost made him laugh.

"It seems this case has attracted the public's attention, sir," Sebastian explained, closing the carriage door and following Ciel through the crowd. Ciel fixed a disapproving frown on his face and glared at
everyone around him. As soon as he began striding toward the crime scene, the crowd parted with biblical speed- it was as if he were Moses, and the Red sea lay before him.

Ciel knew better than to think that he himself was intimidating enough to cause such a reaction. He could sense Sebastian at his back and knew that the demon was the reason people moved out of the way so quickly. It was as if their basest instincts told them that this was not someone- or something, rather- to be trifled with. He wondered if those instincts might have been present in him if he had met Sebastian under different circumstances. Somehow he doubted it.

This train of thought made him want to look over his shoulder, to see Sebastian and try to ascertain what the demon was thinking. He had never thought about what Sebastian's life had been like before all this- before he came to serve Ciel. How many other contracts had he made? How many other masters had he served? A spark of jealousy flashed behind his eyes. Not that he knew what jealously felt like. He'd never been jealous in his life. Honestly, he was just being absurd- what did it matter if Sebastian had previously been loyal to someone else? All that mattered was who he now belonged to. Still, he wondered...

It occurred to him that he had not replied to Sebastian's comment about the crowd.

"It was highly publicised. I've never seen such a detailed newspaper report on a killing like this before. We shall have to find the source of this information; perhaps the police force has a man with a rather loose mouth."

"Perhaps," Sebastian agreed, as he almost always did. Ciel smiled to himself.

"Ah, Lord Phantomhive," Abberline greeted, standing just outside the door of the small row house where the murders had taken place. "I had begun to wonder when you would come around."

"Where is Sir Arthur?" Ciel inquired. "I wish to speak to him at once."

"He's inside, sir." Abberline gestured to the doorway. "I can take you to him."

Ciel followed him inside without another word, Sebastian on his heels. The house was dark, as all the shutters had been closed to avoid prying eyes. It did little to alleviate the heat- the air was close and warm, so much so that Ciel hoped he wouldn't soon be struggling to breathe.

Past the small sitting room and even smaller kitchen, there was a short staircase that lead to the only bedroom in the residence. There was a still silence around them, broken only by the clacking of their footsteps on the hollow stairs. It was the same quiet reverence that hung over ever murder scene Ciel had ever been too- it was as if the place of someone's death became sacred to those who had remained alive. Ciel found that there was rarely anything sacred about death. Especially murder.

When Ciel entered the bedroom, he was shocked at what he saw.

On almost every occasion that Ciel was called in by the Queen to investigate a murder, there had been some particularly gruesome sort of gore the killer displayed that made one's skin crawl with the knowledge of what sort of evil it would take to commit such a brutal and heinous act.

Here, there was no gore. No brutality. The strangest thing about this crime scene was in fact the lack of apparent violence. And, of course, the fact that the victim was hung from the rafters by his ankles- fully clothed, though his shirt was threadbare and there were several scuffs in the dull leather of his shoes. The leg of his trousers had been rather shoddily patched. All of this was information that Ciel could use- this was why he excelled in these types of inquiries- he was the only one who bothered to look.
Ciel took a deep breath through his nose- there was no smell of death or rotting flesh. That meant the murder was recent. Normally that would be an asset, as any evidence would still be preserved and not degraded by time. But as he looked around the room, Ciel saw no physical evidence to speak of. The room was incredibly neat- every piece of furniture was pushed to the walls- no dust on the bureau or the nightstand. The bed was made with military precision. Sebastian himself could not have done a better job. Ciel opened one of the bureau drawers, to find that the clothes there were folded perfectly, packed in rows and stacked precisely by colour.

"The killer has a compulsion for order. The victim was not this orderly, judging by the way he's dressed and the manner in which the rest of the house is kept," Ciel proclaimed, noting the way the books atop the bureau were arranged in alphabetical order. There were three picture frames, in a row from tallest to shortest. The pictures in them were images of the victim sitting next to a young woman, possibly his wife, along with a photograph of an elderly couple. Parents, maybe.

"His name was Francis Pembroke. He was married," Sir Arthur told him, forgoing a formal greeting. "His wife found the body when she returned from the market earlier this morning. What are you doing here, Phantomhive? I reported to her Majesty this morning- she didn't inform me of her request for your... services." The dismissive tone of his words meant little to Ciel.

"I received a courier from the Queen not an hour ago. Apparently her sentiments about my 'services' regarding this case have changed since she last spoke with you." Ciel still didn't look at sir Arthur, crossing the room to the body and inspecting it closely. "Perhaps she was dissatisfied by this morning's report."

Sebastian cleared his throat, clearly suppressing laughter. Ciel grinned. When he caught Sir Arthur's eye, the man's face was red with embarrassment and frustration.

"What are your thoughts, Phantomhive?" Ciel could have sworn there was a silent 'let's get this over with' added to the end of that question. He slowly knelt before the hanging corpse, removing his own top hat and holding it under his arm. He swiped the back of his gloved hand across his forehead, hair matted to his skin with sweat. He loathed the heat- but this was truly an excellent mystery, and so he could tolerate the weather.

There was a single incision in the man's throat- it began just below his Adam's apple and extended down to the center of his clavicle. It appeared to be deep- there were no ragged edges suggesting hesitation or inexperience. It was clean and medical. The most notable thing about the wound was that there was not a single drop of blood. Anywhere. The body, walls, and floors were clean, and Ciel knew with certainty that the floors had not been scrubbed, despite the killer's predisposition to cleanliness.

"This is the sixth victim, yes?" Ciel already knew the answer. But he could allow Sir Arthur to keep some of his pride, out of common decency. He had been bred with manners, after all.

"Yes," Sir Arthur confirmed. "The victims have been of both sexes. Their ages range from twenty-six to sixty-eight. Some married, some unattached. One of them was a widower. The only thing they had in common was that they were all killed in the same way, and in their own bedrooms, while the other inhabitants of the house were elsewhere."

"Age, sex and marital status are irrelevant to this man," Ciel stated. "These killings are clearly ritualistic."

"D'you mean devil worship?" Abberline asked, astonished and disturbed. "Like that child murderer?"
"Something similar, though it's unclear as to what exactly the killer was after."

"What I want to know is how he was able to kill the victims and not leave a single drop of blood behind. As a matter of fact, there was no blood loss shown in the victims at all. No other wounds or marks suggesting an alternate cause of death. The motive behind these murders is irrelevant if we do not understand the method," Sir Arthur grumbled.

"On the contrary, Sir Arthur," Ciel countered, standing and replacing his hat atop his head. "The motive is everything."

"Well, you're welcome to keep theorising about what kind of demented mind could have done this- I, on the other hand am going to continue looking for evidence that might actually be helpful in tracking down this monster."

"I wish you all the luck in the world." Ciel nodded curtly, cape swirling behind him as he made for the door. His voice was clear and he made no attempt to his sarcasm. "I've seen all I need to. Clearly you gentlemen have it under control. Come, Sebastian."

"Yes sir," Sebastian said, and followed Ciel down the stairs and out into the blinding sunlight.

"Your ability to deceive astounds me, my lord," Sebastian praised, staying close as the two of them began to navigate the way back to the carriage through the blessedly thinning crowd.

"Whatever do you mean, Sebastian?" Ciel wondered coyly.

"Only that you never received a summons from the Queen," Sebastian reminded, prompting Ciel to think of how he had been made aware of this case.

'MYSTERIOUS KILLING SPREE CONTINUES: AUTHORITIES AT THEIR WIT'S END'

'In the past fortnight, London's middle class has seen a rash of tragic murders rivalled only in their bizarreness by those of the notorious Jack The Ripper. Five people have been murdered in London's midtown district, each of them displayed in a strange and macabre way- hung from the ceiling by their ankles after having their throats cut.

Scotland Yard has been on the case since the second body was found, but have made no progress in their quest to apprehend the criminal mastermind behind these ghastly killings. Though no links between the victims have been found, there are reports from neighbours that there were no suspicious events before or after the estimated times of death. This would lead some to believe that he must be one of the common folk- and therefore can strike without drawing attention to himself. While the police struggle to find a clue, the people of London have begun to wonder- is anyone truly safe from this madman?"

"Criminal mastermind. Hardly," Ciel scoffed, sipping his tea while he held the paper with one hand, pages spread out like a map before him. 

Despite the melodramatic article, the story did hold some interest for Ciel. It was indefinably familiar to him, and that same familiarity pulled at his mind, like sharp nails tugging at a loose thread, threatening to unravel memories that had been sewn up and hidden away. So much of his own past was a mystery to him; the truly mysterious thing was why he should think that this case was at all connected to it. This murderer's modus operandi bore no resemblance to that of his parents' killer. It was certainly not the most fascinating subset of moral depravity he had ever seen. In his years of service to the Queen, he had become well versed in much more unique evils than the one this killer presented.
And yet, Ciel felt the gears in his mind beginning to turn- the machine of his intellect rumbled to life, spinning and steaming and driving him onwards to an inevitable collision with the psyche of this madman. Little did he know just how predestined he truly was to hunt this monster. Whatever the circumstances, he was not one to ignore instinct.

"Sebastian. This killer will undoubtedly strike again. I wish to be aware of it the very instant it happens. Do I make myself clear?"

"Transparently, sir."

Now, as he stepped up into his carriage, his instinct was telling him to be wary and cautious; there was most certainly something bigger and darker afoot than just a string of random murders. One look at Sebastian confirmed his suspicions.

"With me, Sebastian," He ordered, sliding into his seat and waiting to speak again until Sebastian had shut the door and settled into the seat across from him.

"You know how he's doing it," Ciel almost accused, pulling the shades on the carriage windows shut. They fell with a hiss, and the small space was bathed in a bluish darkness, murky and dim in the way it obstructed all else but Sebastian's eyes. "You know how he's killing them without spilling a drop of blood."

A recent memory flooded unbidden into his mind.

*Your blood is a precious thing, my lord, and I would not have it spilled so easily.*

"What makes you so certain?" Sebastian asked. Ciel read the words from his lips more than he heard them.

"All the sources of human fears are real. Death, disease, and the creatures that are only supposed to exist in children's storybooks. What I saw in that house defies any *natural* explanation. Which means something supernatural is underway. And I do believe the supernatural is *your* area of expertise."

"Ah, you are correct," Sebastian said, in the same tone he had used when-

*Your blood is a precious thing, my lord, and I would not have it spilled so easily.*

*Affection?* Ciel shook his head, attempting to clear his mind of all things but the conversation at hand.

"I had noticed the specific placement of the victim's neck wound," Sebastian observed. "It was immediately recognisable to me. The place where the murderer slit the skin is the very place where a human being's soul sits within the body. When a soul is harvested, it must be taken from there."

Sebastian reached out, fingertips hovering over Ciel's throat.

"So, a *demon* is responsible for these deaths? Stealing souls that he has no right to?" Somehow, Ciel didn't need to ask if it was Sebastian himself who had done it. He realised it was his belief in Sebastian's faithfulness to him. This prompted him to shake his head once more, as if the thought were a fly buzzing annoyingly around his face. Sebastian, thankfully, didn't seem to notice.

"I am not of that opinion, no." He sighed infinitesimally. "One of the ways demons harvest their prey's soul is a process similar to the one this killer has used- however, demons have no need to cut into the throat, and if they do, they are rarely so careful. For a demon, a simple kiss can draw the soul from the body."

"A kiss?" Ciel startled, head jerking away from Sebastian's fingers, which had come to rest under
Ciel's chin, tilting his face up to force eye contact. Sebastian lowered his hand just as Ciel lowered his eyes. He stared hard at the blue diamond of his ring, turning it on his thumb with nervous tension- he clung desperately to any thought that didn't involve kissing or Sebastian- or kissing Sebastian.

"A kiss," Sebastian confirmed, watching his master's face carefully. There was a fresh blush on Ciel's cheeks. His thoughts were written plainly on his face. Sebastian could not deny that is own thoughts had often taken a turn in the same direction.

"This is why I believe that the murderer is human. Humans cannot simply consume souls as my kind can. Souls can be extracted through rituals, but the purpose of doing so remains unclear to me."

"It's almost a shame that he's only human." Ciel smirked, finally regaining some of his eternally amused demeanour. He didn't feel nearly as confident as he sounded. "This one won't be much of a challenge after all. Not like having to fight a grim reaper." he paused- "could it be a grim reaper?"

"A reaper can only take a soul at the moment of death. It appears to me that these people were alive and well when their souls were taken from their bodies. Death is merely the effect of that cause. When the soul leaves the body, the heart ceases to beat, and thus, there is no blood at the crime scene."

"I wonder if the reapers are onto this case yet," Ciel remarked somewhat distractedly. "Souls being stolen- someone must have noticed."

"We did," Sebastian pointed out.

"I'm sure it's only a matter of time until we run into one of them," Ciel guessed, laughing quietly to himself. "Perhaps you'll get to fight Grell again."

"I'm sure that would be most amusing for you, my lord." Sebastian smiled sweetly, opening the carriage door and stepping out into the street once more. A wave of fresh air hit Ciel's face- it was warm, but not as stifling as it had become inside the carriage. Ciel hadn't noticed until now just how much heat had risen in his neck and face. He took a deep breath, the air feeling like a thick cloud in his lungs.

"Now, I believe we must return to the house," Sebastian was saying. "You have a meeting this afternoon with the Overseer of The Funtom Company's exports to America."

The door clicked shut again, and Ciel was left alone with the nagging familiarity that had plagued him when he'd first read the newspaper article. He remembered the look of terror in the victim's vacant eyes, the same terror he had felt all those years ago during his captivity. Perhaps that was why this case was familiar- it simply reminded him of what he had suffered at the hands of his abductors. He took another deep breath. There was no reason to think there was any more of a connection than that. Still, a sickening ache sat low in his stomach. Why would someone be collecting souls?

The carriage lurched into a crawl. The crowds had begun to clear, once it was obvious that there was nothing all that interesting to be seen. Still, Sebastian had to keep the horses at a maddeningly slow pace to avoid running into the remaining onlookers. As it was when they had entered the house, Sebastian caught the glances of every person around him.

He had always been aware that the beauty of his human form surpassed that of actual mortals. It was intentional, to charm and lull his prey into a false sense of security. As much as he knew he was mesmerising, Sebastian knew he was frightening- frightening in an unnameable way that spoke to the most primitive parts of this already primitive race. None of them would ever know why, but they feared him. Even those who had willingly formed a contract with him- those who would dare to
intentionally summon a demon- even those souls were rank with terror. Some hid their fear well- they fancied themselves worthy of his respect, as though he did not own their soul in the way they owned his services. Some groveled, shaking before him as though they thought he would devour them and be gone without a second thought. In the end, all of them would eventually break under the weight of their fear.

Ciel Phantomhive was the exception.

When Sebastian had been summoned to Ciel's side for the first time, he had expected it to be much like the beginnings of every other contract he had made. A lowly, wretched human, too weak or too lazy to attain what they truly desired- the soul dull, with a pallor of that which was already dead. But when he first saw Ciel's soul, marred yet shining as it was, he caught no glimpse of dread, no sight of horror- this soul called out to him with burning rage and desperation. He would later learn that desperation was far too weak an emotion for this child to ever feel- it was his resolve, his utter lack of regard for anything but his own survival that drove him to make the contract.

Ciel's wish was one that even Sebastian could understand; he had never sympathised with those who wanted wealth or love or any other fleeting thing- but vengeance, survival, power- these were the most primal and intriguing conditions on which Sebastian had ever made a bargain. Entering into this contract, he had known that it would last longer than most of his others had- but he had also known that it would be well worth the prize. He had not known that he would come to have any semblance of true respect for his master, a human who knew nothing but pain and the desire to overcome it.

Here he was, almost ten years later, driving a carriage through the filthy crowded street, without even a genuine complaint to speak of.

Worth the prize indeed.

Ciel's head pounded with the heat as he ascended the steps of his townhouse. He didn't often waste time on things like longing, but at this moment, he did somewhat miss the fresh country air and the pearly shine of rosebushes. The social season allowed him to be closer to his work- he still resented every minute he had to spend so close to so much of England's population. The hall clock struck one, and the sound of it clanged in Ciel's ears as if the bell had gone off inside of his brain.

"Shall I get you something cold to drink, master? Lemonade perhaps?" Sebastian offered, hanging Ciel's hat and cloak by the door. Ciel massaged his temples, feeling his entire brain throb against his skull with every beat of his heart.

"Yes, thank-you. I'll be in the study," He replied automatically, climbing the stairs heavily. His feet seemed like bricks, and he wished it were winter- he would much rather be hot from catching a fever than from stuffy carriage rides and the noon-day sun. He raised a hand to is face, squinting at the light that streamed through every window he passed. He could see dust floating in the air around him, feel every bead of sweat that trickled down his forehead. His head continued to ache.

Once he reached the study, Ciel flung a window open, hoping at least for a breeze to move the stagnant air over his face. There were several documents scattered about his desk- he took one and began to fan himself with it, loosening his tie and falling back into his chair with a huff. His headache suddenly flared and he gasped, pressing a hand strongly to the side of his head, like putting pressure on a wound. It did nothing to alleviate the pain. It felt as though his head had been set ablaze.

A whole world on fire, burning, white heat licking at fragile skin, all-consuming flames decimating
memories, poisonous smoke in tendrils around his throat, choking and drowning him in acrid blackness. Limbs flailing, feet stumbling through darkened hallways to reach, to find-

Mother! Father!

Screaming, chanting in foreign, heathen tongues; more smoke, scented with strange spices and incantations. The same unbearable heat, concentrated on his ribs- the sickening smell of burning flesh and his own cries of pain, for help, help that he doesn't believe will come-

"Master? Are you alright?"

Ciel's head whipped towards the door, so fast that it left a twinge of pain in his neck. Sebastian stood at the door, though it was unclear if he had just entered or of he was on the verge of leaving. Ciel at first wondered why Sebastian was asking, and then realised that he had been staring, eye wide in horror.

"I- I'm fine, Sebastian," He answered quickly, blinking to clear his vision. Once, twice, three times- the pain in his head had vanished, but he still struggled to catch his breath. His skin felt cold, clammy, as it always did when he woke from a nightmare. He hadn't had a nightmare in years, and he was sure he hadn't had one just now- he didn't recall falling asleep. He looked through the open window only to find that the shadow of the house had lengthened. He looked once again at Sebastian- he had an empty glass in his hand- Ciel had drunk a whole glass of lemonade? Time had passed, and he had not been aware of it.

"What time is it?"

"Half past two." The click of Sebastian's pocket watch being snapped shut rung out in the silence that followed. I've lost more than an hour, Ciel thought- what have I missed? "My guest?"

"He should be arriving at any moment, sir." Lines appeared on Sebastian's forehead where his brow was knit with confusion. "Forgive me, but, I believe we had this conversation not ten minutes ago."

Sebastian crossed the room, scrutinising Ciel's face with bewildered concern. "Are you sure there's nothing the matter?"

"I said I'm fine," Ciel lied. "You may go."

"Very well."

As soon as Sebastian had left him, Ciel took several deep breaths, forcing himself to remain calm, though his vision- those memories, were suddenly as fresh as they had been the day they were created. He had tasted the ash, smelled the burning of flesh and paper- though it had seemingly lasted only a few seconds, what was truly unnerving was the fact that so much time had passed- Ciel had obviously been functioning normally- but he recalled none of what he had said or done since he came upstairs when they'd come back from the- Crime scene. Murders. Something had triggered the vivid flashback to his parents' death.

But what?

The meeting with the exports overseer was long and uneventful, as was the rest of that evening. The clear sky was overrun by thunderclouds some time just after dinner. Their many shades of grey
blotted out the sun before it even set- the later hours were gloomy in their lack of light and in their manner.

Ciel spent most of the evening in his armchair by the empty hearth, reading. In the past few months, he had been working his way through the many versions of the story of Faustus- the German folk tale of a philosopher so longing for the power and knowledge of the gods, that he sells his soul to Lucifer himself, with the help of a willing demon, Mephistopheles.

He was currently part way through the playwright Christopher Marlowe's version of events. He had just reached the scene wherein Faustus made his pact with Lucifer. Mephistopheles was the messenger, and Faustus negotiated the terms; he would have twenty-four more years of life on Earth, all the while keeping Mephistopheles as his personal servant. When the twenty-four year period came to a close, Faustus promised to willingly give up his soul to Lucifer, spending the rest of eternity damned in hell. The terms were set- the contract had to be written in Faustus's blood. Faustus cut his arm, but the wound healed itself by some miracle- the words "Homo, fuge!" appeared on his skin. God had sent him a warning.

"Flee, man!"

Faustus did not listen. Instead, he believed that he was already damned and had been left with no place to flee, even if he wanted to. Mephistopheles appeared, reopening the wound- and thus, the oath of Faustus was written, signed and sealed in the man's own blood.

Ciel let the book fall open in his lap, reaching around himself to press his fingertips to the mark on his ribcage. He imagined it burning, the heat of it melting through his clothes. This was not his Faustian mark. Nor was it his divine warning. There had been no divine warning for him- not of the evil he would enter into, nor of the tragedy that would befall him. Only fools need to be reminded of all that which they stand to lose, he thought. His hand drifted to the smooth leather of his eye patch. It was cool to the touch.

"Faustus was given a warning," Ciel commented as Sebastian set a cup of tea down on the table beside the armchair. Ciel's hand fell from his own face. "He ignored it. He considered himself already damned. Foolish; I don't think the consideration of selling one's soul should be nearly as abhorrent to God as the act itself."

"If you had been offered a warning, would you have listened?" Sebastian wondered, challenging Ciel's dismissal of Faustus's motives.

"Would you have let me?" Ciel countered. He smoothed his fingers over the pages of the book, looking up through his lashes to meet Sebastian's eyes. Sebastian laughed softly; it had the same tone as a soft breeze through tall grass, or the soft touch of silk on one's skin. Ciel didn't even chastise himself for these whimsical thoughts as he waited for Sebastian to answer.

"Technically, even I could not have contended with divine intervention, especially when our contract had not yet been sealed."

"Technically," Ciel prodded. Sebastian's careful choice of words was not lost on him. "Practically speaking, however..."

Sebastian did not immediately reply. He simply knelt in front of Ciel and put a hand to the side of his face, as he so often did.

"I had decided that your soul would belong to me, from the first moment I laid eyes on it."
Ciel, of what volition he did not know, tugged at the strings holding his eye patch in place. When it fell, Ciel could feel a low hum somewhere in his mind- a low note, warm and peaceful. He knew this to be the mark of the contract, reacting in its close proximity to the sigil on the back of Sebastian's gloved hand. It was a pleasant feeling, one that Ciel must have felt before, though he could not remember it. He thought it to be reminiscent of the trance-like state he had fallen into when he had danced with Sebastian. That seemed so long ago. This, however, was augmented by the exposure of Ciel's mark.

_The more visible the mark, the stronger the bond between the predator and his prey._

"I suppose we'll never know what would have happened had the side of heaven tried to take you." The sentence seemed incomplete without the words 'from me'.

"Heaven allowed my parents to be killed. Heaven allowed my home to be burned and my body to be broken. Heaven could not possibly have any right to my soul as well." Something akin to bitterness tainted Ciel's voice. "I believe that I was damned _long_ before I summoned you, Sebastian." This idea had always been a comfort to Ciel. Things were only as they were meant to be.

"You should not be so quick to disbelieve the possibility of second chances." Sebastian was teasing now, though something in his voice rung true. "Did Goethe's telling of Faustus's legend not include redemption? Faustus was spared his eternal suffering."

"His lover, an innocent girl, was killed and sent to heaven. She fell at the feet of God and pled for her beloved's freedom from the terrors of hell. Because of her purity, God saw fit to grant her wish." Ciel rolled his eyes. "I doubt that even the mother of God herself could convince him to intercede on my behalf now."

"And I doubt that even God himself could keep me from defending my claim." Sebastian's hand moved from Ciel's face, and he stood, smiling his best devil's smile. The humming in Ciel's ears lingered for a moment, and the trance lifted. Ciel felt the tendrils of it slip from him, even as part of him attempted to hold onto it.

"You should drink your tea, my lord, before it gets cold. I must prepare your bath."

Sebastian had long since gone from the room, but Ciel was too engrossed in thought to notice. He stared blankly at the pages of his book, reading the same sentence over and over, though he couldn't have said what the words were, had someone asked. All of this suddenly seemed very trivial to him; old books and cups of tea and evening baths. They all paled in comparison to the unfathomable scale of eternity. Ciel supposed that any other person, when faced with their own insignificance, would panic and try to escape the eternity to which they were bound. Ciel felt no panic; only a small sense of satisfaction, knowing that he had at least chosen his own fate, such as it was.

His mind once again settled on the question of Sebastian's past. He couldn't understand why he was so fixated on it now, after all the years Sebastian had been with him. He wondered again, just as he had earlier, how many other souls Sebastian had taken, how many of those he had sworn fealty to, _until the very end_. Earlier, he had dismissed this train of thought as one of childish jealousy. Tonight, however, he was determined to know the truth, whatever it may be.

"Sebastian, you have served other masters before me, yes?"

It was not much later that Ciel presented the question. He stood still on the cold tile floor after his bath while Sebastian painstakingly dried him off.

"Yes," Sebastian confirmed.
Ciel had hoped for more than a one-word reply. He sighed. It seemed that he would have to try hard to get the information he wanted.

"How many have there been?" This inquiry was muffled by the thick towel Sebastian had draped over Ciel's head and shoulders. He could feel the shape of Sebastian's hands as they ruffled his hair dry. Ciel's breath was hot beneath the canopy that had been created, and the white down was impossibly soft on his face, as it always was. Ciel thought of his bed and yawned slightly.

"Dozens upon dozens." Sebastian said this in a completely casual tone, as if everyone on Earth had, in effect, lived a myriad of lifetimes in the span of several centuries. Ciel once again found himself with more questions than he would have liked.

"And do you remember them? Their names, their lives, the things they asked of you in return for their souls?" The towel was pulled away, and Ciel felt the cool slip of his nightshirt where Sebastian pulled it over his arms.

"Forgive me any impertinence, my lord," Sebastian apologised, "but you've never once wanted to know anything about my existence prior to our contract. Is there a specific reason for this sudden curiosity?"

"Does inane curiosity require a definite motive?" Ciel met Sebastian's eyes and hoped he would not give himself away. Sebastian's remark of 'dozens upon dozens' had caused Ciel's inexplicable jealousy to rear its ugly head. He, of course, would sooner die than ever admit to feeling anything akin to jealousy where Sebastian was concerned.

"Why, sir, I do believe you're bluffing." Sebastian noted the blood that had risen in his master's cheeks. As much as he knew Ciel's hatred for it, Sebastian had always found that blush to be endearing. It reminded him how truly human is master was, despite Ciel's intolerance of his own perceived weakness.

"You cannot lie to me, Sebastian." Ciel frowned petulantly. "I asked you a question."

"Three questions," Sebastian corrected Ciel gently, buttoning the last button on his nightshirt. Ciel's blush became worse, but he glowered as best he could despite the redness of his face.

"Very well. I will indulge you," Sebastian conceded, following Ciel into the bedroom. He pulled back the covers, and Ciel slipped beneath them, sitting cross legged and waiting for Sebastian to continue.

"It is true that I have taken countless forms over the course of my lifetime. It is also true that my lifetime exceeds most of human history. I have witnessed the rise and fall of empires. I have participated in or been privy to every depravity known to man. And I have served more masters than I care to remember."

"Care to remember?"

"After centuries of this, some more meaningless contracts have simply faded from my memory; some disgusted me so that I put them out of my mind as soon as they ended. The few that I truly remember are the ones whose souls were the most- I'm not sure there is a word in all of human language that can accurately describe the power of such souls, or the bond that they form between master and servant. Those souls are the ones that are truly impossible to forget."

Ciel curled his knees up to his chest, heart sinking in a way that even he, with his legendary stubbornness, could not fight. He now rued his own curiosity; the same jealousy from before was still
present, but it had been covered with a dull ache of disappointment that fell over his mind like sleep. His eyes shifted downward- he blinked quickly and clenched his fists against his knees- he could not bear to see the look of Sebastian's face.

What Ciel could not know was that when Sebastian spoke of indescribable bonds, he was referring to the one that he and Ciel had shared for over half a decade. Sebastian watched his master's eyes shift listlessly from left to right, forcing themselves to avoid Sebastian altogether.

Sebastian considered telling Ciel the full truth of it, but there was a sense of foreboding about these murders, and he knew that it simply wasn't the right time for anything to distract Ciel from them. He doubted that Ciel even completely understood what he was feeling as of yet. Humans weren't really all that slow to feel- they were merely hindered by their consciences and inhibitions. Sebastian had always found that it was their desires which won out in the end. He had lived by capitalizing on this fact. It was only a matter of time.

"You seem tired, sir. You should sleep."

"Yes," Ciel replied quietly. he slid deeper beneath the sheets, burying his head into the deep softness of his pillow.

Despite the lingering heaviness in his chest, he was asleep almost instantly.

Sebastian stood over him for longer than was strictly necessary; only when Ciel was asleep could Sebastian stare for as long as he wanted without attracting attention to himself. It was the only time Ciel looked truly content, his face the perfect picture of serenity and innocence. For a demon, being able to look on such a face so often was a rare privilege. It reminded him of the paradise he had been cast from, and the purity he could only hope to corrupt, but not achieve. Some would find it torturous or tempting, to look upon that which one could never have. Sebastian found it almost peaceful.

Tempting as well- but what kind of butler would he be if he had no self-control?

The following morning started out as uneventfully as its predecessor. To Ciel, this meant that something interesting was bound to happen at any moment. It was almost eerie, the easy silence to which he had awoken- after his apparent lost time yesterday afternoon, he had gone to bed almost expecting some sort of nightmare to keep him from restful sleep; instead he had not been disturbed once by the sound of his own screams. That worried him. So when the morning proceeded without incident, he began to prepare for the worst. He spent most of this time mulling over the facts of the case, managing to make it all the way through breakfast without once dwelling on the previous night's conversation with Sebastian. But once he had, it was impossible to set his thoughts on another course.

Ciel wasn't a fool. he knew that Sebastian must be able to read his face and determine his thoughts with little effort. He almost wondered what Sebastian had seen- Ciel's feelings towards Sebastian had become a mystery, even (or perhaps especially) to Ciel himself. What he had yet to understand was that the nature of these feelings was not actually unknown- it was only shifting, evolving, as everything was prone to do.

He, unaware of the changes taking place inside of himself, had just taken the last sip of his breakfast tea when Finny burst madly into the room, red in the face and gasping for air. It was clear that he had just run a great distance at high speed- it would have taken a very great distance or very high speed to make him so out of breath, given his excessive strength and stamina. Ciel was less startled by this sudden appearance than he was by the abject terror in Finny's eyes.
"I've just come from the marketplace," he gasped, his words becoming mere exhalations. "I heard from one of the shopkeepers- there've been two more murders!"

"Two?" Ciel stood, knocking his empty tea cup into a frantic spin across the table. "Two more victims, and Scotland Yard hasn't come to me?"

Ciel's indignation was directed at no one in particular, though he did shoot a passing glance at Sebastian as he made for the door.

"I told them I wanted to be kept informed about the details of this case- Abberline should have come here the moment the bodies were found."

"Perhaps your dishonesty at the crime scene yesterday raised some questions as to your jurisdiction concerning this investigation," Sebastian suggested.

"Are you insinuating that Sir Arthur called my bluff?" Ciel blew past Finny and stomped down the hallway towards the foyer, footsteps echoing throughout the house, warning anyone within its walls to take cover.

"It would seem so." Sebastian, for once, did not seem amused at Ciel's apparent misfortune. He looked as though he had been personally offended and was keeping a tight leash on his temper. Ciel once again wondered what Sebastian must think of petty human emotions. He was beginning to resign himself to the idea of never really knowing what Sebastian thought about anything.

"It's just-" he paused while Sebastian helped him into his cloak- "this doesn't often happen. In fact, it never happens."

"I believe this would be the first time," Sebastian agreed, managing not to smile; they both thought of what had happened the night before.

Why, sir, I do believe you're bluffing.

"Well, it doesn't happen often," Ciel muttered. He looked over his shoulder when Finny entered the foyer.

"Where exactly did these killings take place?" He asked.

"On the South end of Water Street, sir." Finny nodded, obviously sure of himself.

"That's right on the doorstep of the opium dealers' territory," Ciel noted, pleased with this turn of events. "Close enough to the London underworld. I would say that's my jurisdiction, wouldn't you, Sebastian?"

"I would indeed, my lord."

"Terribly sorry, Lord Phantomhive. I cannot allow you to pass. Sir Arthur's orders."

Ciel felt the sudden urge to break something. His knuckles went white around the handle of his cane as he tried to keep himself composed. He trained his eyes on the faded grey house in front of him. It sat on the corner of two streets, one of which could arguably be the most crime-ridden in all of London. This part of the city belonged to him just as much as it did to Lau and his associates.

"Let me pass, Abberline." Ciel could feel the eyes of the gathering crowd, drawn to his raised voice
and out-of-place appearance. He hated to make a scene in front of so many people, but if that's what it would take to gain entrance to the crime scene, then so be it.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir." Abberline stood his ground, blocking Ciel's view of the open doorway.

Ciel could see that the man looked intimidated, shaken, and Ciel belatedly realised that this fear was not generated by Ciel's presence. Something else had frightened him. This only made Ciel more eager to get inside that house. He rolled his eyes dramatically at Abberline's pathetic attempt at authority and strutted boldly by him, their shoulders brushing as he passed. He didn't notice Abberline grabbing for his arm, nor did he feel it. He only turned around when Abberline made a surprised noise- Sebastian had stepped between Ciel and the detective, holding his wrist in what must have been a tight grip for the expression that had crossed Abberline's face.

"Sir Arthur has his guard dogs," Ciel quipped, "he would do well to be reminded that I too have mine."

Abberline looked back at Sebastian, who grinned his most terrifying grin. Sebastian let go of Abberline's wrist and Abberline stumbled back, stammering useless protests as Ciel proceeded inside the house.

He entered the sitting room and stopped. He could not have been prepared for what was within it.

The report of two victims was correct, though it must have taken some time to ascertain that fact- the bodies were strewn haplessly across the room, in more pieces than anyone would care to count. The walls had once been white, but were now splattered with blood, thick and grotesque as it dripped downward. The floor was flooded with it; another step and Ciel would have slipped and fallen. Torn globules of flesh lay before him in no discernible pattern, some still clinging to the bone where others were carved away completely. A woman's head lay inches from Ciel's feet, her mouth gaping and eyes left wide open in terror at the last thing they had seen. Most of a man's torso was farther across the room- the side of his skull had been smashed in, the grey matter of his brain in a pool around it. There wasn't much of a face left to see.

Ciel immediately backed from the doorway, falling to his knees. His stomach churned and he wretched, the sour taste of bile in his mouth a bitter twin to the acrid stink of death and decay in the air around him. His eyes were clouded with it, and his head ached. For a horrifying moment, he thought he might faint, or be ripped from his consciousness, only to be dropped back into it sometime later, without memory or awareness of it ever happening.

"Master, please take deep breaths. Through your mouth."

Sebastian's hand was firm at Ciel's back, confidently talking Ciel through his panic. Ciel could feel Sebastian's body shielding him from the nightmares in this house, and from the prying eyes of Sir Arthur, who had come to witness Ciel's humiliating reaction to the carnage.

"I should have had Abberline warn you about this one. Scenes like this are no place for a boy, even one who claims to be the scourge of the underworld."

Ciel scowled, knowing that Sebastian's face must be a mirror of his own. He seemed to recall Sir Arthur saying something very similar to him at the scene of one of Jack the Ripper's victims. That was an entire lifetime away from this place. Even Mary Kelly's rented room, painted in her bright red blood, had not succeeded in disturbing him as this did. Mary Kelly's room had been shrouded in darkness. This evil should never have seen the light of day.
Ciel had been a boy then, but he was a boy no longer, no matter how woefully unprepared he had been for the horrors in this house. Sir Arthur, however, didn't see it that way. Ciel could live to be forty, and Sir Arthur would still refer to him as a child, any chance he got.

"There is no shame in such disgust." Sebastian stood, rising to his full height as he stepped towards Sir Arthur. From Ciel's vantage point, Sebastian towered over everything. Sir Arthur was nothing compared to him.

"I should think that any man would be sickened at the horrors within that room," Sebastian continued. Ciel now noticed the handkerchief that Sir Arthur clutched over his mouth and nose. Ciel scoffed quietly, but began to cough. Sebastian returned to his side, encouraging him to sit back and take more deep breaths.


"What kind of butler would I be if I allowed my composure to waver when my master requires my assistance?"

Sir Arthur remained silent on this matter. Ciel favoured smirking over scoffing this time, should another coughing fit ensue.

"This killer's rage has escalated-" Sir Arthur finally spoke- "with this level of violence, and three victims in two days-"

"You believe this is the same killer?" Ciel's voice was only a rasp, but the derision in it was palpable nonetheless. "He would have looked at this scene and responded just as I did."

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"There was no order to these killings!" Ciel exclaimed. He stood, and the room spun, Sebastian held him steady by the elbow. Ciel felt the same edge to his touch that he had felt three times now- this feeling was officially familiar, even if he had yet to know what it was.

"Order?"

"Order. At the Pembroke house, and I suspect the others also, the books were stacked by size. The bed had been freshly made. The body was in pristine condition, save the incision in his throat, which was made with surgical precision. There's barely anything left of the bodies here. The blood is two inches deep on the floor." Ciel choked on his words, the bile rising back up in his throat. He held it down.

"Be that as it may, I am still of the opinion that this is the work of the same killer. The victims and location fit his pattern."

"He has no pattern. He only has his ritual. The man who killed these two people may have been trying to recreate that ritual, based on what he read in the papers, but it is a far cry from the original work. Whoever did this is not to blame for the six other murders in the past two weeks."

"Regardless of your insight, I cannot have you interloping on my crime scenes without invitation from higher authority," Sir Arthur replied firmly. It would have been more imposing had he not still had his handkerchief to his face like a fretting woman. Ciel grimaced.

"Fine- when more innocent lives are lost, I will not have to be held responsible for your incompetence."
Ciel stepped forward, closing his eyes to block out the gore until Sebastian had guided him outside. The heavy city smell seemed like fresh air compared to the stench inside the house.

"What is our next move, sir?"

They had come to the next cross street, far from the edge of the crowd. Ciel's knees no longer shook, but Sebastian's arm held fast around him. Where he formerly would have pushed it off, Ciel allowed it to remain, telling himself that he was still unsure if he had the strength to stand on his own. He heard Sebastian's question, but did not reply.

Someone was shouting in the street- a mother calling for her child. There was nothing frantic or shrill in her voice, but it split through Ciel's skull like an ax blade. He cried out in pain, legs buckling, only vaguely aware of Sebastian catching his full weight- he floated for a moment, and then felt himself plummet.

The bars of the cage are cold against his back, and despite the close and creeping darkness, a constant screaming echoes outward through a much larger, cavernous space. He presses the heels of his hands hard to his ears, curling in on himself to try and escape the shrieks of those around him. He has yet to become accustomed to the filth that sticks thickly to the inside of his mouth. The sound of tearing flesh is not yet one he can recognise over cries for mercy. He had woken up here some indeterminable amount of time ago, scared and in the dark. He had known almost instantly that he was not alone- but aside from feeling the chill of cold, dank air, he knew nothing of his surroundings. He had screamed until his throat was raw, and from then on ceased to make any sound at all.

Now, he hardly feels his own heavy breaths, or the beating of his heart as it races within his chest. His fingers have gone numb- his feet are bruised and aching. He does not know where he is. Though he remembers nothing of the fire, of his home falling into ashes and dust, he knows he will never see his parents again. Tears burn the corners of his eyes, running into the corners of his mouth- he can taste the salt of them, and something else- metal, sharp and sour. He will grow to know this taste as well. These tears will dry eventually- from then on, tears will serve him no purpose, and so he will not allow them.

Sebastian watched Ciel's face; closed-eyed and contorted in agony. Ciel had collapsed, completely limp in Sebastian's arms. Sebastian's immediate thought was to carry him, but that may attract the attention of anyone in the immediate area, as would shouting for his master to wake up. Sebastian had no choice but to set Ciel down against the nearest wall, his head falling to the side. Sebastian held Ciel's face in his hands, turning it upwards to the sun.

"Master, wake up," he whispered harshly.

Ciel backs himself as far into the corner of the cage as he can, entire body wracked by tremors of fear and weakness. A hellish voice hisses in his ear, somewhere close, as though the mouth that forms the indiscernible words is biting into his skin. His head feels like it is in a vice, and some invisible hand winds the crank, tighter, tighter, until his skull might collapse in on itself. The voice hisses louder in his ear. Still, he cannot understand the words.

"Master, please. Wake up," Sebastian spoke aloud now, shocking himself at the abundant concern in his voice. Ciel did not stir.

"Ciel," Sebastian all but ordered. "Wake up."

Ciel jolted against the prison bars when the voice began to screech his name.
Ciel gasped, hands flying out to grab at the first things they found—Sebastian's shoulders, as it turned out. His fingers gripped the soft fabric of Sebastian's coat sleeves—this was tangible, and real, he assured himself. But his hallucination had seemed real as well—recreate straight from memory.

"Sir? Sir, please, look at me," Sebastian coaxed, one hand softly stroking Ciel's cheek, offering what comfort he could through the touch.

Ciel's blue eye was wild, slipping in and out of focus, until it rested on Sebastian's face. He stilled.

"Se-Sebastian, I was—"

"Shhh. There is no need to explain. You were recalling your time in captivity, yes?"

"How did you—"

"Intuition," Sebastian informed him. "You witnessed such a brutal display of death today, and it affected you in a way that such things never have. What other explanation could there have been?"

"It's this case; it's opened doors within my mind that I have tried to keep closed for such a long time. I can't understand why—why these murders?"

"Perhaps that is the very thing that you are meant to discover."

Sebastian used Ciel's grip on him to lift Ciel to his feet, and then off of the ground entirely—his reservations about carrying Ciel had been overruled by his protective instincts.

"Put me down!" Ciel exclaimed, thrashing about. "There are too many people! I can't be seen like this!" It was ridiculous enough when he was a child—Ciel had hoped that Sebastian would have ceased with this nonsense now that Ciel had physically grown out of it.

"I am sure your reputation will survive, sir," Sebastian retorted pleasantly, noting that Ciel was no longer making any real physical attempts to escape his current position.

"Bastard," Ciel huffed. "I suppose my ordering you to put me down would have no effect."

"My master's well-being is my topmost priority, as ever."

"I'd never have made this contract with you had I known then how often you would use that as an excuse to defy me."

Sebastian snuck a glance at Ciel's face from the corner of his eye and saw a small smile sitting lightly on Ciel's mouth. A joke, then.

"Your humor amuses even a heartless monster such as myself."

"Shut up," Ciel mumbled— he was still smiling. Sebastian smiled as well.

They rounded the next corner, only for Sebastian to almost trip over a young newsboy.

"Extra, extra! Read all about it! London's latest killer claims two more victims!"

"Two more?" Ciel asked the newsboy, who gave Ciel a very strange look. Ciel remembered that he was being carried and very nearly turned red.

"'s'right, sir," The boy confirmed, handing Ciel a folded copy of the morning paper. Sebastian continued to walk as Ciel squinted at the front page.
"...The "Murderer of Midtown" strikes again'....'two more bodies were discovered this morning on the corner of Water Street and'- Sebastian, this article is about today's crime scene."

Sebastian knew instantly where this one-sided conversation was going- but he allowed Ciel to come to the foregone conclusion on his own.

"Those bodies were just found this morning," Ciel restated the obvious, staring intently at the paper in joyous disbelief. "This paper couldn't have gone into print any later than last night, meaning that this was written days ago- so how did the author of this article know that two more bodies would be found this morning?" He searched through the rows of typeset for the name that would put an end to this copycat case.

"Sebastian, this is our next move. Find Norman Hague."

It took Sebastian little effort to find the address of one Norman Hague, a journalist for the London Times. Within half an hour of discovering his name, Ciel and Sebastian were standing on the man's doorstep- a small row house not three blocks from the home of that morning's two victims. Ciel reasoned that Hague must have known one or both of them, and had some personal vendetta that motivated him to kill them in such a gruesome way. He must have thought he could pass off his murders as the work of a much more famous killer, thus ensuring that he himself would never be caught. Predictable and foolish, especially when one had no real knowledge of the killer they meant to impersonate.

Sebastian knocked on the door and then tilted his head, listening for any movement inside the house- a troubled look passed over his face.

"What is it?" Ciel whispered. Sebastian held a finger to his own lips.

"I am not certain- the house seems to be empty. I do not sense the presence of anyone living or otherwise."

"But?" Ciel prompted.

"There is something else at work here, though I cannot say what that something might be."

"Search the house. Hague must be found." Ciel ordered.

"Yes, my lord." Sebastian nodded, and tried the door. It was unlocked.

"I suggest you stay outside until I am certain that there is no threat to you."

Ciel stood by and watched as Sebastian stepped inside. Three things then happened in a matter of seconds and in such quick succession that Ciel barely had time to react.

First: Sebastian turned to face him just as the door slammed shut- apparently of its own volition.

Second: Ciel was grabbed from behind, two unfamiliar arms wrapping tightly around his body and dragging him back from the porch. Ciel screamed involuntarily, and a foul hand clamped over his mouth.

Third: The entire house exploded into a ball of flame.
08/05/15:

OOOOO. *cue dramatic music*

This chapter was SO LONG. I would apologize, but I know people love huge big fat juicy updates on fics (I know I do). >_
"The mistake was yours," Sebastian hissed. "It was to think that I would not climb from the very flames of hell to return to his side."

This is what Sebastian remembers:

Ciel, in the very beginning, being as wary of physical contact as he was vicious in his manners; flinching at Sebastian's every move, and lashing out with insults on his next breath. His refusal to be bathed or dressed by anyone other than himself- and his complaints about the way in which Sebastian performed these tasks when it was absolutely necessary.

Ciel, waking multiple times during the night, screaming for his murdered parents. Sebastian, spending all this time at the foot of Ciel's bed, never straying, knowing that he would be called back almost as soon as he left. He remembers how tedious it was to him then, having to shake the child from his delirious panic, to repeatedly reassure him that he was out of danger. And with Ciel's persistent wakefulness came a much more vapid temper during the day.

Ciel, unwilling to admit his weakness, thus preventing the wound within himself to properly heal. If such wounds could ever heal at all.

Sebastian remembers the first time Ciel had asked him to stay.

It had become a habit- stationing himself at Ciel's side long after Ciel had fallen into restless sleep. Sebastian had become a spectre, existing in between shadow and light, walking the edge of death so as to guard the living. This night was just like any other. Ciel slept fitfully, tossing and turning, caught in the throes of some night terror or another. He woke twice, but only briefly, sitting up quickly before realising where he was- barely aware that he had woken at all, he would drift back into his purgatorial state.

Upon his third waking, Ciel's screams were so deafening that they could have woken the dead. Irony abounded, given that the he screamed the names of those who could never be woken. Sebastian sighed as if he were about to undertake some abysmally mundane task. He knelt at Ciel's side, putting a firm hand on Ciel's shoulders and shaking him gently.

"Master, you are safe now." Sebastian's tone was flat and unemotional- these words were so often repeated that he no longer cared to remember their true meaning.
For a fraction of a second, the screams continued- when they did die, there was a spectacular moment of silence, during which Sebastian thought he had, blessedly, gone deaf. But then a strange noise reached his ears, one that took him several moments to recognise.

Ciel was crying. Certainly this could not have been the first time Ciel had wept in Sebastian's presence. And yet, Sebastian felt as though he had been here before- or perhaps it was the knowledge that this moment would inevitably arrive, sooner or later.

There had, of course, been other tears- when Ciel had first called out for Sebastian's help from the squalor of his cage- those had been desperate tears, tears of pain and fear. The tears he shed now were simple grief; agonising grief. Sebastian had previously believed his master to be incapable of such vulnerability.

At first, Sebastian was at a loss to understand how he should proceed; there was no clear course of action. Words failed him- what could he say to one who had finally broken under the weight of such a burden? He found himself completely out of sorts. This was not a place to which he had ever been. Despite his complete confoundedness, one thing was obvious to him- this moment would come to define the course of their relationship as master and servant.

Something shifted then, within the very fabric of Sebastian's consciousness- it was not sympathy that overtook him then, but perhaps the beginnings of it were present. He had been shown his own narrow-mindedness; he had not thought Ciel capable of grief, no more than he had thought himself capable of caring whether or not such grief existed. He peered at Ciel's heaving shoulders through the darkness, and some part of him did care.

Demons did not fear- they fed on fear. They had no weaknesses, but preyed on those who did. Sebastian was not afraid of (but still adverse to) the idea that he would or could ever come to have any sort of honest emotions where this small, frail, shaking mortal creature was concerned.

Sebastian remembers being under the illusion that he had any choice in the matter.

And so, out of some unbeknownst instinct, he reached out and placed a hand on Ciel's upper back, directly between his shoulder blades. Sebastian's white-gloved fingers fanned out over Ciel's spine. The notches of it were easy to feel, pressing out against skin- so fragile- it would take no effort at all to snap such a spine in two.

The image of Ciel's back breaking was not only vivid in Sebastian's mind, but also abhorrent. The ease with which Ciel could be killed only served to stoke the flames that had begun to lick at the corners of Sebastian's perception of his own attitude toward Ciel. This body had survived so much and yet still lived- Sebastian had no doubt that he himself would use any means to ensure that this fact did not change. He had sworn an oath of protection to Ciel upon the moment of their contract's establishment- now was the first time he swore it to himself.

Even when Ciel's choking sobs began to quiet, Sebastian was hesitant to move his hand. He could hear Ciel's rapid pulse, and breaths that were far too shallow and quick. Ciel had turned his head away from Sebastian, perhaps to hide his display of emotion. Sebastian noted that Ciel had not flinched at his touch- not so much as a complaint had left his lips. This was a first, Sebastian realised.

It almost seemed a shame to break the peaceful trance that had fallen over the room. But when the rhythms of Ciel's body had returned to their slow and steady norms, Sebastian withdrew his hand, lingering on his knees for a moment before retreating to his original position at the end of the bed. He believed that Ciel had once again fallen under the cover listlessness that plagued his nights. He was mistaken.
"Sebastian." Ciel's voice was muffled by the pillow- it sounded small, choked by residual tears, but not at all timid, in keeping with the boy's character. "Stay with me."

"As always, sir, I shall remain by your side."

Sebastian waited for some verbal confirmation, proof that Ciel had witnessed his obedience. None came. Ciel had gone to sleep. Sebastian stayed, as he had been told to. Of course, he knew that he would have stayed regardless of whether or not the order had been given; so was his duty. But now, knowing that this was what his master wished, he felt as though something in him had been completed.

Listening to the quiet of Ciel's soul as he found rest for the first time in weeks, Sebastian felt fulfilled as the keeper of that soul. This night was truly one of firsts- it was the first time Sebastian had ever felt at all sated by a soul he had not yet consumed.

And it was only the beginning.

Ciel regained consciousness slowly and in stages. His senses were reluctant to return, and even as they did, they only fell into place one at a time.

His hearing came first- before he had even registered in his own mind that he was awake at all, he was aware of sounds around him- some ambient, some acute. There was the distant ticking of what might have been a clock but what was in fact water, dripping from somewhere above him. These drops echoed, leaving ripples of sound in their wake, suggesting a cavernous space. The air carried a subtle white roar that made the space feel as suffocating as it did vast.

This thought was confirmed by Ciel's sense of smell when it began to function a moment later. It was when he knew he was awake, consciously taking deep breaths, and the musty odour of copper and sewage that assaulted every one of his inhalations. Ciel attempted to expel the foul air through his mouth only to find that he had been gagged- rough cloth had been tied around his head- it grated against his lips and nearly made him choke when he tried to call out, his voice finally coming back. He opened his eyes and hoped he would at least be able to see.

There was barely any light by which to make out the shape and size of the room, but enough that Ciel knew he had not gone blind. What he did observe was grim. He was cloistered in a small chamber that was no bigger than two wardrobes put back to back. The aches in Ciel's shoulders and hips told him he had been left on the floor for quite some time; his arms were secured to a cold steel pipe, rusted and rough where it met his wrists. His legs were bent underneath him at an unusual angle, making it impossible for him to move.

His eyes had adjusted well enough to see that the pipe his arms were fixed to ran up the wall behind him, branching off in two directions toward the opposite walls of the room. Those sections turned up and supposedly continued through the ceiling- to ground level. Ciel knew now where he had been brought. He was in the sewer tunnels beneath London; miles and miles of maze-like caverns where no one would ever think to look for him, except- Ciel blinked and noticed that his eye patch had slipped from his face and fallen loosely around his neck.

Sebastian, he thought confidently, get me out of this place. Now.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Sebastian did not come.
Sebastian, this is an order. Come and get me.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Sebastian still did not come.

It was then that Ciel remembered: the old doorway, the empty house- a blinding explosion of flame, Sebastian at its very center. Ciel being wrestled away by an unknown figure-

Norman Hague.

The screech of metal hinges jarred Ciel from his flash of memory- his breathing had become harsh, filling the tiny space with echoes of his panic.

Fire couldn't have really hurt Sebastian, could it?

If not, then why had Ciel's calls for help gone unanswered?

A door opened directly to Ciel's right, clanking heavily as it was pulled aside. Ciel squinted at the invasion of light, bright and flickering. He struggled to see any detail in the silhouette of the person crouching in the small opening. he had no time to do this- the silhouette reached out, unfastening the ropes that held Ciel to the pipe and promptly dragging Ciel from the shadows.

"You've finally woken," a scratchy voice intoned. "I've been waiting."

The voice belonged to the man who now ripped the gag from Ciel's mouth and threw him to the floor of a much larger room. The cobblestone scratched the palms of Ciel's hands raw when he put them out to break his fall. His immediate instinct was to get to his feet, but a heavy boot pressing into his spine kept him on all fours, his face inches from the dirty ground.

"Are you Norman Hague?" Ciel grunted, finding it difficult to breathe.

"Yes, or so some call me," The man, Hague, confirmed. His accent was incredibly cultured, as if he were from aristocracy and not a lowbrow riverside resident. Of course, this was not the most unusual detail about this situation.

"I hope you know what you've gotten yourself into, Mister Hague," Ciel spat, sounding ten times surer than he felt at the moment. "I have someone very powerful in my employ, and he'll soon be missing me, if he isn't already." He is contractually obligated to miss me, but he will miss me nonetheless.

"We'll see about that, won't we?" Hague taunted, lifting his foot from Ciel's back. This allowed Ciel to turn, finally getting a good look at his captor. What he saw was an unremarkably average looking man, with scuffs on the knees of his well worn trousers and a scratchy day's worth of stubble across his jaw and neck. The only thing that was at all striking about his appearance were his eyes- they were dark and wild and looked as though they belonged to a vicious animal. For the first time since waking up, Ciel felt the true sting of fear under his skin.

"You killed the couple on Water Street," He accused, making an effort not to break eye contact with Hague. He could not let fear overtake his body. Still, he found himself slowly crawling backwards to the wall, careful not to turn his back on Hague.

"I did at that," Hague admitted proudly, his smile much too toothy and ferocious. He circled the room, stopping to stoke the fire that was the only source of light in the tunnel. It danced in his eyes, making them seem all the more volatile. Ciel reached the wall and pressed his back to it, shielding his
body by bending his knees up and crossing his arms. He felt a little less vulnerable, though still ill-at-ease.

"Why?" Ciel demanded, keeping his tone sharp and authoritative. He couldn't divulge any of his previous assumptions about Hague's motive, though from what he could tell, those assumptions appeared to be correct.

"You couldn't have possibly hoped to harvest their souls with the way you ripped apart the bodies. I'm surprised you showed such violence- the others were so cleanly disposed of-"

"The others? No, no, you see, the others were not mine, not my souls to take. I can take no credit for such holy work. You mistake me for one much greater and more powerful than I."

I knew it, Ciel thought smugly, and vaguely wished Sir Arthur were here to witness it. This reminded him of how alone he was, and he shivered, lifting his eyes to the arched ceiling of the tunnel- he knew it must be a tunnel- the ends of it disappeared into darkness and slow curves- he would at least hear anyone approaching, should rescue come.

Not should it, but when it. Sebastian will come.

Hague had begun to laugh quietly to himself- the rough staccato of it vibrated through the air, and even the flames seemed to move along with it.

"Who is he?" Ciel asked, not sure if Hague was even listening. The laughter carried on a few moments more, becoming louder and louder until the tunnel seemed too full of it to take much more.

"He is a saviour and a creator. He is my God and the Father of the next world, and I serve him without question." These words, though doubtlessly rehearsed, were said zealously and with such devotion that Ciel instantly knew this was not a man who had killed merely out of personal rage.

"Those articles you wrote, praising his work-"

"I had to spread his word- plant the seed in the weakest minds so that it might grow and bear fruit. I could not give him the adulation he deserved," Hague sounded almost mournful, "but the stories served their purpose."

"But why kill that couple? What _purpose_ did their deaths serve?" It was perhaps insanity to try and reason with a reasonless man, but Ciel needed to know all he could, and he needed to stall Hague for as long as possible until help arrived.

"Rosa- my dear, sweet Rosa," Hague mumbled, sinking to his knees in front of the fire- sweat glistened on his forehead as he stared directly into the flames. His well-to-do tone was slowly devolving into cockney garble, adding to the madness of the man himself. Ciel briefly wondered if Hague had a fractured mind- the tale of Jekyll and Hyde played out in vivid detail- but Hague had the same terrible look on his face, and Ciel had no doubt that there was only one man inside the wretched skin of Norman Hague.

"She was _promised_ to me. Father said it was our holy right, the sons, to take wives to bear our children. _She_ was my _right_." His words dripped with deep-seated rage, every emphasised syllable coming out in beastly growls that shook the stone above them. "Always, Father said to me, from the beginning of time- it was _decided_."

"She was married." Ciel had not meant for this thought to escape his mind and be born from his mouth. Hague lunged and was across the tunnel before Ciel could flinch- he felt the sting of a hand across his cheek, blood swelling from his lip and flooding the inside of his mouth. he spat, not at
Hague, though red did spackle his muddy shoes.

"I was PROMISED HER. And she was STOLED FROM ME!" Hague's screams were reminiscent of a dying animal, a wounded dog begging to be put out of its misery. It was Ciel's initial reaction to flinch, expecting Hague's neck to be wrung as Sebastian burst forth to end this incoherent drivel. But Hague remained upright, stalking to and fro, pacing in strange lines, remnants of his ramblings being left behind in the form of footprints.

"Is that why you killed her? Was it preferable to you that she die rather than be married to someone else?"

"I killed them because they were unclean- Father can see into the core of us. He knows the true power and worthiness of our souls from one look into our eyes." Hague grabbed Ciel's chin, fingernails no doubt leaving impressions in the skin there. He forced Ciel to meet his eyes, twitching with manic fervour.

"Father would say your soul is unclean. I do not have the sight that he does- but some souls are so impure that they cry out to be cleansed, and the cry of their plight can be heard by anyone who listens for it. I heard your soul screaming to be cleansed. A soul so unclean as yours can only be cleansed through servitude to the Father, the one who guides them. Without the Father, we are all lost. Lost." Hague's breath was dry and foul- it smelled of stale liquor and it made bile rise up into Ciel's throat- but Ciel did not waver. He stared Hague down, defiant and determined.

"Rosa and her husband- were they cleansed?" Ciel ground his teeth, jaw still clenched shut by Hague's hand. Hague turned somber at this question- his erratic body language weakening as he stumbled away from Ciel, contemplation clouding his sharp features as his eyes fell.

"It was my duty, to cleanse the souls of those who had betrayed us. When I saw the man, he who had taken what was rightfully mine, I- the rage within me burned brighter than I imagined. Their souls could not be cleansed. I failed the ritual and so failed the Father. And now I must atone for my sins."

"I don't see where I come into it." Ciel felt as though he had the upper hand in this discussion, now that Hague was so caught up in his own wretchedness. As soon as Ciel spoke though, Hague's head snapped up almost inhumanly fast, and he scrambled back towards Ciel on hands and knees.

"Patience. You will understand, in due time. In due time, you will understand."

Hague laughed again, a horrid hiss, pressing his hand over Ciel's face. Ciel managed to call out the first half of Sebastian's name before he could no longer breathe- Hague was smothering him, kneeling on his legs to keep him from kicking. Ciel's only defense was to raise his hands, to pull futilely at the vice grip Hague had over his mouth and nose. Beside the wheezing in his lungs, all he could hear was the leaking pipe, still counting off the seconds of his imprisonment.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Sebastian did not come.

Ciel's throat burned with its need for oxygen.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Sebastian did not come.

Ciel's eyes watered, black spots crawling at the corners of his vision.
Drip. Drip. Drip.

Sebastian did not come.

Ciel lost consciousness once again.

This is what Sebastian remembers:

Ciel's nightmares had grown more violent. In addition to tangling himself in the sheets and crying out for his parents, he would begin to thrash about, screaming protests and fighting off invisible attackers. He would ruthlessly claw at his own arms, beating at his chest, trying to pull away from his phantom captors. He had left raised and reddened scratches on his wrists as well as blue bruises on his shoulders. The marks would barely fade before new ones took their place. Sebastian had become more attentive than ever, kneeling on the floor at Ciel's side all hours of the night, ready to fly into action at the first sign of a nightmare.

Stormy nights were worse for Ciel than any other. The entire world would be in turmoil, and so it only added to Ciel's unrest. As winter raged on, the weather- and the nightmares- had become constant and severe. It was clear that Ciel could hardly bear it- unable to stay awake during the day, unable to sleep at night- Sebastian knew that the lack of sleep and extreme stress on Ciel's mind would soon take an extreme toll on his already fragile physical health.

By late February, it had.

Wind wailed across the countryside, howling like a banshee wandering the wilderness. The night sky was clouded over, only adding to the darkness within Ciel's bedroom. Hail pounded the windows, the incessant spray of ice on glass going from a grating nag to a numbing presence- it paled in comparison to the hoarseness in Ciel's throat as he coughed, his cries croaky rather than shrill. Sebastian's ability to see perfectly even in the absence of light allowed him see the feverish pink that covered his master's face- there was an even pinker welt blossoming across his cheekbone where he had inadvertently struck himself in the face during an earlier fit.

Sebastian's mouth was a thin line of concern as he tugged at the fingertips of his gloves, pressing the back of his bare hand to Ciel's forehead- the skin burned. At first, Ciel didn't react to the touch, though his head shook from side to side, incoherent mumbles barely making it past his chapped lips. Then, without warning, he bolted upright, screeching in fear and lashing out with his arms while simultaneously attempting to roll away from Sebastian, whom he obviously believed to be a threat.

Sebastian grabbed Ciel's wrist, not hard enough to cause harm, but just hard enough to jar him from his delirium. Ciel's scream died in his throat, cut short by a gasp that dissolved into a series of choked sobs. His entire body began to shake, and tears welled up in his eyes- the mark of the contract in his iris grew dull and dim. It repulsed Sebastian, to have something come between him and his prey. Master, he corrected himself.

He remembers thinking it odd, then, to no longer be considering this boy a meal; not only a meal, but something more as well.

Ciel's head fell forward, resting on Sebastian's chest. Sebastian allowed this- part of him welcomed it. Ciel may have formed this contract out of necessity, but he was only beginning to realise how much he truly needed Sebastian.

"I want to find them," Ciel hissed the words as if he were in some unbearable pain. "I want to find
"We will. I promise you." Sebastian found his own arms encircling Ciel's shaking body— he could feel every tremble, every pulse of his heart under searing skin. "But first, you must regain your strength."

When the coughing had ended and the sobbing had ebbed, Sebastian knew that the fever would soon break, though he did not know how he could be so sure. He remembers this feeling now, and recognises it as hope; the strange, warm glow of it, barely permeating the abyss of his spirit.

When Sebastian began to pull back, Ciel stopped him, tear soaked fingers all but clinging to Sebastian's sleeves.

"Not yet," he sniffed, voice muffled by Sebastian's coat. "Hold me. Just a little longer."

"Displaying such vulnerability to one's butler?" Sebastian teased. "How uncouth. Is a bad dream all it takes to bring the Earl of Phantomhive to his knees?"

Ciel did not reply. He had fallen asleep, still cocooned in Sebastian's embrace. Sebastian listened closely to the slight crackle in the boy's lungs—despite this, he seemed to be breathing much easier now than he had before. Outside, the howling winds and spattering hail had ceased.

Sebastian held Ciel until dawn. By then, the fever had gone down, and Ciel maintained the facade of not remembering what had happened. Sebastian could see whispers of the memory in Ciel's eyes, however, at breakfast in the days following; and at night, just before he was tucked into bed. The nightmares stopped soon after.

There was no way to mark the passage of time while sequestered bellow the city. The foul smell did not fade with exposure, and every sound was maddeningly diluted by the obtuse shape of the tunnel walls.

Ciel had once again been locked in the smaller chamber in which he had first awoken. This time, when he regained consciousness, he immediately knew where he was. Finding that he had full use of his limbs, he felt across the walls, learning the exact size and shape of the room with only his hands as guides. The walls were rough and wet, without a single gap in them— they were stone and thick and Ciel knew at once that no escape was possible.

His mouth remained un-gagged, but he had lost his desire to speak. He understood now that calling for Sebastian would not make Sebastian appear any sooner. Ciel still did not allow himself to believe what his memory and common sense told him— that Sebastian was more than likely dead. Ciel knew that he would feel different if that were true. He never could have known that there was anything to feel, but he had never been away from Sebastian for this long without knowing Sebastian's exact whereabouts. His absence was palpable, impossible to ignore, and Ciel could do nothing else but sit and dwell on the situation in which he now found himself.

It had taken Ciel no time at all to see to the heart of Hague's plan, or 'the Father's' plan, rather. It was obvious that Hague had been manipulated into committing the Water Street murders by this 'Father' person. He'd used Hague's connection to the victims (and his already unstable mind) to orchestrate killings that would no doubt make Hague the chief suspect in the Midtown slayings. However much Hague believed himself to be part of a cult, or the protégé of a much higher power, he was merely a pathetic scapegoat and nothing more. The Father must have known the police would find Hague and pin all the murders on him. At the very least, it would stall the investigation- the Father would have
to resume killing eventually, thus pardoning Hague of (most of) the things he'd been accused of doing.

One thing remained a mystery- why would the Father need to stall the investigation? The police were never going to find him, not when the purpose of the murders was beyond their comprehension. Once again, Ciel was struck by the feeling that there was something much larger at play here. Something Ciel would not understand if he did not first escape the sewers.

As time passed, Ciel began to feel a chill settling deep within his bones. He knew this meant the beginnings of a fever, and he clenched his teeth against every shiver that threatened to overtake his body. His breaths became thicker and slower, a bout of coughs tearing through his chest. His throat felt dry as a desert every time he swallowed. He wondered how many hours it he'd been here- how long had it been since he'd had food? Water? It frightened him that he could not remember.

It wasn't long before he had drifted into the small space between wakefulness and unconsciousness; when he did sleep, it was light and dreamless. He never lost awareness of the cold, hard floor against his shoulders- how his entire body ached at the slightest movement. Even his ribs seemed to creak with every expansion of his lungs. He longed for the safety and softness of his own bed- any sleep at all would be preferable- but he remained half-awake, cognizant but too weak to move.

So when he felt the vice grips of Hague's hands clamping around his arms, he did not struggle- there was still a part of him that wanted to lash out, to scream, but he was lost within his own body, unable to intervene on his own behalf. He was finally granted his wish a moment later, and completely fell under the cover of darkness.

He dreamed he had been hung by his ankles with cold, thick chains- ropes bound his arms to his sides, and when he looked, he could not see the ground through the darkness. Voices surrounded him, some close in his ear, others shouting from far away. They warned him, but forgot the words as soon as they had been spoken. Someone laughed, louder and louder, and the voices scattered. He woke to find that his dream had, for the most part, become reality.

Every notch in his spine felt pulled apart, detached from the others as his back was stretched by the force of gravity. The chains that suspended him cut painfully into his ankles, no doubt bruising the fragile flesh. This was the least of Ciel's agony- his brain seemed to float within his skull, tossing and turning independently of Ciel's position- his vision was doubled and blurred as he tried to ascertain all he could about his surroundings, despite the fact that he was suspended upside down. All Ciel could see was Hague, pacing back and forth before him, pulling harshly at his own hair with one hand while the other clutched a knife- the jagged blade glinted in the dwindling firelight, and Ciel finally understood.

"This was your plan all along; killing those two people, luring me into a trap- all so you could harvest my soul." His speech was slow and thick- he barely understood himself.

"The plan, yes. One of many. But not mine. No- this plan was borne of the Father, and it is the only first step on his journey to power."

"It won't work." Ciel had stopped struggling against his bonds- he could do nothing now but buy himself more time.

"It might not have, if not for the Father's warning to me regarding your demon."

Ciel could have been shocked by this- perhaps he should have been; but of course a soul stealer would know the signs of a Faustian contract.
"If you know that Sebastian is a demon, then you know my arrangement with him. You cannot possibly hope to take my soul- it is his alone. Fire would not burn him; nor would it dissuade him from reclaiming what rightfully belongs to him."

"No fire of this earth," Hague agreed, "but fire lit with holy oil, flames blessed by God- this can destroy even Satan himself."

Ciel sucked in a gasp- what would have been a quiet noise, but ricocheted off the tunnel walls and collided with his ears again in suffocating fear.

"No," he argued thinly. Hague's madness must be wearing off on him- Ciel already felt on the verge of hysteria. "You're wrong. You're lying!"

"If I were, you would have been rescued from this fate long ago." Hague pointed out. Ciel could no longer see him.

The light had been leeched from the room- a rush of cold wind and the rustle of feathers signalled another presence within the overwhelming shadows of the tunnel.

"My apologies, Mister Hague, but I believe you've been misled."

"Sebastian!" Ciel exclaimed. It seemed inappropriate to thank God for this, so Ciel settled for the unrelenting warmth of relief he felt at Sebastian's presence.

A thought struck him then, plain as day- This entire time, I have been more worried for him than I have been for myself. Ordinarily, such sentiment would have appalled Ciel- but he hadn't the strength to fight his own feelings at the moment.

"No, you- you couldn't have survived! No denizen of hell can withstand the flames of God's retribution!" Hague screamed in rage- the same murderous rage that had led him to kill. But the hand with which he held the knife had begun to shake.

"You forget- I am a creature of tribulation. And here I am," Sebastian replied simply, voice close. Ciel, though his vision was limited, should have been able to see Sebastian by now.

"Show yourself, demon!" Hague demanded, head whipping about frantically as he searched for the source of the taunt. This is when Ciel realised the Sebastian had not- perhaps could not- take physical form. As he thought this, however, he felt something brush his cheek- it reminded him of Sebastian's hand, and so he knew he was not alone.

"Show yourself!" Hague cried again.

"I am afraid that I am unable to do so at present," Sebastian's voice drew ever closer. "It seems the fire did indeed have some effect on my power. But it was foolish on your part to believe that even death would prevent me from coming to claim what is mine."

Ciel's heart thrilled at those words, and at the sound of footsteps on the wet stone floor. They were the first footsteps Ciel had ever heard in tandem with Sebastian's voice- sharp heels clicking, signalling danger as they steadily approached.

"How-" Hague faltered.

"Even now, my power grows," Sebastian boasted. "Simply being close to him is enough to strengthen me."
Ciel felt Sebastian's eyes on him, even though those eyes were still invisible.

"It seems you have taken rather poor care of my master," Sebastian scolded. "And if I am to help him, I must return to the form in which I serve him best."

"You can't! It's impossible!" Hague started. "You would need to consume a soul, and you cannot consume his!"

"His soul, no. Not until I have fulfilled his deepest wish." Sebastian's halo of feathers surrounded them, and Hague shrunk away as they threatened to tear into his skin. Sebastian chuckled.

"Your soul, unremarkable as it is, will have to suffice," Sebastian taunted. "Unfortunately, under the laws of the contract, it is forbidden for me to partake of another soul without my master's express permission." Sebastian's voice softened, now addressing Ciel directly. "Master, if you would?"

"Sebastian," Ciel breathed. "Take his soul and get me down from here. That's an order."

The knife was wrenched from Hague's grip by an unseen force- it hovered over his throat and that same force pulled his head back.

"You may kill me, but I am only one of an army of believers. The Father will not be thwarted so easily, make no mistake!" Hague protested weakly until the point of the knife dug into his pulse point. Blood poured forth, and Hague managed one last scream, gurgling and choking as his neck was severed.

"The mistake was yours," Sebastian hissed. "It was to think that I would not climb from the very flames of hell to return to his side."

Hague's head lifted from his body with a sickening gush of red- Ciel flinched at the sudden light that filled the tunnel- a bright cloud, the form of Hague's soul, hovered above him. No sooner had it emerged than it was swallowed up- silently devoured, sucked in by a waiting mouth that Ciel could not see. Hague's body slumped to the floor, the knife clattering beside him. The feathers and shadows stilled, and for a moment, Ciel thought he was alone.

"Sebastian?" He rasped. He felt himself slipping away once more, but then realised that he was being turned upright- the chains around his ankles snapped loudly, the ropes binding his arms giving way and falling to the ground. The world around him spun as he was righted, gathered into blessedly familiar arms.

"Sebastian," he said again, barely in a whisper. "You came for me."

"Of course," Sebastian answered, calm and serene. Instead of the voice coming from nowhere, Ciel could feel it resonating through him from Sebastian's chest. He craned his neck and took in the sight of Sebastian's face, unusually open with concern, yet still laced with his constant hint of a smile.

"What kind of a butler would I be if I could not do this for my master?"

Chapter End Notes

08/12/15:

I know this chapter is 6k, but it feels so short after the last chapter ha. Now, on to more
shippy things!
"She thinks," Ciel whispered, as though worried that he might be overheard, "that I don't love her as much as I love you."

Lord Phantomhive,

First, I must say that I was sorry to hear about your misfortunate encounter with our mutual acquaintance, Mister Hague. I wish for you to know that this was not how I had hoped to be represented to you in our initial encounter, indirect though it may have been. I have been awaiting it for so long, after all, and my true intention was to make a better first impression.

Rest assured that Mister Hague would have been reprimanded more harshly by me than he was by your 'companion'. Unfortunately, Mister Hague did not possess my aptitude for subtlety and forethought. His initiative, however, will be sorely missed.

I wish you a speedy recovery from your ordeal—perhaps the time required for your recuperation will give you the opportunity to think on your sins. I will spend the time making up for the assets I lost due to Mister Hague's enthusiasm. I look forward to our next meeting.

Sincerely,

Father

Sebastian stood alone in Ciel's study, glaring scathingly at the letter in his hand— it had mysteriously appeared on the doorstep that morning, and Sebastian knew that if he read it again, he might very well be responsible for setting the entire house ablaze.

Rarely in his multi-millennial existence had Sebastian felt such acute hatred and rage— anger had always been a useless waste of his energy, though not all demons adhered to this principle. Sebastian knew that in his weakened state, he was much more susceptible to primal emotions— and it was an effort to keep the sometimes explosive consequences of these emotions in check.

He found himself full of unadulterated loathing for this 'Father' individual; for his pride, for his gloating. He seemed to think it somewhat of a game, the harvesting of human souls. Sebastian was a predator; he at least had some sense of ceremony when it came to the hunt.

Most of all, it perturbed Sebastian to know that there was someone in the world with knowledge if
his true nature and the origin of his relationship with Ciel; this person had found a way to hurt Sebastian, and this person had fixed his attention on the most important part of Sebastian's existence. Indeed, it would be an insult to call Ciel anything less than that.

Fire fueled by holy oil was quite effective at snuffing out a demon's life-force- much like holy water, it burned through the physical vessel and into a demon's true form. A demon without a contract certainly would have been incinerated. Only Sebastian's ties to Ciel had kept Sebastian alive until he could replenish his strength.

Norman Hague's soul had been foul and weak, but it had allowed Sebastian to take physical form once more, so as to return Ciel to safety. It seemed that Ciel had saved him this time, just as much as he'd saved Ciel. At a price, as most everything was; Sebastian was still relatively weak and would need time to completely heal- Ciel had fallen quite ill, despite the time of year. His body would be feverish and ache for days, no doubt.

Sebastian looked at the letter and longed to destroy it- but he knew Ciel would want to read it for himself, when he was able. So he merely replaced it the envelope and dropped it on his master's desk.

"You wanted to see us, sir?"

The other four Phantomhive servants entered the room, having lost their care-free facade- Finnian and Bardroy stood ramrod straight, a salute being the only thing missing from their militarised postures. Mey-Rin had shed her thick glasses, sharp eyes piercing Sebastian's when he looked at her. He understood how mortal men might find such a stare unnerving. Tanaka's face showed the weathered experience of a man who had been called to arms for his master many times before.

"Due to the recent threat to the Master's life, I have reason to believe that this house is under surveillance," Sebastian explained, gesturing to the letter. "Times like these are the true reason you were brought here to serve Lord Phantomhive. I will have no more threats delivered to this door. Your household duties are henceforth suspended until such a time as the threat to the Master's life has passed. I want a constant watch of the property's perimeter. No one is to pass the front gate without my express permission. No one. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir!" Bardroy and Finnian exclaimed. Mey-Rin and Tanaka merely nodded, and one by one, they all filed from the room. Sebastian waited only a moment before following, turning left down the hallway rather than right; while the other servants watched over the house, his place was at Ciel's side.

It was midday, though one would not know this from inside the Earl's bedroom. The heavy, dark curtains had been closed since Sebastian arrived the night before, carrying a sleeping Ciel in his arms. Ciel had remained asleep until now, and Sebastian predicted that he would not wake any time soon. Norman Hague had held Ciel captive in the sewers for no less than three days, from what Sebastian understood- he himself had spent most of that period in another physical state, unaware of the passage of time- using all the energy left within him to locate Ciel and stop his soul from being stolen.

Looking down at Ciel now, burrowed under many more blankets than were common in the summer, Sebastian wondered what would have happened, had he not reached Ciel in time to stop Hague's knife. Theoretically, Ciel's soul could have been stolen; would Sebastian's failure to appear have rendered the contract null and void? Or would his claim to it remain? Did the contract make Ciel invulnerable to the Father's methods?

Hague's soul certainly hadn't been protected. Sebastian could have made the harvest bloodless,
painless, instant- much like the Father's work with his previous victims. But Hague had been motivated by personal rage- he had killed with incomparable brutality. It was more fitting to Sebastian that Hague should meet a similar end. It was merciful compared to what he deserved for threatening Ciel's life- and his soul.

Perhaps Hague had not been the only one with personal motives.

Sebastian banished this thought from the forefront of his consciousness as he took a seat in the armchair beside Ciel's bed. It did not occur to Sebastian that he was behaving in a rather human fashion- denying any feelings that might complicate his life or cloud his judgement. Incredibly human- he was even going so far as too deny his own denial.

He had not long ago looked at Ciel and known that he must not yet understand his own feelings; that when he did understand them, he would most certainly fight against them- such was the nature of human existence. What Sebastian had not known was that he too, was misinterpreting himself; and that now, he had crossed the threshold into war. What he could not know was what would be waiting for him on the other side of it.

Ciel had no memory of returning home- he had slept through being carried across the city, being cleaned, redressed, and buried under layer after layer of blankets. One moment, he had been looking up into Sebastian's newly reformed face, and the next, he was blinking awake, bleary-eyed and burning from the inside out. Every bone in his body ached to the point where he could not feel anything but the sheen of sweat on his face and the weight of the covers on his shoulders. He could not tell the time of day; he knew at least that he was no longer underground. The curtains in his room were closed, blocking out most of the light from the window- some still found its way through, giving the dull murky effect of being underwater.

Sebastian was easy to find- he sat in the armchair beside the bed, eyes trained on Ciel's face in careful contemplation.

Ciel immediately opened his mouth to speak, but found his throat to be a dry wasteland. He made to sit up but felt Sebastian's hand at his shoulder, gently guiding him back down through the confusion and dizziness.

"There is no need for words, master; for now, you must rest."

There were things Ciel wanted to know, but he could not gather up the words to ask them.

"You must be somewhat disoriented- I will do my best to explain. It has been more than two days since I brought you back from the sewers. You were there for approximately three days, and you have been asleep since I found you. Aside from a fever, you have only sustained a few minor injuries. With rest, I expect you to be recovered within the week."

This was nothing new; Ciel was reminded of all the winters Sebastian had spent nursing him back to health, often from sickness far worse than this. He was simply glad to be home, safe, with his soul intact.

He pushed his hand from beneath the covers and pointed at Sebastian insistently, trying to convey his true concern at present.

"I assure you, I am quite well." Sebastian placed a hand over his own chest. "Once I consumed Norman Hague's soul, I was able to reform my physical body. My power is still returning, but I am
in no danger now."

"How- how did you-" Ciel tried to ask, but was launched into a coughing fit. His body seized and he doubled over, leaning up on his elbows as he gasped for air. When it passed, Sebastian offered him a glass of water. He drank gratefully before collapsing back onto the pillows behind his head.

"You wish to know how I survived the fire," Sebastian guessed. Ciel nodded quickly.

"The answer to that lies with you, my lord," Sebastian answered after a rather long silence. "I believe that the power of the contract kept me from dying completely. Knowing that you were in danger allowed me to survive long enough to find you."

I saved you this time, Ciel thought, grateful that his words were failing him.

"It is you who has saved me this time." There was an odd pace to Sebastian's voice, as if he had not meant to say all this aloud. Ciel was glad Sebastian had said it. He was glad that his own fever would hide any blush- even he could not tell the difference between the two.

It took a few moments for Ciel to notice that someone had begun to knock at the bedroom door; Sebastian ignored it. Ciel knew without a doubt that they'd both heard it- but Sebastian did not break eye contact with Ciel, holding his gaze until almost half a dozen more knocks had sounded. Even when he rose to his feet, he gave Ciel another look, reluctant to turn his back until he reached the door.

Ciel did not pay attention to the conversation that followed. All he heard were the hushed undertones of what could have been grim news or cause for celebration- still, it was easy to distinguish Sebastian's voice, though he did not hear the words. Ciel had never thought much about Sebastian's voice- its cultured timbre or smooth shape. He wondered if it was conditional, changeable like his appearance, differing from contract to contract- or was it his one constant attribute besides his unfailing loyalty?

Sebastian returned to the chair, a letter in hand. It bore the royal seal. Ciel was surprised at the dread he felt upon seeing it.

"This is her Majesty's official request for you to investigate the criminal known as 'The Murderer of Midtown'. I wonder if the Father would approve of this title."

Perhaps he would, given his predilection for garish theatricality, Sebastian thought, thinking once again of the Father's letter to Ciel. He opened the letter from the Queen and unfolded the thick paper, eyes scanning the words.

"Would you like me to read it all, or shall I summarise?" Sebastian asked, eyes darting up to Ciel's face once more.

"Summarise," Ciel croaked, throat straining through the word.

"It seems she is remarkably concerned, given the number of victims there have been in this case," Sebastian began. "Due to recently increased brutality- I see. They are still counting Hague's killings among that number."

Ciel scowled and waited for Sebastian to continue.

"You will be happy to know that she is thoroughly displeased with Scotland Yard's handling of the investigation. She has notified Sir Arthur that you are to be kept appraised on all new murders, and
that he is to default to your lead in the rest of the inquiry."

Ciel hummed, pleased with this turn of events. A slow smile crept across his face, and Sebastian mirrored it.

"There will be no more investigating for the time being," Sebastian reminded him. "You need your rest."

The hum of satisfaction turned to a grumble. He didn't want to rest, to simply lie about being ineffective and pathetic. But he was tired, oh so tired. He blinked slowly, eyelids growing heavy; he missed most of Sebastian's movement to the door, and only noticed when light from the hallway invaded the room. He noticed nothing after that.

Sebastian smiled. He had smiled so often lately, each smile was beginning to have feeling behind it.

"Sleep well, master."

News of the worst kind came to the manor within the week; two more people had been killed in their home, throats slit bloodlessly, bodies hung from the ceiling by their ankles. A married couple, just as Hague's victims had been. The Father had kept his word, taking two souls as compensation for the ones Hague had cost him. But the symbolism did not end there- unlike the rest of the Father's targets, this couple had been among the nobility: and they had left behind a young son. It was hardly difficult to discern the intended message.

As the Father's playful spite toward Ciel worsened, so did Ciel's condition. He had been sleeping more and more each day, and when he did wake, he was giddy at best and incoherent at worst. If not for Ciel's history with illness, Sebastian would have been at a loss to understand it. Sometimes, the fever and resulting symptoms were the most severe just before they disappeared completely.

Still, on the afternoon of the fifth day, Sebastian began to entertain a gnawing worry. He had obviously been unable to inform Ciel of the most recent murders- he shuddered to think how the news would affect Ciel when he was healthy, let alone the damage it would have done had he not held off on revealing the information. For now, making Ciel well again was what took up most of Sebastian's attention. The doctor had been summoned (again) and would be arriving at any time.

Sebastian all but waited by the door. He opened it at the first knock, expecting to see the hunched and weathered from of the Phantomhive family physician.

The reality was altogether very different.

"CI-EEELL!" Lady Elizabeth screeched, careening through the doorway in a whirlwind of pink frills and golden curls. Sebastian barely contained his exasperated sigh. Instead, he bowed cordially.

"Good afternoon, Lady Elizabeth."

Elizabeth had cut her frantic sprint short, coming to a halt in the middle of the empty foyer. Her arms were still outstretched as if she had expected to collide with her fiancé, as was her customary way of greeting him. The look on her face when she turned back to face Sebastian was confused and bordering on forlorn.

"Sebastian- where is Ciel?"

"Apologies, my Lady. The master is not accepting visitors today."
"What? But Why?"

"I'm afraid he has recently fallen ill and is still in the process of recovery." To put it mildly- Sebastian omitted the part of the story wherein Ciel was imprisoned and nearly killed.

"Oh no! My dear, sweet Ciel; I must see him at once!"

Before Sebastian could comprehend her intent, Elizabeth had taken off once more, racing up the stairs in an impressive display of agility; Sebastian had yet to find out how she could move so swiftly while wearing such restrictive and cumbersome clothing. By the time he took his first step in the chase, she had almost made it to the landing. Fortunately, where Elizabeth was surprisingly quick, Sebastian's speed was superhuman.

When Elizabeth reached Ciel's bedroom door, Sebastian was already there, hands folded behind his back in the perfect picture of gentlemanly grace. He smiled brightly, and Elizabeth was startled. For a moment, Sebastian's shining white teeth had been fangs, pointed and sinister. She looked again, and they were perfectly normal. Strange. She must have been seeing things. Still, there was most certainly something off-putting about that smile; something false and deceitful, feral and frightening. Was there a specific reason for the sharp edge to his grin- or was it a common occurrence? Had Elizabeth simply failed to notice it all the other times it had happened?

"I am truly sorry, Lady Elizabeth." Sebastian's smile did not fade as he spoke. "I cannot allow you to pass."

Elizabeth frowned sourly, but did not pout- she was twenty- a proper lady. Proper ladies did not pout. She would get what she wanted with sound reasoning; she would keep her dignity intact.

"It is I who is sorry, Sebastian, but you must let me see him. I am Ciel's fiancée; the future Countess Phantomhive. It is my duty and right to be by his side. I know you have your own obligations to Ciel, and I respect them- I would ask that you respect mine."

Sebastian had always found the girl's attempts at garnering his favour rather entertaining- but now, his patience had worn too thin to bear such trivial things. Especially when she flaunted her unearned right to Ciel's attentions and affections. Especially today, when Sebastian had so recently pulled Ciel from the jaws of death (yet again), proving his right to every part of Ciel.

Mine.

Every voice in him screamed the word, to the point where even the bones of his earthly vessel ached with it.

Mine.

This word, this sentiment, this truth- it echoed through the roiling darkness within him. It burned at his core, the very center of his existence.

Mine.

He had begun to understand that he could no longer blame this possessiveness on his weakened state.

Elizabeth had gotten past him. While he seethed within himself, he had failed to stop her from entering the room. He followed her in, if only to drag her back out again himself.

"Ciel! Oh, you're awake! That's wonderful! Are you feeling any better?" She was saying, having
seated herself on the edge of Ciel's bed.

"What are you doing here?" Ciel was, to Sebastian's immense relief, alert enough that the presence of his fiancée and her exuberance annoyed him. Not so alert as to have any tact in concealing it.

"What do you mean, silly? I'm here to take care of you!"

For all that she was no longer a child, Elizabeth looked to be on the verge of pouting. Sebastian was reminded of a day so many years ago, when she'd pouted her way into having Ciel dance with her, false enjoyment and all. A remarkable persuasion technique.

*Some things, Sebastian observed, do not change with time.*

Ciel rolled onto his side so that he faced away from the two of them, pulling the blankets up until they hid him entirely from view. Because of this, his next words were muffled.

"I don't want her here, Sebastian."

"But, but-" Elizabeth was pouting quite marvellously now, taken aback by the rejection. The expression was wasted, as Ciel could not see it. Sebastian doubted that Ciel seeing it would have made any difference.

"I do believe the Master needs his rest." Sebastian ushered Elizabeth to the door.

*I did warn you.*

"I'm sure he will be more than happy to see you once the worst of the illness has passed. Tanaka will show you out."

Elizabeth made a small noise of indignation and promptly disappeared down the hallway. Sebastian let out a relieved breath and shut the bedroom door behind her, turning once again to face Ciel.

"She seemed less than pleased with your response to her concern," he commented, wandering aimlessly about the room. He found himself peeking between the dark curtains in time to catch a glimpse of Elizabeth retreating into her carriage. This pleased him.

"She's just jealous," Ciel scoffed. He had dug himself out from beneath the covers; he waved a dismissive hand to further support his point.

"Oh?" Sebastian's interest had been piqued. Ciel was in a delirious, semi-conscious state; his lack of inhibitions and the supreme likelihood that he would later forget this conversation entirely made him astoundingly honest about that which he loathed- his own heart.

"She thinks," Ciel whispered dazedly, as though worried that he might be overheard, "that I don't love her as much as I love you."

Sebastian nearly flinched at the bright flash of something blooming behind his ribs.

Ciel was not looking at him- he had burrowed back down, eyelids fluttering, inviting the return of sleep. Sebastian knew he was running out of time to ask.

"And is she right?" He found the sheer hopefulness in his voice to be astounding; it nearly dwarfed the amusement he had intended to present.

Ciel closed his eyes, hands pillowed beneath his head, a dreamy smile on his face.
A bone-chilling breeze whistled in through the open window. Someone had pulled the curtains back, and they rustled with the night air that moved past them. Ciel shivered at the sudden shock of cold on his heated skin; moonlight bathed him in eerie blue, and when he looked down at his hands, he found them to be as pale as those of the dead. He was naked, kneeling at the center of his bed; the sheets pooled thickly around his hips as though he were rising from a soft white ocean. He could not see beyond the edge of the mattress - the floors and walls and ceiling were like a starless sky - black and empty. The sheets around him and the square of light from the window were the only things visible to him.

The wind blew harder, and he shivered again, drawing his arms around himself, an ineffective measure against the cold. A formless silhouette moved across the window, and Ciel gasped.

"Who's there?" He called weakly. "Sebastian?"

From the overwhelming darkness, a pair of glowing eyes emerged. Ciel could easily imagine the fanged grin below them, even if there was not light by which to glimpse it.

"Sebastian?" The name turned sour with fear as the demon drew closer. Ciel was acutely aware of his own nakedness in a way that he never had been when in Sebastian's presence.

"I have waited so long for this moment," Sebastian cooed. "So long." He came to the edge of the bed, his face still half-veiled in shadow. Ciel once again felt the whisper of feathers on his skin and he knew that Sebastian had shed all the parts of him that were even the least bit human.

"What moment?"

The question went unanswered.

"I must confess, there have been times when it was difficult for me to bear." Sebastian's voice was almost tangible - Ciel could feel it in Sebastian's fingers when they reached out to touch him. The fingers were talons, black-tipped and razor sharp.

It dawned on Ciel like hellfire on the horizon.

"You can't take my soul, Sebastian - not until you've fulfilled your part of the contract. Not until you've helped me get my revenge on those who took my parents from me."

Sebastian laughed. The laugh was not his. There was no music in it - it was revolting and froze Ciel to the core. But worst of all, it was familiar.

The face before him flickered. One moment it was indiscernible; then it was Norman Hague, his crazed smile more like a grimace of pain. And then it was Sebastian again, beautiful and terrifying.

Sebastian leaned closer, and for an instant, Ciel believed Sebastian was about to kiss him.

_For a demon, a simple kiss can draw the soul from the body._

A kiss?

Ciel choked on his last breath as Sebastian's claws pierced his throat. He felt his skin give way beneath them, sliding painlessly open. He watched a cloud of white-blue light, what must be his own
soul, cascade from his own body and into Sebastian's waiting mouth.

And then he woke.

"Sebastian!" Ciel screamed, shrill and almost out of breath.

Sebastian was startled- he had not expected Ciel to wake so suddenly- one moment, there had been the shallow but peaceful rhythm of his breathing, and then he had nearly launched himself out of bed in the midst of his fright. Never had one of Ciel's nightmares come so violently and without warning.

"There is nothing to fear, master. You are safe here."

Sebastian did not know that he was the source of imagined danger.

"Sebastian- Sebastian, promise me," Ciel panted, touching a trembling hand to Sebastian's chest. "Promise me you won't take my soul before it's time. Promise me."

"Of course." Sebastian did not hesitate. "I promise."

Ciel stared long and hard at Sebastian, his eyes clearer than they had been in recent days. He looked to be considering an important decision.

"Lie down with me, Sebastian."

Sebastian's eyes widened, and his body felt like it had frozen in place. So, this was shock.

It was the first time he had ever faltered when Ciel had given an order.

"Must I repeat myself?"

All of Sebastian's focus was on Ciel's mouth as he spoke. He had not stumbled over the words.

Sebastian wasted no time with undoing buttons and such- his tailcoat and waistcoat were gone without so much as a wave of his hand, as were his shoes. He rounded the bed to the empty side, and lifted the covers just enough to slide beneath them. He moved thoughtlessly, automatically- he had imagined this situation before, but felt wholly unprepared in the face of it. Feeling nervous about anything was not within the boundaries of what he had always known of himself.

He kept to the edge of the bed, more conscious of his physical form than he ever was. For what seemed like the first time in all the years he had spent in this body, he could hear the breath moving through him- he felt it, cool on the back of his throat. It occurred to him, not for the first time, that he was once again acting more human than most humans he had come into contact with. To think their strange behaviours were becoming his. Perhaps this was the price of being so intimately connected with one of this infantile species.

Not intimately enough.

Ciel was apparently dissatisfied by the distance between them- he slid to the middle of the mattress, reaching blindly out until his hands found any part of Sebastian he could hold. He found Sebastian's hand and frowned, squinting through the shadows.

"Your gloves. Take them off."

Sebastian obeyed. Ciel pressed the palm of his hand flat against Sebastian's; though Ciel was no
longer the small child he once had been, his fingers were still shorter. His frown deepened a little, a familiar crease appearing between his eyebrows. Sebastian reached out and smoothed it away with his thumb. This turned into him putting the back of his hand to Ciel's forehead, checking his temperature for what seemed like the thousandth time.

When the seal on Sebastian's hand made contact with Ciel's skin, Ciel felt a flash of heat go through him that he (even in his current state) was fairly sure had nothing to do with the fever. A question fought its way through the haze over his mind, and He was in no condition to stifle it.

"What did his soul taste like?"

Sebastian's fingertips travelled the length of Ciel's face, hand coming to rest on the side of his neck- his thumb pressed lightly to Ciel's pulse point. The beat there skipped, and Ciel swallowed thickly. 

_Ah, _Sebastian thought. _Of course._

Some of the nervousness he felt was coming from Ciel himself. It was not uncommon for demons and their masters to be so in tune that sometimes, the master's feelings became the demon's own.

"It was _vile_. I never would have given such a soul a second look had the circumstances permitted another course of action."

Judging by the look on Ciel's face, this was precisely the answer he had hoped to hear.

"And what about others?" He wondered. "Have you ever grown tired of waiting? Are the souls of others not tempting to you at all? Surely there must be far better souls than mine."

"It is not my place to be presumptuous, but I highly doubt that. There has never been a soul more tempting to me than yours, and I suspect there never will be. So you see, when the moment does come, it will have been well worth the wait."

Ciel's pulse jumped once again. His nightmare was all but forgotten to him. He knew that _this_ Sebastian, the one his fears could not touch; _this_ Sebastian would never break the promise he had made.

"Sebastian," Ciel murmured capriciously. "Kiss me." He met Sebastian's widened eyes and quickly added, "if it's not too much trouble."

"I assure you," Sebastian laughed quietly, the fingers on Ciel's neck sliding back to comb through his hair, "it is no trouble to do that which I already wish to do."

He closed the distance slowly, savouring the shy but willing flutter of Ciel's eyelashes. Ciel's next words were passed from his mouth and into Sebastian's in the instant before their lips touched.

"Just don't take my soul," he breathed.

"Not _yet_," Sebastian promised, and kissed Ciel.

Ciel surprised himself with the intensity of his reaction- he could not keep from surging forward, clenching a fist against Sebastian's chest, fingers curling into the front of his shirt. Sebastian, too did something unexpected- he closed his eyes, giving himself over entirely to the simple pleasure of Ciel's soft lips, of their bodies being close in a way they never had been before. He hadn't thought he would be able to feel Ciel's soul so intensely through such physical contact- it brightened and swelled and burned- this was perhaps the closest Sebastian had ever been to tasting it.
Ciel's soul was the caress of a lover; the blazing heat of the sun on frost-bitten skin. It was sweeter than the ripest fruit, paling in comparison to any nectar the gods could offer. It was poetry and sin and the closest thing to heaven a demon could ever know. Only suffering of the truest kind could make a soul so powerful- and this was only the barest hint of it.

Soon, too soon, the kiss ended, as all things are wont to do. Ciel remained bewitched, searching Sebastian's face for signs of the same; he found it, in how deeply Sebastian breathed, slowly taking him in. Ciel pulled himself ever closer, tethering himself to Sebastian by the hand he still had clutched to Sebastian's chest. Sebastian's arm curved around him, to shield and to protect. Ciel hadn't even asked for him to do so- he wondered how many other things Sebastian refrain from doing because he had not been asked.

"You do have a heart," Ciel observed, noticing the rhythm of Sebastian's pulse when he rested his head on Sebastian's shoulder. It remained slow and steady, only serving to remind Ciel of how quick and uneven his own still was.

"This body does function in the same way as yours, at least in this respect, yes." Sebastian's answer came quietly, whispered into Ciel's hair.

"And your chest- how it rises and falls," Ciel mimicked Sebastian's breathing. "It seems so easy to forget what you truly are." He closed his eyes and leaned his face into Sebastian's shoulder.

_Truly_, Sebastian thought, as Ciel fell back to sleep, _I am yours._

The night was crisp and clear, a definite change from the heated and hazy days of late. It was a pleasant refrain from the unusually warm summer which London had been suffering. Some doubted the relief would last. Ciel had many more important things to think about than the weather; murders, for instance, or, in this case, how much he loathed the social season.

He had woken up the morning before the ball, feeling almost normal aside from a lack of memory regarding most of the last week. He did remember ordering Sebastian to take the soul of Norman Hague, and the stunning relief he'd felt to be gathered up into Sebastian's arms. But the ordeal had resulted in sickness, which in turn had wiped clean his memory of the next five days. Probably for the best, he'd reasoned- he didn't care to recall being confined to bed with a fever and crippling aches. He'd experienced enough of that to last him a lifetime. However, when Sebastian had found him healthy and reminded him that the ball was only a day away, Ciel wished he could have remained ill just a little longer- it seemed there were no other viable excuses for not being in attendance.

And then there was the ominous feeling that something had happened while he had been sick, something significant that he needed to know about. More ominous still- the feeling did not subside, even when Sebastian had given him the news about the newest victims of the Father's conquest. Their standing in society and their now orphaned son were undoubtedly meant to strike Ciel at his weakest point. He had read the taunting missive from the Father himself- he had read it repeatedly until he knew every word from memory- and then he had burnt it to a crisp.

He recited it to himself during the short trip to the ball the next evening. He could not help but think that the choosing of these victims was more than an insult or a taunt- it was a _clue_- a clue that the Father must not think Ciel was clever enough to solve. A clue that, if Ciel could decipher, would be the father's undoing. Ciel would have preferred to think over this clue at him, in peace, but even a challenge from a mass murderer did not permit him to miss the final ball of the season, according to Sebastian. Ciel knew the truth; Sebastian was a sadist. He live to watch Ciel suffer through the
trivialities of social life.

That's not quite though, is it? He thought, unbidden. Not entirely.

The nagging shadows of memory scratched at the corners of his mind.

The carriage had fallen into the parade of nobles, migrating towards the house of the Marquess of Scotney. The horses had slowed to a crawl, whinnying lowly, perhaps in frustration.

Sebastian sat next to Tanaka on the driver's bench, oblivious to the potholes and heaves in the road that bounced the carriage from side to side. He was unusually lost in thought, as was Ciel, not a few feet away from him. He doubted they were thinking about the same thing.

Ciel had no memory of his request for Sebastian's kiss; of course, this was to be expected. It was one of the reasons Sebastian had allowed it to happen - it would be harmless. Ciel would get what he wanted without consequence, and Sebastian would never speak of it again - the memory would sustain him.

Or so he had thought. The fever had broken some time during the night, and when Ciel woke the next morning, it only took one look into his eyes for Sebastian to know that anything and everything he'd said or done during his illness was gone, as if it had never happened. It stung Sebastian like a proverbial slap to the face. The sting had yet to subside; it only grew more severe every time Sebastian relived the memory.

While Ciel delved deeper into the mystery at hand, Sebastian delved deeper into his desire. Memory, as well as it served him, was not nearly enough. Ciel had avoided any consequences, as was Sebastian's prediction; Sebastian himself had not been so lucky.

The sight inside was a mix of familiar and foreign - he knew this house well, having visited with his family there many times - but so many of the faces were unknown to him, their chatter filling the air where there would have otherwise been silence. The faint ambiance of music met his ears, carried to him from on the air from somewhere deeper within the house. The chandeliers glowed warmly, crystals sparkling like the glasses of champagne that clinked between those in attendance; the women's jewels put both chandeliers and champagne to shame.

Indeed, the female guests stood apart in the crowd - the men in their dark suits provided a stark contrast to the satin and lace finery on display. Looking from head to head, Ciel was more relieved than not to find that there was not a single blond curl to be seen. He had not worked out a plan yet as to how he could avoid dancing if at all possible. It made him grit his teeth to think that Sebastian was right; more dance lessons would have been profitable. He thought of the last lesson they'd had - three weeks ago, sunlight streaming through the open window as Sebastian had spun him around the room. The tug of his forgotten days grew stronger. What had he missed?

"Ah, Ciel, you've arrived."

Ciel turned to see his aunt and uncle approach; a few of the guests had stopped their revelry to acknowledge the presence of their gracious hosts. The crowd parted to let them through, and Ciel felt
more watched than ever.

"Aunt Francis, Uncle Alexis," he addressed them with a courteous bow. Francis studied him briefly, and Ciel thought for a moment that he could hear her tongue click with her albeit begrudging approval of his appearance. Alexis smiled warmly and offered his hand, which Ciel took.

How two people of such opposing countenance had managed to do so well together, he would never know. He supposed that Lizzy was most like her father, kind and trusting and loyal to those she cared about. He must be more like his aunt, then. Though he respected her discipline and concern for her daughter's future, he was relieved nonetheless when her attention turned from him and to Sebastian. She regarded him coldly, but nodded cordially to him just the same.

"Sebastian," she greeted.

"My lady," he replied. "I was just about to remark to the master how well the house looks tonight, as does it always."

The perpetual downturn of Francis's mouth straightened out a little. She might as well have smiled. Ciel considered it one of the more impressive things he'd ever seen Sebastian do. Francis opened her mouth, perhaps to offer thanks for the compliment, when-

"CIEL!" Lizzy exclaimed, having apparently materialised from thin air. She threw her arms around Ciel's shoulders, and he was barely staggered, expecting such a gesture from her. By the time she let go of him, she had already started into her usual practice of saying everything that crossed her mind.

"I'm so glad you're here! I was so worried when you were sick and wouldn't see me- you weren't acting like yourself at all! Well, you're better now, and that's all that matters."

"Wouldn't see you?" Ciel frowned bemusedly.

"Yes, when I came to visit you. You don't remember?"

Ciel shook his head. Was this the thing that had happened? Was this what his subconscious had been trying to tell him about? He highly doubted it.

"Of course you don't remember- you were so very sick." Lizzy patted Ciel's cheek, meaning to comfort him. He felt coddled and annoyed- the truth of his memory must be staring him right in the face, and he couldn't see it. He looked to Sebastian for answers, but Sebastian was gone.

"Come dance with me," Lizzy begged, dragging Ciel towards the ballroom. The satin of her glove slipped against his sleeve, and she readjusted her grip, clasping his hand in hers.

Bare palms pressed tightly together, fingers pale and longer than his own.

Lizzy guided him to the dance floor, where a multitude of couples had already gathered, floating about the room to the lilt of a Viennese waltz. Ciel took a deep breath and tried to recall everything he knew about dancing. He gingerly put his hand to Lizzy's waist, his other hand still in her grasp.

An arm around him, holding him close, a hand spread across the small of his back. Another hand, cool on the side of his neck, even as blood pumped hotly under his skin.

He looked steadily and Lizzy, managing not to trip as he took control of the dance. He knew he could never lose himself in the green of her eyes the way he could in the glow of Sebastian's.

Now lead me. Lead me as you were meant to.
Ciel very nearly faltered, his eyes drawn over Lizzy's shoulder, past the nondescript faces and to the ballroom doorway. There stood Sebastian, bathed in warm, white light. The look on his face was nigh unreadable. Ciel thought he knew every one of Sebastian's looks, but he did not know this one—it was dark and primal in a way that even Ciel was not used to.

He returned his focus to Lizzy and was reminded that he was leading the dance—every move was his to make. The power imbalance between he and Lizzy was weighted in his favour. It wasn't always so with Sebastian, though their relationship was that of master and servant. Sebastian was his knight, but he also held Ciel's soul in the palm of his hand.

*He is mine and I am his.*

Lizzy's smile was dazzling. The room spun as they did—everything revolved around her. In that moment, she was every inch his dear, sweet cousin. He was as close to her as he could ever be.

*She is mine. I am not hers.*

Applause broke out across the room—dulled by gloved hands, it was reminiscent of thunder in the distance. The music had stopped. So had they. Ciel stared open-mouthed at Lizzy, not sure if he should speak or what he would say if he did.

Sir Arthur appeared in the doorway next to Sebastian. He was flanked by Abberline and another nameless officer of Scotland Yard.

"I'm sorry, there is someone I must speak to." He excused himself from Lizzy's company, not stopping to notice whether she was disappointed or confused. She was both.

"I wasn't aware that Scotland Yard had been invited here tonight." Ciel narrowed his eyes at Sir Arthur when he saw the small police force that had not congregated.

"Due to the social standing of the most recent victims, I thought it prudent to offer security for tonight's *gathering.*" Sir Arthur said 'gathering' with some disdain, watching his men fan out across the room.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted your merriment," he added stiffly, nodding in the direction of the dance floor. "You dance rather well, I must say."

"Thank-you." Ciel answered blow for blow. "I have an excellent teacher." He looked briefly at Sebastian, expecting a knowing grin in response. Sebastian's face remained stoic.

"We've collected new information regarding the Midtown murders," Sir Arthur was saying. "We traced several inflammatory articles in *The Times* to one Norman Hague. He very nearly praised the killer in his work, and he was the former suitor of one of the Water Street victims."

"You still believe Midtown and Water Street were perpetrated by the same man?"

"I have solid evidence to support my belief, unlike some," Sir Arthur boasted—it was the most emotion he'd ever shown Ciel. "Norman Hague went missing on the same day as the bodies at Water Street were found. His works about the Water Street murders were published before the murders themselves took place. His house, at stone's throw from the crime scene, burnt down on the day he vanished."

"So he's dead then." Ciel's mind readily supplied him with the vivid image of Hague's head being severed from the rest of his body.
"There were no human remains found in the ashes." Sir Arthur seemed very sure of himself indeed. "And two more people are dead. Hague is the killer, and now he is a fugitive gone into hiding, more than likely still in the city."

*His corpse is somewhere beneath us, being gnawed on by rats*, Ciel thought.

"Your tone is rather accusatory, Sir Arthur," Ciel noted the expectant look on the man's face. "Do you have a question for me? By all means, feel free to ask it."

"You lied and bullied your way into this investigation. You contaminated a murder scene, and you spouted unfounded nonsense about copycat murderers and ritual motive. Then, the only suspect in this case vanishes in a puff of smoke, not an hour after you did," Sir Arthur explained. "So my question to you Phantomhive, is: where is Norman Hague?"

"How should I know?" Ciel spat. If Sir Arthur's arrival had attracted attention, Ciel's outburst demanded it. "I'll have you know that I've been extremely ill. Of course I disappeared."

"The two newest victims were of the nobility," Sir Arthur pointed out. "They left behind a ten year old son- their only child. That is a very clear message, don't you think? Why would Hague be sending you such a message if you had no previous connection to him?"

*Previous connection.*

*Ciel watched from a great height. His home was in ruins- a rolling, burning mess of heat and light. He fell into the blaze, crashing through the weakened roof- scrambling to his feet and running, running-*

*Mother! Father!*

Ciel opened his mouth to speak, but fainted.

He woke up to the scent of an old memory- the coarse, musty fabric of a chaise against his cheek. As a child, he had once fallen asleep here in his mother's lap, waiting for his father and the carriage to come around after a long visit at Auntie and Uncle's.

"Ciel? Ciel!"

This voice was not his mother's. It was loud and of the present- not the voice of a ghost.

Lizzy knelt delicately beside the chaise, leaning over Ciel and gently shaking him by the arm.

"Ciel, are you alright? Open your eyes!"

Her perfume overwhelmed his senses, and he felt choked being so close to her. There was no room for him to breathe.

"Sebastian," he groaned, pushing Lizzy away so he could sit up. He took several deep breaths and wished that Lizzy wouldn't hold his hand so tightly.

"I'm here, sir." Sebastian stepped into Ciel's line of sight. His face was pulled taught with worry- a deep line was etched between his raised eyebrows.

*A gentle touch, smoothing away the mark of such frustration. Affection, palpable in the air around them.*
"Sebastian carried you here after you fainted," Lizzy whispered. Ciel would not, could not look away from Sebastian's face. Ciel did not need to see Lizzy to hear the acidic way in which she said Sebastian's name.

_She thinks I love you more than I love her._

And is she right?

Ciel sifted through the strange voices in his mind and found the one he had been searching for since he'd read the Father's letter.

_I had hoped to be better represented to you in our initial encounter, indirect though it may have been. I have been awaiting it for so long, after all, and my true intention was to make a better first impression._

_I have been awaiting it for so long, after all._

"Sebastian, it's him. The Father is the man who killed my parents."

Ciel managed to make it out to the carriage without drawing any more attention to himself than he already had, though Lizzy made it difficult. She was insisting that he stay the night, that he was in no condition to travel, even though the drive back would be no more than ten minutes. He clenched his jaw against the scowl that wanted to show on his face, avoiding the eyes of everyone present as he left the house. The English nobility loved nothing more than an interesting story; they'd be gossiping about this one until Christmas.

Lizzy followed him out and caught his hand just as he was about to step up into the carriage. Her face was a storm of conflict, hesitation and determination warring for control over her body. To see her so timid was odd. Odder still was what she did when her determination won out.

She kissed him so quickly that he didn't have any time to react. His head was still swimming with realisations and nightmares, and so he thought for a moment that he'd only imagined it. The touch of her lips was soft but firm- her whole body was tense, from her mouth to her jaw to her hand where it held onto his. She was almost shaking with nervousness, eyes squeezed shut- he was so shocked that he barely moved at all, eyes wide and unblinking.

Almost as soon as she kissed him, she pulled away. He continued to stare right through her, as if he had been touched by a ghost. She let go of his hand. Her cheeks were dusted pink. He could feel his own face burning.

"Goodnight, Ciel," she whispered. He could not tell the moments apart; she spoke, and she was gone. His hand still throbbed from being held so tight.

When Ciel was a child, his mother had read him many fairytales. They mostly consisted of knights and dragons and grand adventures- or the handsome prince, kissing the sleeping princess to free her from her eternal curse.

*True love's first kiss.* The defining moment in so many of the stories he had once known. The event that singlehandedly breaks a curse or turns a frog into a prince. It made things different.

He didn't feel any different. Then again, he wasn't living in a fairytale. Perhaps it didn't count- Lizzy had kissed him on the cheek plenty of times, but never on the mouth, never when they were alone. This led him to wonder just what the parameters were for a first kiss.
It wasn't the first. He heard his own voice say the words from somewhere inside his chest. Sebastian was the first.

A fever dream, he countered, nothing more.

You do have a heart.

It seems so easy to forget what you truly are.

"Master?" Sebastian called from somewhere above him. Ciel turned to see him staring down from the driver's bench. "Shall we go?"

He met Sebastian's eyes, and for a beat, the world around him disappeared.

Sebastian, kiss me. If it's not too much trouble.

Not just a dream, then.

"Yes," he answered quietly, his voice stolen away.

It didn't matter, he decided, as the carriage trundled homeward. Whatever he had said or done while he was ill had no bearing on how he would act now. It surely wouldn't have affected Sebastian. Sebastian had only done what he was told and nothing more.

I assure you, it is no trouble to do that which I already wish to do.

Irrelevant. Demons, as Ciel understood them, had no concept of anything beyond physical desire. So the fact that Sebastian had wanted to kiss him was just as irrelevant as the kiss itself.

The kiss itself remained irrelevant until half an hour later, when Sebastian knelt before him, slowly doing up the buttons of his nightshirt. This was when it came to Ciel's attention that he had been doing nothing but staring at Sebastian's mouth since they'd arrived home.

He tried to remind himself, then, of all the reasons it would be such a bad thing to ask for another kiss. It would be so easy- so why did it feel like a hollow victory?

"Sebastian," he commanded, barely louder than a whisper, "kiss me."

"Of course, sir," Sebastian replied.

Ciel closed his eyes and braced himself for an impact that never came. He'd expected there to be some sort of blatant physical intensity to the way that Sebastian kissed- it was much more muted, the strength of his body shimmering beneath the surface, hidden to the untrained eye. As in all other ways, Sebastian was a wolf in sheep's clothing.

When Ciel allowed himself to relax into the unexpectedly gentle touch, he was surprised and far from disappointed to learn that his mouth fit against Sebastian's in a way that set every nerve ending in his body on fire. Sebastian tilted his head to counter Ciel's movement- but he stopped himself, too soon Ciel thought, and pulled back just as his tongue slid over Ciel's bottom lip. The next breath was so full of anticipation and potential, Ciel felt he would burst with it.

"Goodnight, my lord." Sebastian stood and left before Ciel had even opened his eyes. When he did, the room was cold and dark.
He fell back atop the covers, too warm to climb beneath them. His racing thoughts formed a comparison between kissing Lizzy and kissing Sebastian. There was only one major difference that he could find.

He wanted to kiss Sebastian again.

Chapter End Notes

08/19/15:

I just want to thank everyone who's been reading this story (and all the people who've left nice comments y'all are my lifeblood). I don't know how it happened, but on Sunday, this story was at three hundred hits, and now it's over FOURTEEN THOUSAND. THAT'S CRAZY. LIKE. Did this story get put on a rec list that I wasn't aware of?? We may never know. Also, I can't believe this baby is already up to 30k words. Many more words to come, that's for sure. Thanks again for reading- see you next week :)}
Ciel spun around so suddenly that Sebastian would have fallen on top of him if he had not been anticipating this very reaction. On top of Ciel- now there was a pleasant image. Instead, they ended up toe-to-toe; something akin to electricity buzzed between the places where their bodies almost made contact. For a fraction of a second, the tension between them was so thick that one could not have cut it with a knife.

July saw a mass exodus of the upper class from their homes within the stifling confines of the city. They would spend the remainder of the summer in their countryside estates, throwing tedious garden parties and authoring enough sordid tales to keep themselves satisfied all the way into the next social season.

Ciel hadn't the luxury of such inane pastimes, nor the patience to withstand them. While every other Earl and Viscount and Lord and Sir made their escape, Ciel had no intention of leaving London. He would not abandon this case so easily, especially with his new-found belief that it was the key to his long-sought vengeance.

Not even the fact that the trail had gone cold could break his resolve. He could not allow Sir Arthur, or more importantly, the Father, to think him weak. He was the Queen's guard dog after all; not a scared little mongrel who would run off with his tail between his legs at the first sign of danger or difficulty. It had been a week since the ball, longer since the Father's last two victims had been killed. To say that Ciel felt restless would have been an understatement.

"He said in his letter that he was giving me a chance to 'think on my sins'," Ciel observed as Sebastian poured his afternoon tea, "I wonder; to which sins was he referring?"

"The word 'sin' originates in archery, my lord," Sebastian commented. "It is the word that refers to a shot that does not go far enough to reach the intended target. Perhaps the Father would have you recognise your shortcomings."

"My failures," Ciel huffed, pinching the bridge of his nose to combat the headache he knew would come soon enough. "My failure to do what, exactly? Catch him? Avenge my parents' murders?" Though those things are one and the same, I am certain of it. "I am well aware of my shortcomings, Sebastian."

"Unfortunately sir, there is nothing to be done until he comes out of hiding and-"
'kills again,' Ciel finished the sentence. "I know. That doesn't mean I have to like it."

"You've received a letter from her Majesty." Sebastian sensed that Ciel's simmering anger was about to boil over, and so swiftly changed the subject, placing the envelope on the table in front of Ciel.

"What could it possibly be now?" Ciel sighed in exasperation, tearing the letter open with far less delicacy than he normally would have. His frustration was very nearly tangible to Sebastian - it crackled like a lit fuse, sending off a shower of sparks and threatening to detonate an explosive charge.

"Four people in otherwise perfect health suffering cardiac arrest from exposure to an unknown substance. Witnesses report the victims had all visited private opium dens on the day of their death. The Queen wants me to find the distributor of this substance and put an end to their business."

"It seems as though we will need to be paying our friend Mister Lau a visit, then." Sebastian leaned closer, reading the letter over Ciel's shoulder. If Ciel turned to the left, he could easily tug at Sebastian's tie and tug him down to-

There it was. The urge that had been prickling across his subconscious since the night of the ball. It was an itch that, now that it had been scratched, was nearly impossible to keep from scratching it again.

The desire to kiss Sebastian had been growing stronger every day; it made the ends of his fingers ache with the need to reach out and touch. It had gotten to the point where he was afraid of what he might do if he became careless - he kept his hands clenched into fists most of the time, and was diligent to focus on something else in the moments when Sebastian was the closest to him.

The uneventful nature of the past week had made this an excruciatingly difficult task. And even though this drug case looked to be almost as mundane as having no case at all, at least it was something that required him to be out in public. When around other people, controlling himself was made easier simply because it was more necessary than ever. He never believed there would come a day when he would prefer being social to being alone. Just a month ago, he would have thought himself mad for almost looking forward to a meeting with Lau.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

The air inside Lau's opium den was thicker than soup. Of course, with the weather the way it was, the air outside Lau's opium den really wasn't all that much better. Still, Ciel didn't have to cover his mouth and nose until he stepped inside.

Smoke hung in a pale cloud around him, stinging his eyes to the point of tears; he couldn't see much farther than an arm's length ahead. He slowly navigated the space, glancing from side to side in search of Lau.

Ciel felt Sebastian's presence like a restless spirit at his back; he never stood closer to Ciel than he did when they were in Lau's company. Ciel was already melting in his clothes - to think of Sebastian being possessive only served to make Ciel feel hotter under the collar. He could only hope that Lau wasn't feeling overly affectionate.

Everywhere Ciel looked, he saw women, all in various states of undress. Ciel had never counted just how many women Lau had in his employ, but there seemed to be more of them every time Ciel came here. So far today, he'd seen nearly twenty, most of them lounging about and smoking. Every single one of them fixed their glassy stares on Sebastian, regarding him with unabashed lechery. Ciel could not cast stones at them for this - he was far from blameless when it came to thinking of Sebastian as
these women clearly were now.

One of the women came closer than the others had dared, blowing smoke at Ciel's face with a grim look in her eye. Ciel sputtered and gasped, inadvertently taking more of the toxic air into his lungs. He clutched at his throat and coughed dryly - the taste was reminiscent of dirt and blood, and covered the inside of his mouth like a layer of dust. Even as he tried to catch his breath, his throat closed against any further intrusion. He doubled over, bracing his hands on his knees while he coughed. Sebastian put a hand on Ciel's back, slowly rubbing small circles between his shoulder blades.

Ciel felt the cold ghost of memory pass over him; the whisper of that same hand over his forehead, through his hair, holding him close. He craned his neck and stole a glance at Sebastian's face - there was the same concern that was always present at times like these - familiar, repetitive, dutiful.

This was the worst of it. The stab of rejection that followed every memory, every fantasy - the knowledge that Sebastian had only been following orders. He could not dismiss the embarrassment that had set in when he'd realised why Sebastian had pulled away. He must have thought Ciel amusing at best and foolish at worst for making such a request, for laying his feelings bare and being naive enough to believe that they would be returned. Sebastian had done what he'd been asked to do, and then he had run - probably to laugh at Ciel's inferior humanity.

This could not be farther from the truth.

"Ah, Ciel Phantomhive, come to see me at last."

A voice penetrated the smoke, followed posthaste by its source. Lau entered the room from somewhere deeper in the house, the blue silk of his robes swishing audibly as he walked. Ran-Mao was at his side as always, regarding Ciel with her usual disinterested glare.

"I'd been wondering when you'd deign to pay a visit to my most humble establishment." Lau waved his arms in a grand arch over his head.

"Then I suppose you're willing to answer my questions." Ciel straightened, regarding Lau coldly. He was particularly uninterested in small talk today; his voice rasped with smoke inhalation and the tail end of his coughing fit.

"Of course my lord. I just have one question for you." Lau leaned forward, face within inches of Ciel's. Sebastian's hand, still on Ciel's back, twitched.

"What is this about?"

"What do you mean, 'what is this about'? You just said you'd been expecting me!" Ciel hissed in exasperation.

"Did I?" Lau smiled absently. "I'm truly flattered. I should think you must have far more important things to do than come to see me, what with the Murderer of Midtown on the loose."

"Exactly." Ciel crossed his arms, frowning at Lau's thinly veiled mockery. "Which is why I don't intend to stay here any longer than I absolutely must. The Queen has charged me with putting a stop to the recent deaths occurring in opium dens such as this one, due to a new drug that has begun to circulate throughout the black market. Obviously, this case is not a priority for me, so I can't be bothered to look too close at every single dealer in London - especially those who are forthcoming with relevant information."

"You're asking me if I know anything about this 'new drug'."
Lau began to circle Ciel and Sebastian; some of the women followed suit, forming a strange parade around them. Sebastian did not look pleased.

"Perhaps," Lau sighed, long and drawn out, "but my memory does not always serve me well."

"I didn't come here to play games, Lau. Tell me what you know or I'll have you arrested within the hour."

"Ah yes- that drug."

Lau's marching ended abruptly; the girls behind him tripped at the sudden stop and bumped into each other in an almost comic chain reaction. With a nonchalant wave of his hand, Lau dismissed them from the room. They scurried off in various directions, leaving only Ran-Mao behind. She wandered off to a nearby couch, sprawling out over it as if she had fainted there.

"The substance you seek is called Dragon's Tongue," Lau began. "It is a small red flower that comes from a specific region in South-West China; there is a village built into the side of a hill, where Dragon's Tongue is the only thing that grows from the ground."

"What does it do?" Ciel didn't see how he could ever regret asking this question, although he most certainly would.

"When the flower is dried and burned, it gives off a sweet-smelling smoke that, when inhaled, enhances the physical senses in the most pleasurable of ways."


*Oh, God.*

Ciel felt his neck heating up, a fierce blush no doubt spreading across his face, his own body betraying him. He cringed, waiting for Lau to say something that would only further his embarrassment. Lau merely looked at him and smiled.

"I'm curious," Sebastian inquired, clearly having much more fun than was strictly appropriate, "how does a substance meant for pleasure lead to multiple fatalities?"

"Everything in moderation," Lau intoned wisely. "Some people have no self-control."

"I see," Sebastian nodded, having completely taken over the conversation in Ciel's stead. "Prolonged exposure leads to an increase in blood pressure, eventually causing heart failure."

"Had they perhaps achieved release, their fates might have been different." Lau stared directly at Ciel as he spoke. Ciel wanted to crawl into a deep, dark hole and be buried alive.

"Oh my," Lau teased, drawing closer to Ciel once again. "Is the Earl of Phantomhive not acquainted with the nature of man?"

Sebastian barely resisted the urge to laugh. Ciel's face had gone beet red- his mouth moved silently, trying to find the words for a clever retort. It was endlessly entertaining that Ciel could cross paths with thieves and murderers and not flinch away, but he turned into a mortified stuttering mess at the first mention of anything sexual. It had occurred to Sebastian that this reaction was more than likely compounded by thoughts that had no doubt been running rampant through Ciel's mind since the night of the ball.

Sebastian's contract and subsequent relationship with Ciel was defined by how it had taught them
both things about themselves which they had not known before. It was defined by how it had changed them both in ways they had not thought they could be changed. Sebastian had learned that even with all the tedious years he had spent among humans, there were still things humans did that could surprise him- or at least one human in particular. He had learned his own unpreparedness in the face of change; the sudden onset of feelings that had long been nonexistent in him, or had at least been lying dormant, waiting for something, or someone, to wake them.

Sebastian had not been ready for what he felt when he had kissed Ciel for the second time; the elation that had overtaken him when it became clear that this was something Ciel consciously desired. The true meaning of such elation was not lost on him- he shied away from the attachment that had already been formed, deeming himself weak for truly needing anyone in such a way. He had held himself to such a high standard of heartlessness for such a long time that the only thing he could do in the face of his failure was to hide; his own cowardice astounded and appalled him.

Ciel had obviously taken this as a rejection, as he had not spoken of the kiss since it happened. Indeed, the two of them had barely had a real conversation about anything all week. Ciel had spoken more words to him today than he had in the last three days combined. Silence, though Sebastian appreciated it, was loathsome coming from Ciel. And Sebastian could only follow Ciel's lead, as he was bound to do. Though he longed to change the way things were, he could do nothing without his master's consent. It would make for a hollow victory, to take something he had not been begged to take. The key was getting Ciel to beg.

All in good time.

"Who's been distributing this drug?" Ciel had overcome his momentary lapse of brain function, at least enough to form a question. "Where are they distributing it from?"

"I'm afraid I don't know that, my lord," Lau shrugged, the palms of his hand turned upward as if to prove his veracity. Ciel was sure it was a lie. He considered threatening Lau with arrest again, even deportation- but Lau's favourite thing to do was call his bluff- he knew his true value as an informant, and so he had all the power in this game.

"Very well. Thank-you, Mister Lau." Ciel bowed stiffly, turning to leave.

"So long, Ciel, I do hope you will visit me again soon," Lau called after him. Ciel could hear the swishing of Lau's sleeve as he waved goodbye.

Ciel took a deep breath and did not exhale until he had stepped back out into the street. One look at the sparkle of amusement in Sebastian's eyes, and Ciel knew that the blush had yet to leave his face.

"Oh, shut up," he muttered.

"I said nothing, my lord."

"I suppose you think this entire thing is hysterical," Ciel accused, turning his back on Sebastian and starting off toward the nearby carriage. "The strange sexual practices of humans must be quite the joke to someone like you."

"Actually, I was just thinking of how pleasantly surprising it was that Lau kept his hands to himself."

You and me both, Ciel thought.

"I do so abhor it when other people touch my things," Sebastian continued. "Rather a childish sentiment, to be fair, but I'm sure you can relate."
Ciel spun around so suddenly that Sebastian would have fallen on top of him, had he not been anticipating this very reaction. On top of Ciel- now there was a pleasant image. Instead, they ended up toe-to-toe; something akin to electricity buzzed between the places where their bodies almost made contact. For a fraction of a second, the tension between them was so thick that one could not have cut it with a knife.

It was suddenly very obvious to Ciel, just exactly what Sebastian was up to; he should not have doubted Sebastian's ability to see through every one of his pretenses. It may not have been rejection that drove Sebastian to pull back so suddenly. Sebastian must have known that what Ciel wanted was what he wanted also. He was merely waiting for Ciel to make the next move; to forfeit the game- asking Sebastian to kiss him had been a slight slip of the tongue, but it was not enough to constitute surrender. And Ciel had never been one to back down from a challenge.

"Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do." Ciel's words were a near growl in the back of his throat. "You should know better than to play such games with me."

"You wound me, sir." Sebastian put a hand to his chest in mock sorrow. "I would never presume to goad you towards action in any way whatsoever."

"We'll see," Ciel huffed. He returned to his former course down the pavement, and all at once it was as if he had never stopped. His gait was steady, determined. It was abundantly clear that this battle of wills would be equally matched. Sebastian expected nothing less from his master.

It took the rest of the afternoon to gather the necessary information about the victims; each of them had been financially well-off, and had lived within a few miles of each other. They had all died at home in the small hours of the night, after having come home from 'undisclosed errands'. This led Ciel to believe that they had all been exposed to the drug at the same location.

Finding that location proved to be more time-consuming. They had gone to almost a dozen houses in the area of the victims' homes, collecting bits and pieces of speculation that mostly only add up to paranoid rumor. Some rumors, however, are borne from truth.

The supposed drug den was a house no different from its neighbours. They kept watch on it as the sun disappeared behind the rooftops. Clouds were moving in over the horizon, boiling with the makings of an incredible thunderstorm. It wasn't long before the sky was dark- and still not a single person had entered or left the house.

"We have no choice but to search it," Ciel stated warily- the last time he had Sebastian search a house, that house had exploded, nearly costing Sebastian his life. It was irrational, Ciel knew, to think that it would happen again. Still, always best to be cautious.

"Would you have me go alone?" Sebastian asked.

Ciel only heard the words 'have me' and scowled. Since they'd left Lau's, Sebastian had be phrasing every sentence as suggestively as he could reasonably get away with. This was by far not the most inflammatory thing he had said, but Ciel's imagination was highly suggestible, and Sebastian knew it.

"No," Ciel replied. "I'm going with you." He was very careful to say 'going' so that Sebastian knew he had intentionally avoided the word 'coming'. He couldn't avoid thinking it though, anymore than he could avoid the images it put in his head.

They approached the house directly, quickly crossing the empty street, unworried that they would be seen. The porch steps did not creak as Hague's porch steps had- Ciel considered this to be a good omen. The door was locked. Hague's hadn't been. Ciel closed his eyes and saw fire in the darkness.
"Be careful," he warned Sebastian before he could stop himself.

"I always am," Sebastian answered.

The door gave way with one shove of Sebastian's shoulder; Ciel flinched slightly at the loud crack. There was no burst of light or ball of flame that followed. Ciel let out a long-held breath and gingerly crossed the threshold.

The atmosphere within the house was much the same as that of Lau's, though the decor here was decidedly much more English. The air was clearer too, the smell a little less revolting. There were lounge chairs and tables in every room; it resembled something of a Diogenes club rather than the illegal operation it actually was. If not for the drug paraphernalia lying about on every flat surface, one could not have told the difference.

"It looks like someone left in a hurry." Ciel noted the heat that met his hand when he held it closely over a nearby ashtray, and how every light burned despite the lack of people around.

"Do you think our friend Mister Lau sent them a warning?"

"I don't doubt it." Ciel grimaced at having allowed himself to be lied to by the likes of Lau. "Finish searching the house, and we'll go. This is most certainly the place- I'll put Scotland Yard on the trail tomorrow and let them deal with this."

"As you wish." Sebastian's footsteps on the staircase echoed through the empty rooms. Ciel wandered toward the back of the house, passing a rather small kitchen and a barren pantry. There was another door beyond that, maybe a closet, and Ciel was about to ignore it- until he saw a light flicker on the floor underneath it. He neglected to call Sebastian and simply tried the doorknob. The door swung inward on silent hinges.

The room was more spacious than he had assumed it would be- it appeared to be a bedroom, one that a servant might use. There was a small bed in one corner, a candle burning on the nightstand beside it. A wave of cold air hit Ciel as he entered- The window in the wall opposite the bed was wide open, the curtains whipping in the gale-force wind that had brought the storm clouds overhead.

Someone must have exited the house this way- the low bureau under the windowsill had been knocked over, and everything that once sat atop it was now scattered at Ciel's feet. It was then that Ciel noticed the wispy smoke curling up toward him. On his next inhale, he caught the smell of it, something light and pleasant, an embrace one could easily be lost in- it was a smouldering bundle of withered flowers, the colour of dried blood.

Ciel swore under his breath, crushing the flowers under the heel of his shoe, holding his breath to avoid further exposure. He backed hurriedly from the room, right into a waiting Sebastian.

"Is everything quite alright, sir?"

"Fine, everything's- everything is fine."

"The house is completely deserted," Sebastian reported. Just then, a great crash of thunder sounded from outside. Sebastian paused to let it pass. "We should be on our way if we wish to avoid the worst of this storm."

"Yes," Ciel agreed distractedly. He felt warm, though not to the point of discomfort- something heavy settled low in his stomach- the start of a knot, pulling tighter and tighter by the second. He recognised that the drug was beginning to take effect and averted his eyes from Sebastian, panic rising up in his throat. He knew he hadn't inhaled enough of the smoke to constitute an overdose by
any means- but he was obviously under some level of influence- and that influence would only grow stronger.

A good part of Ciel's ego had always hinged on his self-discipline; his ability to be in control of himself and his urges at all times was what set him apart from the common man. It was this self-discipline that kept him relatively sane throughout the ride home. He knew, however, that willpower would soon amount to nothing when there were chemicals at play inside his brain, all well beyond the reach of his control.

Sebastian, for his part, was not letting on that he knew anything about Ciel accidentally inhaling the fumes of an ancient aphrodisiac, though Ciel didn't even try to fool himself into hoping that Sebastian didn't realise what had happened. One glance at Sebastian's face told Ciel everything he needed to know.

Ciel had recently begun to bathe himself, for the most part; it had become abhorrently childish to him, to be cleaned by someone else, for reasons that had nothing to do with his new-found attraction. Sebastian had, of course, insisted on continuing to wash Ciel's hair; Ciel had reluctantly agreed.

This newly acquired habit made it much more tolerable for Ciel to be naked in Sebastian's presence. He had practically dove into the bath, eager to have an excuse to hide most of his body. Even if the soft cloth rose goosebumps all over his body, it was easier to ignore the pleasure it brought him when it was his own hands that brought it. He hunched over, leaning his elbows on his knees as he braced himself for what would be tantamount to torture.

The first pull of Sebastian's fingers through Ciel's hair had Ciel biting painfully on the inside of his cheek to keep in the obscene noises that wanted to escape. True, Sebastian massaging his scalp had never been an unpleasant experience, but it had never been as sexually charged as it was tonight. Ciel closed his eyes at the stinging suds that fell into them, pointedly keeping his arms crossed to his chest so as not to let his hands wander beneath the surface of the water. He remember what Lau had said about the other victims not finding release in time and shuddered.

When Sebastian tugged his hair purposefully harder a moment later, that shudder turned into a shiver that jolted down the length of his spine. His shoulders shook visibly at the gentle scratch of Sebastian's fingernails scratching lightly at the base of his neck, at the smoothness of his hands over his forehead. He wanted to feel those hands on every inch of him; long, slender fingers leaving trails of impossible heat wherever they went- across his stomach, down his legs, pushing easily inside of him, only teasing at the things to come.

"Time to rinse your hair out, master." Sebastian's close, quiet voice could barely pull Ciel out of his fantasy- even as he ducked his head under the water, he could still feel the ghost of Sebastian's hands on him. The heat in his stomach increased, and he felt his cock begin to harden.

When it came time to stand, Ciel was careful to keep his back to Sebastian at all times- he took the towel without a word of thanks, hurriedly drying himself while Sebastian drained the bathwater. He reached for his folded up nightshirt on the stool nearby, shrugging it on and beginning to fiddle with the buttons as he all but rushed back into his bedroom. He heard the bathroom door click shut behind him, saw the glow of the lights being turned out. Sebastian spoke just as Ciel had hidden himself under the covers, huddled beneath them on his side.

"Will that be all, sir?"

Sebastian's voice had the same proposition in it as it had earlier, when they had left Lau's. Ciel was once again struck with all the potential this moment held, just as he had been the last time Sebastian had kissed him. And though Ciel was about to give in to himself, he would not so easily give in to
Sebastian. Not yet.

"That will be all, Sebastian."

"Goodnight, sir."

No sooner had Sebastian shut the door behind him than Ciel rolled over, burying his face in the pillow to stifle a gasp as he finally wrapped a hand around his near-aching cock. He knew he must keep quiet above all else, though any penchant he had for coherent thought was quickly being burned out of him. He felt wild, untamed, an animal in heat, unable to suppress his most primal urge any longer.

He stroked himself quickly, roughly, his hips thrusting into his hand on instinct alone. The friction on his most sensitive skin was heavenly, a wave building higher and higher as it raced toward the shore, ready to crest and crash at any moment.

In his mind, Ciel had not trouble envisioning what he wanted; Sebastian's hands digging into his hips, leaving bruises in the tender flesh as he fucked Ciel from behind. His fingers pulling harshly at Ciel's hair, forcing his head back so Sebastian could suck marks onto his neck. Ciel bit down on his bottom lip until he tasted blood, imagining the sounds he would make, the filthy things he would order Sebastian to do to him, and how perfectly Sebastian would do them, as he did with everything else.

Ciel could not suppress the keening moans that came out with every ragged breath as he sent himself over the edge. His cock pulsed under his touch, his thick release staining the sheets below him. Even then, he did not feel any shame- if anything, he felt a thrill go through him. Sebastian would have do the laundry, to see the evidence of what Ciel had done and have to imagine what it must have looked like. Even as he cleaned himself off with the long sleeves of his nightshirt, the drug-induced haze lifting from his mind, the idea of Sebastian thinking about him in such a state made the same warmth curl within him.

He turned onto his back on the clean side of the bed, his entire body feeling both weightless and heavy at the same time. His breaths came quick and shallow, slowly deepening as exhaustion overtook him. His last waking thoughts were of the storm that had finally come, rain pounding relentlessly against his window. Tomorrow, the unbearable summer would give way to a colder one. Ironic that just as the weather cooled off, other things were beginning to heat up.

Sebastian knocked his head back softly against the door, hand smooth against his cock as he stroked himself through his climax. Sex had always been such a messy, deplorable thing to him; until Ciel, he had not known this kind of hunger to be so enjoyable. And now, having stopped outside the door to listen to what he had known Ciel would do, Sebastian was quite overwhelmed by just how human his own body truly was. His legs felt weak, head pounding in time with the pulse of his mortal heart. He could smell Ciel from here, the heady scent of him easy to distinguish, even through walls. That smell was more addictive than any drug ever could be, that he was certain of. He grinned to himself in the dark, euphoric at the prospect of things to come.

It wouldn't be too long, now, he knew- it was only a matter of time until one of them gave in, and they both got what they so desperately wanted.

Chapter End Notes
08/29/15:

I'm SO SORRY this was late, and short-ish, and probably not as good as it could have been. I'm really sick, like, emergency room sick- I've apparently contracted mono. So this is unfortunately all I could do while hopped up on steroids and ibuprofen. For some reason, writing smut for this story (even though it's not the first I've ever written) is giving me huge stage fright, so I hope it's okay (also apologies, it's totally unedited because I was in a rush to post it, so there are probably typos or grammar hiccups. I intend to come back and fix them in the future when time is not so of-the-essence).

Also, and this is IMPORTANT: I'm putting this story on hiatus until SEPTEMBER 9th. As I said, I'm quite ill, and I'm way behind on this story. AND my family is going on vacation next week to a land without internet (cottage country, baby). AND my brother is moving into his college dorm the day after we get back. Lots of stuff going on. TOO MUCH. I know it sucks and I'm sorry but bear with me; I just want to give you best story I possibly can. You guys are the greatest readers ever, so I know you'll understand <3 I love you guys and I'll see you soon.
Those who are Damned

Chapter Summary

"Surely you must know that no force of this earth, of heaven above or hell below could stand between you and I." Sebastian bent and stroked Ciel's face with the back of his hand.

Ciel's whole body thrilled at the touch- all the rushing desires and vagaries within him paled in comparison to the simple, familiar comfort of Sebastian's affection.

Chapter Notes

Words: 10k
Chapter Warnings: None. Wow. I think that's a first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- August -

Frederick Abberline's day started out like any other. He woke suddenly, just before dawn, lost in the murky darkness of his small flat. He had not dreamt, at least not that he could remember; but something loomed in his mind, left over from his troubled sleep. It plagued him like a forgotten warning- an old adage spoken to him in childhood that, if he could only recall, would banish the fears of great evil that haunted his steps.

It had been almost seven weeks since the last victims of the Murderer of Midtown had been killed. These had been the victims whose lives had mirrored those of the late Earl and Countess Phantomhive. A message for Ciel, Sir Arthur had said.

Abberline would never forget reporting to that crime scene- the house had been in perfect order, all but for the Lord and his wife hanging from their ankles from the banister. The screams of their son had rung in Abberline's ears for days after. He wondered if Ciel had ever screamed so for his murdered parents.

It was seven weeks ago that Abberline had begun to view the killings as thefts just as much as they were murders- thought he could not say why he felt so strongly that something more important than life had been taken. 'The Murderer of Midtown' was a ham-handed name for such a sinister force.

Since the last two deaths, Abberline had been reluctant to call the killer by that frankly comical mantra. Perhaps Ciel had been onto something when he'd shunned the nickname from the beginning. Perhaps Sir Arthur had been right; Ciel might know more than he was letting on. This idea continued to nag at Abberline until the killer suddenly resurfaced.

Abberline had come into work early, as he had been doing every day since his restlessness had begun. The offices of Scotland Yard were always cramped during business hours, but seemed eerily large when no one else had yet arrived.
Due to his self-imposed overtime, Abberline had completed not only his own backlog of case reports, but also most of the ones that had piled up on the desks of his co-workers. All crime seemed mundane to him now; what were petty thieves and drug-traffickers when there was a mass-murderer on the loose?

When Abberline had first joined the Yard, every new case had been an adventure - a chance to stamp out the impurities that ravaged his city. Now he looked at the streets of London and saw greed and depravity in all people, not just those who had been accused of breaking the law. Though he once sought to see the good in everyone, the bad had become far easier to find.

Ciel Phantomhive was the exception to this new-found misanthropy. Many knew the Earl to be a conceited and unpleasant sort of person; Abberline saw a man who carried the scars of his misfortunes without stumbling beneath the weight of them. If he appeared proud, his pride was certainly justified.

Abberline was jarred back to reality by the sudden trilling of the telephone. He stared at it for a moment from his place across the room. The dread within him swelled like the tide during a storm. He could easily guess what the call would be about. Slowly, full of resignation, he crossed the room and lifted the receiver to his ear.

"Scotland Yard, Abberline speaking." He was ashamed of the way his voice shook.

"Ah, Abberline. I had hoped you'd be in early." Sir Arthur sounded so much more gruff on the telephone. It was the note of exhaustion that caught Abberline's attention.

"Sir," he asked, "what's happened?"

"There's a butcher shop on the North block of Bridge Street," Sir Arthur stated simply. "Be there as soon as you can. And," he added reluctantly, "call Phantomhive."

"Yes sir."

Abberline stood watch in the street, frowning at every last passerby who stopped to gawk at this latest spectacle of death. This would make it into the papers for sure - he could already see the disparaging headline.

THE MURDERER OF MIDTOWN RETURNS: WILL THE STREETS OF LONDON EVER BE SAFE AGAIN?

At the far end of the crowd, the onlookers began to steep apart, allowing someone to come through. Abberline knew who it was without even having to look. Instead, he glanced back at the shop; Sir Arthur had just come out and was glaring over the heads of all who had gathered, throwing figurative daggers in the direction of Ciel Phantomhive.

Ciel was trailed closely by Sebastian. Abberline had the same thought he always did when he saw the two of them together - the energy they exuded was a single-minded one. Today, however, he noticed that they barely looked at each other. Sebastian was even standing noticeably farther away from Ciel than he usually did. For Abberline, who had once seen Ciel whisper into Sebastian's ear, or often noticed Sebastian gently touch the small of his master's back as he followed, any tension between them was odd to say the least.

"How many?" Ciel addressed Abberline, ignoring Sir Arthur altogether. However, it was Sir Arthur who answered the question.

"Seven."
Abberline gasped audibly, drawing strange looks from all within earshot. He hadn't been told the number of dead within the shop, only that he was to stand watch outside.

"They've been dead since yesterday. Five customers, the shopkeeper, and his apprentice. The shopkeeper's wife found them when she came to the shop early this morning after realising that her husband didn't return home last night."

"They must have been killed right before the shop closed last night, then," Ciel surmised. "That would give him plenty of time to work and be gone before anyone came looking."

"Seven," Abberline repeated flatly. "How could one man have killed seven people without one of them trying to escape or call for help?"

"One man couldn't." Ciel didn't seem at all surprised by the thought of more than one killer.

"I suppose you'll want to take a look inside?" Sir Arthur looked suspicious of Ciel's blasé reaction to such a development.

"How kind of you to invite me." Ciel brushed past Sir Arthur. "Abberline, would you care to join me?"

"Me, sir?"

"Yes. I can always use another sharp pair of eyes."

Abberline recognised this as a slight against Sir Arthur. Since the ball, there had been several insults slung between the two of them- always in the most passive-aggressive of ways. Just last month, Ciel had personally seen to it that Sir Arthur's time was taken up with a manhunt for a drug dealer whose clients had been dying. Sir Arthur had personally made the arrest, grumbling all the while about how such work was beneath him.

Abberline made up his mind not to side with one man or the other; both could make his life difficult if he inadvertently chose the wrong alliance. He might be doing just that by following Ciel so readily- he looked to Sir Arthur.

"You'd better do as he says," Sir Arthur muttered, just loud enough for Ciel to hear. "He may be a mutt, but his teeth can be quite sharp."

"Yes," Ciel smirked, "they can indeed."

The inside of the shop was stuffy and warm; everything in it reeked of decay, as if the very air had gone rancid. The shutters on the front windows were closed, and had been since before the murders, if the blood spatter was any indication.

The bodies were mangled, though not dismembered. They hung at separate points throughout the room, dangling from meat hooks situated among the various sides of beef and pork. Abberline averted his eyes as soon as he saw them- unlike the other victims of this case, these bodies had been stripped naked. Ciel looked away out of respect for the dead, but clearly not out of disgust. He didn't shy away so easily from the gore this time.

"Do you think this was the copycat killer? On account of the fact that this place isn't bloodless?" Abberline asked. It was easier to look at Ciel than it was to look at anything else in the place.

"No. Norman Hague didn't do this." Ciel's confidence in this matter was abundantly clear. "But it did take several people to accomplish this amount of staging. The real killer has acquired a
"These victims were cut in the places a butcher cuts to drain the bodies of blood before he slices off the meat," Sebastian observed. "Naked and vulnerable, much as animals are just before they are brought to slaughter." He paused, bending down to inspect one of the victim's terrified faces. "Do you think this is another message, sir?"

"Oh, most certainly." Ciel wandered toward the back of the shop, craning his neck to see up through the rafters. "He wants me to know he is simply using killing as a means to an end. These people, though they served a purpose, were insignificant to him- no better than the food he eats."

"He did take what he came for." Sebastian prodded the throat of the victim he had been inspecting. Beneath the sticky sheen of blood, Abberline could see the clean slice that had become this killer's signature.

"What did he come for?" Abberline's curiosity was piqued by Sebastian's choice of words- so there was something being taken from these victims. He knew it. However, his question went unanswered.

"Sebastian," Ciel called thinly, having disappeared into the back room.

Both Abberline and Sebastian responded instantly, rushing through the swinging door to find Ciel crouched just beyond it. A strange symbol had been painted in blood on the far wall. Ciel stared at it with wide-eyed recognition, face paler than the dead. He clutched at his ribs with one hand, almost as if he was unable to breathe. But when he grimaced a moment later, it was clear to Abberline that something had put him in pain.

Sebastian touched Ciel and Ciel jumped, nearly slipping in the bloody mess on the floor. He locked eyes with Sebastian, and Abberline suddenly had the distinct feeling that he had become invisible to the two of them. He could have danced a jig or given a speech, and their attentions would not have been swayed from each other. He looked back at the symbol on the wall and felt a shudder pass through his body. There was something evil about it; something ancient that he could not hope to ever understand.

"What does it mean?" He wondered, mostly to himself. He was once again ignored.

"Do be careful, master," Sebastian was saying with his usual tone of concerned condescension. Ciel, usually one to fire back when mocked, simply spun on his heel and blew from the shop like a ark storm cloud over the sea.

"I would advise you to tread very carefully," Ciel said to Sir Arthur as he emerged from the shop. "This is a far deeper conspiracy than Scotland Yard is equipped to handle. I suggest you save yourself the disgrace and let me deal with this alone."

"Listen here, Phantomhive-" Sir Arthur had gone red in the face- "I'll not have my competence questioned again. It's you who'll disgrace yourself if you continue to behave in this manner. this is Scotland Yard's line of inquiry, and I will find whatever it is that you're hiding."

"Very well, Sir Arthur. Your funeral."

Ciel gave Abberline a very poignant look; Abberline thought he could almost hear the words 'save yourself' echo through the air. He nodded in understanding, and Ciel left the scene in a great flourish.

"There is something incredibly wrong with that boy," Sir Arthur grumbled. "He walks with the smugness of someone who believes he has the power over life and death themselves. Sometimes I
think I'm the only one immune to his sickening brand of charisma. That butler certainly isn't."

"What do you mean?"

"Make no mistake, Abberline- there is something unholy going on between those two. You're a fool if you haven't noticed it until now."

Abberline looked back to the shop and felt the clammy touch of the same shadow that had been following him for weeks. It stretched out over his mental cityscape, threatening to tarnish everything- including the shining white image of Ciel Phantomhive.

Could he be hiding something? And if he was, then what on Earth could it be?

Ciel had known he was being taunted the instant he'd walked into the butcher shop. The Father was obviously revelling in Ciel's helplessness, his inability to even know where he should start looking. Today's victims brought the total up to fifteen; far too many by any standards. The symbol on the back wall had only confirmed his belief that this was the same cult that had killed his parents. Unfortunately, this knowledge was as useful to him as a broken bow would be to a violinist. He had no way of finding the cult's base of operations; he still didn't even know their purpose in stealing the souls of innocent people.

He had sent Sebastian out to search the homes of the most recent victims. He didn't think it would yield much, but he was desperate. If one of them had been connected to the occult or black magic in any way, it would at least give Ciel a direction in which to point himself. With Sebastian on his errand, Ciel had nothing to do but retreat to his office and sulk about the frustrating nature of the situation.

Ciel sighed heavily and rested his face in his hands. He blinked slowly against the urge to lay his head down on the desk and sleep. He was beginning to get quite fed up with the inconvenient timing of mass murderers and wayward fantasies. As if this wasn't already proving to be the most challenging case of his life, he also had to contend with the difficulty of being around Sebastian day in and day out without succumbing to the urge to forfeit this little game of theirs and get exactly what he most wanted. He was becoming desperate, and his desperation was a distraction he didn't need. In the face of his long-sought revenge, what he needed was to keep his wits about him at all times.

Of all the conflicting emotions that threatened to tear down his concentration, shame was not one he had yet experienced. Not only was shame something which was generally not in his nature to feel, but for every reason he should justifiably be appalled at his own mind, he knew that his desire for Sebastian could never be the absolute worst thing he'd ever done.

I've already bargained away my immortal soul, he told himself. What's a little sexual deviancy, really?

Ciel was startled from this train of thought by the sudden crash of the window flying open, followed by Sebastian nearly tumbling through it.

"Sebastian, what-" Ciel's reprimand was stopped short when he saw the state of Sebastian's face. There was a long scratch on his forehead, and it bled profusely, leaving the left side of his face painted red. His lip was split and swollen and dripping blood as well. These wounds were nothing compared to the gash across his shoulder and chest- Ciel was reminded of Sebastian's long-ago fight with the reaper Grell Sutcliff.

"Forgive me my unorthodox entrance- I did not wish to startle the other servants with my unseemly appearance," Sebastian explained, nonchalantly drawing a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbing
at his cheek.

"You seem to have no qualms about startling me," Ciel complained under his breath, standing quickly and coming to Sebastian's side. He was relieved to find that, upon closer inspection, Sebastian’s injuries proved to be less severe than he had originally thought. The cut on Sebastian’s forehead had already closed up, and the split in his lip did the same as he licked away the blood.

*I could kiss him right now,* Ciel thought. *I wonder- what would his blood taste like?*

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"Rest assured that I am, for the most part, unharmed."

Sebastian tugged his tie away, undoing several buttons and pealing back the ruined fabric of his suit to look at the worst of the wounds he had suffered. His skin, though marred by drying blood, was undamaged but for a thin scar that looked months old rather than minutes. Ciel tried not to blush as he looked away.

*Really Ciel, it's only his shoulder.*

It was more the idea that this was the most of Sebastian's body that Ciel had ever seen, and how much of it was still left to his overactive imagination. Now was not the time for this, he knew, but he was apparently much weaker than he had previously thought himself to be.

"Go and get cleaned up," he ordered, as an excuse to get the undressing Sebastian out of his sight. "And then I want to know just exactly what happened."

"It would seem," Sebastian began, when his suit had been changed and Ciel's afternoon tea had been poured, "that I have stumbled upon the reason for the Father's collection of souls."

"Oh?" Ciel was immediately captivated- this might be their first real break in the case.

"It happened as I was returning from the errand you sent me on," Sebastian explained. "As you suspected, none of the victims from the butcher shop had any known affiliations with the occult, nor evidence of witchcraft present in their homes. But not long after I departed from the last house I had to search, I was attacked by none other than three of the victims themselves."

"What?" Ciel nearly choked on his tea. "How is that possible?"

"I myself was so surprised that I did not at first trust my own senses," Sebastian confessed. "The creatures that attacked me today were my own kind."

"Demons? Are you telling me-"

"Yes. The Father has found a way to turn human souls into demons."

Ciel was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of questions that fought for control of his mouth. He stared blankly at Sebastian for several moments before he could sift through the chaos and choose a suitable one to ask first.

"That can be done?"

"Indeed it can."

Sebastian paused, pulling a chair closer to Ciel's desk and taking a seat. Sitting wasn't something he normally did in Ciel's presence, and Ciel wondered if perhaps Sebastian was tired, that his injuries
were still having some sort of adverse affect. Either way, the fact that Sebastian had sat down was
enough to tell Ciel that he was about to be given an extensive explanation. He leaned back in his
own chair and listened.

"Demons as a race fall into two categories. The first demons were created when Lucifer was exiled
from Heaven; the angels who were loyal to him followed him to hell, abandoning their names and
the cause they had been charged with by God- to protect the souls of those that dwelt on the earth.
Instead, they became the guardians of hell, torturing the souls of those who are damned, feeding on
their eternal pain and suffering. These demons are ancient and powerful and seldom ingratiate
themselves among the living."

"The second kind of demon comes from the depths of hell itself. When a soul is condemned to the
pit, it becomes broken and twisted over time- without earthly attachments such as love or physical
life, the soul will go through a transformation of sorts, becoming an entity that craves the power and
light of what it once was. These are the demons that are released upon the earth to steal and beguile
man away from the side of what is holy. The more souls they consume, and the longer they live, the
more their power grows."

"What kind are you?" It seemed the obvious thing to ask.

"I myself was once human; centuries ago, long before the rise of modern civilisation. I have no
memory of my life before- anything I might have known, the bonds I might have had in that life,
were stripped from me during my transformation. I awoke only knowing the savage hunger that
drives my kind."

"And what does this history lesson have to do with the demons that attacked you today?"

"There is a ritual, conceived in the earliest days of my race; as such, only a few of us still remember
it. Its original purpose was to allow demons to create other demons for themselves. The created
demon is eternally bound to its creator in a kind of symbiosis- the created demon's energy feeds and
sustains the creator. And in return, the creator protects the created. It was once seen as a status
symbol; the more underlings one had, the farther their dominance extended."

"So, do you now believe that the Father is a demon after all?"

"I do not. There is one thing the ritual requires that the Father has not had thus far- a soul that is
willingly given."

Ciel was surprised. "What difference should that make? Surely demons are capable of taking what
they want, regardless of their victim's consent."

"Of course; you witnessed something similar when I devoured the soul of Norman Hague. But it is a
question of power, my lord; a soul earned is a far better meal than a soul stolen. I suspect it is the
same with the Father's demons. They were powerful enough to injure me, but clearly not as powerful
as other demons I've known."

"How did you know the demons that attacked you had been created from the souls of the Father's
victims?"

"They looked as they had in life. You know that demons have the ability to manipulate their physical
appearance. Newborn demons do not yet possess enough control over their powers to consciously
alter their physical form. As a result, their first instinct is often to take the form they inhabited as a
human. Also, there was the mark."
"You mean the one painted on the shop wall in the victims' blood? The one I was marked with?"

"The very same," Sebastian nodded. "It was branded on their foreheads. I assume the Father used it as part of the binding ritual."

"How did you escape?"

"They didn't fight in the way that demons usually do." Sebastian tilted his head. "They fought with only the offensive in mind, never with any attempts to defend themselves. It was apparent to me that they were being controlled by an external force. I suspected their weakness would be related to the mark, and I was correct. When I destroyed the mark by damaging the demons' heads, their connection to their master was severed, effectively cutting them off from their source of power. This is another reason I do not believe the Father to be a demon. If he had been, the mark on his underlings would have been more difficult to destroy- and it would have looked much more like the mark of our contract."

Ciel felt sick to his stomach. He was beginning to watch the pieces come together; after nearly a decade of wondering the reason for his suffering, the truth was finally rearing its ugly head.

"Do you think that the Father had intended to make me one of his slaves, when he had me captive all those years ago?" He asked, though he already knew the answer.

"It is highly possible, yes." Sebastian got to his feet and slowly rounded Ciel's desk; he could see the fatigue in the line of Ciel's back. For the first time he could remember, he had the urge to heal.

"If he's been killing this whole time, he could easily have dozens of demons at his disposal, ready to carry out whatever assault he's planning. So why show himself now? Why begin killing in the open?"

Sebastian could practically hear the wheels turning in Ciel's mind, the tumblers of a lock clicking into place as his face dawned on a sudden dreadful realisation.

"What if the symbol on the wall at the butcher shop was a warning? What if he means to come back for me?"

Sebastian allowed himself to reach out and touch- he put a hand on Ciel's shoulder and felt the tension go from his body in a long sigh.

Ciel had not expected to be filled with so much fear, even in the face of his worst nightmares coming true. He looked at Sebastian, and the fear felt foolish; it hissed and dissipated like a cloud of steam. After all they had been through, how could he doubt the extent of Sebastian's protectiveness enough to really fear anything the Father could do?

"Surely you must know that no force of this earth, of heaven above or hell below could stand between you and I." Sebastian bent and stroked Ciel's face with the back of his hand.

Ciel's whole body thrilled at the touch- all the rushing desires and vagaries within him paled in comparison to the simple, familiar comfort of Sebastian's affection.

"If anyone were allowed to keep you forever, it would be me," Sebastian said.

It could have happened then. Ciel was moments away from abandoning his pride, the shell of his resolve about to give way- but it seemed fate had other plans.

Mey-Rin burst into the room, shrieking and tripping over her own bootlaces. She fell flat on her face,
and Sebastian took the opportunity to move an appropriate distance away from Ciel, so when Mey-Rin picked herself up a moment later, nothing would look amiss. Nothing but the slight blush and look of disappointment on Ciel's face.

"What is it, Mey-Rin?" Sebastian frowned.

"Sebastian! Come quick! Bard has set fire to the stove again, he has!"

Sebastian sighed tiredly and went to help Mey-Rin back to her feet. "I swear, someday, one of you is going to bring the whole house down on our heads." He gave Ciel an apologetic if not cryptic look and followed the panicking Mey-Rin from the room.

Ciel put his warm forehead to the cool desktop and groaned. It was once again poor timing that plagued him. He thought about what Sebastian had said about an eternal bond, and imagined his life as a demon, bound to Sebastian for the rest of time itself. It was a startling thing to try and comprehend. But still, the idea did not repulse him- it instilled in him the same sense of rightness that he so often felt in Sebastian's presence.

Ciel touched the place on his cheek where Sebastian's hand had been and smiled.

After the murders at the butcher shop, Abberline began to keep a tally of the total number of victims in his notebook, which he carried on his person at all times. It became a constant reminder of the lives he felt he had failed to save.

As of August twenty-fifth, the total was raised to eighteen. These people had been killed in the seclusion of their own home, just like the first wave of victims. A young woman and her parents, killed bloodlessly and silently in the night. Abberline could not stomach the scene, despite having seen far worse very recently. It was as if death, gruesome or not, was becoming too much for him to take.

He could only hope that Ciel would find this monster and put a stop to him.

- September -

"How do demons heal so quickly?"

They were on their way home from yet another crime scene. Another two victims, another home devoid of warmth and life. Ciel had seen Abberline marking down a tally in his notebook. The total was twenty now.

There had been no further demon activity since the attack on Sebastian- Ciel was sure this meant that there would be another incident when he was least expecting it. His inability to predict exactly when and where said incident would occur was beginning to make him paranoid; he eyed every stranger on the street with great suspicion. He warily looked down every alley they passed, though it was the middle of the day.

"Why do you ask, sir?"

Honestly, Ciel didn't know. It might have been to reassure himself that they were safe, that Sebastian could in fact withstand the small army of demons that the Father had amassed. He might have asked to distract himself from the constant nagging in his mind.

"I've seen you riddled with bullets on many occasions; I once watched you almost have your arm severed by a reaper's scythe- and yet you always carry on as if nothing has happened. How is that possible?"
"A demon's healing process has to do with the fact that we technically have two bodies. One physical and one not. The physical body is a vessel, a host for my consciousness when I must live among humans. My true form is the amalgamation of my power; something like the evil spirits of legend. When a demon's physical body is injured, the power of their true form heals it almost instantly- this effect is augmented if the demon is in a contract."

"Man-made weapons are especially ineffective at damaging anything but flesh and bone; what is normally fatal for a human is only cosmetic to a demon. Even the weapons of a reaper, though more substantial in supernatural energy, have no real lasting effect on demons."

"But then, Norman Hague's trick with the holy fire did something else entirely," Ciel pointed out.

"True. As you know, holy fire reaches deeper than the physical form. Any sanctified weapon crafted for the purpose of destroying dark energy can weaken a demon to the point where injury to their physical body can be debilitating. Such weapons essentially make us mortal, if only temporarily."

Sebastian told Ciel all this as if he wasn't discussing what was possibly his only true weakness. Ciel stopped dead in his tracks and stared up at Sebastian's straight face, his own brow creased with concern.

"Mortal?"

"Do not trouble yourself, master. The only creatures that carry weapons such as these are the armies of heaven; and they are far too disinterested in the plight of man to go picking fights with nameless demons such as myself."

"Can this type of injury be healed?" Ciel continued around the corner. He could see his house at the far end of the street, the peak of the roof stark against the dark clouds of the autumn sky.

"In certain circumstances, yes," Sebastian qualified. "A demon without a contract is far less likely to survive- you recall that our connection was the only thing that allowed me to live long enough to rescue you from Norman Hague." Sebastian quickened his steps to keep abreast with Ciel's sudden change in pace- the clouds threatened rain at any moment.

"If a demon's true form is weakened, they have only two options- healing through the consumption of a soul, or the drinking of human blood."

"Blood? That's not too creative," Ciel joked, though something in him paused to dwell on the unbidden image of Sebastian's fangs deep in his throat.

"Demons and vampires both thrive off of the life forces of their victims. While vampires are reanimated corpses who require the blood of the living to survive, demons are essentially wandering spirits of the damned who require the souls of the living for nourishment. Similar, are they not?"

"They are at that," Ciel admitted, briefly glancing both ways before he crossed into the street. "But why should drinking blood heal a demon?"

"For a demon who is contracted, tasting the blood of their master is the only way in which they can truly taste the soul which is promised to them. If they are in danger of dying, this taste is enough to strengthen them to the point where they can heal the most life-threatening of their injuries."

Heaven's floodgates opened on them the instant Sebastian opened the front door.

Ciel was about to speak, but turned instead to look across the road. He could not see the eyes watching him through the downpour, but he could feel them. If he could sense it, there was no doubt
that Sebastian had sensed it as well.

"Shall I fetch it for you, sir?"

"Yes."

Sebastian launched into action, becoming no more than a dark streak through the air as he blurred away. He returned a moment later with his quarry; one of the demons Ciel had heard so much about. This demon had the face of a young man- a face Ciel did not recognise from any of the Father's crime scenes thus far. He inspected the mark on its forehead- it appalled him to think that he had anything in common with this monster.

What struck Ciel most about the demon was that it did not appear to be violent- it did not lash out- not even as Sebastian forced it to its knees, holding the claws of his hand over its head.

"Why hasn't it attacked us?" Ciel asked Sebastian, never taking his eye off of the demon's eerily stoic expression.

"It must be a much older demon than the ones from my previous encounter," Sebastian suggested. "As demons age, they grow accustomed to their power and learn to control their violent nature; as a result, they become less feral, especially if they have been enslaved in some way."

"He must have been sent to watch us and report back to his master," Ciel guessed, leaning down so that he was eye-to-eye with the demon. He did not fear it- he knew Sebastian could and would kill it at the first sign of aggression.

"I was not enslaved," the demon rasped. Its voice did not sound like it should be coming from such a slight figure- it was a an impossibly guttural sound, tearing from the demon's throat.

"My soul was saved, cleansed by the Father's holy power. I serve him now for eternity. I am but a herald of his glory, and I have been chosen to deliver his message."

"Then deliver it," Ciel commanded.

"My master knows your fear- he knows that you dread the violence his children could do to you. He would not have your fear. He does not seek to harm you. He only wishes for you to know that he seeks to save- to cleanse that which he has already claimed." A wicked smile split the demon's face- "Your soul."

Sebastian snarled, claws tearing into the demon's scalp as he yanked its head back. There was the sickening crunch and crack of breaking bone as the demon's neck snapped- any human would have fallen dead. The demon simply laughed as blood dripped thickly into its wild eyes. Ciel stepped back, loathe to do anything but watch Sebastian's anger unfold. He felt a rush of adrenaline to see Sebastian worked into such a possessive frenzy.

"You tell your master this," Sebastian hissed, throwing the demon to the wet ground and planting his foot squarely on its throat.

"Every part of him has already been spoken for."

Sebastian kicked the demon squarely in the jaw. Its head lolled grotesquely to the side as it picked itself up and scurried away.

It had taken all of Sebastian's self-control not to kill the creature, to peel back the skin from its face.
and enjoy its screams of agony as it slowly died. When he found the Father, Sebastian would be sure to give him an even worse fate.

"Why did you let it live?" Ciel questioned disapprovingly. "Mercy has never been your strong suit."

"The merciful thing would have been to kill it," Sebastian huffed, still fuming with rage. Ciel could almost see the black smoke curling from his shoulders. "Also, I believe the Father was expecting me to do just that. Audacious of him, to challenge my claim. No matter; I have issued a challenge of my own."

Sebastian turned to Ciel, who looked spectacularly smug; he was clearly pleased to see the effect this had on Sebastian's composure.

"He will find that it is not wise to question my authority," Sebastian continued. "Nothing he may do can take you away from me."

*That is the least of my worries*, Ciel thought.

By the time the Autumnal equinox came around, Abberline's tally had risen to nearly thirty-five. Each dark line on the paper was a scar that would never completely fade, even if the man responsible for this was ever, by some miracle, brought to justice. It had reached the point where Abberline felt a genuine sense of surprise if more than a day went by without yet another hanging corpse turning up.

Ciel Phantomhive had stopped turning up at the crime scenes. Sir Arthur liked to think that he had finally scared Ciel off, but Abberline knew better. Ciel would still be investigating this case, whether or not he had the full force of Scotland Yard behind him.

Abberline had developed a habit of taking extensive notes at every new crime scene, documenting everything from the colour of the walls to the exact placement of the bodies in the room. The notes would then be sent to Ciel by express courier. He made it a point to personally telephone Ciel to inform him of every new murder, though the papers were doing a fine job of publicising this maniac's reign of terror.

He had no idea if Sir Arthur suspected his deception, but it felt less like betrayal with every death that occurred. Abberline had a thousand times more faith in Ciel's preternatural instinct about these things than he did in himself or any of his colleagues. If Ciel was hiding something from them, Abberline thought there must be a good reason for it.

"These victims have no connection to one another," Ciel had told Abberline during their last telephone call, after Abberline had explained that Scotland Yard was still trying to find a link between everyone who had been killed thus far.

"The only thing these people had in common was their killer. Sir Arthur is wasting precious time trying to find him that way. This killer would never be so careless as to use a traceable pattern for choosing his victims."

"What do you mean about 'wasting precious time'? Is something bad going to happen? Something worse than what's already happened?"

"Something worse is always going to happen, Abberline," Ciel had retorted. "The question is not 'if', but 'when'."

Everything since then had been coloured with a shade of foreboding- it stuck with Abberline like an awful taste in his mouth, inescapable as his own shadow. Fear rotted inside of him and turned to stagnant resignation. Perhaps the most terrifying thing was that he had begun to accept the fact that
there was nothing more for him to do but wait for an inevitable end.

- October -

Sebastian was certain that Ciel was deliberately trying to torture him. Even more irksome was the fact that he was doing an excellent job of it.

What had started out as a game was rapidly devolving into something more serious altogether.

Longing, he had always thought, was a weakness exclusive to the human race. It was a feeling he could never understand until he was in the full throes of it. It felt much like hunger in that there was a need that cried to be met. It felt much like thirst, in that it left a dry ache that begged to be soothed. It felt most like desire, in that it burned, a constant flame that could only be extinguished by one thing. But longing was also a pit, deep and vast and dark, an emptiness that he had never known.

Longing contained one thing that neither hunger nor thirst nor desire could capture: to truly long for something, one must first love it.

Sebastian could no more deny what he felt than he could say when he had begun to feel it. It was impossible to distinguish the moment when simple affection had grown much stronger roots, or when the instinct to protect his prey had become a genuine need to shelter a soul unlike any other he had seen.

He knew it didn't matter when this transformation had taken place. His days of questioning were over. Where he had once thought it impossible for demons to love at all, he now simply considered nothing to be outside the realm of possibility. How narrow-minded he had been to never entertain the idea; in retrospect, such an attachment seemed like a natural progression than a major alteration of character. Was it not even the slightest bit predictable that, under the right circumstances, a bond between a demon and its master could grow strong enough to resemble the thing that humans called love?

If this was indeed love, then Sebastian had a new appreciation for the misery it brought upon mortals. For where the great poets sang of the joys of a love returned, love was an unfailling source of agony if it was unrequited.

For Sebastian, it was not quite so melodramatic. Sebastian was simply not accustomed to wanting something he could not have. The only thing he could not have, in fact- Sebastian could have Ciel's body, and would one day have Ciel's soul- but it was his heart that Sebastian now coveted most.

If he had to describe the feeling, he would say that he wanted to hold Ciel- but it was more than that. He wanted to be the thing that occupied all of Ciel's waking thoughts; all of his deepest dreams. He wanted Ciel to imagine sleeping next to him just as often as he imagined anything else that might come just before it. He wanted the thunderous yearning inside himself to be inside Ciel also- he did not want this longing to be in vain. Something as rare as the love of a creature who could not love should never go to waste. And yet, he was convinced that in this case, it would.

Sometimes it was difficult not to break and confess everything- but while demons did not lie to their masters, they could omit as much information as they wanted if they deemed it necessary. This feeling, Sebastian thought, would pass in time. He simply must weather the storm, and all would return to the way it had once been.

As the weather took a steady turn for the colder, Ciel had come to the decision that perhaps it was
better to withdraw his presence from London altogether; if the Father truly was after Ciel's soul, there was a chance that Ciel could draw him out, away from the thousands of potential victims here in the city.

The week before All Hallows Eve, he had the servants begin the task of packing all the things they would need to take back with them to the manor in the country. It had been months upon months since Ciel had seen the high roofs poking out among the barren trees, or walked the long hallways where he would sometimes imagine the sound of his mother's laughter and his father's footsteps. If this was to come to an end, there was no better place for it than the place where all of it had begun.

Sebastian too was looking forward to returning to the country. Cities were such filthy places, overcrowded and banal. When one's existence hinged on the happiness and fulfilment of another, as was the case with Sebastian, he was simply content to be wherever Ciel was.

The morning before their scheduled departure was when Sebastian became convinced that Ciel was aware of his feelings, and was using that knowledge for nothing more than his own amusement.

"Oh, a letter from Lizzy," Ciel had commented, quickly slicing through the seam of the envelope, unusually excited to read the words his fiancée had penned for him. Sebastian sensed something false about said excitement.

"It says that Uncle Alexis has to come into town this week on business, and the entire family has decided to come along. I've been invited to dinner tomorrow night."

"That would interfere with your plans to return to the country tomorrow afternoon, sir," Sebastian needlessly reminded him. It was the one and only thing Sebastian could no longer stomach; an entire evening of Lady Elizabeth fawning over Ciel, hanging on his every word.

Sebastian had been able to ignore his jealousy as of late, given that Ciel was well out of Elizabeth's reach- but with her reappearance, he was confronted with it once more. And though he knew how petty it would be by human standards, he chose to find comfort in the fact that Ciel would use any excuse not to be burdened by his relatives at a time like this.

"We can leave the day after next. We'll have dinner tomorrow night and leave for the manor first thing the next morning. It will do me good to visit family." Ciel said all of this so pleasantly and with such an unrehearsed air that anyone else would have thought it was genuine. Sebastian, of course, wasn't anyone else. Ciel shot him a furtive glance, and Sebastian knew at once that Ciel's willingness to see Elizabeth was purely a ploy to incite Sebastian's possessiveness. An incredibly successful ploy at that.

On the day Ciel was to have dinner at Lizzy's, he had the servants pack their things and go on ahead to the manor. By the time their trunks and crates had been strapped to the wagon, the sun had risen past its highest point and was just beginning its descent toward the West end of London.

The afternoon was crisp and cold, the air filling Ciel's lungs with an invigorating chill as he watched the goings on in the drive from his open bedroom window. The curtains swayed slightly with the autumn breeze, the heavy cloth kicking softly against his legs when he leaned against the windowsill. The ridges of the window frame dug into the softness of his palms, leaving red indentations when he pulled them away. This reminded him of Sebastian, as most everything did of late. Specifically, the memory was of the first days of their contract, wherein Sebastian would use the cane on Ciel's hands if Ciel was the least bit uncooperative during his lessons.

Ciel flexed his fingers and recalled the sting of the reed, and the dreadful anticipation he would feel as he waited for the inevitable next strike. Now, the idea of such a strike from Sebastian garnered
anticipation of an entirely different kind. He leaned farther out of the window and took another deep breath to clear his mind. Of all the things he had forbade himself from asking Sebastian for, this was possibly one of the more scandalous.

"Goodbye master!" The shouts came from below him; Finny, Bardroy and Mey-Rin were waving excitedly from the back of the wagon- their farewell echoed up to Ciel along with the clipped steps of the horses on the cobblestone of the courtyard ground. Tanaka snapped the reins and the wagon lurched into motion; Ciel raised a hand to wave back just before Finny's straw hat and Mey-Rin's bright hair disappeared around the corner. Ciel wished for a moment that he was going with them. But this proverbial chess match between he and Sebastian was in its final stages, and this visit with Lizzy was a necessary move toward the inescapable checkmate.

"They act as though they won't see me for a month; they do know we're returning to the manor tomorrow, yes?" Ciel did not look from the window, having sensed another presence in the room with him.

"You are their master- it is their job to care for you, and they do it well, even if they are lacking in other areas. I am told that when someone you care for is gone, it is only natural to miss them, even if you are only apart from them for a short time." Sebastian flitted about the room, emptying Ciel's bureau drawers into steamer trunks.

"I wonder," Sebastian continued, folding shirt after shirt, "if this is why Lady Elizabeth was so adamant that you come to dinner this evening. It would certainly explain why she bothered to come into town with her father at all."

Ciel turned at that, spinning sharply on his heels and glaring at the back of Sebastian's head. He steeled his shoulders and forced himself to remain calm and detached when next he spoke.

"Whatever do you mean, Sebastian?"

"Only that your last encounter with your fiancée ended somewhat differently, shall we say, than any other has in the past. I'm sure she must be eager to-"

"Tell me, Sebastian- when did you fall under the impression that you were allowed to speak so freely?"

Ciel would not have called this an outburst- it was a concise reprimand, one that stopped even Sebastian dead in his tracks, even if only for a moment. He carefully closed the trunk he had been packing, bowing his head in keeping with what Ciel knew was a merely a facade of remorse.

So, this was Sebastian's countering move then. Ciel had roused his jealousy by accepting the invitation, and so Sebastian sought to rouse Ciel's temper with his impertinence.

"My apologies, sir. I do not know what came over me," he said, moving swiftly to the door. Ciel had the unmistakable feeling that this might very well be the first time Sebastian had ever lied to him.

_Demons do not lie._

_That doesn't mean they can't_, Ciel thought.

"Will you take your lunch in your study today, my lord?" Sebastian asked an obvious question, looking for a reason to leave the room.

"Yes," Ciel answered, turning back to the window as the door clicked shut, signalling Sebastian's departure.
The last thing Ciel and Lizzy had done was kiss. It was very likely that Lizzy had spent nearly every moment since then thinking about nothing else. After Lizzy had kissed Ciel, all Ciel had wanted to do was kiss Sebastian- and so he had. This is what he had spent his last four months trying not to think about. He had all but forgotten Lizzy's kiss- it seemed so long ago and insignificant to him now, though it must be one of Lizzy's most treasured moments.

"Funny," Ciel said to no one in particular, "how a kiss can mean so much to one and mean nothing to the other."

When Ciel was a child, trips to the Midford house were as follows:

Arrivals in the front hall; warm greetings shared between parents while children chased each other around in mindless circles, hiding behind mother's skirts and jumping out to cause fits of surprised and delighted laughter and amused smiles from fathers both.

Dinners were the most forgettable; conversations among the adults, concerning the quality of the food or the current gossip of the aristocracy. Ciel's legs, too short to reach the ground, his feet swinging idly through the air while he made silly faces at Lizzy across the table- picking through the food on his plate until his mother would talk him into eating all of it. Even when she scolded him, her voice was never angry; she knew he would do whatever she asked if it would make her smile.

After dinner would come the quiet, relaxed visits in the lounge; boxes of toys emptied onto the rug, playing with Lizzy in the warm halo of the fireplace, the light making her golden curls look luminescent. Edward, not quite a man but older than a child, begrudgingly joining them in their games of knights and dragons. Their mothers sitting not far off, dresses colourful on the dark fabric of the wingback chairs. Sometimes Aunt Ann would come, happy to be with family after a grueling day at the surgery. Vincent and Alexis's voices were a constant hum, the low timbre of their business discussions filling the room along with their cigar smoke.

Much later, after the windows had gone dark with the night, the children's usual bedtime long past, Ciel would be carried back through the darkened halls, nodding off on his father's shoulder. He would wake in his bed on the mornings after, not remembering the carriage ride home or the kiss his mother had placed atop his head when she tucked him in.

Peace. Trips to the Midford house had always meant peace.

Tonight, however, peace was a state of mind Ciel could not achieve. He sat alone in the carriage, looking out at the familiar streets going by, all bathed in the orange wash of sunset, like a watercolour painting in the way that the light seemed like a veil over the houses and pavements. It all looked serene to him, but it was another world, fleeting and false; he could neither touch it nor live in it.

On this trip to the Midford house, Ciel had taken on the role of child and father; his aunt and uncle met him in the front hall with pleasantries and small talk. It surprised him that Lizzy had not been waiting by the door, or that she had not come running out to meet him. When he entered the dining room, she was already seated- quiet, nodding politely to him, with only a small smile to show her happiness at his presence. It startled him, not to even hear her speak until much later in the evening.

Sebastian had noted this change in Lady Elizabeth's behaviour- he was glad for it, if it meant she would keep her well-known affection for Ciel to a minimum. The reason behind it was encouraging to him also- after she had kissed Ciel, his shock had been taken by her to mean rejection. Sebastian knew Ciel would never wish to have her think this, but she, insecure in her developing feelings about their relationship, now wished not to appear childish and cause him to reject her further.
Sebastian knew that for all of Ciel's observational skills, he had not the ability to read into the emotional cues of those around him. He would be oblivious to Elizabeth's feelings, and so, through no fault of his own, seem aloof and even cold, therefore giving Elizabeth all the more reason to believe that kissing Ciel so suddenly had been a grave mistake. Sebastian was pleased; there was no need to drive any sort of wedge between them- Lady Elizabeth and her girlish whims had done his work for him.

Ciel himself felt incredibly separated from everyone around him; it was as though his body moved automatically, eating and speaking and acting as a young man of his social standing would during such a visit with relatives. None of it felt completely real to him- he wondered if he had fallen into the painting of London he'd imagined on his way here.

Time dragged on and flew by in equal measures- he had blinked and suddenly, was in the lounge, standing on the very rug he used to play on, staring into the fireplace until his eyes watered.

"Ciel, are you quite alright?" His aunt wondered, sinking slowly into her chair by the fire.

"Quite alright, Aunt Francis. I was just remembering how often Lizzy and I used to play here, when Mother and Father and I would come and visit."

Lizzy looked up from her window seat on the far side of the room, shocked to hear Ciel engage in such a sentimental line of conversation, let alone initiate it. She glanced at the doorway, where Sebastian stood watch; his eyes were trained on Ciel, as ever, but his gaze did not share the surprise that hers did.

"Your father would have been proud of what you've done, what a name you've made for yourself and the house of Phantomhive," Alexis said somberly, clapping Ciel fraternally on the shoulder.

Ciel felt undeserving of the words, though he was indeed proud of what he had accomplished for his parents' legacy, and for himself. He felt undeserving of the kindness of family; family who did not and could not know what horrors he had been subjected to and had so willingly subjected himself to- what unholy things lay within him. How truly depraved he was, that the irony of their ignorance almost caused him to laugh. He looked at Sebastian and knew that the same thought had crossed the demon's mind.

After this, the conversation turned to matters of the present. Alexis spoke of his own business, and then Ciel of his; various developments regarding Funtom's continued expansion into continental Europe. The world was a much bigger place than Ciel cared to think sometimes- so much of it was out of his control.

There was talk of Edward and his successes at school, and the successes Ciel might have had if he had also been a student. No one had ever openly questioned Ciel's decision to forego preparatory school in order to personally run his family's company, however skeptical they may have been in the beginning about his ability to run said company at such a young age. It no longer mattered; he had proven himself a hundred times over. He was a man now, beyond reproach and doubt.

Sebastian remained a silent observer through all of this, watching with some disapproval as Elizabeth left her seat by the window and joined the rest of them by the fireplace. She moved slowly, in a sort of rhythm-less waltz, trying to remain close to Ciel without crowding him. For the most part, she remained silent, only contributing to the discussion when she had something truly pertinent to say; even then, she looked out the corner of her eye for Ciel's reaction every time she spoke. He remained as Sebastian had thought he would; oblivious to her games, unintentionally uninterested. It seemed that everyone present had forgotten that Sebastian was there- all but Ciel. He would look over at Sebastian from time to time, their eyes meeting through the haze of mindless drivel that Sebastian...
barely even listened to.

As if time had been shortened, folded over and stitched down, the grandfather clock suddenly chimed ten times. The loud noise of it interrupted the ever-slowing dialogue between everyone present. Ciel felt like he had just woken from a dream- he had been given time to consider something, but the moment had come when he would have to make another move.

"I believe it's time for me to take my leave," Ciel announced, looking at Lizzy instead of Sebastian. "I must return to the country tomorrow, and I wish to have an early start."

"Very well," Alexis replied, making to get to his feet so as to show Ciel out.

"I would prefer it if Lizzy would show me to the door," Ciel chose this moment to lock eyes with Sebastian once more. The line of Sebastian's mouth had tightened, imperceptible to most- but Ciel knew so very much about Sebastian's mouth.

"Certainly." Alexis smiled knowingly at Francis, who, despite her prim and proper ways, made no objection to Ciel being alone with Lizzy. Probably she thought nothing too indecent could possibly happen, not with Sebastian standing watch. Ciel couldn't have agreed more; anything he and Lizzy might do, Sebastian would most definitely witness.

Lizzy smiled and took Ciel's arm, escorting him from the room and through the house towards the front door. Ciel felt Sebastian's eyes boring holes in the back of his head; Ciel's plan was most definitely working, then.

When they reached the front door, Sebastian helped Ciel with his hat and coat, tugging it up over Ciel's shoulders more aggressively than he normally would.

"It was wonderful to see you tonight," Ciel told Lizzy. When he met the unadulterated surprise and hopefulness in her eyes, it gave him pause; he wondered, briefly, if there was a lifetime in which he could have loved her, truly, the way he was supposed to.

"We must see each other again, before Christmas," Lizzy was saying. "I know! We'll come and visit you on your birthday! We'll have a party and-" she caught herself, "that is, if you-"

"Whatever you want," Ciel promised, trying his best to completely ignore Sebastian's presence- something he would never really be able to do. He took Lizzy's hand in his, leaned forward, and softly kissed her on the cheek. Thankfully, she didn't squeal, or faint, or do anything that she might have done as a child. Instead, she curtsied, the blush on her cheeks matching the bows in her hair.

"Goodnight, Lizzy," he whispered, voice almost lost to the whistling wind that entered the room as Sebastian opened the front door. Ciel bowed and left Lizzy with a giddy smile on her face.

"Hm, do you think there's another storm coming?" Ciel asked Sebastian, pretending that nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. Sebastian remained completely silent, opening the carriage door and waiting for Ciel to climb inside.

"Alright then, ignore me." Ciel smirked at Sebastian's childish reaction to all of this. He could have ordered Sebastian to speak, of course, but watching him brood was much more fun.

"I was not ignoring you, my lord," Sebastian said tersely. "I was merely lost in thought about the boundless depravity of mankind. How some will toy with the emotions of others just to amuse themselves."

"I agree," Ciel retorted, looking at Sebastian directly. He wondered if he was the only human who
had ever known the full power of Sebastian's wrath and had yet dared to meet his eyes. "Some people are so petty. The way they become nearly insane with jealousy at the slightest provocation. Astounding, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Sebastian hissed, and slammed the carriage door. It was too dark to see out the carriage windows, so Ciel leant back and closed his eyes, content to count the minutes of the ride home while he considered his coming victory over Sebastian's legendary self-control.

*I wouldn't be surprised if he breaks tonight*, Ciel thought, the familiar heat of anticipation rising in his body.

*Checkmate.*

The carriage skidded to a halt, so suddenly that Ciel nearly fell forward out of his seat. Every nerve in his body was immediately put on edge. There was no way they had been on the road long enough to make it home- he strained to see out the windows, but could not make sense of where they were.

"Sebastian?" He called, voice betraying his growing fear of the worst. "Why have we stopped?"

The carriage door opened, and Sebastian appeared, the anger from before completely gone from his face. He looked concerned, but not afraid.

"I realised shortly after we left that we were being followed," he explained. "I took a detour and attempted to throw off our pursuers, but, as I thought, they could not be dissuaded. We are currently a few blocks West of the house, in case you should have to run."

"Run from what?"

Sebastian never answered- a streak of darkness collided with him, taking the carriage door right off its hinges and knocking Ciel out into the street. The horses reared and whinnied in distress, and bolted off before they could be stopped, taking the carriage with them.

Ciel went for the gun in his coat- he had begun carrying it after Sebastian was attacked. He felt only marginally safer with it in his hands, which shook as he pointed the gun into the shadows where Sebastian had gone.

"Sebastian, are you alright? Where are you?"

"I am here my lord," Sebastian materialised at Ciel's side, unharmed. "But we are not alone."

Out of the darkness, from all directions, demons came.

There were a least a dozen of them, though Ciel did not exactly attempt to make a precise count. He was too fixated on their faces; as empty and as haunting as the corpses they had once inhabited. Ciel would have preferred them to be grotesque and distorted; instead he was faced with the ghosts of his failure.

All this time, all his vigilance against another attack- and he had blindly stumbled right into the Father's trap.

Chapter End Notes
09/23/15:

*CUE DRAMATIC MUSIC* WILL SEBASTIAN DEFEAT THE ATTACKERS? WILL THE FATHER EVER BE STOPPED? WILL CIEL QUIT BEING AN ASSHOLE? WILL SEBASTIAN REALISE THAT HIS FEELINGS ARE PERFECTLY NATURAL AND NOTHING TO BE ASHAMED OF? WILL THESE TWO MORONS EVER GET OVER THEMSELVES AND JUST HAVE SEX ALREADY? FIND OUT, NEXT WEEK ON: TO THE END OF EVERYTHING, CHAPTER SEVEN: TO HEAL A DEMON.

Soooo this is really late. I know I said I was coming back on the ninth. But my sickness took a turn for the worse and it was literally impossible for me to write. And there are a couple of other things that happened but long story short it just couldn't happen until now, and I am SO SORRY, and I will try my damnedest to make it up to you. The GOOD news is that I'm feeling much, MUCH better and I've been looking forward to writing chapter seven since the day I started planning this story so I can say with certainty that it will be right on time.
"No." Sebastian huffed out a laboured breath. It sounded like an admission of guilt- as though Sebastian thought he should be punished for wanting to save himself even though it meant hurting Ciel. His eyes betrayed him- they flicked to Ciel's mouth, then from Ciel's mouth to his throat. His gaze was bereft of all propriety- it was raw hunger, and it made Ciel shiver. He had imagined Sebastian looking at him like this- he'd wanted it. He'd only hoped it would have been different. A bed, perhaps. Less blood.

"Sebastian, Ciel breathed, "what should we do?"

The demons had not attacked- they surrounded Ciel and Sebastian on all sides, stopping no more than a few arm-lengths away. Ciel kept his gun trained on the nearest demon, the shaking having given way to the rush of adrenaline that heightened his senses.

"Running would be unwise."

The answer Ciel had expected did not come from where he had expected it. The voice that spoke was eerily familiar, though Ciel could not place it.

Ciel looked up to the rooftop, and there he was.

"It's you." Ciel could not have come up with a more clever thing to say had he tried- of all the ways he'd imagined finally coming face to face with the man who killed his parents, this had not been one of them. He had been preparing for this stand-off since the moment since he'd made his contract with Sebastian- but now that the moment had come, he found himself overwhelmed and afraid, despite Sebastian's arms encircling him.

"It is I," the Father said. Ciel could not see his face. The man was a lithe and hooded figure, standing tall and straight atop the ridgepole of the house across the street. He bowed gracefully, silhouetted against the deep blue of the night sky.

"Sebastian," Ciel shouted, the words he had been preparing to say since the day he sold his soul, "this is an order: end hi-"

"Ah, ah, ah," the Father interrupted, precociously waving a finger at Ciel. The demons around them
'I'm sure you've realised by now that you are not the only one with a demon at your beck and call. Or demons in my case.'

"It's good then, that I have more faith in my demon than I do in yours," Ciel retorted, though he was far from undaunted at the prospect of the inevitable fight.

"Faith is unnecessary when one's strength lies in numbers," the Father countered, a smile evident in his voice.

"Your numbers become irrelevant if I order him to strike at the heart," Ciel pointed out.

"I suppose that's true. You could order him to attack me," the Father taunted, "but the moment you do, my children will tear him to pieces. Of course, I was going to have them do that anyway. Your choice."

Ciel considered this for a moment, then took his shot.

The bullet lodged itself squarely in the closest demon's forehead. The demon had no time to react; the scream from its throat was aborted by the burning cloud that surrounded it. At a second glance, the cloud was not surrounding- the demon had simply disintegrated into a puff of dark smoke and flickering embers- they blew across the ground toward the feet of the other demons, who momentarily backed away in fear.

"Go forth, my children!" The Father did not seem at all perturbed by his loss. "Avenge your fallen brother! Bring the unclean to me, so that his soul may be cleansed!"

These words were all it took to make the remaining demons swarm- one moment they stood still, and the next they had pounced on Ciel from all sides. He closed his eyes and raised his arms reflexively. His feet left the ground, but it was not from being knocked onto his back. When he did not feel himself fall, he looked down; Sebastian had lifted him and jumped above where the demons could reach.

"Sebastian, what are you doing? I have to get to him! He'll get away if I don't-"

"Must I always repeat myself, sir?" Sebastian set Ciel down with his back to a wall; Ciel leaned against it to combat the sudden onset of weakness in his knees.

"My safety is your first priority," Ciel grumbled.

"And as such, I would ask that you remain here, where it is easier for me to defend you." Sebastian whipped his arm out as he spoke, catching an approaching demon by its face. He looked away from Ciel only for a moment, grabbing hold of the demon's skull and crushing it in his gloved hand. The demon made no sound as it was reduced to dust and smoke.

"Fine," Ciel grumbled, aiming his gun under Sebastian's outstretched arm, managing to hit another demon in the head. It fell to the ground, its mark intact, before Sebastian's foot destroyed it with ease.

"If he makes a move to escape, you have to go after him. You heard the orders he gave- I'm in no mortal danger at the moment; he wants me alive. If he tries to run, end him. That's an order."

"Yes, my lord." Sebastian seemed less than agreeable to this, but Ciel knew he would not disobey.

Ciel kept his gun in hand, but did not fire it again as Sebastian flew into action. The revolver had
four shots left, and Ciel never shot unless he was certain he would hit his target. He didn't want to risk hitting Sebastian, even if a bullet would only slow him down momentarily—there were no moments to spare in a fight like this.

Sebastian spun gracefully, tilting his head as if there was music in the air around him. As three more demons charged him, he kicked, sending the first flying into the second. The third demon saw its opening and lunged, but Sebastian lunged first, his fingers growing into claws and digging into the demon's forehead. Its death was more explosive than the others—it was beautiful, in a way—but not as beautiful as Sebastian, Ciel thought.

This could be the last fight, their last moments as master and servant, and even when faced with the finality of the situation, Ciel could see no one but Sebastian.

The demons that had fallen now picked themselves up, only to have Sebastian descend upon them; he stood among their remains, brushing the ashes from his coat. He turned to Ciel, and Ciel's heart skipped a beat at the violent storm in Sebastian's eyes, and how it swelled and then ebbed when Sebastian looked at him.

They were on him then—four more demons, one jumping and landing atop Sebastian's back. Ciel fired without thinking; the bullet caught the demon's neck, sending it tumbling to the ground with a spray of blood. Sebastian made quick work of it, but the other demons held fast, tearing at Sebastian's sleeves. When Ciel saw the blood dripping from Sebastian's arm, he leveled his gun at the demon with its talons in Sebastian's arm. His aim was true, and Sebastian's arm was freed just in time to kill the demon that was about to sink its teeth into his shoulder.

Another demon succeeded at doing just that—this time, Ciel's shot missed, the bullet whizzing off into the darkness. Sebastian tried to shake the demon loose; he was unsuccessful in doing so, and so he was too late to react to the calculated ambush that followed—two more demons restrained his arms, a third forcing him to his knees with a well-placed foot to the small of his back.

The fifth and final demon approached, a wicked smile on its unearthly face. Something in its hand glinted, silver and shining in the dark.

*Any sanctified weapon crafted for the purpose of destroying dark energy can weaken a demon to the point where injury to their physical body can be debilitating.*

*Such weapons essentially make us mortal.*

Ciel's sight seemed disjointed from his mind. He had not realised it was a knife until the demon had buried the blade into Sebastian's body. Ciel did not realise what kind of knife it was until Sebastian let out a strangled cry, until the ground was running red. Ciel had not realised that he had screamed Sebastian's name in warning until it was too late for any such warning to be useful.

The demons who held Sebastian by the arms had stepped back—Sebastian fell forward, one hand clutching at his stomach, the other keeping his face from smashing into the street.

Ciel gaped—he had never seen Sebastian overtaken by an enemy—he had not believed that there was an enemy in existence capable of doing such a thing. Ciel was frozen in shock, his mind racing to come up with a plan. He looked at the gun in his hand, the single shot inside it weighing more than it should.

He only had one bullet left; one piece remaining on the board. One move to try and save both his and Sebastian's life.
The Father leapt from the rooftop, landing among his demons as they congregated around him— all but one—the one that held the knife to Sebastian's throat, about to deliver the final strike.

Ciel did not hesitate—he pressed the end of the barrel to the side of his own head.

"Call off your dog or I'll shoot," he threatened, proud of the way his voice barely shook at all.

"Master—" Sebastian's protest became a cough, wet and wretched as he spat mouthfuls of blood.

"Quiet, Sebastian," Ciel hissed, looking back at the Father. "Well?"

The Father slowly raised his hand, and the knife-wielding demon pulled back.

"Don't be foolish," the Father said.

"I'm never foolish," Ciel retorted, half-expecting Sebastian to say something in argument of this statement. He did not.

"You want my soul, yes? If I die now, my soul will go to Sebastian, and you'll have to contend with him at his most powerful. And his most enraged—he's rather fond of me, you see."

Despite his injuries, Sebastian managed to scoff. It was a small comfort to Ciel, if nothing else.

"Don't be desperate, then. That's all this bluff of yours is; desperation. I do not believe, however, that you are desperate enough to go through with it. You're far too obsessed with your revenge, I think, to truly end it all like this. Even if you are willing to die, surely you won't allow it to happen before you've done all you can to stop me, no matter how pathetic your attempts may be. I'll give you to the count of ten to lower your weapon before I have my children destroy your butler for good."

"There's something else you haven't considered, Father; I may be just as fond of him as he is of me. If each of us is willing to die for the other, then you cannot possibly win. You can kill him, but know that I will have pulled the trigger long before your children reach me."

"Oh, but I'm afraid you haven't been given all the facts, Lord Phantomhive. If your pet fails to protect you, be it from my hand or your own, then the contract is rendered null and void. You will die, as will he, whether my children bleed him out or not."

"Is this true, Sebastian?" Ciel called.

"I cannot deny it." Sebastian gritted the words out through his agony and reddened teeth.

"Ah, that changes things now then, doesn't it?" The Father boasted.

Ciel scowled, looking from the Father's shrouded face to Sebastian's fallen form. With a deep breath, he let the gun start to lower, though he never moved his finger from the trigger.

"Very well," he spoke in the most cordial voice he could muster. "I know when I've been beat."

Ciel imagined Sebastian laughing at this; he imagined the knowing look that might have passed between them.

He took his last shot.

The Father pitched back, his dark cloak whipping around him as he fell. And then he was gone, the cloak empty, falling loosely atop the smouldering ash.
"What-" Ciel spoke before he remembered there was no one to speak to; his jaw fell slack in utter shock. The Father had been yet another demon, sent as a decoy. **Coward**, Ciel thought, though he could not deny the genius of the plan.

The other demons had reeled, shrieking in surprise and horror at Ciel's bold move. They took one more look at the empty cloak and bolted, all of them disappearing into the darkness just as suddenly as they had emerged from it.

Ciel stood perfectly still but for the wind rustling through his hair. When he was sure the demons were well and truly gone, he bolted. He skidded to a halt and fell at Sebastian's side, knees landing in the thick spread of blood that surrounded him.

"Sebastian," he said, "are you alright?"

He took hold of Sebastian's shoulder, his other hand supporting Sebastian's head. Sebastian had gone still some time before, and he lay heavily in Ciel's arms. He put a hand to Sebastian's chest and felt the subtle rise and fall.

**Not dead, then, but very nearly.**

"Sebastian." Ciel's voice was louder now, more urgent, but still steady. The time to be frantic had long since passed.

"Sebastian, do you hear me? Wake up, that's an order."

Sebastian did not stir. Ciel felt something wet on his face- too cold to be tears. He looked up to the sky as it began to rain, a fine mist that covered the entire world around them.

"That was utterly unwise of you, master."

"Sebastian," Ciel sighed in relief, pushing wet strands of hair from Sebastian's face. "We can't stay here; they might return. Can you walk?"

"For you, sir, anything." Sebastian slowly sat up, unable to hide his pain.

Ciel was under no illusions- Sebastian was dying. All he knew was that he would do whatever it took to save him.

Sebastian's knees gave out just as Ciel shouldered the front door shut. The foyer had remained brightly lit in their absence, and so Ciel momentarily expected to be bombarded by the panic and concern of the other servants, until he remembered- they had all gone back to the country. There was no one else in the house.

**Sebastian could die, Ciel thought, and I would be all alone.**

He knelt before Sebastian, who had propped himself up into a sitting position, back pressed to the door. It occurred to Ciel that even now, Sebastian was ready to defend him. While the sentiment was comforting, Sebastian looked about as battle-worthy as an old ship, full of holes and hauled off to the shipyards to be dismantled.

Ciel found the rows of buttons and layers of clothing tedious when he was the one being dressed; even more so now that he was trying to get a better look at Sebastian's injuries. Where his own rain-numbed fingers failed him, the mangled fabric did not- he tore and ripped until most of Sebastian's
chest and abdomen was exposed to him. This told him nothing new. The worst wound was horrific, to say the least- it began on Sebastian's left side, just under his ribs, and curved downward to the right. Sebastian's gloves were soaking wet and red as he tried to stop the bleeding.

The veins around the wounds stood out, purplish-blue underneath Sebastian's skin. His blood ran thick, deeper and deeper red until it was almost black- until it was black, Ciel realised in dismay. Sebastian's true form must be leeching out of him, signalling the final stage of his physical body's death.

For a demon who is contracted, tasting the blood of their master is the only way in which they can truly taste the soul which is promised to them. If they are in danger of dying, this taste is enough to strengthen them to the point where they can heal the most life-threatening of their injuries.

"Sebastian," Ciel whispered, "drink my blood."

"Sir-"

"Don't- don't you dare stand on ceremony now. You're dying. Drinking my blood will heal you, yes?"

"Not entirely-"

"It will keep you alive."

"Yes."

"Then do it. Must I order you?"

"No," Sebastian huffed out alaboured breath. It sounded like an admission of guilt- as though Sebastian thought he should be punished for wanting to save himself even though it meant hurting Ciel. His eyes betrayed him- they flicked to Ciel's mouth, then from Ciel's mouth to his throat. His gaze was bereft of all propriety- it was raw hunger, and it made Ciel shiver. He had imagined Sebastian looking at him like this- he'd wanted it. He'd only hoped it would have been different. A bed, perhaps. Less blood.

"Good."

Then put these thoughts aside and crawled closer, sitting back on his knees between Sebastian's legs. He felt his face flush, and he kept his hands clenched on his own thighs, fists so tight that his knuckles had the pallor of the dead.

Sebastian moved slowly, out of exhaustion, Ciel thought. Truthfully, Sebastian was not only exhausted, but reveling in the moment, savouring this barely believable reality. He peeled his bloodstained gloves from his bloodstained hands, fingers leaving red smudges on Ciel's shirt when he pulled away his tie and worked open the buttons. He stopped after the third, the familiar mindlessness of the task threatening to overtake him. He then gently tugged Ciel's eye patch away, blood streaking his cheek.

Ciel held his breath when Sebastian's mouth lowered to his throat. He waited, preparing himself for the pain that was sure to follow. Instead, there was only the heat of Sebastian exhaling heavily against his skin, his forehead falling to rest on Ciel's shoulder.

"Sebastian, this is no time to hesitate," he nearly snapped.

"I'm sorry sir, only- I fear that once I start, I will not be able to stop."

"I trust you," Ciel whispered. Mad as that may seem.
Ciel cried out at the sudden, sharp sting of Sebastian's fangs piercing his skin. This was nothing compared to the flicker of heat low in his stomach when Sebastian outright moaned a moment later when Ciel's blood hit his tongue. It was maddening to Ciel, to have to listen, unable to see the reckless need on Sebastian's face. Ciel remained quiet, fingers aching as he strained to keep them from wandering to all of the places they secretly wanted to go.

Sebastian, even half out of his mind, could easily detect the arousal in Ciel's voice. He might have smiled at this victory of sorts, had his mouth not been otherwise occupied. He could taste it in Ciel's blood; the pent-up desire, the incredible lust that Ciel had been trying to hide for so long. Now that Sebastian was so viscerally aware of it, he wanted to use it to his advantage. The hand that had left blood on Ciel's cheek now slid to hold the back of Ciel's head, making a fist in his hair that pulled his head farther back. Ciel gasped but remained otherwise silent until Sebastian sucked greedily at the wound and then licked slowly over it. This caused Ciel to whimper and arch up into the touch instead of flinch away from it. Sebastian moaned again and drank deeper.

The taste of Ciel's blood was sweeter than Sebastian had imagined. It was fuller and deeper than their first kiss had been, a better glimpse of the soul within. Sebastian could feel his own body returning to him, strength slowly building in his chest, hands no longer shaking with weakness. His mind became sharper, thoughts forming into words once again, only to slip away with every sigh from Ciel's mouth. He felt the shifting of skin, his wounds beginning to sew themselves shut, and knew with some reluctance that this bliss would soon be over.

Ciel was in danger of no longer being able to hold himself upright. His head was feather-light, but it didn't occur to him that this was from any blood loss- he was only aware of Sebastian's mouth on his throat, Sebastian's hands in his hair. He lifted a hand to steady himself against Sebastian's body and found that the skin where his hand fell was smooth- slick with blood but no longer torn open. This was what finally cleared the fog gathering in his head.

"Sebastian-"

Sebastian had evidently come to the same conclusion Ciel had; he withdrew, his breaths coming easier than they had before. When he met Ciel's eyes, heavy-lidded and no longer hiding his secrets, Sebastian let the last of his pretense slip away; he had waded too deep into this river- his reasons not to give in were gone, swept swiftly downstream. He closed his eyes and kissed Ciel without another thought.

This kiss was nothing like the ones they had shared before. Where the others had been measured and controlled, this kiss was frenzied from the start, hot and open-mouthed. Ciel could taste what had to be his own blood on Sebastian's tongue. Perhaps that should have scared him, or disgusted him- perhaps it would have- but he simply felt drugged on the thought that it was this bitter-sweetness, it was him that had kept Sebastian alive.

Even when the need to breathe became almost too great, Ciel did not want to stop. He didn't know how long this would last, how many more kisses he would get before one or both of them came to their senses.

Ciel finally gasped for air, barely able to pull himself away. Sebastian's fingers loosened in his hair, and he could not meet Ciel's eyes.

It was sudden and painful, the question and the doubt still chaining Ciel to his own treacherous mind.

_He doesn't want me- not of his own volition- it is only the contract, his reliance on my blood to survive. It is my soul that draws him, not me._
"Sebastian," he began somberly, "why did you-

Sebastian kissed him once again, hard and fast. It dawned on Ciel even before Sebastian answered the half-asked question.

"Forgive me. This is something I have wanted for such a long time- I am no longer strong enough to fight my own impulses. I have found it exceedingly difficult these past weeks, past months, having the object of my greatest desires within my grasp and not being able to speak of it, to touch you-"

"Shut up," Ciel breathed. He surged forward and kissed Sebastian, catching the taste of the words he had spoken- words which made Ciel's heart flutter and fly and beat its wings madly against the cage of his ribs. His chest ached with it, ached in the sweetest way. He could scarcely believe that he had clung so tightly to reason until he almost lost his last chance, all for the sake of his pride. The wasted time behind him pushed into every kiss that followed, their mouths sliding seamlessly, heads tilting as though they were stars, aligning out of provident design.

Sebastian was striving to learn all he could about the new side of Ciel that was being shown to him. He found that Ciel, though somewhat uncertain, no longer stopped himself from touching. He mimicked Sebastian's previous action, threading his fingers through Sebastian's hair and pulling- there was no hesitation in this. Sebastian growled playfully, nipping at Ciel's bottom lip. Ciel gasped and shuddered, hands involuntarily fistig in Sebastian's hair. Sebastian responded by taking hold of Ciel's hips, easily sliding his hands down and spreading his fingers over Ciel's thighs. More shivers from Ciel, but not a single protest as Sebastian pushed Ciel's legs apart, bringing him up to his knees and pulling Ciel into his lap.

Ciel wound his arms around Sebastian's shoulders, holding himself chest-to-chest with Sebastian while Sebastian's hands moved to roam Ciel's back. Ciel felt afame- his face, his body- this was becoming such a familiar and addictive heat that he wasn't surprised or ashamed when his thoughts took a turn toward getting Sebastian- and himself- out of these ruined clothes.

"Perhaps we should- oh." Ciel nearly lost his train of thought altogether when Sebastian lowered his head to kiss the livid mark his fangs had left behind.

"Perhaps we should wash all this blood off." He tried the sentence again and this time made it all the way through.

As much as Sebastian did not want to move- to stop touching Ciel for even the briefest of moments- he was loathe to disagree with Ciel's suggestion.

"Perhaps you are right." He sucked lightly at the as yet untouched parts of Ciel's throat, unable to resist- delighted that he no longer had a reason to.

Ciel stood, somewhat reluctant; remarkably, his light-headedness did not affect the steadiness of his legs. True to form, he did not wait for Sebastian to follow as he turned toward the stairs. True to form, Sebastian was close behind him.

Running a bath was much the same as ever but for the reversal of Ciel and Sebastian's roles. Ciel was the one to reach over and turn the tap, testing the temperature of the water with his hand until steam began to cloud in the cold air. It instantly brought images of the Dragon's Tongue drug den forward from the depths of Ciel's memory; he recalled the heat that burned through his drug-addled mind- the heat in him now was better, purer, coming from within him rather than from some outside influence.
Sebastian was there, then, taking Ciel by the hips and turning him to sit on the edge of the bathtub, the ceramic shockingly cold on Ciel's warm hands. Sebastian knelt before him, slowly and ceremoniously undoing the laces of his boots.

Ciel watched it all unfold with undivided attention. Everything was new; it was as though Sebastian had never undressed Ciel before in any other context but this. He could have let it go on forever of not for the ache within him, a twisting knot that pulled with something akin to hunger. He wrestled himself out of his jacket, then his waistcoat, dropping them haphazardly on the floor.

When he went to undo the remaining buttons of his shirt, Sebastian's hands were already there. Ciel settled for taking in the graceful line of Sebastian's shoulders, the barely controlled arousal present on his face. Ciel was struck once again with the momentum of all the time he'd so foolishly squandered; he couldn't quite yet convince himself that all of this was not a dream, or that Sebastian would change his mind at any second.

What Sebastian did do, he did painstakingly- he wanted to savour the newness of this moment, of pushing Ciel's shirt from his shoulders and raising goosebumps on Ciel's skin when he smoothed his hands across the bare skin beneath it. It was the first time he could recall touching Ciel without gloves- the seal of their contract flashed in the low light, and Sebastian never again wanted to ouch Ciel in any other way.

Ciel sucked in an enraptured breath when Sebastian kissed softly across his chest. Sebastian pressed his mouth to Ciel's ribs, to the mark that had come from the shadows of the past to haunt Ciel now in the present- Ciel felt an unexpected rush of emotion rising within himself.

"What are you doing?" He was neither indignant nor confused; he was breathless and enthralled.

"This mark, however hideous you must think it, played a central role in your suffering- the suffering that brought us together. It is a part of you- and every part of you belongs to me."

Ciel laughed quietly as Sebastian leaned up to kiss him again.

"Is something amusing?" Sebastian asked coyly, reaching around Ciel to turn off the taps. The sudden silence as the water ceased to run made Ciel all the more aware of his racing heartbeat.

"Not particularly, it's just-" Ciel smiled. "Since you kissed me, I've been expecting to wake up and find that all of this was simply a dream. But here you are."

Ciel's smiles were few and far between; Sebastian treasured each and every one. He had always known that the strength of a soul lies in its agony; but with a soul that was as deeply pained as Ciel's, Sebastian had learned the true power that a moment of happiness brings.

"Here I am," Sebastian answered. He took a moment to pull the ruined clothes from his body while Ciel took of his trousers and slipped into the bath. Sebastian had never placed any significance on nakedness, but then, he did not look at things the way humans did. He turned to find that Ciel's face was perhaps the reddest that he had ever seen it. Endearing, until he caught sight of the way that Ciel's heavy-lidded eyes raked over him. Quite something, given that parts of Sebastian were still mostly covered in blood.

As soon as Sebastian had settled into the water, Ciel was on him, fingers learning the lines of his collarbones and dropping to smooth away the blood that had begun to dry on his skin. The water around them clouded red, becoming dirtied as Sebastian became clean.

Ciel kissed Sebastian with abandon, humming when Sebastian licked into his mouth. His hum turned
into a groan a moment later when Sebastian took Ciel by the hips, once again guiding Ciel into his lap. This time though, there was nothing but water between them- Ciel felt Sebastian hard against him and moaned. He rolled his hips against Sebastian, jaw falling slack at the feeling of his cock trapped between their bodies.

"Seb-ah, Sebastian," Ciel whined, shuddering as Sebastian's hands tightened on his thighs. "Touch me."

"Am I not touching you already?" Sebastian whispered roughly, dragging Ciel's hips against his once again. He felt Ciel's fingernails dig into his back, no doubt leaving visible scratches. It thrilled Sebastian like nothing else.

"Sebastian," Ciel said again; he met Sebastian's eyes with what was intended to be glare, Sebastian was sure. What it actually was was another matter entirely- pure desperation, the sweetest thing a demon can receive.

"You know what you must do," Sebastian coaxed, holding Ciel away from him, though Ciel strained against his hold. "Just say the words."

"Sebastian, I order you to touch me."

"As you wish." Sebastian wrapped his hand around Ciel's cock and stroked him firmly- even he could agree that the time for teasing had passed. He could feel his own release closing in- he could come like this, he realised, untouched, just from hearing Ciel's wanton moans echoing off the walls, nails cutting deeper into Sebastian's skin as he clung to him for dear life.

Ciel could not have lasted long, not with Sebastian touching him, the final rush of getting what he wanted more than anything. His voice was broken and ragged as he called Sebastian's name again and again with every move of Sebastian's hand. It was overwhelming- his most vivid dreams could not have done it justice- he never wanted it to be over.

Sebastian readjusted his grip, taking both of them in hand at once- Ciel gasped and bit into his lip hard enough to draw blood. Sebastian kissed him and sucked the wound clean, the taste of Ciel's blood sending another surge of unimaginable pleasure through his body. He had never felt so deeply connected to another being in so many ways; it was as if this had always been, but was only just beginning. One thing was certain- there were no thoughts in his mind of this bond ever coming to an end.

They came with simultaneous intensity, their voices both raised in wordless cries. Ciel had never heard Sebastian so utterly defenseless, so debauched and laid bare. He felt Sebastian go still beneath him, muscles tensing with the force of his release.

Ciel himself began to shake, hands going weak as he gasped for air. Even when he had finally caught his breath, he did not speak- he imagined being outside himself, watching from above as Sebastian kissed him softly, pushing Ciel's hair back from his face. He felt himself being lifted, the far-off sound of draining water barely reaching his ears. He was vaguely aware of the air around him, cold on his wet skin, off-set by the warmth of Sebastian's arms encircling him. Sebastian toweled Ciel off slowly; something in it felt reverent, and it made Ciel's heart fly into his throat.

The silence that fell between them was far from uncomfortable; they both knew there was nothing that needed to be said. In this moment, at least, it was enough for them to be alive, unharmed, and together.

Ciel blinked, eyelids growing heavy. His feet left the ground, and, as much as he always protested
being carried, he was glad for it now; his legs felt too leaden and boneless to walk on. He glanced at Sebastian to remind himself yet again that this was his reality. Surely he couldn't have imagined any of it so well; not the way Sebastian was looking at him now, or that Ciel didn't need to ask Sebastian to get into bed with him- Sebastian simply did, as if he had done it a thousand times. As if he belonged there.

"Are you alright?" Ciel asked when Sebastian had settled next to him. His voice was so quiet that he was unsure at first if the words had left his mouth at all.

"I am," Sebastian replied. "I am perhaps as right as I have been in a century." He pulled Ciel to his chest. Ciel went happily, tangling his legs with Sebastian's and tapping his fingers in a mindless rhythm along Sebastian's collarbones.

"Only a century?" He pouted mockingly, unable to keep a sleepy smile from his kiss-redened lips. "Will you sleep?"

"I do not require sleep as you do," Sebastian answered; Ciel felt the words resonate in Sebastian's chest more than he actually heard them. "But, of course, I will do anything you ask of me."

"Sleep with me," Ciel murmured, eyelids fluttering closed with the delicacy Sebastian knew so well. "You will not leave my side."

"Never; not until the very end," Sebastian vowed.

_Perhaps not even then._

Chapter End Notes

10/29/15:

You right now probably: OH MY GOD FUCKING FINALLY

I would like to say the biggest "I'M SORRY" that has ever been said in the history of humankind; I'm sorry this is so late and I'm sorry it's so short. I'm not entirely happy with it but I think that's just my own mind being an asshole so I hope you like it. I literally have no excuse as to why I left you guys hanging for a whole entire month and then some. I don't want to use my depression and anxiety to garner sympathy from you but that's really the only explanation I can give. Long story short: the last five or so weeks have been the worst weeks of the entire year so far. I'm just glad to still be in one piece.

I think it's safe to say that there's no such thing as an updating schedule for this fic anymore. However, my love for this story is returning and I will be working my fingers to the bone to bring you new chapters as soon as I can. The good news is I'm more than half done the story now so that should inspire me to push on through if nothing else does. So yeah, if it's a while until the next update, just know that my life is a shitstorm but I am not giving up on this.
"This is the evidence," Sebastian replied, calmly removing his glove and holding his marked hand up to the light. "I have no reason to steal souls- such souls would be insignificant compared to the power of this contract. My master's soul is all I need. He is the only thing I crave."

Chapter Notes

Words: 7k
Chapter Warnings: Idiots being in love. The plot monster rears its ugly head. ((And editing this was a rush job, sorry for any mistakes, I'll fix them later))

***Note: Grell makes an appearance in this chapter. I know there's been a lot of speculation (and unfortunate drama) in the fandom in regards to Grell's gender. Grell refers to themself as she/a lady in canon, (and I think it was in one of the extras too). Personally I think Grell is trans or gendefluid. I literally obsessed over what pronouns to use for Grell for WEEKS. In the end I stuck to canon, where the others refer to Grell as he/him, simply because the pov is never from Grell's side of things. Really, I still don't feel 100% comfortable with it?? I'm sorry if anyone is offended, I could probably be convinced to change it with little to no argument tbh.

Sebastian woke after dawn, around the same time he would usually begin his rounds throughout the house, opening curtains to bring the rooms back to life with the light of day. These rounds would end in Ciel's room; he would use every bit of his dramatic flair in jarring Ciel from sleep, and no small amount of teasing in trying to persuade Ciel not to burrow farther beneath the sheets. The sheets beneath which Sebastian now laid as well.

He looked once at the closed curtains and once at the sleeping form beside him and decided that he much preferred this vantage point.

For Sebastian, waking up was as instantaneous as falling asleep; being that it was unnecessary, his mind did not fall as deep into unconscious thought as the mind of a human- he was simply asleep one moment and awake the next. He had not dreamt but of his own memories of the night before- bodies moving together, the heady scent of blood driving him wild, the taste of it sickly sweet in his mouth- the consummation of a pact long in the making. Now he drew a hand over Ciel's forehead and thought only of the things to come.

He peers into the darkness, unable to differentiate between closed eyes and open ones. The heat of his own breath clings to his face- a heavy black shroud hangs over his head, utterly blinding him. He reaches to pull the hood away, but his arms refuse to move from his sides. The chains are icy cold on his wrists, as is the stone at his back. He thrashes his arms again and frantically kicks his legs,
but finds that his ankles are fixed down as well.

"He has awoken."

The voice is guttural and unfamiliar- he has heard many unfamiliar voices as of late, heathen chants and blasphemies spoken from behind masks and shadows.

The veil is torn from his face- his eyes are greeted by flickering lights, faraway candles casting strange shapes on the misshapen walls- again, masks float around him, smooth yet grotesque in the way that they grin horridly down at him.

"Let me go!" He shrieks, though the better part of him knows they will not listen. They begin to speak, without rhythm or sense, their words all competing to be heard over one another.

Out of the darkness comes a glowing symbol, the strange and crooked shape of it smouldering red and white hot- he realises all too late what this symbol is, though its meaning will never be explained to him. By the time the scalding iron is pressed onto his skin, he no longer cares what that meaning is. His screams become wordless, and even when the iron has been pulled away, the agony continues, smoke rising from his flesh with the sick stench of decay.

They keep speaking to him, the voices. One is close to him, breath warm on his neck as it speaks; words that are important, he knows, yet he cannot decipher their intent. A curse, a prophecy, a threat that he has heard before- it is lost on him. His mind is consumed with only pain and fear; fear that his pain will never end.

Ciel jolted awake, scrabbling to push away from Sebastian in his disoriented panic. Sebastian allowed it, Ciel's glancing blows landing about his chest and shoulders. He waited it out; sure enough, Ciel came to his senses a moment later, hands going still as he blinked away the remnants of his nightmare.

"Sebastian," he gasped, the name on the inhale of a heavy breath. His face was pale and he shivered violently; it was as if Sebastian had pulled him from the depths of a frozen river.

"You were only dreaming," Sebastian reassured him.

"Was I? I don't remember-" the events of his nightmare, with all their sharpness and depth, melted into memories of a much softer kind, warm in the way that they brought the colour back to Ciel's cheeks.

"Last night-" he started, not sure what he'd meant to say next. Everything from the night before was still a blur, as though it were the dream he had just woken from.

"It was real," Ciel breathed. Of course it was real- they were naked in bed together, weren't they? They lay facing each other, Sebastian's arm around Ciel's waist. Ciel expected to feel shy, embarrassed or some other sort of useless emotion. Instead he felt rested, comfortable, like he'd been sleeping among the clouds. Then again, he was still half-asleep- the embarrassment might come later.

"Very real, I assure you." One of Sebastian's hands wandered the length of Ciel's back. Ciel shivered again, this time out of pleasure rather than fear. The touch woke him up all the more; his memories of last night began to solidify into something literal rather than something abstract.

Ciel looked away from Sebastian's face- his gaze immediately fell on the scratchy scar on his arm, left there by a demon's claws. It looked weeks old rather than hours. Ciel's eyes drifted across Sebastian's chest, farther down toward the other scar, made by the sacred knife- the wound that could have easily ended Sebastian's life. It still looked fresh- red and raised against Sebastian's marble skin.
Ciel touched it gently, unable to shake the image of his own hands covered in Sebastian's blood.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not much. Certainly not compared to how it did before." Sebastian was staring at Ciel's throat, apparently lost in thought. He looked hungry, like he had when Ciel had offered up his blood. But this hunger was of a different kind, Ciel knew.

"I should think it will be rather difficult to cover this up," Ciel smirked, stretching his neck and poking lightly at the bite mark. He imagined how dark it must be by now, and realised just how high up it was- higher than the collars of his shirts, he was sure. "Most would think it shameful."

The shameful thing would be to hide it, Sebastian thought, though he did not miss the intention of Ciel's carefully chosen words.

"Most would," he agreed, his fingertips joining Ciel's in prodding at the bruise. "And you?"

"I've half a mind to wear it plainly, shamefulness be damned." Ciel's hands found their way to Sebastian's hair again, which he was pleased to see looked less than immaculate for once. What pleased him the most was that he was the one responsible for it.

"I've half a mind to let you." Sebastian replaced his fingertips with his mouth, kissing gently at the place his fangs had once marred. He relished the resounding shiver that passed through Ciel's body, the way it made Ciel's fists tighten in his hair. "But only half a mind. Fortunately, however, the alternative is just as preferable."

"Oh?" Ciel asked with breathless curiosity as Sebastian's mouth slid down his throat. Sebastian used Ciel's distraction to his advantage, rolling Ciel onto his back and kneeling over him.

"I'll simply be forced to keep you in this bed until the mark fades." Sebastian punctuated his sentence by leaning up to capture Ciel's mouth in a long and languid kiss, his tongue immediately pushing past Ciel's already parted lips.

"Hm. Alright, I'll allow it," Ciel said when he could speak again; the words went straight from his own mouth and into Sebastian's. To Sebastian, they tasted of playfulness and an underlying bone-deep satisfaction.

"I thought you might." Sebastian moved farther down Ciel's body, stopping briefly to flick his tongue over one of Ciel's nipples. Some kind of high-pitched noise escaped Ciel's mouth (a whimper, though he would sooner die than admit it). Ciel felt a familiar tension begin to build, a knot pulling tighter and tighter in his stomach. He could feel his cock hardening between their bodies, and felt Sebastian's erection against his leg as Sebastian disappeared beneath the covers, mouth sliding obscenely across Ciel's skin.

"Oh God, Sebastian-" Ciel swore when Sebastian's teeth grazed over the fragile skin of his hip.

"God? No, certainly not," Sebastian scoffed and took Ciel's cock into his mouth. Ciel was immediately overwhelmed by the heat of Sebastian's mouth around him, the smooth slide of his lips as he bobbed his head in a slow but steady rhythm. Ciel could only rely on four of his five senses- he couldn't see Sebastian at all- he was forced to imagine the look in his eyes. Sebastian hummed around Ciel's cock, and Ciel nearly screamed His mental image of Sebastian shifted; he now pictured Sebastian with his eyes closed, focused only on Ciel's taste, on driving him over the edge. Ciel was barely coherent enough to find it surprising that Sebastian had chosen not to tease him- teasing was such a large part of his nature. This was just another way in which reality differed
His heart pounded madly; he could feel his pulse everywhere, from the center of his chest to the tips of his fingers to the bruise on his neck. He clenched his fists in the sheets until his knuckles were white- he wanted to close his legs, to plant his feet on the bed and thrust his hips upward into the heat of Sebastian's mouth- but Sebastian's hands pinned Ciel's legs down, holding him still. He was completely at Sebastian's mercy. Sebastian was teasing him then, but in an entirely different way than Ciel had expected him to. Interestingly enough, having control of the situation taken away from him was incredibly arousing for Ciel in and of itself. And of course, Sebastian had figured it out almost right away.

Ciel could not have been more grateful that the servants were gone- he couldn't have kept from moaning loudly as he came- a moan that could no doubt be heard through the halls, had anyone been there to listen. For a moment he saw only white, every thought in his mind washed away by the waves of heat coursing through him. His back arched almost painfully, his head thrown back into his pillow as he struggled to catch his breath. It had been such a rush, and over so quickly, that Ciel was once again struck with the feeling that it might not have been real at all.

Sebastian crawled from beneath the sheets, licking his lips and grinning obscenely. His heavy-lidded eyes found Ciel's and a genuine warmth spread into his devilish smile. It sent Ciel's heart fluttering anew, to be on the receiving end of such a smile. But with the lightheaded affection coursing through him, he was unprepared for the stab of something else; a splinter deep in his side when he came to the unbidden realisation that he was not the first to see such a smile, to have Sebastian's hands and mouth and body on and around him, making him feel things he'd never felt before.

When Sebastian kissed him again, bitter and filthy and perfect, the ache seemed to lessen. Ciel had always been skilled at convincing himself that emotions were merely weakness leaving the mind. Why should this be any different?

Ciel did not often watch Sebastian cook. In fact, he was hard pressed to remember ever having witnessed this part of his butler's daily routine. It was uncommon, he knew, for any nobleman to actually see the inner workings of his own household. Ciel could have gone forever without seeing it- but he had to eat at some point, or so he'd been told. If it were up to him, he wouldn't have left his bed for the rest of the day- and neither would Sebastian. But since Sebastian had insisted on cooking Ciel breakfast (something about Ciel's health and well-being taking precedent), Ciel had followed him down to the kitchen, unwilling to suppress his newly realised desire to be near Sebastian at all times.

He had felt out of place at first, being that he rarely ventured to this part of the house. It was also strange that he should be out of his bedroom when he was anything other than fully clothed- now, clad in only a nightshirt, he felt somewhat exposed. That was until he reminded himself that there was no one here to see him but Sebastian (who had seen him in far less). Once Sebastian began to work, Ciel was content to let all of these thoughts fall by the wayside.

As with everything he did, Sebastian's gracefulness in the kitchen was unparalleled. Ciel was unsurprised by his skill and efficiency, but was mesmerised by it nonetheless. He realised it must be because it was something entirely new to him- he hadn't watched Sebastian do it hundreds of times; some of its magic was retained.

"You said once that you've forgotten some of your previous contracts over the years."

Ciel kicked his heels idly against the cupboard doors- sitting atop the counter, his feet had no hope of reaching the floor.
"I did." Sebastian nodded, flipping the eggs as they sizzled in the frying pan. Ciel could feel the heat from the stove, perched near it as he was. He had to admit that the food was enticing- despite his earlier reluctance to get out of bed, he couldn't deny that he was hungry. It was true, then- sometimes Sebastian did know Ciel's needs better than Ciel himself did. Ciel wondered if Sebastian knew his insecurities as well.

"The ones you don't forget," Ciel paused, trying to phrase his question in the vaguest possible terms, "what makes you remember them?"

Sebastian looked at Ciel then, trying to discern his motive for asking such a question- Ciel refused to meet his eyes. He didn't realise until too late that this gesture was just as telling as the look in his eyes might have been. He waited for the laughter that was sure to follow; when there was none, he glanced up to find that Sebastian wasn't even smiling, much less suppressing laughter.

"The reason isn't what you think." Sebastian pushed the pan off the heat and stepped in front of Ciel, making it impossible for Ciel not to look at him. Ciel felt blood rushing to his face, and he knew he must be blushing terribly.

"I don't think anything," he lied.

"You wish to know how many relationships with my former masters have been sexual in nature."

Ciel didn't bother denying it. He merely crossed his arms over his chest and waited for Sebastian to continue.

"In truth, there have been several, though the precise number escapes me. With some, that aspect of the relationship was central to the contract; for others, it was something that was later requested of me. And, as you know, I only live to serve."

So that's it then, Ciel thought. He only wanted me because I want him.

Ciel had never been one to admit defeat, but he felt utterly downcast- and he couldn't understand why.

I wonder if this is how Lizzy feels when I don't pay her enough attention.

Oh.

"What about me?" He asked; he felt like he was taking a shot in the dark. It was as if he had already jumped across a great chasm, only now reaching out to find a handhold. There was no guarantee that he would hit the target. No guarantee that he would catch himself in time.

At this, Sebastian laughed.

"For all of your cleverness, your powers of observation in one area are severely lacking."

Ciel opened his mouth to protest, but Sebastian kissed him before he could speak. He pushed Ciel's knees apart, moving closer until they were chest to chest. His gloved hands were warm on Ciel's bare thighs, though Ciel felt a sudden cold shiver go through his body.

The kiss itself was reminiscent of their very first; soft and searching, but laced with strength and passion. It struck Ciel as being reverent in a way that was uncharacteristic of a demon. Sebastian was trying to tell him something, something that words could have not done justice to. Ciel wanted to hear it anyway.
"Tell me," he whispered against Sebastian's lips. "Tell me the truth."

"You are the first and only one that I have ever wanted, body and soul, of my own volition," Sebastian confessed. "I did not know what it was to truly feel until you. I will not forget you, not even after the world has been destroyed and rebuilt a thousand times."

"Sebastian," Ciel murmured, dumbstruck. "I-"

Suddenly, Sebastian pulled back, turning his head to the door and scowling.

"What is it?" Ciel asked. He was ignored.

"Always at the least convenient times," Sebastian muttered.

Ciel felt a whoosh of air and found himself across the kitchen, seated at the small table in the corner. Sebastian was back at the stove, frowning at the eggs.

"Oh, Bassy!"

Grell Sutcliff burst into the room, unannounced but for the sing-song cry of Sebastian's name. The kitchen door bounced against the wall but stopped abruptly when William Spears entered, halting its wild trajectory with one hand while the other pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Sutcliff, please," he said shortly, his exasperation well-controlled but apparent. "We are not here to fraternise with this demon scum."

"Ah, Mister Spears." Sebastian ignored William's insult and Grell's presence in favour of his icy politeness, reserved only for those he loathed. His smile was terrifying. "To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"Spare me your forked tongue," William scoffed.

Grell pranced over to Sebastian, walking two fingers up Sebastian's chest before swooning dramatically against his shoulder.

"Spare me nothing," he cooed, lips entirely too close to Sebastian's face for Ciel's liking. He'd never been fond of Grell's overly physical affection for Sebastian, but this was an entirely new kind of disgust, one that involved no small amount of jealousy. His only comfort was that Sebastian looked just as repulsed as ever by Grell's advances.

"I am here on company time," William began. "Overtime, in fact, so let's not draw this out any longer than we must." He took a large book out from under his arm and began to flip through several pages.

"There has been a discrepancy in our numbers. In recent months, several deaths have occurred without the presence of a grim reaper. That is to say, the souls of the deceased have gone-"

"Missing," Ciel finished. "We know. Honestly, I'd expected to cross paths with you earlier regarding this case."

"So you are investigating the disappearance of these souls," William made some sort of note in his book. "Interesting. What have you found out?"

"Is that why you're here?" Ciel asked. "You haven't been able to come up with any feasible leads, so you've come to find out what I know?"
"Something like that, yes. In fact, my superiors," William replied disdainfully, "were hoping you could lend some, oh what was it- insight- into these disappearances."

"Thefts," Ciel corrected. "They're thefts. That's all I know." He crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair, no longer conscious of how he was dressed. "You're not only here for that though, are you?"

"No, it would seem you are correct," William sneered. "We were called to this area after an incident last night involving several of the stolen souls. Since the incident took place no more than three blocks from this residence, it seemed only prudent to ascertain the extent of your involvement in-" he looked at Sebastian- "or knowledge of said incident."

Ciel and Sebastian exchanged a look. Grell pouted and wrapped his arms around Sebastian's shoulders, trying to win back Sebastian's attention. Sebastian easily shrugged out of the hold and turned on William.

"You believe that a demon is responsible for the theft of these souls. You believe I am that demon."

"The thought had crossed my mind, yes," William admitted, obviously confident in his assumption. "Although I suppose you have some sort of evidence to the contrary."

"This is the evidence," Sebastian replied, calmly removing his glove and holding his marked hand up to the light. "I have no reason to steal souls- such souls would be insignificant compared to the power of this contract. My master's soul is all I need. He is the only thing I crave."

Sebastian glanced at Ciel and smiled.

"My eternal curse," Grell sighed melodramatically. "The attractive ones are always taken."

"Why are you here?" Ciel hissed.

"Sutcliff found out where I was going and followed me before I could stop him. My sincerest apologies." William bowed his head slightly, voice dripping with sarcasm. "No one is more put out by this than I am." He looked at Ciel with an appraising glare, no doubt noticing the bite mark on Ciel's throat.

"Back to the situation at hand." William closed his book with an authoritative slam. "Were you or were you not present during last night's incident involving the stolen souls?"

"We were," Ciel told him. "We were on our way home from my uncle's residence when we were attacked."

"Attacked?" William asked as though he'd never heard of such a thing.

"By a group of demons," Ciel answered plainly. Sebastian raised an eyebrow at Ciel's honesty. "I incurred this injury during the resulting fight." He gestured to his throat, careful not to look at Sebastian lest his eyes give away the truth.

"You expect me to believe that the stolen souls have been, what- turned into demons?"

"Believe it or not, that is what happened," Ciel retorted.

"Very well," William huffed, turning on his heels and strutting toward the door. "Sutcliff, come along; we're done here."
But William-

"Now." William turned, glasses sliding down his nose as he lowered his chin to glare at Grell. Grell sighed and obeyed, blowing one last kiss at Sebastian before he disappeared through the doorway. Ciel nearly gagged.

"One last word of advice," William said, adjusting his glasses and looking at both Ciel and Sebastian in turn. "Leave the handling of this case to the Reaper Society. My superiors do not take kindly to outsiders meddling in affairs which they have little understanding of."

And with that, he was gone, without so much as closing the door behind him.

"Such poor manners," Sebastian sighed, closing (and bolting) the kitchen door.

"Indeed," Ciel agreed, relaxing into his seat now that the reapers were gone. "Barging in here unannounced, and accusing you as they did? Positively barbaric." He was smirking now, a patronizing tone seeping into his words. Really, he was just glad that the reapers had finally left; he had Sebastian all to himself once again.

"Now," he said calmly, ready to take full advantage of the situation at hand, "where were we?"

"I believe you were just about to confess your undying affection for me," Sebastian answered easily, licking his lips as he watched Ciel spread his legs, one hand slowly pulling the hem of his nightshirt further and further up-

Sebastian was across the room in less than a second, lifting Ciel from the chair and pinning Ciel to the nearest wall. Ciel moaned, high and breathless, arms wound around Sebastian's shoulders, hooking his legs around Sebastian's hips out of instinct and the pure need to be as close to Sebastian as was physically possible.

"Really, sir," Sebastian huffed as he began to do the buttons of Ciel's nightshirt. "Did no one ever teach you how rude it is to tease?"

"You're one to talk," Ciel hissed when Sebastian bit at his collarbone. "Besides- it's only teasing if I don't give you what you want." He dropped his hands to trace the shape of Sebastian's cock, already hard and straining inside his trousers.

"I have every intention of giving you exactly what you want."

Above them, there was a sudden knocking at the door.

Sebastian groaned, his head falling against Ciel's shoulder as the knocking continued.

"I am currently fighting the urge to murder whoever that is," Ciel whispered, as if he thought he'd be overheard.

"Shall I murder them for you, master?" Sebastian offered, his voice equally hushed.

"That might be more trouble than it's worth," Ciel grumbled as Sebastian set him down. Sebastian instantly regretted having to do so. "Just make them go away."


- Ten Minutes Earlier -

"Shall I call on him, sir?" Abberline asked, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Sir Arthur, averting
his eyes from the hanging corpse in front of them. "I can take him the letter if you'd like."

Sir Arthur glared sourly at the envelope clutched in his hands; a message from the killer, found in the hands of the dead woman herself. He read and reread the flowing script, written in blue ink.

*For Ciel Phantomhive.*

"Just get him down here, Abberline." He frowned, already anticipating the smugness that the brat would no doubt exude when he arrived. "I'll give him the letter myself."

Abberline stood on Ciel Phantomhive's doorstep, knocking persistently while he hunched his shoulders against the bitter wind that whipped through the streets. Last night's rain had subsided, but a pervasive cold had settled in the air, the sign that the last of summer's warmth would soon be gone.

Another gust of wind nearly blew Abberline off his feet- he looked over his shoulder for a moment, plagued by the distinct feeling that he was being watched. When he turned back to the door, he realised that his fist was no longer knocking on wood, but on air.

"Detective Abberline," Sebastian greeted tersely, having opened the door some seconds ago.

"Ah, Sebastian," Abberline said as cheerfully as he was able, given the gloomy weather. He took in Sebastian's immaculate appearance and noted that something about it seemed amiss, hurried, as though Sebastian had been interrupted. Just what was out of place, Abberline could not decide. Sebastian's suit was spotless, his tie knotted precisely as ever- perhaps it was his hair, falling slightly too far across his face, a little messy on one side.

"I am assuming there has been a development in the case," Sebastian was saying.

"Development? Oh, no- well, yes. Another murder, unfortunately. Only three blocks east of here- a woman was murdered in one of the empty houses- the lord who lives there is currently at his manor in the country. I've been sent to see if Cie- if Lord Phantomhive will come and have a look at the crime scene."

"Three blocks east of here, did you say?" Sebastian sighed, apparently burdened by this information.

"Yes. Less than a ten minute walk," Abberline offered. "Sir Arthur asked for the Earl personally."

Sebastian sighed again. "Very well. I shall inform my master, and we will be along shortly."

And with that, he slammed the door right in Abberline's face.

Abberline had been back at the crime scene for nearly fifteen minutes before Ciel arrived.

"I was under the impression that you wanted me nowhere near this case, Sir Arthur." Ciel sauntered into the house, closely followed by Sebastian, who appeared more like a shadow than ever in the gloomy mid-morning light that seeped through the windows.

"So I'm sure you can imagine my surprise when Abberline turned up on my doorstep, asking me to come down to one of your crime scenes." He observed the body with somewhat of a disinterested stare- *distracted* was the word Abberline's mind supplied him with. What it was that distracted Ciel, Abberline was loath to guess. He looked to Sebastian, who stood by the door, watching his master move about the room. The entire time that Abberline watched Sebastian watch Ciel, Sebastian did not blink once.

"It seems that the murderer has asked for you by name," Sir Arthur told Ciel, offering the letter.
"This was found in the hands of the victim."

Ciel eyed the letter warily but took it, tearing unceremoniously into the envelope despite it being an important piece of evidence. It was obvious to all present that he had done this mostly out of spite for Sir Arthur and his immaculate nature.

"Dearest Lord Phantomhive," Ciel read the letter aloud, striding slowly about the room. "Due to the unfortunate conclusion of our most recent encounter, I felt it necessary to compensate you for any harm I may have caused to you and yours."

Ciel glanced at Sebastian then, and Abberline was reminded of the butcher shop, of the odd tension that was almost palpable between the earl and his butler. The tension had changed since then, evolved into something more conscious. It was more purposeful in the way that both of them seemed to have acknowledged it, not only to themselves, but to each other as well. The feeling of profound understanding between the two of them had returned, and it was stronger than ever.

"What is he talking about?" Sir Arthur demanded. "What encounter?"

Ciel ignored him entirely, turning on his heels and beginning another circle around the room. It was then that Abberline caught sight of the bandage around Ciel's neck; it stuck out above the wide collar of his coat, stark white against his already pale skin.

"I have decided to do the gracious thing and give you the opportunity to regain the lead in this race," Ciel continued, no longer pacing. In fact, he stood eerily still, half in light and half in the shadow of the body, still suspended from the rafters.

"If you are truly half as clever as I have observed you to be, then I trust you will be fully prepared for our next meeting." Ciel looked up at the body, brow knit in suspicion. "Yours truly."

"He seems to be quite... familiar with you," Sir Arthur observed. "Care to explain that, Phantomhive?"

"Men like this crave power above all else," Ciel started, handing the letter to Sebastian, who tucked it into his own coat pocket. "He wants to outwit the best mind that comes up against him to prove his dominance. All other intellects are irrelevant. Apparently, out of all those investigating this case, I seem to be the only one he has deemed worthy of his challenge."

Somehow, Abberline knew that this couldn't be the one and only reason for this killer's fixation on Ciel. Sir Arthur had been right; Ciel was hiding something. Abberline had never been more certain of it.

"I don't appreciate what you're implying." Sir Arthur glowered at the back of Ciel's head as Ciel rounded the body once more.

"I'm not implying anything; I am merely stating the facts," Ciel replied calmly. "He said this was an opportunity, that I should be prepared for our next meeting. There's obviously something about this murder, about this woman, that will tell us what he plans to do next," he surmised. "All the other victims have been killed at home, but this woman was brought here from somewhere else. Clearly not a victim of opportunity- she was chosen for a reason."

Ciel took a breath, and Abberline knew that Ciel was about to tell them what that reason was.

"She was a prostitute, judging by her clothing. But this home is far too extravagant, and it's not where she would have lived- one could say she doesn't belong here, that she doesn't deserve it."
Ciel crouched, picking up a strand of the victim's hair from where it had fallen. "He cut her hair to strip her of her beauty, in essence, her power."

Ciel froze, eyes widening in realisation.

"What was her name?"

Sir Arthur looked to Abberline.

"We sent officers down to White Chapel to find out where she may have been abducted from, or if anyone knew her. Her name was Victoria."

Ciel didn't appear all that shocked.

"What is the next event her Majesty plans to attend?"

"The All Hallows Eve ball," Sir Arthur answered. "You don't think-"

"I don't think. I know." Ciel looked at Sir Arthur for the first time since he'd arrived. "He means to assassinate the Queen." He said it as if it made perfect sense, as if all the murders had been leading up to this. Abberline didn't see any sort of connection. He was still curious about the bandage on Ciel's neck.

"That will not happen!" Sir Arthur snapped. This was the first time Abberline had ever seen the man so close to exasperation. "I won't allow it to happen. We'll cancel the ball if we have to-"

"Don't," Ciel argued. "This may be our best chance to apprehend him." He stood quickly. "It could be our only chance."

"You would have me risk the life of a sovereign, the heart of an entire nation, in order to stop one man?"

"I would," Ciel nodded, squaring his shoulders as Sir Arthur did the same. They looked to be on the verge of a physical fight. Abberline's eyes unconsciously wandered to Sebastian, whose dark gaze was fixed on Sir Arthur. It seemed he was prepared to fight as well.

"In case you've forgotten, more than two dozen people are dead because of this man. I will not rest until he's been stopped," Ciel spat.

Once again, Abberline got the impression that there was another cause for Ciel's conviction.

"Very well," Sir Arthur conceded. "The ball will proceed as planned. But I will report this threat on the Queen's life to her personal guards, and if she chooses not to attend the ball because of it, I will hear no complaints from you."

"Fine." Ciel's coat whipped behind him as he turned. He said nothing as he swept from the room, Sebastian on his heels. Abberline thought it was the most childish thing he'd seen Ciel do in years.

Abberline stood in the doorway and watched them go, frowning to himself, carefully observing the easiness of their gaits as their footfalls fell into an identical rhythm. He couldn't help but notice that Sebastian walked closer to Ciel than he had in recent months, or the way Ciel swayed a little too often, his arm brushing against Sebastian's with every uneven step. Whether a conscious change or not, it was a change that, to Abberline, was plain as day.

Make no mistake, Abberline- there is something unholy going on between those two.
"Unholy indeed," Abberline muttered to himself, and turned his back.

"Do you think they suspect us?"

They were almost home- it was difficult to believe that they'd only just walked this distance last night- stumbling, soaked in cold rain and warm blood. It seemed like ages ago- like it had been part of an entirely different life.

"There are many things the two of us could be suspected of," Sebastian said, deliberately touching the back of his hand to Ciel's as they walked. "To which are you referring?"

"That we know more than we're saying regarding this investigation," Ciel clarified, immensely pleased with the way Sebastian had said 'the two of us'. "That you're not human at all, but a demon with a claim laid on my soul."

"Humans who have never been exposed to the supernatural world have little ability to comprehend or believe such things as the existence of demons; therefore it is unlikely that the idea would ever occur to them on its own. Even to the religious, such creatures as myself are most often thought to be myth and nothing more- a superstition meant to frighten the masses toward the path of righteousness." Sebastian spoke of the church with such disdain- it made Ciel laugh- the pettiness in heaven and hell seemed no different from that on earth.

"As far as the investigation goes, the opposite is true," Sebastian continued. "Sir Arthur's low opinion of you has lead him to be overly suspicious, bordering on the paranoid. And Abberline is highly suggestible. It would surprise me if they didn't suspect your deception."

"Sir Arthur will see deception wherever he wishes to see it." Ciel agreed, walking faster as the house came into view. "And you're right about Abberline- Sir Arthur could probably convince him that I was the murderer if he truly wanted to. In fact," he paused, "we shouldn't discount the possibility that he might do just that."

"Duly noted." Sebastian opened the front gate and ushered Ciel through it, the heavy metal hinges screeching when he closed it behind them.

"Can you imagine if he tried to have me arrested?" Ciel was almost laughing now; it was absurd, he knew, that such a thing would make him laugh. He hadn't felt this kind of giddiness since before his parents were murdered. It seemed that something had shifted inside him; something awakening where it had lain dormant for so long. A forgotten part of his heart, rusted from disuse and kicking off clouds of dust as it began to beat again. He never would have thought that a demon could put such a thing into motion.

"It would be horrible for the family name," Ciel continued idly, pausing on the stoop to look sideways at Sebastian as Sebastian unlocked the door. "But it would give us an excuse to run away together."

No sooner had Ciel uttered the last word of his sentence than Sebastian opened the door, pulling Ciel inside and pushing him against the door as soon as it closed behind them.

It was as if no time had passed since they were in the kitchen; they reverted to the same positions they had been in before, though this time, there were far more layers of clothing between them. To Ciel, this was somewhat of an advantage; he had been barely clothed before, unable to gain any semblance of an upper hand. Now, he could at least make it last a little longer, before Sebastian inevitably took control. Sebastian, on the other hand, saw nothing advantageous about it, if the way he was kissing Ciel was anything to go by. He all but tore at the bandage on Ciel's neck, the buttons
of his coat, anything that would get him closer to Ciel's skin.

"What did I say about teasing?" Sebastian asked when it became apparent that Ciel needed to breathe.

"Who's teasing?" Ciel was honestly at a loss to understand what Sebastian meant.

"If you keep saying such things," Sebastian replied, coy and condescending, but with an honest edge to his voice that sent Ciel reeling. "I might just do them."

It was so rare for Sebastian to say something without even the slightest hint of humour; Ciel instantly recognised Sebastian's sincerity. It made Ciel pause, mouth hanging open slightly as he took in the barely hooded emotion present on Sebastian's face.

Ciel didn't know why he hadn't thought of it sooner; he had known for months now that the Father was the man who'd murdered his parents, who was the very reason that Ciel sought vengeance in the first place. And yet it had only just occurred to him that once they had found and destroyed the Father and his ever-growing army, Ciel's revenge would be complete- the contract would be over.

That wasn't quite true- he must have thought of that already; but now the full meaning of the fact was beginning to take hold in him. There was a difference between knowing a thing and completely understanding its implications.

The supremely ironic tragedy of it all was this: that when contract was coming to its inevitable, natural end, two of them were only just getting started. But then, what was Ciel's life if not a sequence of tragedies, ironic or otherwise?

For his part, Sebastian didn't seem to be anymore thrilled about this idea than Ciel was, even if Sebastian himself stood to gain immensely from the fulfilment of the contract.

Knowing and understanding were two different things; the solution may yet be found, but neither of them had realised it yet. Either way, Ciel chose not to dwell on it- not now, not while he still had Sebastian, any way he wanted to have him.

Sebastian buried his face in Ciel's shoulder; perhaps to breathe him in, or perhaps to hide his expression. Ciel threaded his fingers through Sebastian's hair and pulled.

"Take me to bed," he whispered- any louder and he feared his voice might break.

Sebastian lifted his head, and Ciel kissed him before either of them could speak again.

Footsteps in the dark.

All else is silent; not even a breath in the cold air, not a single spark of light as the steps go farther down the passageway, the sound ricocheting from the high, round ceilings and bouncing back inward. It grows with the room, accompanied by the steady rhythm of water, dripping and cascading from somewhere high above.

The footsteps slow and then stop altogether.

"The message has been sent and received."

The voice shatters the silence, ripping through it with the shrillness of its hiss.

"What would you have us do?" It asks.
"Raze it to the ground." This voice is no hiss, but a rumble, rolling over itself in waves, filling the chamber. It lingers in the air with a strange echo even after it has ceased to speak. It is stalwart and steady and full of the authority it has been accustomed to having for most of its life.

There is hesitation, but the hissing voice speaks again.

"As you wish, my Father."

Ciel and Sebastian ended the day just as they had started it.

The last of the morning disappeared, giving way to an afternoon smattered with bouts of rain, with whistling wind and a gloomy sky, all out of sight and out of mind beyond curtains that were never opened. The passing of the sun behind the clouds was forgotten within the walls of Ciel's bedroom, beneath the sheets of his bed.

It was sometime after sunset when Ciel opened his eyes- he had been in and out of consciousness throughout the afternoon, exhausted to the bone and more than happy about it. He remembered Sebastian insisting on a bath earlier, but he must have fallen asleep just after that, warm in the water with Sebastian's arms around him.

He woke now in much the same position in his bed; wrapped in Sebastian's arms while Sebastian watched him, his eyelids fluttering as they betrayed his all-too human instinct to fall asleep as well. A fire burned in the hearth, though Ciel would have been just as warm without it, he was sure.

"How long have I been asleep?" He asked, voice thick and heavy.

"Nearly an hour," Sebastian answered, pushing Ciel's hair away from his forehead so he could place a kiss there. He felt Ciel's body respond in the simplest of ways, shoulders moving forward, lungs expelling a contented sigh as he leaned into the touch. "You were tired."

"You and I both know who's fault that is," Ciel smiled, his cheeks turning a most lovely shade of pink. Sebastian couldn't help but smile back.

In all his centuries of life, Sebastian had never once been surprised by a human being. Even though he was far from all-knowing, the practices and mistakes of the human race were an easily learned thing, and became almost mind-numbingly predictable after a few decades. Indeed, Sebastian had learned everything there was to know about the inner workings of the human mind. But even thought souls were his means of survival, it was becoming apparent to him that they still held mysteries beyond his powers of comprehension. He looked into Ciel's eyes and knew that could not be true- perhaps it wasn't all souls that mystified and wondered him so- perhaps there was only one.

Sebastian, I-

"This morning, in the kitchen- you were about to say something before the reapers interrupted us." Sebastian's thoughts became words before he made the conscious decision to speak. "What was it?"

"You said something just before that." Ciel's gaze was warm and unyielding. "Did you mean it?"

You are the first and only one that I have ever wanted, body and soul, of my own volition. I did not know what it was to truly feel until you. I will not forget you, not even after the world has been destroyed and rebuilt a thousand times.

"Of course." Though I never would have thought it was possible, I meant every word.

"Then you know what I was about to say," Ciel answered, closing his eyes and resting his head on
Sebastian's chest. "And so I will never need to say it."

In all his centuries of life, Sebastian had never been surprised by a human being. Perhaps there was only one who could exhibit the best and worst of his race and still be so wondrous to behold. Perhaps it was Sebastian who surprised himself. Perhaps what surprised him most is that he was losing what he had left of his desire to destroy the soul he now held in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

12/27/15:

Adele voice: Hello... It's me.

It feels like it's been about a thousand years since I updated! Fall/winter is really hard for me and I've been combating some of the worst depression-induced writer's block that I've ever experienced in my life. Once again I'm sorry for the wait and I'll keep working as hard as I can to get the rest of this fic done ASAP. I'm projecting that it'll end up somewhere around 75-80k words total. Call this chapter your a-little-bit-late-for-Christmas present. Happy holidays to everyone, I hope they've been wonderful for all of you :)

P.S. - I have a sideblog on tumblr that's completely Kuroshitsuji. Check it out if you want?
Ciel wondered how long it would take to get used to Sebastian looking at him this way- his heart still jumped and raced whenever Sebastian's eyes were on him. It had been less than two days since their first night together, and yet it seemed so much longer. It seemed as though Sebastian had always looked at Ciel like this- it had always felt right. And so Ciel wondered- how long until he was used to it? More importantly- how much time did he have left before it would no longer matter?

The house is burning.

He has been here before- countless times in fact, running endlessly through smoke-blackened hallways, unable to breathe and completely lost in a place that he should know like the back of his own hand. His bare feet strike the floor at a frantic pace- the heat is closer than it has ever been, and there are flames wherever he looks. Though he tries, he cannot escape it- not this time.

"Mother? Father! Where are you?" He tries to scream, but he chokes instead, falling hard on hands and knees in the soot and- the floor here is wet. Sticky, something thick and bitter-smelling on his fingers. Blood.

"Mother," he coughs. "Father!" He crawls forward, feeling around blindly until his hands meet skin. A hand, still warm, unmoving and slick with blood. He finds the face with shaking fingers, tracing a strong jaw and hair the length of his own.

"Father," he croaks. "Father, wake up, we have to- the house is on fire, we have to get out, we have to-"

There is a soft whimper, far-off to his right, barely heard above the groaning beams of the house and the crackling of flame that grows closer with every second. The whimper is the sound of a wounded animal.

"Sebastian," he hisses, a name that he has said so many times- a name that does not yet carry more weight an meaning than any other name he knows.
"Sebastian," he pleads, beginning to feel consciousness slip from his grasp. "Sebastian, come here."

The animal gives a dying cry, and Ciel is left alone.

Ciel woke to find that his nightmare had become his reality.

The bed was cold and empty beside him, despite the burning air around him, full of smoke that smelled of ash and death. His head spun as he sat up, immediately gagging on the breath of smoke that caught in his lungs. He tried to speak, to call out for Sebastian, but his throat began to close in on itself.

The fire in the hearth had gone dead, signalling that it was not the source of the flames. In fact, there were no flames anywhere in the room- but there was a flickering glow beneath the closed bedroom door, thick smoke oozing in at the seam of the threshold.

Ciel heard the unmistakeable sound of the window being thrown open- he looked, and there Sebastian was, standing in the shadows, leaning out into the night as if looking to see that the coast was clear. He was fully dressed- almost, Ciel amended. His tie was nowhere to be seen, and his shirt remained unbuttoned across his chest- he looked strikingly disheveled, his hair falling in his face, blown away by a gust of wind as it blew through the open window. Even now, Sebastian's looks were distracting.

"Sebastian," Ciel said- it seemed to be the only thing to be said at a time like this.

"The fire was set with holy oil," Sebastian said by way of answer to the question Ciel hadn't yet asked. "The entire house is about to go up in flames. We must leave, and we must do it now."

"Where will we go?" Ciel sat up quickly, head spinning. The memory of Norman Hague's house exploded behind his eyes when he blinked.

"The manor." Sebastian was already helping Ciel into his nightshirt, there being no time for proper clothing. "We can make it there by morning."

"We're going to walk back to the country?"

"Yes, my plan was to make you go barefoot over miles and miles of frozen ground," Sebastian joked, though there was no humour on his face. "Of course not- I'm going to carry you."

"That would seem the more practical course of action," Ciel agreed wryly.

Sebastian didn't reply. He simply knelt in front of Ciel and draped something around Ciel's shoulders. It was Sebastian's coat, Ciel realised- Ciel felt immediately dwarfed by it, even more so as he slipped his arms through the sleeves- he could barely reach his fingers through the ends. It brought him some comfort in the midst of this chaos- the coat smelled strongly of Sebastian- a smell that had always meant protection to him. He wrapped the coat tightly around himself and reached out for Sebastian.

Sebastian swept Ciel into his arms and raced to the window. Ciel looked back over Sebastian's shoulder- the room had filled with smoke- the only light was that of the fire, now licking up the sides of the door, flickering across the wood and eating through it with a loud crackling noise that popped loudly in Ciel's ears.

"Hold on," Sebastian whispered.
Ciel barely had time to tighten his arms around Sebastian's shoulders before Sebastian jumped. Ciel closed his eyes through it all, the brief sense of weightlessness followed by the sudden landing.

When Ciel opened his eyes, the house was rapidly being swallowed by a wall of flame- he could feel the heat of it searing his skin, his eyes burning at the blinding brightness of it, and fleetingly wondered if hellfire gave off nearly as much light as holy fire did. He thought of his possessions, of his books, kindling for the blaze. He thought of the story of Faust, of its pages bending and crackling and going to ash.

_Flee, man!_ God's warning to Faust, to turn his back on his evil ways and keep to the path of righteousness.

Ciel closed his eyes again and held tighter to Sebastian.

Dawn was beginning to break by the time Sebastian and Ciel reached Phantomhive manor. The sun's bright hues of orange and red lit up the sky like the flames that they had only just escaped. Ciel looked away, afraid he might envision the manor on fire, the fire that had killed his parents and thrown him into the hands of a madman.

The wind whipped bitter and cold against Ciel's skin, just as it had been during the entire journey home. His face had long since gone numb, as had his feet- his hands would be next if he didn't get warm soon. Violent shivers wracked his body, and he turned his head to rest it on Sebastian's shoulder. Sebastian glanced down at him, visibly concerned.

"We've arrived," he said, biting back his anger. Wanting to slaughter those who harmed Ciel was not a new feeling for him by any means. But to feel it this acutely, this _personally_- he was still caught slightly off guard.

Rather than go through the front doors and risk alerting the servants, Sebastian thought it best to go to Ciel's room directly. Getting from the ground to the window was an easy task, made challenging only by the fact that he had Ciel in his arms.

Once inside, Sebastian immediately put Ciel in bed, pulling the covers up until only the top of Ciel's head remained visible. Ciel was fighting sleep, barely conscious enough to peek out from the blankets and watch Sebastian move about the room, lighting a fire and inspecting every corner to make sure no one else had been here. Ciel felt something warm and wet on his frozen face and realised that he was crying.

"Sebastian," he called softly. It really _was_ the only thing to be said at a time like this.

Sebastian was at Ciel's side in an instant, stroking his hair and kissing the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"This was a failure on my part, Master. I promise you, they will _never_ get this close again."

Ciel tried to scoff and hiccupped instead. It was the first time in months that Sebastian had thought of Ciel as anything close to a child.

"That's not why I'm upset," Ciel sniffed. "The Father tried to take you from me- that's the third time now that he's tried to take you from me- it's as if he wants me to watch you _die_, and if there's one thing in this world that I am incapable of doing, it's watching you _die_."

"Three times he's tried to take me from you, and three times he's _failed,"_ Sebastian murmured. "If there's one thing in this world that I am incapable of doing, it's being taken away from you. You _know_ this."
"Yes, but I do love hearing you say it," Ciel admitted. The tears were real, however unpleasant, but they'd stopped running the moment Sebastian had kissed them away. Ciel wouldn't have resorted to faking tears to get what he wanted. He never had to—especially not with Sebastian.

"Duly noted, sir." Sebastian kicked his shoes off and all but dove beneath the covers. Ciel immediately latched onto him, and was back asleep very soon after.

Ciel woke up some time in the late morning—he had slept so well that, at first, he had no memory of the events that had brought him back to the manor. Once he had completely come to, however, it took him only a moment to recall the fire. He spent the rest of the day contending with a sinking feeling in his chest that would not leave him—it was not grief for the possessions he had lost, for he had survived—but the premonitory grief that he would soon be faced with a loss that he could not escape.

"I can't help but wonder—if the Father really wanted us dead, why not simply have our throats cut while we slept?"

Ciel had talked Sebastian into letting him eat his (late) breakfast in bed. He sat cross-legged on top of the covers, a cup of tea in his hands while Sebastian fed him blackberries. Ciel pretended not to notice the satisfied smile on Sebastian's face that appeared whenever Ciel sucked the taste of the berries from the tips of Sebastian's fingers; nevertheless, a smile soon appeared on Ciel's face as well.

"Perhaps it was his taste for the theatrical," Sebastian suggested. "Perhaps he wanted to eliminate you in the same way he eliminated your parents. It does carry a sort of poetic symmetry."

"Perhaps," Ciel mused, taking another berry as Sebastian offered it. The tang of the berry's juice as he bit into it reflected itself in the sour look on his face. "But then, he warned us about his plan to kill the Queen—he referred to it as 'our next encounter'. So why try to kill us last night, an entire week before the ball?"

"You ask that as if you don't already know the answer," Sebastian commented, his smile going sly around the edges.

"You know me too well," Ciel replied, smile already as sly as Sebastian's was becoming. There was a moment of prolonged silence between them, wherein they simply stared into each other's eyes, both of them lost in thought.

Ciel wondered how long it would take to get used to Sebastian looking at him in this way—his heart still jumped and raced whenever Sebastian's eyes were on him. It had been less than two days since their first night together, and yet it seemed so much longer. And so Ciel wondered—how long until he was used to it? More importantly—how much time did he have left before it would no longer matter?

Sebastian, meanwhile, was becoming certain of what he must do.

"You were saying," he prompted, when it felt as if several minutes had passed. "About the fire—"

"Yes, right," Ciel answered, blinking his way out of the trance he'd been in. "I don't think it was entirely intended to kill us. I think it was a warning."

"A warning of what?"

"That we're not as safe from him as we think we are."

Ciel said this quite matter-of-factly, without any fear to speak of. Truly, he sounded amused that the Father thought himself capable of truly threatening Ciel's life. Sebastian found Ciel's confidence
surprising, given how distraught he had been that morning, and that Sebastian himself had very nearly died less than two days ago.

"It's his overconfidence that's going to trip him up in the end," Ciel was saying. "He's going to be at the ball next week. I'm sure of it. He wouldn't want to miss the final act of his show."

"You believe this is his final act," Sebastian began, "that his entire reason for amassing his army has been simply to kill the Queen, dismantle the monarchy-"

"And assume the throne, of course," Ciel finished. "He wants what all men want once they've had a taste of power. He wants to rule the world."

"If all men wanted to rule the world, my kind would never go hungry," Sebastian remarked. "The world isn't what you asked me for."

"I asked you for the rule of my world," Ciel pointed out.

"One thing about men who wish for power," Sebastian observed, offering Ciel another blackberry, "is that they rarely give up their pursuit of it. And if they do achieve control, their stubbornness only increases."

"Do I detect a hint of worry?" Ciel finished his tea, placing the empty cup in its saucer, nestled among the folds of the blankets. He turned on the bed so that he could swing one leg over Sebastian's hips.

"You needn't be concerned," he purred. "When the time comes, the devil will get what he's due."

The following day, Ciel received a visit from none other than Sir Arthur himself, Frederick Abberline in tow. The three of them sat in tense poses, shooting tense stares at each other over their steaming cups of tea.

"I'm assuming you're here about the fire," Ciel said after several minutes of utter silence. He didn't like the way Sir Arthur was looking at him—like he knew something Ciel didn't want him to know. Of course, Ciel never liked the way Sir Arthur looked at him. What really bothered Ciel, though, was that Abberline was looking at him in much the same way. Abberline, with whom Ciel had trusted his insights about this case—Abberline, who had once had an obvious respect for Ciel's intellect as well as Ciel's station. Now, it appeared he had neither—much like Sir Arthur.

"The house burnt to the ground in a matter of hours. There's nothing left, I'm afraid." From anyone else, this would have been a statement of condolence. Ciel didn't like the way Sir Arthur was looking at him—like he knew something Ciel didn't want him to know. Of course, Ciel never liked the way Sir Arthur looked at him. What really bothered Ciel, though, was that Abberline was looking at him in much the same way. Abberline, with whom Ciel had trusted his insights about this case—Abberline, who had once had an obvious respect for Ciel's intellect as well as Ciel's station. Now, it appeared he had neither—much like Sir Arthur.

"The house burnt to the ground in a matter of hours. There's nothing left, I'm afraid." From anyone else, this would have been a statement of condolence.

"I assumed as much." Ciel did not give Sir Arthur the satisfaction of an emotional reaction to the loss of his possessions—a feat which was not at all difficult to achieve. He felt very little emotional attachment to any of his possessions—save for Sebastian, of course.

"It appears that there were some similarities between the fire at your residence last night and the fire that destroyed the house of Norman Hague, back in June," Sir Arthur told him.

"Really?" This wasn't news to Ciel at all, but he didn't want Sir Arthur to know that. He tried to seem as surprised as he could without being obviously false. By all accounts, Sir Arthur's reaction to Ciel's reaction would suggest that he suspected nothing. Ciel knew better—Sir Arthur suspected everything.

"I find it interesting," Sir Arthur began, "that you would think this surprising at all when Norman
Hague has been a suspect in this case since he set fire to his own house and disappeared. It would make a certain sense that he would come after you in much the same fashion. Quite interesting, wouldn't you say, Abberline?"

"I would, sir," Abberline replied, never taking his eyes off of Ciel, keeping a close watch on his every movement. Ciel couldn't help but let out a quiet scoff- quiet though it concussively pierced the terse silence the three of them had built up between words.

"Oh yes, that's right," Sir Arthur remembered. "You don't believe that Hague had anything to do with this. That's right. I'd forgotten." He clearly hadn't.

"I never said anything of the sort," Ciel argued brusquely. "I told you that he was responsible for the two murders at Water Street, and that he more than likely was a follower of the man responsible for the rest of the killings. And how many times have I been wrong, in all the years that you've known me?"

"I know you wouldn't be so sure of Hague's innocence, partial or otherwise, if you hadn't already come to a sure conclusion as to who the actual perpetrator is," Sir Arthur fired back. "It must be someone with considerable knowledge of your investigational skills. Someone close the investigation itself, perhaps?"

Sir Arthur glanced scathingly at Ciel, but looked longer at Sebastian, who stood just behind Ciel, looming over him like a warning.

"Be careful not to waste your time with assumptions, Sir Arthur."

Ciel got to his feet and crossed the room, pausing in the doorway long enough to speak over his shoulder.

"This is not an enemy you can hope to easily defeat, even if you do have all your wits about you. Your focus needs to be in the correct place if you have any hope of being victorious."

Sir Arthur opened his mouth to reply, but was clearly at a loss for words. Ciel smiled.

"Sebastian, have Tanaka show our guests to the door."

It was no surprise to Ciel that the word about the residence fire spread among the nobles in the following days. He received several letters, all thinly veiled as condolences while their true purpose was to garner news to feed the next two weeks worth of gossip. Ciel replied to each and every one of them with standard and vague answers to the questions. He hoped it meant not being ambushed at the ball next week by all manner of curious lords and their nosy wives. He would do anything to avoid something so banal, even if it meant his hand going numb after penning the sixth letter.

Lizzy came to call, three days after the fire. Honestly, Ciel was surprised it had taken her so long.

He was in his study that afternoon, at his desk, penning more of his inane responses when Sebastian burst into the room, immediately shutting (almost slamming) the door behind him and crossing the room to Ciel's side of the desk. Ciel immediately looked up in shock, pulling his chair out from the desk and turning it to face where Sebastian now stood.

"Your fiancée is here, sir," Sebastian said demurely, though his following behaviour was anything but demure. He braced his hands on the armrests of the chair, leaning down to kiss Ciel once, quickly, before doing the same to the side of Ciel's neck. He rested his head on Ciel's shoulder for the briefest of moments, breathing deeply.
"Sebastian, what are you doing?"

As soon as Ciel started to ask, Sebastian stood; this was about the time that Ciel heard the unmistakable sound of Lizzy's footsteps outside the study door. He continued to ask his question silently, staring at Sebastian until Sebastian answered.

"I will explain later," Sebastian said quietly, going to open the door before Lizzy knocked it off its hinges with all of her exuberance.

"CIEL! Oh, thank God you're alright!" Lizzy exclaimed. Ciel couldn't help but smirk, as he always did when God was thanked for something he had very little or nothing at all to do with.

Ciel braced himself for impact; Lizzy flew to his side, all but falling on top of him in his chair. The fact that he managed to stand up at all with Lizzy hanging by her arms around his shoulders was a miracle. The overbearing scent of her perfume settled around him like a cloud, and even if he managed to get away, he knew that same scent would still cling to him.

It dawned on him then, what Sebastian had been doing just before Lizzy arrived- he'd been smelling Ciel before his smell could be polluted with anything else. Ciel wondered how many times Sebastian had wished he could do this, how many times he would have if not for how obvious his intentions would have been. He looked over Lizzy's shoulder at Sebastian's face- Sebastian obviously knew that Ciel had figured it out. Ciel fondly rolled his eyes at the mockingly innocent smile that spread across Sebastian's face.

"Lizzy, please- I'm quite alright, I assure you." Ciel extracted himself from Lizzy's hold as delicately as was possible, but she held onto him with an insistence he dare not challenge. It wasn't the worst thing in the world- he was once again reminded of how much Lizzy really did love him- and that it was his duty to allow her affection for him because of it.

"I was so worried," Lizzy gushed, tears welling up in her eyes, "when I heard about the fire, I wanted to come to you immediately- there was a rumour that you hadn't escaped, and I couldn't bear to think that you had-" she stopped herself, hurriedly wiping away her tears and regaining her composure. "I came as soon as I was sure you were alive."

This news came with relief- the relief was to know that he did still have some kind of genuine feeling where Lizzy's wellbeing was concerned- to know that she had been that worried about him made him truly displeased. He was grateful for at least one thing about their relationship that he didn't have to pretend his way through.

The rest of the visit proceeded how most of Lizzy's visits usually did, whenever she showed up unannounced in the wake of Ciel nearly dying. It had happened more times in Ciel's life than he cared to think about. Lizzy nearly cried several times, and Ciel repeatedly reassuring her that he wasn't injured in the fire. She stayed for tea and another two hours after that before Ciel was finally able to (politely) make her leave. As it turned out, this involved Sebastian telling Lizzy that despite Ciel's strength of character, he had not emerged from the fire completely unscathed and therefore needed his rest.

"Why didn't you say something sooner?" Ciel asked, when Lizzy had been sent off in her carriage with a promise she would see Ciel at the All Hallows Eve ball.

"She is your fiancée," Sebastian reminded him. "My last intention was to behave rudely."

Ciel considered this. "I suppose I thought-"
"That the new development in our relationship would give me cause to dislike her?" Sebastian suggested.

"Well, I-"

"I can assure you that any feelings of animosity I may have towards Miss Elizabeth did not simply appear last week."

"Are you- are you jealous?" Ciel was smiling quite proudly now.

"Jealousy would imply that I am insecure about your attachment to me. Ridiculous, in fact- I know very well just how attached you are to me." Sebastian smirked. "I may be a basely possessive creature, but jealous I am not."

Ciel didn't believe there really was a difference between possessiveness and jealousy. He could have pointed this out, but he found it rather amusing that Sebastian, a demon, an immortal, inhuman, nearly all-powerful being would be jealous of Lizzy. So he would allow Sebastian his dignity.

"If you insist," Ciel said, smug smile staying firmly in place. "If you insist."

What made the All Hallows Eve ball such a societal spectacle was the tradition that everyone attended it in costume. In fact, it was somewhat of a competition among the nobles to see whose costume was the best- be it the most beautiful, most terrifying, most expensive- England's wealthiest made it a point to try and outdo each other year after year after year. It was a practice that Ciel of course found pointless- the contest of it, that was. Going to the All Hallows Eve ball without a costume at all simply wasn't done. And so, whenever the end of October came around, Ciel was forced to come up with an entirely new costume. Necessary, but tedious nonetheless.

Far less tedious this year, however, seeing as Ciel's circumstances had given him the perfect idea.

"A vampire, sir?" Sebastian asked, placing Ciel's tea on the table in front of him.

It was four days until the ball, and Ciel had been the one to bring the issue of costumes up in conversation. He must really be looking forward to it, Sebastian thought. The notion was both amusing and unnerving.

"This gave me the idea." Ciel tapped the side of his neck. While the bruise was finally beginning to fade, the fang marks in Ciel's skin were still perfectly visible.

"I won't have to cover it up," Ciel explained. "No one will think it's real. They certainly won't think you did it. But they'll all see it."

Sebastian could see the thrill of this thought alight in Ciel's eyes. He felt the same thrill alight in his.

"Unless you have a better idea," Ciel amended teasingly, biting his lip at the desire painted on Sebastian's face.

"I had intended to suggest Faust. But I must confess, I find your idea much more... satisfying."

"Faust, you say?" Ciel asked, intrigued. "Then that would make you-"


"No, I quite like it." Ciel smirked. "But tell me- what does a demon wear?"
Sebastian simply smiled his most devilish smile.

"Oh, I'm sure I'll be able to come up with something."

All Hallows Eve came without a breath of wind or a wisp of cloud, one of the first nights in weeks that hadn't so much as threatened a storm. The stars sparkled above the city, far out of reach for the warmth of the streetlights below. The roads near the palace were lined with carriages; some of the lords and their ladies even deigned to walk the last few blocks on account of their impatience and the pleasantly fair weather. Altogether, it made for an excellent parade of extravagant and strangely dressed partygoers, all pouring toward Buckingham itself, lit up brighter than the moon glowing in the night sky.

"I can't believe the Queen agreed to host the ball," Ciel grumbled as he and Sebastian entered the palace courtyard. "We're playing right into his hands. He wants to dismantle the Empire, and there's no better platform on which to do it. What fool convinced her to stage this farce here of all places?"

"Me. I am that fool."

Sir Arthur appeared from the crowd. He stood out from the throng because of his solemn expression and his lack of a costume.

"I see you've dressed in the spirit of the occasion," Sir Arthur commented idly, eyes narrowing at Ciel's cape, the collar of it turned up over the lower part of Ciel's face. Ciel felt the evening air nip at the tops of his ears and wished that he hadn't slicked all of his hair back like he did. He could almost hear Sebastian's lungs bursting with suppressed laughter.

Of course, Sebastian picked a costume for himself that was barely any different from his daily appearance- all he had other than his usual outfit was a paper mask that resembled a fanged ram's skull, large horns curling around the sides of his head. The first time Ciel had seen the horns, he'd almost thought they were real. He hadn't asked yet whether or not Sebastian really had horns and what they might look like.

"I must attend to the duties of my social station," Ciel gritted through his teeth, barely managing to sound cordial at all. As if he didn't already feel ridiculous in this costume, now he was obligated to suffer insult at the hands of Sir Arthur, who was quickly becoming as much of a nuisance and the Father already had.

"As I must attend to mine," Sir Arthur replied. "Which is why I saw fit to have the venue of the ball be a place in which her majesty could be easily secured in event of an attack. Her entire personal guard is already present here, and there are many rooms in which she may be hidden- rooms which were constructed for this very purpose. I personally fail to see the foolishness in that, but you seem assured of nothing if not my failures, so I'll leave the part of the doubting Thomas to you, Phantomhive. Good evening."

Ciel said nothing else until he'd lost sight of Sir Arthur as he wove his way back into the crowd.

"Let the record show that I warned him," Ciel muttered. "The arrogant bastard. Conceited, overconfident-"

"His sins will find him out in the end," Sebastian interrupted. "Pride goeth before the fall."

Ciel looked at Sebastian and laughed, his anger all but forgotten.

"You're one to be quoting scripture," he jibed. "Maybe you should have come dressed as a priest."
"There are lines in this world that even I would not dare cross."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Ciel said, and followed the crowds toward the palace doors.

The scene inside was nothing short of spectacular. It was never anything short of an experience to enter the grand ballroom of Buckingham palace- a privilege only afforded to a select few- most would say a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Indeed, it was rare for the Queen to host such a public event; this only heightened the sense of excitement that pervaded the wide open space Ciel now found himself in.

All of the ballroom glowed with golden light; every chandelier was draped in sparkling diamonds, casting refracting lights of every colour across the floor. Ciel almost had trouble deciding where to look- his eyes followed every new colour, every strangely dressed person that walked by him- he shook his head to clear it and reminded himself that he must be constantly on his guard. Any one of these people could be a demon in disguise. One of them was almost certainly the man he had been hunting for half of his lifetime. He could not afford any distractions tonight.

"Ciel!"

So much for no distractions, Ciel thought as he caught sight of Lizzy racing toward him. It seemed this was a moment in his life that he was always doomed to repeat. In fact, he could not count the number of times he had walked into a room only to be bombarded by his fiancée's affection. A handful of times in the last few months alone, he was certain.

And to think, it was once a foregone conclusion that he would be subjected to endless moments like this for the rest of his life. For all the uncertainty about his future he was grappling with as of late, he was at least somewhat grateful that this would not be a part of any future he could hope for now. Still, part of him was startled with the revelation that when he finally died, Lizzy would be bereft. He was far more startled to find that this thought was unsettling, even upsetting, the longer he dwelled on it.

Lizzy was impossible to miss. Even against the backdrop of absurdities, she stood out from those around her. She wore a ball gown of the palest blue, the skirt of which was bigger than Ciel had ever seen. It was all trimmed with pastel pink frills and mint green bows, which matched those that adorned the white bonnet she was wearing. In her hand she held a white shepherd's crook, wound in pink ribbons which hung from the end in curls.

"Little Bo Peep has lost her sheep and doesn't know where to find them," Ciel thought he heard Sebastian mutter. This made him smile, which was beneficial, as Lizzy had just reached him. He continued to smile at her, even as she hugged him tightly and kissed his cheek. His smile only faded when he realised that since she had found him, he would more than likely be forced to dance.

Just as Lizzy opened her mouth to ask that very question, there was a great fanfare of trumpets from all corners of the room. Ciel could hardly see through the crowd of those around him, but he could hear doors opening, which prompted a sudden hush from the crowd as the band started into a boisterous rendition of 'God Save the Queen'. The crowd began to part, to make way for the Royal procession that was sure to follow. A young herald marched to the center of the room, taking a deep breath before bellowing,

"Her sovereign majesty, Queen Victoria!"

There were eight guards ahead of her and eight guards behind, marching in perfect two-by-two formation while staring straight forward and nowhere else. Ciel wondered how they could ever managed to prevent threats to the Queen's life if they never looked around for things that were
threatening. Ciel looked across the room at Sir Arthur, who looked smug and satisfied with the
Queen's protective detail. No doubt he'd had a hand in doubling the guard.

The Queen herself was not in costume- she was, however, dressed more richly than Ciel had ever
seen. She wore a dress of deep red, trimmed with white and grey-mottled fur. Her cloak was a few
shades lighter than her dress, trimmed in the same fur and dragging several feet behind her as she
glided through the room. All in attendance bowed as she passed, returning the companionable smile
she offered them. The music came to an end as she reached the stage that had been set at one end of
the ball room, mounting the platform and sitting gracefully in the throne that had been placed there.
The herald addressed them all once again.

"Her majesty thanks you for your attendance, and for once again bringing such life and laughter to
the halls of her family's home. She wishes that you resume your dance and enjoy the remainder of
the evening."

The high ceilings caught the overwhelming applause that rose toward it. Soon, the band had struck
up a tune again, a waltz that Ciel knew he'd heard somewhere before but could not remember the
name of.

"Oh, won't you dance with me, Ciel?" Lizzy asked as if there had been no interruption. "Her majesty
had requested it of us! We must dance and enjoy ourselves!"

"Very well," Ciel consented, lifting Lizzy's hand and he led her to the dance floor, guiding them into
the sea of couples with relative ease.

There was nothing to distinguish this dance from the seemingly infinite number of dances he had
shared with Lizzy over the course of his life- it was no more difficult, no more simple or no more
tedious than any other. In fact, it was more reminiscent of past experiences than it was a recognisable
experience in and of itself. Ciel wondered idly if it would be the last dance he would ever dance. He
supposed it would be, if the Father made good on his word and showed his face at tonight's ball.

Ciel suddenly felt the full force of someone staring at him. It was an unmistakeably familiar feeling-
he knew the person staring must be Sebastian. Ciel himself had been so focussed on his footwork,
and on smiling, that he hadn't noticed it at first. Currently, he could do nothing about it- his back was
facing the wall where Sebastian had stationed himself. When the waltz finally permitted them to turn,
Ciel searched over Lizzy's shoulder for Sebastian's face- and found it almost right away.

When he did lock eyes with Sebastian, he was immediately caught in the throes of a memory he
hadn't had cause to think of for many months. It was of the last ball where he and Lizzy had danced-
the end of the social season back in June, where Sebastian had watched Ciel and Lizzy dancing, face
painted over with a darkened look Ciel knew now to be jealousy. The look of Sebastian's face now
was the same only in that Ciel knew of Sebastian's jealousy. The darkness, however, was not so
present, as Sebastian had not had Ciel then as he did now. They had both been wanting and waiting
in silence, spending all of their time staring at each other from across crowded rooms and yet never
coming closer out of fear and sheer foolishness.

So much wasted time, Ciel thought, not for the first time. And now it seems that I'm running out of
time altogether.

Sebastian appeared at Ciel's side almost as soon as Ciel thought this, clearing his throat and halting
Ciel and Lizzy in their tracks.

"Sir, I'm afraid I must interrupt. There is an emergent matter that requires your immediate attention."
Lizzy looked less than pleased.

"Must you? The dance has only just started."

"I apologise my Lady, but I assure you that only the most urgent need could cause me to behave so rudely."

"It concerns the interests of her Majesty," Ciel explained, his lie clearly placating Lizzy. "I'm terribly sorry, but I promise I'll return to you as soon as I can."

"Alright," Lizzy agreed, setting her shoulders and letting her white gloved hand fall from Ciel's shoulder.

"Pease follow me, sir," Sebastian said, escorting Ciel across the room, through the multicoloured crowd, around the edge of the dance floor until they reached a set of doors that led into the Queen's private residence. The hall way was white and trimmed in gold, lit brightly though left deserted.

Ciel followed Sebastian around a corner and up a flight of stairs before Sebastian opened yet another door, ushering Ciel into a room with an appearance congruent and yet opposed to that of the hallway. While white and richly furnished, there was no light to speak of but for the little that leached in beneath the door as it closed and through the heavy curtains on the windows. Altogether, everything was washed in shadowy shades of blue and grey.

Ciel stood still for a moment, listening to the continued raucous of the ball, the music somewhat muffled through the walls that separated him from it. This room was rather like a pocket of air, he thought, trapped within the filling hull of a sinking ship. A haven, the last safe place there was. His breaths came quick and close in his ears, and he found himself smiling at Sebastian's deception.

"You liar!" he exclaimed, barely able to keep himself from laughing as Sebastian pulled his own mask off and dropped it carelessly to the floor. He then turned his attention to Ciel's cape, tearing it from Ciel's shoulders without so much as a warning.

"I never lie." Sebastian smiled in return.

"Not to me, perhaps," Ciel qualified his jest of an accusation, his smile turning more knowing and playful as he stepped closer to Sebastian. "I thought you said you weren't jealous."

"Not jealous," Sebastian insisted, putting a hand on Ciel's hip and pulling him close. "But a slave to my desires. And how else was I to get a dance with you than to steal you away from her?"

"Is it really stealing if I came willingly?" Ciel wondered, hands finding their places, feet falling into stride as Sebastian began to lead them in a dance around the room.

Ciel closed his eyes, first imagining them in the very ballroom they had only just escaped from, surrounded by glittering light and the dozens of other couples also waltzing this very waltz- a world where there were no judgements or restrictions imposed upon them by an ignorant society.

Soon, the vision shifted to the last time he and Sebastian had danced, months and months ago, in a house that was now only ashes- the house where, during that waltz in the study, Ciel's now fully realised (and returned) feelings for Sebastian had first taken root within him. From there, they had only grown, and everything that had happened since within that house only served to bring them closer together.

This was where they belonged, Ciel decided- the prying eyes and narrow minds of the world could not touch them here. What he and Sebastian had belonged, not in view of all, not in crowded
ballrooms and marble halls but in the moments they shared— in sun-drenched studies and darkened parlours, behind locked doors and between the sheets. Most importantly, they belonged in the halls of Ciel's memory, where not even fire could destroy the evidence of something so eternal. What he and Sebastian had was theirs and theirs alone.

Beyond the walls of their refuge, the music shifted, giving way to a much more joyful melody, too quick for the decaying revolutions of their slow dance. Ciel and Sebastian came to a standstill, eyes locked in a clear and complete gaze, more intimate than any touch could ever be. Even in the dark, they had never seen each other more clearly than they did now.

"Ciel," Sebastian said simply, quietly, in a way that made Ciel forget that he'd ever heard Sebastian say his name before this moment. It was over too soon, he thought, the syllables dying into silence far too quickly.

"Say it again," he ordered gently. "Just like that."

"Ciel."

"Again."

"Ciel."

"Again."

Sebastian paused a moment and then kissed Ciel instead which, while technically in disobedience of Ciel's order, was just as pleasing to Ciel as hearing his name from the mouth that now kissed him.

Kissing Sebastian was always as new as it was familiar, as exciting as it was comforting. He had learned every facet of Sebastian's shining passion; the way his lips moved against Ciel's, forming words in a language that only the two of them knew. The way his hands would move over Ciel's face, Ciel's body, the lines of which he already knew by heart but which he continued to devote himself to the study of. Even the manner in which he moved, in which every fibre of his being ached to follow when Ciel pulled away to breathe— Ciel knew all of this implicitly.

And yet Sebastian's kiss never ceased to have the same effect on Ciel— a bursting sense of affection, an insatiable desire for more, a fire that burned beneath his skin, the flames sparking and leaping inside him— no kiss would ever be enough to quell that flame, to quench the thirst that very kiss began.

"I thought perhaps I could control myself," Sebastian said wistfully, pulling back to observe Ciel's now dishevelled appearance— his hair had fallen in his face, blood rising beautifully in his cheeks and in his neck, darkening around the faded bruise. He could never quite take his eyes off of it, for as long as it had been there. It was plain on his face what he wanted to do.

"People will see," Ciel warned, half-hearted as it was, pulling Sebastian down and tipping his own head back in invitation.

"Let them," Sebastian answered, and down he went.

"Still no sign of anything unusual, sir," Abberline reported, narrowed eyes scanning the sea of masked faces. "Nothing unusual for this sort of event, anyway."

"It would appear that Phantomhive's arrogance has finally lead him to make a mistake," Sir Arthur commented, staring across the room to the doorway Phantomhive had disappeared through several minutes before, accompanied of course by his butler. Abberline caught onto his line of sight, looking
at the door with confusion.

"Where do you suppose they ran off to?"

"The question is not where they ran off to, but _why_ they ran off in the first place, and I don't believe it's a question you should be asking so casually."

"You think they're plotting something," Abberline guessed. "You think Ciel-you think Lord Phantomhive might be behind all this."

"I do," Sir Arthur confirmed. "But I also think that something far more illicit and depraved is going on beyond that door."

Abberline all but gasped, looking back to Sir Arthur with indignation and disbelief.

"You don't mean-"

A sudden scream rang out over the din of a hundred conversations. The musicians ceased their playing to look for the source of the shriek, as did every other person in the room. A collective gasp rose from the crowd, followed by an eerie silence as they all began to step back.

Sir Arthur pushed his way to the edge of the sudden clearing, Abberline at his side, gun drawn. There was the sound of a door opening and closing somewhere behind them. Phantomhive pushed through the crowd a moment later. His hair was askew, his face stained by blush. Sir Arthur would have scowled at Phantomhive if not for his inability to take his eyes from what he had now saw before him.

One of the guards had fallen face down on the floor, a thick red pool seeping out from beneath his already red coat. A creature, human in appearance, shrouded in black, was crouched over the guard, tearing rabidly at his neck. When it pulled back, its eyes were wild with an evil the likes of which none present had ever seen. A chunk of the guard's flesh hung from the creature's mouth- its fangs were red, its face and hands dripping with the blood of its victim.

Abberline, along with every other soul present, stood paralyzed in abject terror. While their peril fixed them where they stood, more of the same creatures appeared, as if they were simply materialising out of thin air. Not as if, but in the literal sense, Abberline realised- one moment they weren't there, and the next they were, the very opposite of a magician's vanishing act. At first there were three, then five, then a dozen. Soon there were twice that many, the group of them fanning out toward the crowd.

There was a sudden motion at Abberline's right arm- Sir Arthur brushed past him, shoving his way by like a fish fording a stream, trying like mad to get to where the Queen's guards were already surrounding her, weapons in hand.

"Aim for their heads," Ciel said, revolver in hand, suddenly standing right next to Abberline.

There was another scream from someone in the crowd- Sebastian had jumped down from overhead, landing on the bloodstained creature and crushing its skull. This was apparently enough to kill it- it simply went up in a great flash of flame, its ashes billowing to the ground around Sebastian's feet.

"Ciel, tell me what's happening," Abberline pleaded, voice shaking uncontrollably. It was then he noticed that Ciel had rid himself of the high-collared cape he had been wearing. Abberline, absurdly enough, could only stare at the bite mark on Ciel's neck. It had been pale before, perhaps painted on, part of his vampire costume for the ball. But now, the bite was red and livid, the bruise around it blue and _fresh_.

Ciel ignored Abberline's gawking and looked to Sebastian, exchanging silent words with him that Abberline often wished he could hear—now he wasn't so sure he wanted to hear those words at all.

"Armageddon."

Abberline balked at Ciel's response, his entire body going cold as the inflection of Ciel's voice seeped into his mind.

Ciel had said Armageddon as if it was something he'd been looking forward to.

"Everyone, run!" Abberline screamed. At once, there was a great thundering of footsteps as the crowd began to charge for the nearest they could reach.

This caused the demons to charge. Ciel had hoped to avoid this, but there was nothing to be done about it now. At the moment, his only concern was staying on his feet—he knew if he fell, he would be trampled by his fellow aristocrats. He bowed his head, ducking under the flailing arms and sidestepping those who thought they could simply climb over everyone else to get to the doors.

He tried not to watch the demons descend on those that were separated from the group. He could hear nothing but screams dying in the throats of those who were unlucky enough to have fallen behind. The silencing of a few did nothing, however, to affect the utter chaos and pandemonium caused by the many.

"Master!" Sebastian called, rushing to Ciel's side and lifting him from the ground. He rushed Ciel to the safest place he could find, sequestered behind a table near the edge of the room where no one could approach unnoticed.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Ciel answered calmly, even as he watched one of the demons snap a man's neck before turning on the man's terrified wife.

The demon snarled, about to lunge, when, its head was taken clean off its body by an unseen force, a blur that passed by at inhuman speed, blowing the demon's ashes every which way as it moved throughout the room.

"It would appear that the destruction of the vermin's head results in its immediate death," William Spears observed, coming to a standstill in the cloud of the demon's remains. For a moment, Ciel wondered who he was talking to—until another blur flew past, this one quicker and unmistakably red.

"Oh, what fun!" Grell exclaimed, excitedly waving his tiny scissor-like scythes.

"What are they doing here?" Ciel hissed, just as Grell killed another one of the demons. "They could ruin everything!"

"How do you mean?" Sebastian asked, looking disgustedly at Grell who apparently (and blessedly) hadn't seen him yet.

"The Father wants to kill the Queen, and he wants to take me. He might simply run if he knows that the reapers are involved."

"He might have already run," Sebastian suggested, gesturing to the fleeing crowd. While some had already escaped, everyone else was trapped, their own desperation making it impossible to fit through the narrow doorways. Ciel shuddered to think how many people might be hurt by one
another rather than a demon.

"He's here, Sebastian, I just know it." Ciel looked sternly into Sebastian's eyes, unwilling to accept any other truth than the one he believed. "Find him and bring him to me."

"But-"

"I'll be fine here- I'm a better shot than you think I am. And besides, I have Grell to protect me."

In the midst of all the hell that had broken loose around them, Sebastian laughed. He kissed Ciel, right there- though they were surrounded by people, not a single one was looking in their direction.

"How will I know him?" Sebastian asked suddenly.

"You'll know him." Ciel drew a line down the side of Sebastian's face with the tips of his fingers.

"Go."

"Yes, my lord."

Abberline was out of bullets. He had tried to do what Ciel suggested, shooting for the creature's heads every chance he got- but his shaking hands made his already poor aim even poorer. He had given up trying to kill the creatures altogether, and turned his efforts to directing all efforts to escape.

It had quickly become apparent to him that only one of the doorways was a safe means of escape- the door that lead into the courtyard, and by extension the street. The others only went deeper into the palace, and he could not be sure that there weren't more creatures waiting to attack within the network of hallways.

When a sudden fire broke out at one end of the ball room, he knew he must act quickly.

"This way!" He shouted, waving his arms above his head to catch the attention of those still attempting to escape through the internal doors. "This way! You must get out of the palace!"

Slowly but surely, the crowd headed toward him. He fought his way to the door, calling out his name and rank, hoping it would cause people to be more accommodating. He found that names and ranks meant nothing at times like these. When he did make it, he felt as though his ribs had been crushed, arms nearly having been ripped off by those trying to pull him back. When he stepped out into the night, he breathed deeper than he ever had, as if these breaths would be his last.

"One at a time!" He ordered, grabbing the hand of a woman trapped in the doorway by her billowing skirt. "You'll all make it out if you come one at a time!"

As he pulled people one-by-one from the tangle of struggling limbs, he instructed them to run, to get as far away from the palace as they could. No one argued with him on this point. The more people he saved, the easier it was for them to get through the doorway. Soon they were pouring out in twos and threes, the last of them reaching safety just in time for smoke to start curling out behind them.

This was when Abberline realised that the Queen- and Sir Arthur- had not emerged from the palace. They may have gone further in, but that didn't mean they were safe. Abberline felt his instincts pulling him into the night, but the stronger pull he felt was the pull of his duty to those who may still be in danger.

He took one last look over his shoulder and charged back inside.

Ciel was out of bullets. He had only managed to kill two demons and wound two others before a fire
broke out at one end of the ballroom, the result of candles falling and tables going up in flames. The smoke obscured his view enough that his last two shots had missed his targets entirely. He expected to be attacked again, until he realised that the remaining demons were crowded around something in the center of the room. He looked around for Sebastian, for Grell and for Spears, and saw no one. His curiosity left him with no choice but to find out what was happening.

He crept along the wall, holding his sleeve up to his mouth in an effort to keep the smoke from his lungs. The flames that had engulfed the tables were now licking at the walls, eating into the gilded wood and hand-woven tapestries. The irrational part of Ciel was worried that Sebastian had been hurt. The rational part of him chided the irrational part even as it began to worry as well.

He counted the demons- of the twenty-five or so that he had counted at first, there were only seven left. A cold chill went through Ciel as he remembered what only a few demons could do- what they had done. His hands felt wet with the memory of Sebastian's blood, and he pressed on.

Before Ciel could get close enough to see just what the demons were so engrossed in, Spears and Grell swooped in out of the smoke, each kicking a demon across the floor and chasing after them. Another two demons backed away in fear, but caught sight of Ciel and raced toward him.

Sebastian appeared in a flash, growling something unintelligible. This alone frightened the demons into a halt, but Sebastian was clearly not content with their fear, and so he attacked, not stopping until one was dead and the other was at his mercy.

"My master wishes you to know," the demon hissed, focussed on Ciel even as Sebastian stood on its throat, "your soul is no longer of value to him, wretched as it is. Next time you meet, he will take your life."

Sebastian responded to this threat by clawing the eyes from its head, followed by crushing its skull with his bloodied hand. Ciel, entranced as always by Sebastian's fury, failed to see the seventh demon make its escape.

"Where is he?" Ciel asked Sebastian. "The Father- he was here- he said he would be here."

"I searched, but no one remains who could possibly-"

"He was here!" Ciel screamed.

"Who was here?" Grell asked- he and Spears approached, having killed the demons they were fighting.

"Their leader, their-"

A shrill cry broke out over the sound of crackling fire.

Ciel was on his feet in an instant, across the ballroom, past piles of ashes and the bodies of those who had failed to escape. He dared not look at their faces, lest he saw someone he recognised. He kept his eyes up and ahead- this was when he caught sight of Abberline, who had come back into the burning ball room after escaping outside. He had apparently also heard the scream and was running for the same door where Ciel was headed. It was only a few seconds before his longer strides had overtaken Ciel's- but Sebastian was faster still, sprinting past both of them and down the white and gold hallway.

Ciel and Abberline reached the doorway of the sitting room at the very same moment they heard a loud shattering of glass coming from within. Ciel would later realise that this was the same sitting room he and Sebastian had sneaked off to earlier.
What they saw in the sitting room was the aftermath of a struggle. It seemed the Queen herself was the one whose cries had alerted them to said struggle. She was now crouched in the shadowed corner, ostensibly unharmed- she appeared to be brushing her face clean of something, dark smears evident on her cheeks and hands. Her guards were nowhere to be seen, though there was one other person in the room, apparently dead, laying face down in the dark.

Abberline rushed to the Queen's side, and then to the body, but Ciel hardly noticed him doing so. His only focus was the source of the shattering glass- the window that had been broken when someone had gone through it. That someone must either be Sebastian, or the Father. Either way, Ciel bolted across the room as soon as he came to this conclusion. He slipped in something wet and warm- blood, perhaps- it stained his knees and ran slick between his fingers as he scrambled back to his feet.

He crossed the room at a breakneck pace and barely had time to skid to a stop before he reached the window, grabbing at the window frame to keep from falling head long through it. He leaned over the jagged edge of the broken windowpane, peering down into the dark. The ground was a dozen feet down at least, right onto thorny rosebushes and hard cobblestones. Such a landing would have gravely injured any human. Ciel could barely see to the ground- there was no light but the moon, and it painted an incomplete picture of what had happened beyond the palace walls.

Upon closer inspection, Ciel could see what looked like a human silhouette sprawled out over the bushes. It was hard to determine anything beyond that, but Ciel was sure the silhouette wasn't moving. Which meant it wasn't a demon that had gone through the window. Ciel was startled, but suppressed the shock that threatened to immobilise him. He would not think about what this meant, about who that dead man was, not until he knew where Sebastian was and that he was alright.

"Lord Phantomhive."

Ciel turned to look at Abberline, whose face had gone deathly pale in the light streaming in through the hallway. Ciel's eyes adjusted to the light just fast enough to see who it was lying face down on the floor. Sir Arthur's eyes were wide open, their empty stare frozen in alarm at the sight of the man who had killed him, a man who was no longer there."

"Is he-"

"Yes." Abberline seemed torn between staring shamelessly and not being able to look at all.

The Queen remained silent, having averted her eyes from the scene before her. It was Sir Arthur's blood that darkened her face, her hands. He had died protecting her. Ciel walked closer to the body, standing over it and staring for a long while, this being a sight he did not soon want to forget. Not because it was particularly pleasing to him that Sir Arthur was dead (though he was sure to lose no sleep over the matter), but because he liked to make a note of the times he had been proven right in his life. This was most certainly one of those times.

*I did warn him*, he thought. *The arrogant bastard. Conceited, overconfident-*

Out of nowhere, Sir Arthur began to gasp for breath. Ciel almost jumped out of his skin, but managed to keep his wits about him. Both the Queen and Abberline screamed, but it was Abberline who looked as if he were about to faint.

Sir Arthur's last and laboured breaths were a horrid, wet sound, disjointed and hoarse, as it was obvious from the sheer volume of blood that his throat had been cut ear to ear. He should have bled out in a matter of moments. He should no longer be alive, and yet there he was, pallid hand twitching and reaching for Abberline as a last request.
"Sir!" Abberline nearly screamed, on the verge of hysterics at this morbid turn of events. He reached out for the man's hand, but Sir Arthur didn't notice. The tips of his fingers drifted in Ciel's direction, an accusation from the edge of the grave.

"-can't be trusted," Sir Arthur slurred, his dead eyes meeting Ciel's and flaring with one last hateful flash of life. He looked to Abberline and his gaze softened as the light faded from it. "Find the truth."

His hand fell to his side with a heavy thump, the last beat of his heart passing into a silence that blanketed the room in shock and horror. Abberline looked at Ciel, who could only close his eyes and shake his head at the dramatic of it all.

"The assailant is dead," Sebastian remarked, materialising at Ciel's side. With the adrenaline still coursing through Ciel's system, he nearly jumped out of his skin (again) at the suddenness of Sebastian's presence.

"Inspector, do you not think it prudent that her Majesty should be taken to safety as soon as possible?" Sebastian knelt and passed a hand over Sir Arthur's face, closing his eyes for the last time. "I do believe that more of the Queen's guard have gathered out in the courtyard."

"Yes, of course." Abberline got unsteadily to his feet and offered his hand to the Queen, who took it and allowed herself to be escorted from the room. She fixed her eyes on Ciel and only ceased to stare at him when she was gone from view.

"I warned him," Ciel voiced his continuous stream of thought, voice sounding as dead as Sir Arthur looked. "I warned him."

"That you did," Sebastian echoed, gathering Ciel into his arms. "Pride goeth before the fall."

Ciel could hold off his state of shock no longer- he found himself unable to move, sitting eerily still but for his hands. Though they had been cleaned of Sir Arthur's blood, they shook fiercely while the rest of him remained unaffected. Around him, the world continued to turn, but at a snail's pace. Everything he heard was far-off, all he saw was a blur of darkness and light, mere shapes through a veil. He was vaguely aware that he had been moved to a small dark place, a soft seat and a cushioned wall for him to lean on. Beyond that, he was sure of nothing.

"I must convey my master's gratitude for your assistance in this matter," someone said. Their voice was clearer than anything else, than Ciel's breath or his heartbeat screaming in his ears. This voice reached out to him in the darkness, a steadying hand in the chaos of his mind. Sebastian's voice, then.

"It was not on his behalf that we interceded. Nor will we intercede again," another voice replied. This one was familiar, but it made Ciel want to turn his back, to say something venomous over his shoulder. Oh yes, the reaper- William Spears.

"Nevertheless, you have his thanks," the lulling voice, Sebastian, spoke again.

Ciel's hands continued to shake. They did not cease to shake until Sebastian took hold of them, having climbed into the carriage and shut the door behind him. The click of the door was what completely jarred Ciel back to himself. The carriage rumbled into motion a moment later- now Ciel's hands were still while everything else shook. It was nothing less than a testament to the effect Sebastian had on him; Ciel could always be solid and sure now, even while the entire world crumbled around him. But now-

"So is that it, then?" Ciel wondered, totally devoid of emotion. "Is this the part where you take my soul?"
"Should it be?"

"That was him, wasn't it? That man you killed, that was the Father, that was-" Ciel's unfeeling facade cracked just as his voice did. "That was him. So it's over."

"Master-"

"I just didn't- I knew this was coming. I knew tonight would be the end of it, but- I never expected to feel this way. About it, about you- I never expected to feel anything like this at all, ever again."

"Ciel."

"What." Ciel barked, just as he realised it was unnecessary to do so.

"It isn't over," Sebastian explained.

"What?"

"I counted how many demons he sent and how many demons were killed," Sebastian explained. "There was a discrepancy between the two numbers- some of the demons escaped. If I really had killed their creator, they would have died as well. But they simply ran, likely back to their true leader."

"The Father isn't dead."

Ciel was shocked- the most shocked he'd been about anything since he'd discovered that the Father was the man who'd killed his parents- since ten minutes ago, when he'd thought that man was finally dead.

"I was so sure he'd be here tonight."

"I believe he was," Sebastian said. Ciel almost thought that Sebastian was patronising him, but thought better of it when Sebastian continued to speak. "He must have come to watch the spectacle, knowing you would be waiting for him to reveal himself. When the fight broke out and his plan to kill the Queen was thwarted, he simply slipped away into the panicking crowd, leaving one of his followers to die in his place."

"One of his followers?"

"The man I killed, the man we mistook to be the Father, was human. But he knew what I was. He had a sanctified blade in fact, which he used to kill Sir Arthur, after which he attempted to attack me with it."

"Are you-"

"I am unharmed. I overpowered him easily, which is also how I knew he was human. He did, however, bear the mark. It was branded on the back of his hand."

"The Father doesn't only have an army of demon slaves, then," Ciel realised. "He has humans who are willing to die for him as well."

"It was a cult that took you after your parents were killed," Sebastian reminded him. "The Father is obviously the leader of whatever remains of this cult."

Sebastian pulled Ciel's hand to his mouth, kissing his palm in a sudden gesture of adoration and obedience.
"So you see," Sebastian whispered, "this is far from over. Your soul remains your own until every last one of them is destroyed."

"My soul was never my own. Not since I promised it to you all those years ago," Ciel corrected as Sebastian let go of his hand. "As it should be."

"As it should be," Sebastian tested, "not as it will be?"

"As it should be." Ciel said this but did not meet Sebastian's eyes. 

"It will be nearly morning before we reach the manor, sir." Sebastian, perceptive as ever, changed the subject with ease. "You should try to sleep."

Ciel leaned his head on the carriage window, closed his eyes, and did just that. For the rest of the journey home, Sebastian stared blankly out the carriage window over the darkened landscape, the forms of the trees lost in movement and shadow just as Sebastian himself quickly became lost in thought.

Ciel had barely slept on the carriage ride back to the manor. And though the sun had not yet risen when they arrived, the horizon was a lightening blue that threatened dawn within the hour- which meant that Ciel had effectively had no sleep all night. It was not the longest span of time he had ever gone without sleep- Ciel had experienced the strange comfort of watching morning come after having haunted the halls of his house all night.

There was something unique about the second wind of energy one experienced after a sleepless night, the body's way of sustaining itself when rest had failed to come. It was energy that Ciel did not plan to waste, energy that was augmented by the remnants of adrenaline still chasing the blood through his veins, and the hours long carriage ride during which he'd had plenty of time to decide exactly what he would do with Sebastian as soon as they were home.

These things usually went the same way. A pattern had begun to emerge- a recurring sense of urgency pushing to the surface, governing their every action- it was as if they feared that each time would be the last. Any moment alone found the two of them against walls, atop tables, sharing feverish kisses and touches hard enough to be rough but lingering enough to be tender. One would always ask the other what he wanted; the answer would always be what they both wanted in the end. Tonight was no different.

Ciel pushed Sebastian down onto the bed almost as soon as they entered the bedroom, the two of them having barely just shed their coats. He crawled over Sebastian, straddling his hips and tugging at his gloves with near frantic speed. This left them both mostly clothed, rutting like animals while Sebastian kissed Ciel until Ciel forgot what his own mouth had ever tasted like before.

"Tell me what you want," Ciel said slowly when Sebastian seized him by the hips, stilling his movements. He slid his hands down Sebastian's body as he spoke, undoing buttons and pushing Sebastian's shirt from his chest.

"You," Sebastian whispered, far softer than Ciel had ever heard him sound. "Only you."

Ciel's face went red at that, but he felt his mouth turn up in a smile nonetheless. He kissed Sebastian once more before he sat up, running his fingertips over the length of Sebastian's scar, still plainly visible. Ciel wondered if it would ever fade completely. Part of him hoped it wouldn't.

Ciel took off his own shirt and tossed it aside, shivering slightly. Sebastian moved to take off his shirt;
as well, but Ciel gently stopped him, pinning him with a look that Sebastian knew to mean he shouldn't move again. He laid back down, hands falling to rest on Ciel's thighs, a favourite place for them as of late. Sebastian's cock was hard in his trousers- Ciel could feel it pressing against him. He pushed back against it, mouth falling open as he imagined-

"Sebastian," he said, one of his hands wandering to rub himself through his trousers. "I want you inside me."

Sebastian's eyes widened, and he stared at Ciel for an almost uncomfortably long and silent moment.

"Oh please," Ciel scoffed, though it sounded more like begging when he was so out of breath. "I've been thinking about little else for weeks. Months, in fact, and-"

This was apparently all the convincing Sebastian needed. Truthfully, he hadn't really needed any convincing at all- his hesitation came only from surprise. After the night's events, and their cryptic conversation on the ride back, Sebastian hadn't expected Ciel to ask for this now, especially since he'd never asked for it before. The real surprise was that anything Ciel said or did could surprise Sebastian at all anymore. If he'd been thinking from a human's perspective, he would have known that when faced with death, it was in a person's nature to do most anything they could to remind them that they were still alive.

"Well?" Ciel tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, looking at once to be made equally from sharp corners and soft lines in the watery pastel colours of the near-morning light.

"Whatever my master wishes," Sebastian replied, as if he wasn't already aching with the mere thought of what Ciel had asked him to do.

Sebastian went into action, flipping Ciel onto his back and setting him down less than gently on the bed before he slowly but surely rid Ciel of the rest of his clothing. He watched the shiver that travelled the length of Ciel's body when the cold air reached his skin, smiling at the quiet gasp that accompanied it. Ciel's shiver became a shudder, his gasp a moan, when Sebastian's mouth found one of his nipples, teasing at it with his tongue, worrying at it with his teeth until Ciel's entire body was arching into the touch.

Just when it seemed Ciel's back might break, Sebastian pulled away, sitting back on his knees to take in the sight of Ciel laid out before him, legs spread wide and arms flung over his head. There was a dark blush on his cheeks as well as his chest, blood rising beneath his skin as his heart raced faster and faster. His cock was hard between his legs, full and pink as it bobbed against his stomach with every instinctual jerk of his hips. Sebastian could see as plain as day that Ciel wanted to touch himself- his fingers were twitching with the need for it. He looked up at Sebastian with barely open eyes, lips parted, breath catching as he struggled for words. Sebastian made up his mind to get those words out of Ciel yet.

Ciel was still catching his breath when Sebastian suddenly stood and disappeared into the bathroom, returning just as quickly as he'd left, a small bottle of something clutched in his hand. He tossed it onto the bed and proceeded to remove the rest of his own clothing- slow enough to be considered teasingly. Ciel watched him carefully as he undressed, impatient, perhaps, but doing his best not to betray the fact. It was obvious, though, since he sat up and reached out to pull Sebastian down on top of him just as soon as Sebastian was naked.

They found their positions easily, Sebastian on his knees between Ciel's legs, which Ciel was eager to spread, to wrap around Sebastian's waist so as to keep him close. Sebastian kissed Ciel lazily, thoroughly, marvelling at how fast Ciel had learned the finer points of such a thing- of course, he'd had ample amounts of practise.
Ciel was the kind to use any excuse he could think of just to kiss Sebastian- it was something Sebastian was extremely fond of. Come to think of it, there weren't very many things about Ciel that Sebastian wasn't fond of. He was more than a little biased where his master was concerned- rational thought did not apply to him, and hundreds of years of well-practised self-control were all forgotten the moment Ciel's mouth was on his. Right now for instance, Sebastian was finding it difficult to stop kissing Ciel long enough to do anything else. When he did finally find it in himself to stop kissing Ciel, the conflicting looks of bliss and disappointment on Ciel's face were enough to make him want to go right back to it.

"It's important that you relax," Sebastian told him, sitting back and picking up the bottle from its place on the sheets.

Ciel followed this instruction and laid back once again, his eyes following Sebastian's movements as he opened the bottle and poured some of the oil onto his fingers. He closed his eyes, giving himself over to sensation. He felt Sebastian's slick fingers ghost over his cock, then trail lower until one of them pushed inside him. There was no real pain at first, but it was an odd feeling to say the least. He opened his eyes when he felt Sebastian move, planting his free hand next to Ciel's shoulder and leaning over him. Ciel smoothed his hands over Sebastian's shoulders, winding his arms around Sebastian's neck, threading fingers through his hair and tugging him gently down for another kiss.

He groaned when Sebastian pushed another finger inside him, thrusting them in time with the movements of his mouth on Ciel's. Ciel winced, on the edge of being in pain- when Sebastian scissored his fingers and pushed harder, Ciel gasped, breaking the kiss to do so.

Sebastian distracted him from this discomfort with soft kisses of apology to his temple, his jaw, sliding his mouth seamlessly from there to the bite mark on Ciel's neck, kissing it with the lightest touch of all. Ciel wanted to tell him there was no need for apology- the pain was nothing he couldn't take- if he was being completely honest, he'd be saying he liked it. Sebastian knew this, of course, which meant that his tenderness toward Ciel was purely self-motivated. This caused something inside Ciel to burst with warmth, his chest flooding with affection and bringing a smile to his lips.

His smile was short-lived, however- Sebastian sucked at the bruise at the same moment he crooked his fingers in such a way that sent a sudden spark through Ciel's body, lighting a slow burning fuse inside him, adding to the heat he felt in his face and the need he felt to be touched. His mouth fell open and he whimpered, muffling the sound in the side of Sebastian's neck.

He felt Sebastian's smug smile on his skin when another crook of his fingers garnered the same response. He did it twice more, and by then Ciel was trembling, an almost constant stream of incoherent pleas falling from his mouth as Sebastian continued to suck bruises onto his throat, going as high as his jaw and as low as his collarbone. The pain had faded to a dull ache, lost in the back of his mind, and Ciel thought he might come just from this, just from Sebastian's hand.

"Please," he managed to say, tightening his fingers in Sebastian's hair. "Please, Sebastian-"

"Please, what?" Sebastian prompted, slowly pulling his hand away, leaving Ciel desperate to be filled. "All you have to do is ask."

"Fuck me," Ciel growled breathlessly, teeth grazing just below Sebastian's ear as he spoke. "That's an order."

Sebastian slid into him slowly, torturously slowly, thought Ciel knew it was necessary. One moment there was nothing, and the next- to say it hurt would have been an understatement- it burned, the first push of Sebastian's cock filling him up, claiming him, and it was a moment like no other Ciel had ever experienced. It was far from the worst pain he'd felt in his life- in fact, it was the best pain he'd
Every bit of his focus was on remaining still, on keeping his body from tensing up and waiting for
the pain to pass- because of this, it was impossible for him to keep quiet. He cried out, his voice
shattering the silence which the night had cultivated. Part of him knew that must be wrong. Someone
might hear- the better part of him couldn't have cared less.

"Fuck," Sebastian swore, the rarity of the curse making it all the more arousing to Ciel. For
Sebastian, keeping still took every ounce of his not inconsiderable self-control. Ciel was an all-
consuming heat around him- the significance of being joined now in the most physically intimate of
ways was more intoxicating to him than anything else could be. He looked down into Ciel's eyes and
found his feeling perfectly reflected there.

They kissed again, sloppy and open-mouthed between harried breaths, both moaning as Sebastian
pulled back, withdrawing slightly before pushing forward again, slowly, carefully, gauging Ciel's
limits by the hitches in his breath and how hard he pulled at Sebastian's hair. Soon, they fell into a
steady rhythm, until Ciel was raising his hips to meet every thrust, until the only sound that filled the
room were the harmonies of their voices, of low groans and shallow breathing over the constant beat
of skin against skin.

"This is what you thought of, was it not?" Sebastian whispered, speeding up once he knew Ciel
could take it. "That summer night, in your feverish haze, when all you had was your own hand and
your deepest fantasies."

"You heard," Ciel whispered back, not accusatory but relieved.

"I listened." Sebastian hooked a hand beneath Ciel's knee, shifting Ciel's position and the angle of his
own movements. "Before I'd even left the room, I knew what you were about to do- you've always
been an open book to me, so easy to read and so difficult to resist. I stood in the hall and I listened to
every moment of it, every sound you made- I wanted nothing more than to go back inside and take
you right then and there."

Ciel's head fell back, mouth open in quiet ecstasy when Sebastian's cock brushed against the place
his fingers had found minutes before. Ciel could do nothing but cling to Sebastian, fingernails
digging into his back, no doubt leaving bright red scratches when he lost his grip as Sebastian fucked
him harder, faster, putting near constant pressure on that same spot, setting off blinding flashes of
pleasure that nearly made him forget to breathe.

"I tried to control myself- tried only to listen- but the mere thought of you strips me of my defences,
of my control. You are so dangerous to me- I look at you and I come undone. Hearing you lose
yourself in thoughts of this made it impossible for me not to do the same."

"Touch me," Ciel begged, the force of Sebastian's words knocking into him with a tidal wave of
need. "Please, Sebastian, please-"

No sooner had Sebastian wrapped a hand around Ciel's cock than Ciel was coming, the thick stream
of his release spattering warmly over his sweat-dampened skin. For a moment, the world was
perfectly silent and still- he felt suspended in midair, somewhere outside of himself, his heart no
longer beating, no air passing his lips. He lingered like this for a moment, only to be sucked back into
reality, almost violently, gasping for air as he rode out the throes of his climax.

Sebastian's release came soon after- he spent himself inside Ciel with one final thrust, making a high-
pitched, almost startled noise, as if all the air had been knocked out of his lungs. The pace he'd had
before began to stutter as he rolled his sips slowly with the waves of Ciel's muscles pulsing around
him, pulling Sebastian in and letting him go until he finally pulled out altogether, his entire body going weak. He almost fell on top of Ciel, the strength of his arms having nearly failed him. Instead he collapsed next to Ciel, thoroughly enjoying the blissful look on Ciel's face, the completely debauched look of the rest of him.

When Sebastian moved to get up, Ciel stopped him, grabbing his arm without even having to open his eyes.

"Don't go anywhere." It sounded more like a request than a strict command.

"You need to clean yourself off, or at least allow me to do it. As much as I do like seeing you in such an undone state, it won't do to sleep like that."

"I don't care," Ciel claimed, but Sebastian could already hear the sound of Ciel complaining about the mess when he woke up later this morning. He decided to save himself that particular headache and freed his arm from Ciel's grasp, ignoring Ciel's protests in favour of fetching a wet cloth. Ciel was still complaining when he returned, threatening him endearingly through his post-coital daze.

By the time they were both clean and beneath the covers, Ciel had gone silent. He curled up at Sebastian's side, drumming his fingers on Sebastian's chest in a pattern that Sebastian did not recognise at first—until it occurred to him that it was the rhythm of the waltz they had danced to a few hours before.

"I always thought it would end so suddenly, so violently, with no warning to speak of," Ciel said drowsily. Sebastian wondered if Ciel was even awake enough to realise that he was saying any of this aloud.

"To what are you referring?"

"My life. The ending was always such a sure thing, I've never been afraid of it. I've always thought it would be simple. Now I'm not so sure."

Sebastian didn't get to ask what exactly Ciel meant by that—Ciel had already fallen asleep.

- One Week Later -

Sir Arthur's funeral was held in early November as soon as the weather permitted it. Since the night he died, there had been near constant rain, making the ground far too soft to dig a grave. When the rain had let up, the frost had set in, threatening to freeze the ground before a grave could be dug. This day was fair enough so that the frost had melted from the grass as soon as the sun had risen high enough to touch it. Indeed, it was a beautifully sunny day, rather unfitting for a funeral in Ciel's opinion.

The church was filled to the brim with mourners, only a few of whom Ciel recognised. Sir Arthur had left no family behind. He had been unmarried, (hardly a shock as far as Ciel was concerned), and there were no other relatives present to see him buried. It seemed that Abberline was the only one who was truly moved to any semblance of emotion. He sat a few pews ahead of Ciel, head bowed throughout the entire sermon, wherein the priest droned on and on about Sir Arthur's unending love of Queen and country, his unfailing loyalty to his peers and the exceeding strength he showed through his abundant compassion. Ciel tried very hard not to laugh at that last part.

As with every funeral Ciel had ever attended, there was talk of the deceased's 'Good Christian Faith' and a prayer that his soul would find rest in the halls of the Lord. Ciel once again found himself suppressing laughter. He could not imagine how ridiculous this would seem to Sebastian,
who had elected to stand at the very back of the chapel, just as far away from the altar as he could
get without letting Ciel out of his sight.

"In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou
taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return."

The priest set the Bible he had read from atop his pulpit, closing it with a final thud that echoed
through the silent crowd and brought a definite end to the service. Ciel sighed, grateful for it being
over, and slipped out of the pew before anyone else could block his exit. He did not look once to
Abberline, and so he did not see Abberline's sour expression as he distantly followed Ciel up the
aisle.

Abberline trailed the procession of mourners through the church, keeping his head down and his
expression solemn. He would much rather be watching Ciel- he couldn't shake the memory of how
Ciel hadn't run to Sir Arthur's side as he lay dying, or his almost satisfied expression as he stood over
Sir Arthur's lifeless body. The last words Sir Arthur had spoken to Abberline still rang in Abberline's
ears- Abberline needed the truth now, perhaps more than ever.

When he heard two sets of footsteps veer off down a side corridor, he knew this was his chance to
find it. Glancing up to make sure no one was watching him, he followed the wandering footsteps,
careful to keep his own as quiet as possible.

When Ciel and Sebastian stopped walking, so did Abberline, several paces behind them. He hid
behind a nearby pillar, the marble cold under his hands as he leaned forward to hear what Sebastian
was saying.

"Brave of him to run so willingly into a fight he couldn't hope to win, simply to save the lives of
others."

"He was a fool." Ciel scoffed- the sharpness of the sound echoed all around him. Abberline frowned
as Ciel continued. "I warned him that he couldn't possibly take on this threat alone. Instead he chose
to focus his paranoia on me- and now he's dead, along with more than a dozen others."

Abberline's frown deepened. He found it difficult to believe now that he'd ever felt anything close
tsympathy or respect for Ciel- that Abberline had ever trusted him seemed remarkably foolish now.

"I suppose his death is rather inconvenient," Sebastian conceded. "His suspicions of your were rather
well-known; the violent nature of his death and your connection to it may well keep those suspicions
alive and well in the minds of others."

Abberline's suspicions were certainly alive and well.

"Let them suspect me of whatever they wish- they're no danger to me," Ciel replied haughtily. "It's
not as if they'll ever find any proof. But leave it to Sir Arthur Randall to indict me with his very last
breath."

Abberline craned his neck to catch a glimpse of Ciel's face, tripped over his own feet, and nearly fell
flat of his face.

He caught himself quietly enough, but his gasp of surprise caught Sebastian's attention. The butler's
head whipped around, dark eyes searching the corridor for the source of the noise. Abberline barely
escaped detection, scrambling back behind the pillar, just out of sight.

When he was sure Sebastian was no longer looking or listening for him, Abberline quickly slipped
away. He'd heard all he'd needed to hear.
"Let them suspect me of whatever they wish- they're no danger to me," Ciel replied haughtily. "It's not as if they'll ever find any proof. But leave it to Sir Arthur Randall to indict me with his very last breath."

There was a scuffle and a gasp somewhere down the corridor behind them. Ciel didn't hear it, but nothing ever escaped Sebastian's hearing. He looked over his shoulder, eyes scanning the corridor for the source of the noise. He found none.

"At least her Majesty still lives," he said, turning back to look at Ciel, who was staring emptily out the window into the church yard. "Is that not what you wanted?"

"You know what I wanted," Ciel hissed, glaring at Sebastian from the corner of his eye. "And if you hadn't been so focussed on me, you could have done what I'd asked you to, what I'd ordered you to. But you elected to ensure my safety while he escaped into the crowd, ruining my chance to-"

"Your life is my-"

"First priority. Yes, I know." Ciel scowled, turning away from Sebastian completely. "Sometimes I wish it wasn't. Sometimes I wish I'd never-" he caught himself with a frustrated sigh. He hadn't meant that. One look into Sebastian's eyes told him that Sebastian knew it too.

"He escaped." Ciel's voice quieted in calculation and thought. "We ruined his chance at his ultimate goal, and he's angrier than ever. He wants me dead more than anything now, so rest assured that you'll have no shortage of opportunities to protect me in the near future."

Sebastian smirked at Ciel's jab. He could have jabbed back, but he knew an easier way to disarm Ciel.

"Surely you must have known that I would value your safety above all else. Surely it won't surprise you to learn that my obligation to protect you runs deeper now than it did when I was first bound to this contract- deeper than any obligation of mine ever has."

"Vengeance first," Ciel said, reaching up to touch his fingers to Sebastian's lips. "And then we'll get what we both want so much."

"As you say, master." Sebastian dropped to one knee, bowed his head and kissed the back of Ciel's hand. "Vengeance first."

Chapter End Notes

03/25/16:

The All Hallows Eve (Halloween) ball is completely made up. To my knowledge, no such event ever existed. But I like parties and costumes and it worked for the plot, so now it's a thing I like to imagine.

So I did some art for my headcanon of older Ciel.

Speaking of which: if any of you do the art thing and want to do some of the art thing for this fic (a drawing of a scene or a character or w/e), and you feel inclined to post it on tumblr, tag it #tteoe or #tteoeart or direct mention it @totheendofeverything (or leave a comment here with the post's url) and I'll reblog it to my blog for kuro/this fic. I'm not
gonna assume that this story is *that* popular or inspiring, but this is kind of an invitation/request in case any of you do happen to feel inspired. I've already had one person do a little fanmix/playlist type thing, so those are awesome too! I just want everyone reading this story to feel included in the process, since you guys are the reason I do what I do!

Genesis 3:19 - "In the sweat of they face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return." This verse is the origin of the phrase "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust". That phrase is used in the English Burial Service, which is where the last rites come from that are read at the graveside when the casket is buried. I didn't write that scene, but I put the verse in there because it lends to the title of the chapter.
Memento Mori

Chapter Summary

Ciel placed a hand on Sebastian's chest. "How could I ever regret you?"

{ Memento Mori - Latin - "remember that you must die" }

Chapter Notes

Words: 8k
Chapter Warnings: none, this chapter is pretty tame lmao

Before you read this chapter, you should re-read the rest of the fic or at least skim through it to remind yourself of the important plot points. I had to re-read the whole thing a couple of times myself before I wrote this chapter, just to make sure I didn't lose the tone and continuity of the story. I hope I did an okay job.

Also- happy birthday, Ciel!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- November Fourteenth -

Something was amiss at Phantomhive manor. It wasn't something that many people would have noticed, simply because not many people were present often enough to have a true sense of the household's daily goings on. No one but the servants who, despite being remarkably unobservant in so many ways, picked up on the shift in the proverbial weather rather quickly.

"Feels like it's gonna come to an end, dun' it?" Mey-Rin remarked while sweeping the kitchen floor. It was the end of the day, the coldest day November had brought so far, and the house could not be heated fast enough, drafts and cold spots lingering in the many hallways. The oven was still warm from dinner, and so Finny had come to sit near it and keep his shivering hands from going numb.

"What d'you mean? What's gonna end?" He asked innocently, rubbing the palms of his hands together and holding them inches from the oven door.

"I don't rightly know, Finny. Somethin' important, most like. Things as we know it, maybe."

"I never thought about what I'd do if I ever had to leave this place." Bard entered the room and the conversation, leaning one shoulder against the kitchen doorjamb, a freshly lit cigarette in his mouth.

"Maybe that's 'cause there'd be nothing else to do," Finny suggested, pulling his knees to his chest and wrapping his arms around himself. This was the only home he'd ever had; he'd never wanted to think about leaving it.

"Maybe you're right," Mey-Rin agreed, though she hoped Finny was wrong; she hoped that she was wrong as well.
"It's all coming to an end, you know."

It was exactly one month until Ciel's twentieth birthday- the birthday he was sure would be his last, one way or another.

Since Sir Arthur's funeral, time had slowed to a crawl- the inevitable final stand-off between Ciel and the Father loomed in the distance, just over the hill of the foreseeable future. Ciel's mind remained rife with dreadful anticipation of that day which he knew must be very soon to come.

"It is in keeping with the natural order of things," Sebastian remarked, kneeling to stoke the coals that burned low in the hearth. The two of them were sequestered in Ciel's study, long after sunset, having abandoned Ciel's long held and stringent practise of early to bed, early to rise. It wasn't the only thing they had abandoned; now, without the expectations of prying eyes, the usual decorum between master and servant had completely disintegrated.

Ciel sat on the rug before the fire, wrapped in a blanket that had been taken from his bed. He dared not reach one of his bare limbs from beneath his manufactured cocoon; the nights had grown bitterly cold as of late, inviting the frost of early winter to kill everything green in the fields beyond the house, and the bite of early winter's chill to worm its way into the manor, to fill the halls and rooms with shivering drafts.

Ciel silently watched Sebastian place more logs on the fire, and, like magic, small flames began to bloom and jump at the new fuel. The renewed light flickered over Sebastian's face, kissing it with golden warmth. The light faded and died out over his shoulder, leaving gaping shadows that covered the rest of the room in a dense, impenetrable darkness.

"Aren't you cold?" Ciel whispered, trailing his eyes down the line of Sebastian's naked body. Sebastian turned, the firelight glimmering in his eyes, and crawled toward Ciel like a lion toward its prey.

"Not in the slightest."

He leaned up and kissed Ciel, softly, chastely, causing Ciel to shiver, to shake, to smile at the way every nerve in his body came alive at such a simple touch. It banished every other through to the back of his mind- the fear of his final days melted away, becoming nothing more than storm clouds on a distant horizon- at least for the moment.

- November Nineteenth -

Ciel hadn't even meant to ask, though his curiosity about the issue had been plaguing him relentlessly since he'd first become aware of said issue. Something had kept him from broaching the subject with Sebastian; strangest of all, he did not know what it was that kept him from doing so. Perhaps it was his subconscious mind, not really wanting to know- or perhaps it was something darker, something otherworldly, a warning of sorts- this was not something that should be asked lightly. Either way, Ciel had resolved not to speak of it. And yet-

"How is he doing it? How is the Father transforming human souls into demons?"

The question had been on the forefront of his mind all evening, and he must have said those words silently a dozen times. He didn't even realise he'd said them aloud until Sebastian reacted.

"Forgive me sir, but, why do you ask?"

There was something oddly expectant in Sebastian's tone, the way he stood, the slight tilt of his head; like he knew what he wanted Ciel's answer to be- knew what he hoped it would be.
"Just." Ciel shrugged slightly. "Just curious." Truth be told, he couldn't say what he was.

"I only wish to know your motive for asking since you seem- apprehensive," Sebastian explained, searching for words. "This ritual is one of the oldest and most guarded secrets of my kind. I wonder how a human- how the Father- even came to know it. It is not something that is often discussed." Ciel expected Sebastian to say something else, but he remained silent.

"If anyone seems apprehensive, it's you." Ciel sat on the edge of the bed, already loosening the lace of his eye patch. "I could just order you to tell me."

Sebastian said nothing.

"That must be how the Father found out, isn't it?" Ciel asked, realising the truth of what he'd just said. "He must have a demon in his ranks- a real one, one who knows the ritual. Do you think the Father has a contract with a demon?"

"It would explain his abilities," Sebastian supposed, coming to sit on the bed beside Ciel. "And how he has always managed to evade us. The demon would have to be much older; the ritual has not been openly practised for millennia."

"It would seem you've finally met your match," Ciel teased, turning and crawling into Sebastian's lap. "It won't be a problem, will it?"

"Of course not," Sebastian vowed easily, leaning back on his hands and giving himself over to the feeling of Ciel, warm and soft and alive, undoing the buttons that separated him from Sebastian's skin. He did so quickly, barely stopping to push Sebastian's shirt aside as he worked his way down.

“Good,” Ciel whispered, breath hot in Sebastian's ear. "Now tell me- how does one create a demon?"

"Is it just me, or has the master been actin' a little strange lately?" Finny wondered.

"How d'you mean, differently?" Mey-Rin wondered in return.

The servants had congregated in the kitchen, once again sharing the oven's heat and a the evening's last pot of tea before they retired for the night.

"He just seems quieter," Finny elaborated. "Even more than he usually does, if it's not rude to say."

"I dunno. Maybe it's just the season." Bard shrugged. "It's comin' up on his birthday soon, and he's never in good spirits when his birthday rolls around. And it's the tenth anniversary, too, which must make it even more significant for 'im. Maybe that's what's makin 'im quiet. More than usual, I mean."

"Perhaps he's ill, or injured and just not sayin' anythin'," Mey-Rin suggested, wincing when her tea burned the inside of her mouth.

"Just tired's more likely," Finny said. "This Murderer of Midtown business 'as gotta be difficult. It's been months, and still no clue who's been killin' all those people- or who killed Sir Arthur. The master must be thinkin' of that all day and night. I know I'd be exhausted."

Ciel collapsed face-first into the mattress, turning his head to better catch his breath. Sebastian laid down next to him, smiling softly at something- or at nothing in particular- with Sebastian, Ciel could never really be sure.

"I don't think I could ever possibly get tired of this," Ciel commented hazily, wiggling his hips to
clarify just what he was talking about. "I could live a hundred years and not tire of it."

"Even if it meant walking strangely for another century?" Sebastian asked, purely for the purpose of causing an indignant blush to spread across Ciel's face.

"Obscene demon. I am able to walk perfectly well, thank-you."

Ciel got up then, for no other reason than to prove his point. He sat up, swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and stood, smiling in triumph. The moment he took a step, however, his already shaky legs gave out, and he fell.

Sebastian simply laugh. He didn't stop laughing, not even as he stood and lifted Ciel from the floor and into his arms.

"Perfectly well, you said?"

Ciel rolled his eyes. He would have told Sebastian to shut up, but he was already too busy kissing him.

- The Next Morning -

"The master is most definitely not feelin' well," Mey-Rin insisted, her arms elbow-deep in the water of the washing up from breakfast.

"He seems fine to me," Bard argued, albeit noncommittally.

"You weren't there, Bard," Finny protested. "His voice was all hoarse this mornin'. And you didn't see-"

"-the limp," Mey-Rin finished. "Well, not a limp exactly, but he wasn't walkin' right."

"He hasn't walked right for as long as we've known 'im," Bard pointed out. "I'd be more surprised if he were walkin' right."

Mey-Rin and Finny both considered this for a moment, and shrugged. Not another word was said about it.

- November Thirtieth -

"I just remembered- I promised Lizzy that I'd invite her for my birthday."

Sebastian, who had been stoking the fire, looked up.

"That was months ago."

"True, but she's not likely to forget it- I might as well have promised her the moon." Ciel was sitting at his desk, idly tapping the point of his pen against the paper, leaving speckles of black ink sprayed across it.

Sebastian couldn't help but notice how distracted Ciel had been lately- he would have been worried about it, if worry would have been beneficial. But Sebastian had seen this distractedness in Ciel before- it was how Ciel behaved when he was in the midst of solving a puzzle, or working out a solution to the problem at hand. The only difference was that this time, the problem- the Father- could not be solved. It would end one of two ways, and both of those ways were equally inevitable in and of themselves.
"I suppose I owe it to her," Ciel was saying; he stood from his chair and rounded it, standing at the study window, knuckles tapping listlessly on the glass. "Unless he comes for me sooner, this birthday will be my last. And when I die, whether by his hand or yours, there's no doubt she'll be distraught- undeservingly so. Shouldn't I make sure that her last memory of me is something happy?"

Sebastian smiled at the irony of Ciel asking him, a demon, for advice on kindness. He smiled at the single streak of light that remained left in Ciel's soul- Ciel would claim that this invitation was borne of obligation to make his fiancée happy, when really, there had always been a part of him that truly did care for her, as his family if as nothing else.

"The choice is yours," he answered, joining Ciel by the window. "You must do what you think is right."

Ciel scoffed at that. "What I think is right. What I think is right can hardly be compared to sound judgement. I was the one who summoned a demon for the purpose of revenge, was I not?"

"You summoned me for the purpose of survival- and for that, you can hardly be faulted." Sebastian frowned. "Do I sense regret?"

"I have none," Ciel responded firmly. "I have never afforded myself such a weakness. And even if I did, it would be irrelevant. My choices are all I have; my choices are all that matter. It is my choices that have brought me here." Ciel placed a hand on Sebastian's chest. "How could I ever regret you?"

"I'll be the death of you," Sebastian pointed out, somewhat sadly, perhaps even in protest. "That may be so." Ciel shrugged. "But you've made me feel more alive than I've had any right to feel; and when the time comes for me to die, I won't suffer as I might have at his hand. Isn't that all that I could have asked for?"

*Ask me for anything else,* Sebastian thought, but only kissed Ciel in reply.

_Two weeks, Ciel thought. That's all I have left._

_- December Sixth -_

Even as the end of Ciel's days crept closer, his duties as an Earl and as the head of a multinational company did not become any less time consuming; in fact, while his mind had been consumed by thoughts of the Father and his plans, Ciel had allowed himself to be buried in a mountain of paperwork. There were proposals to review, official orders to sign, letters of inquiry to write- it served as a reminder to Ciel that after he was gone, the world would continue to turn, the things and people within it continuing to function just as they had before. The thought of this gave him an odd sort of comfort, but it also made him aware of preparations that must be made.

"Sebastian," he said one afternoon, fingers smudged with ink, neck sore from leaning over the many papers piled on his desk. "Schedule a meeting with my lawyer."

Sebastian placed Ciel's tea down next to his hand, knowing it would most likely go cold before Ciel thought to drink it. "Which lawyer, sir?"

"Both of them," Ciel clarified, not looking up from whatever he was reading- it all got to be something of a blur after a while. "The one who handles my personal estate and the one who deals with my interests in the company."

"I'll make the call immediately, my lord." Sebastian made to leave, pushing the teacart toward the door. "What shall I tell them is the purpose of this meeting?"
"I must get my affairs in order." Ciel signed his name and pushed the paper away, only to find another one beneath it. He sighed, dipped his pen in its inkwell, and began to write.

"In the event of my death," he said, "I'll need to be sure that control of the company will be in the hands of the right people- namely my uncle. I'll also want to make sure that the servants are taken care of- I'll be leaving the house and grounds to Aunt Francis, as she is the only other surviving Phantomhive. The rest of my remaining wealth will be divided equally among the four servants- I'm not sure whether Aunt Francis will want to keep them on as staff- they might let Tanaka stay, but-" Ciel looked up when he finally felt Sebastian's eyes boring holes in the side of his skull. "What is it?"

"Only the four of them, sir?" Sebastian asked. Ciel knew a leading question when he heard one. "Won't that appear somewhat strange?"

"Why should that appear strange?" Ciel blinked, and then smirked. "Oh. I see. My soul isn't enough for you- you want my money as well."

"I assure you, your soul is more than enough- it holds more worth more me than all the money anyone could offer."

Ciel, as always, was daunted in the face of such a compliment, even though Sebastian had given too many of these compliments to count. "I suppose so," he said. "It would seem strange for me to leave something to the others and nothing to you, my closest and most trusted servant. It simply hadn't occurred to me that you-" he didn't quite know what he was thinking or how he should say it- "that you'd even be there to collect on any inheritance, being that you- will you even be you anymore?"

Sebastian silently crossed the room, perched on the edge of Ciel's desk and put his fingers beneath Ciel's chin, forcing him to look Sebastian in the eye.

"All that I am is because of you. You, and you alone, are the very reason I exist as Sebastian Michaelis. When our contract is complete, that incarnation of me will be gone. Sebastian Michaelis will be only a memory to me, as you will be also. Without you, I will be nothing."

"You sound sad," Ciel observed, touching Sebastian's cheek, then his lips. "Are you sad, Sebastian?"

"Not sad, precisely." Sebastian dropped his fingers from Ciel's chin and lifted them to push Ciel's hair back from his face. "But letting go of this contract will be difficult- it has never been difficult before." He let his hand fall and got back to his feet, allowing Ciel to lean back in his chair, putting his pen down carefully so as not to flick ink anywhere.

"Perhaps you'll go mad with grief." Ciel was back to joking, now, though his words were weighted much too heavy for it. "I'll die, suddenly, of some 'mysterious illness', and you'll be devastated- you've been with me for so long, after all, my closest companion in all things. No one will think twice if you disappear completely, knowing that my loss was such that you couldn't bear to stay in London any longer. You'll write the servants a note explaining all of that."

"A shade melodramatic, don't you think?" Sebastian raised an eyebrow- he would never admit how much of what Ciel had just said may yet prove to be true.

Ciel tilted his head, stretching his neck to try and alleviate the ache. "This entire thing is melodramatic, don't you think? Faustian contracts, demons, murder, a cult of demons and murderers, all of them sworn to destroy me. Shakespeare himself couldn't have written it better."

Sebastian rolled his eyes, but smiled at Ciel's playfulness. It was so rare for Ciel to act this way
anymore, as if he no longer saw a reason for such things, as though he was simply ready for it all to be over. At least Sebastian knew Ciel would never attempt an escape. Having to drag a soul down kicking and screaming had always been such a tedious way to do it.

"Will it hurt?" Ciel wondered a moment later, when Sebastian was once again just about to leave the room.

"Will what hurt?"

"When you take my soul." Ciel's had picked up his pen, but had not yet returned to the work in front of him. "Will it hurt?"

"I cannot lie to you," Sebastian told him. "It will be painful. But it will also be quick. It is not uncommon for some demons act sadistically, to draw out the process and cause the maximum amount of suffering- I cannot deny that I have done this in the past. But as far as you are concerned, that could never be the case. I will do my best to take your soul as swiftly and as painlessly as possible."

"It will be what it will be." Ciel shrugged. "Don't hold back on my account."

"You misunderstand." Sebastian stood in the doorway now, his back to Ciel. He could hear Ciel's pen scratching against paper and the soft, quiet sound of Ciel sipping his tea as he signed yet another note.

"I am capable of a great many atrocities," he said. "But to torture you in your last moments, to do anything other than give you a swift and peaceful death- to be cruel to you in the end would make a mockery of my love for you."

Ciel choked on his tea, shock causing the tip of his pen to slide across the page, leaving an ugly black scar in its wake. He quickly looked up, but Sebastian had already gone.

- December Thirteenth -

As winter fully settled upon the streets of London, Frederick Abberline was becoming more and more convinced that what Sir Arthur had said in his final moments of life had been correct; Ciel Phantomhive could not be trusted. He was involved in all of this somehow, but there was only one man who could tell Abberline what he wanted to know. However, talking to this man was impossible- Norman Hague had been missing for months. The general opinion among the investigators at Scotland Yard was that Hague was dead, but Abberline staunchly refused to believe it- until the truth came to light, truth that he could no longer deny.

It was less than two weeks until Christmas, and snow was falling softly outside the windows of the Yard offices, late morning light floating in a haze through the glass. Abberline sat alone at his desk, staring across the room to the closed door behind which Sir Arthur had once worked, when he heard someone clear their throat. He stood quickly, turned around, and saw an officer he didn't recognise standing not two feet from him. The young man blinked nervously, shifting his weight back and forth between his feet.

"Detective Inspector Abberline?" He asked haltingly.

"Yes."

"I was told to come directly to you, sir. Some sewer workers have found a body, sir, in the tunnels near Water Street."
Abberline's heart sank. Water Street was where Hague had killed two people, his former fiancée and her husband. It was also near where Hague himself had lived, in the house which had burned to the ground nearly six months ago.

"Who is it?"

"We didn't know at first- the body's been down there quite some time, it looks like- barely any skin left on his bones. But there was a journal found near the remains- the journal belonged to Norman Hague."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"As sure as we can possibly be, sir. The body's the right height, with the same sort of teeth- doctor says he's been dead since about the time Hague disappeared."

Abberline closed his eyes and shook his head. So it was true.

"How did he die?"

"His throat was cut," the officer told him. "Completely severed, in fact- his head was found separate from the rest of him."

"My God."

Abberline felt the blood drain from his face- his hands felt suddenly cold. A memory came unbidden to his mind- a ball, the end of the season, barely two weeks after Hague had disappeared. Sir Arthur had questioned Ciel about it, and had accused him of hiding something- it was certainly not the last time he would do so in the months that followed.

"We've collected new information regarding the Midtown murders," Sir Arthur had said. "We traced several inflammatory articles in The Times to one Norman Hague. He very nearly praised the killer in his work, and he was the former suitor of one of the Water Street victims."

"You still believe Midtown and Water Street were perpetrated by the same man?" Ciel had asked, perhaps as if he knew differently.

"I have solid evidence to support my belief, unlike some," Sir Arthur had replied, confident in his knowledge. "Norman Hague went missing on the same day as the bodies at Water Street were found. His works about the Water Street murders were published before the murders themselves took place. His house, at stone's throw from the crime scene, burnt down on the day he vanished."

"So he's dead then." Ciel had sounded so sure, even then.

"There were no human remains found in the ashes." Sir Arthur had been sure of himself as well. "And two more people are dead. Hague is the killer, and now he is a fugitive gone into hiding, more than likely still in the city."

"Your tone is rather accusatory, Sir Arthur," Ciel had retorted, his disrespect no secret to anyone who was present to hear him speak. "Do you have a question for me? By all means, feel free to ask it."

"You lied and bullied your way into this investigation. You contaminated a murder scene, and you spouted unfounded nonsense about copycat murderers and ritual motive. Then, the only suspect in this case vanishes in a puff of smoke, not an hour after you did," Sir Arthur had explained. "So my question to you Phantomhive, is: where is Norman Hague?"
"How should I know?" Ciel had spat. If Sir Arthur's arrival had attracted attention, Ciel's outburst had demanded it. "I'll have you know that I've been extremely ill. Of course I disappeared."

"The two newest victims were of the nobility," Sir Arthur had pointed out. "They left behind a ten year old son- their only child. That is a very clear message, don't you think? Why would Hague be sending you such a message if you had no previous connection to him?"

"Detective Abberline, sir," The officer called, jarring Abberline from his recollection.

"Yes, what is it?"

"There's something else you should know about, sir- it might be a clue." The officer reached into this pocket and pulled something out of it. "This was found near the body."

Abberline took the object, the dread and fear and anger within all coming to one horrified crescendo. In his hand he held an eye patch, made of finely crafted leather. He shook his head again and scowled.

"What's the matter, sir?" The officer asked.

"I know exactly who this belongs to." Abberline closed his fist around the eye patch, the only evidence he had, the only evidence he needed. Even in death, Norman Hague had helped him solve this mystery.

"Come with me," he told the officer, striding quickly across the room, grabbing his coat from the rack where it hung. "We're going to need an arrest warrant."

"An arrest warrant? An arrest warrant for who, sir?" The officer was clearly puzzled, though he followed Abberline out of the office ad into the stairwell. Abberline sighed.

"The Earl Ciel Phantomhive."

Lizzy and her family arrived late in the afternoon, their carriage coming down the lane just as the sun set behind the manor. Ciel's birthday wasn't until tomorrow, but they had been invited to stay the night, as the weather this time of year was known to be unpredictable and sometimes violent. Lizzy was secretly hoping for a storm- an excuse to get more time with Ciel.

She stepped down from the carriage, wrapping her arms tightly around herself to guard against the sudden cold. When she looked up toward the front door of the house, it swung open, and a figure appeared, casting a shadow down the front steps. Lizzy blinked against the bright light, trying to discern the identity of the silhouette- she immediately realised that it was too tall to be Ciel.

Sebastian emerged from the house, followed by the other servants, who began at once to unload the luggage while Sebastian escorted the guests inside. He greeted Lizzy first, then her parents, then her brother, but Lizzy wasn't really paying all that much attention. She was secretly hoping for a storm- an excuse to get more time with Ciel.

Sebastian emerged from the house, followed by the other servants, who began at once to unload the luggage while Sebastian escorted the guests inside. He greeted Lizzy first, then her parents, then her brother, but Lizzy wasn't really paying all that much attention. She was craning her neck, trying to see past Sebastian, already looking for-"
least, though she could think of worse things. She wondered if he was ill, and said so.

"Not ill; I've simply had many things on my mind, as of late. Important things, though several of them are rather burdensome."

"With Sir Arthur Randall's killer on the loose, I should think there are many who feel the same," Alexis interjected, casting a somewhat sympathetic and yet still appraising look at Ciel.

Lizzy still vividly remembered the night of the All Hallows Eve ball- the last time she had seen Ciel- pulled away by Sebastian to attend to some unknown crisis. Chaos had descended less than five minutes later. Even now, she could still feel the fear that had exploded in her chest- for herself, but mostly for Ciel and his part in the ensuing fight. She looked at him once more, took his hand, and reminded herself that everything would be fine. They were safe. Nothing could hurt them. Nothing was going to keep them apart.

Dinner passed in a blur of idle conversation; Alexis and Ciel discussed business- Ciel inquired about Edward's classes. Edward's answers to Ciel's inquiries were short and clipped as always. Lizzy never did understand just what it was about Ciel that Edward so objected to. His brotherly instinct to protect Lizzy was admirable, but there was something else, some kind of unfounded suspicion he had regarding Ciel that Lizzy simply could not condone. It had never occurred to her that she might be as biased about Ciel as Edward was, however polarised their opinions of him were.

By dessert, the conversation had taken a full turn back to the subject of business.

"We've had a significant increase in profits," Alexis explained. "Our projected income for the coming year looks quite fortunate indeed. We should have enough by the spring for, say, a wedding."

Lizzy, who'd been focussed on the plate in front of her, did not realise her father had been looking at her when he'd said this. It took her a moment to read the looks on everyone's faces and understand exactly what he'd meant.

"Really? Oh father, that's wonderful!" She could barely contain her excitement. Edward, on the other hand, was doing an incredibly poor job of keeping his rather negative opinions to himself.

"A wedding? In the spring? Don't you think it's a bit soon?"

"Has almost single-handedly run a multinational company for several years," Francis pointed out. "He has overseen the rebuilding of his family home and kept the honour of his family name, my brother's name, intact. If he can do all of that before the rest of his peers have even finished their schooling, then he can certainly get married."

Everyone sat in stunned silence for several moments. Never had anyone expected to hear such outright praise of Ciel coming from Francis of all people. Although, Lizzy thought, perhaps it did explain why she had always been so scrutinising. Obviously he had grown to meet the high standards she held him to.

"I couldn't agree more." Alexis smiled at his wife. "When two people have been betrothed for this long, and one is already heir to his family's wealth, there is no true reason to wait any longer than they already have."

Edward mumbled something that not even Lizzy, who was sitting right next to him, could hear. She was too busy smiling, too lost in thoughts that had already turned to wedding plans and her future with Ciel.
Through all of this, no one had really looked to Ciel for his reaction. This was beneficial, as it gave him time to banish the look of utter shock from his face and replace it with something closer to surprised happiness. He also knew that whatever reaction he had now would soon become irrelevant; he doubted the Father would wait until Christmas, let alone until the spring to try for the last time to end his quarrel with Ciel. Sebastian would be collecting on his debt in no time at all, and any plans of a spring wedding would become the arrangements of a winter funeral.

"There will be pink and white roses," Lizzy was saying. "We can have the wedding here, on the grounds, just as soon as the snow is gone and the trees are in bloom. Oh, it will be the most romantic wedding, every lady in the nobility will be envious of me. I wonder if her majesty might attend- I know that she thinks so highly of you, Ciel. Can you imagine? The Queen, at our wedding? You will invite her, won't you, Ciel? Ciel?"

Ciel jumped slightly in his seat, almost as if he had been woken suddenly from a deep sleep. He didn't like the feeling of so many people watching him so closely, hanging so heavily on his every word.

"Of course, Lizzy." He reached across the table to take her hand. "Anything you wish for. Anything at all." He kept his eyes on Lizzy's face and tried to put at least some depth of feeling in the words, worrying that his voice would sound as cold as he suddenly felt. Lizzy, who had enough warmth for both of them, apparently found Ciel's declaration to be more than acceptable- she leaned over and kissed him, something that might have been inappropriate in mixed company if not for the fact that it was so quick and so chaste.

"A toast!" Called Alexis, raising his wineglass. "To the coming of spring, a time for new beginnings!"

"To love!" Lizzy called, raising her glass along with everyone else (even Edward, though he did it somewhat begrudgingly).

"Hear, hear!" Francis exclaimed. Glasses were clinked, and everyone drank, smiles and cheer passed all around the table.

Ciel looked across the room for just a moment, when everyone else was looking to each other or to their drinks. Sebastian was stood in the doorway, stone-faced and serene, the perfect image of servitude. He looked so human, his skin not as pale in this warm light- only his eyes betrayed his true nature, sharp and merciless as they were. Ciel found reassurance in Sebastian's silent presence, as he always did at times like this. And although he realised there had never really been a time like this, he found comfort in Sebastian's presence nonetheless.

Mey-Rin appeared suddenly in the kitchen doorway, out of breath, eyes bright. Finny and Bard (who had stayed well out of the way in an noble attempt to avoid their usual accidental antics) looked up from their card game.

"Mey-Rin, what is it?" Bard asked, concerned and already on his feet. "Has something happened to the master?"

"Somethin' has!" Mey-Rin exclaimed. "I was just upstairs in the dinin' room- Lady Elizabeth's father's just announced there'll be a wedding here in the spring!"

"A wedding!" Finny beamed, jumping up to clasp hands with Mey-Rin and dance around in excitement. "Amazin'! Oh, I'm sure the master must be over the moon right about now!"

"Aye, he must be." Bard wasn't so prone to such gleeful outbursts, but he had a smile on his face.
nonetheless. "It'll be nice to finally have someone else livin' 'ere. The master's been alone for so long, he deserves some company."

"And Lady Elizabeth is such a gracious girl!" Mey-Rin stood up straight, feet together and hand raised in a solute. "I'll be sure to do my very best to please her!"

"Me too!" Finny declared. "We should go up and congratulate them!"

"Let's!" Mey-Rin agreed. She and Finny grabbed Bard's arms and dragged him off with them, passing Tanaka in the hallway.

Tanaka sighed to himself, thinking on what he had just heard. So, another head of the Phantomhive family was to be married on the grounds of this estate where so many of his predecessors had died. He had never thought he'd live to see a happy ending for the clan he had served since he was a young man. Having witnessed so many tragedies here, he scarcely dared to hope that things might be different for master Ciel.

The rest of the night proceeded without incident- that is to say, there was nothing else eventful about it, good or bad. No more sudden announcements, no narrowly avoided catastrophes caused by the carelessness and clumsiness of the servants. They came up once during dinner, simply to offer their congratulations on the announcement of the wedding, stating that they very much looked forward to serving Lizzy once she became the mistress of the house. This of course pleased Lizzy to no end, and she told them so.

After dinner was dessert- there was a cake of course, something large and ghastly in appearance, though Ciel did enjoy the taste of it, as he was well-known for his sweet tooth. There were several more toasts and glasses of wine, warming everyone from head to toe as they retreated to the salon for more conversation. Ciel had been dreading this portion of the evening, having to make small talk for hours more, as if talking during dinner wasn't bad enough. But the wine had taken some of the edge off of his nerves, and the fire in the fireplace softened the light just enough to remind him of brighter days without allowing him to dwell on what came after, of all that fire had taken from him over the course of his life.

It was no secret that Ciel had always prided himself on not being nostalgic or sentimental to any degree, which is why he found his present willingness to look at the past through rose-coloured glasses to be somewhat shocking. But then, perhaps it was simply his impending doom. Or- as his traitorous mind was all too quick to suggest- it was the fact that he'd recently fallen in love.

It didn't really matter- soon, there would be no need for nostalgia or sentiment.

For now, though, he must play the roles he had been cast in- host, nephew, cousin, fiancé- he had allowed this party for the specific reason of giving Lizzy one last happy memory, being that it was the least she deserved. So he threw himself into his task, being mindful of her every word that evening, granting whatever she requested- even when she wanted a dance.

"We have to practise," she said, cheeks pinked by the wine. "For our wedding."

"We have no music," Edward protested- apparently, wine made him averse to the idea of almost everything involving Ciel- which was to say it had very little effect on his usual demeanour.

"Allow me," Sebastian offered, entering the room, violin in hand.

Ciel remembered the last time he had heard Sebastian play- it had only been a week or so ago. Both of them had been lounging about on that perfectly ordinary afternoon, nothing better to do than enjoy
the simplicity of each other's company. Ciel remembered Sebastian picking up the violin out of boredom more than anything, beginning to pull notes out of the instrument, stringing them along into a composition that Ciel had never heard before. Sebastian had played for what seemed like hours, the harshness of the winter sun streaming in through the windows of Ciel's room and lighting something of a halo around Sebastian's head and shoulders. At one point, Ciel had asked Sebastian what he was playing- Sebastian had not replied, had simply looked Ciel in the eye and smiled. Ciel had rolled his eyes- of course Sebastian could compose waltzes at the drop of a hat- he hadn't known why he'd been surprised at all.

Now, as Ciel took Lizzy by the hand and stepped into position, he was not at all surprised to recognise the tune Sebastian was playing- to anyone else it would simply be a beautiful piece of music- to Ciel, it was a message. He looked over Lizzy's shoulder at Sebastian and resisted the urge to roll his eyes, or to smile, not knowing which he wanted to do more. He did his best not to trip, to focus on Lizzy instead of the music, to give her the best dance they'd ever had, knowing all the while that it would be their last.

The music changed after a while- Sebastian transitioned into something familiar to everyone- Francis and Alexis joined the dance, spinning in much wider circles around Ciel and Lizzy, who was beaming, eyes closed as she leaned her head on Ciel's shoulder. Her cheek was pressed softly against his neck for the remainder of the dance, until the music slowed and stopped, until they stood still in the dying firelight.

The clock chimed midnight- Ciel thought of fairytales, of horses turning back into scurrying mice, of golden carriages reduced to rotting pumpkins, of shattered glass slippers and princesses left with nothing.

Lizzy lifted her head at the sound of the clock, the official change from the thirteenth of December to the fourteenth of December. She smiled sleepily as she realised this and placed a kiss on Ciel's cheek.

"Happy birthday, Ciel," she whispered.

"Thank-you, Lizzy," he whispered back, no longer feeling guilty, knowing that he had done what he'd set out to do.

"I believe it is time for the master to retire for the evening," Sebastian interjected.

"I believe it would be wise for us to retire as well," Francis agreed. Lizzy opened her mouth to protest, but not before Francis could add, "all of us."

"Very well." Lizzy let go of Ciel's hand and went to her mother's side. Ciel bid his guests goodnight and watched them go, Sebastian leading them to their rooms. The embers in the fireplace began to dwindle, leaving Ciel standing alone in the growing darkness.

Abberline was very well near snapping. He had been at the Yard offices all day, arguing with his superiors and making his case against Ciel Phantomhive, but to no avail. They forbade him from going to a judge, saying that no one would give an arrest warrant for a member of the aristocracy, not to mention for an earl so well connected to the Queen herself. To even entertain the request for such a warrant would be an offence to the monarchy.

In the end, Abberline had gone against them, going to the courts and petitioning any judge who would see him. They had all turned him down as soon as he'd mentioned 'arrest' and 'Phantomhive' in the same sentence. Never before had Abberline's resentment of a rich man's privilege been so prominent- never had something made him so restless and livid.
"What'll we do now, Detective Inspector?" Only a small handful of the officers Abberline had enlisted to help him had stayed at his side. Chief among them was Roberts, and he was so young that it made Abberline feel like a miserly old man.

"I don't give a damn what any judge has to say," Abberline answered. "I know that he's guilty, and I have evidence to prove it. It's worth risking my career for, but I'm not going to risk yours too, any of you."

Roberts looked undeterred. "All due respect sir, but I'm capable of makin' my own decision. I've seen your evidence, and I've decided you're right. I think I speak for everyone here when I say that, sir." There was a chorus of nods and affirmations. "We wouldn't risk our necks 'less we thought it needed doin'."

Abberline smiled grimly- if he was wrong, his career and the career of every man here would be over. He would be shamed out of Scotland Yard, out of the city- he could be arrested, even. But if he was right- if he was right it would mean commendations, possibly a promotion- but more than that, it would mean justice for Sir Arthur and for dozens of innocent people who'd had their lives mercilessly stolen. Abberline had to be right- he just had to be. And so he gave the order.

"We leave at dawn."

- December Fourteenth -

The poor weather that had been somewhat expected arrived just on schedule; the wind picked up throughout the night, bringing in the deepest of cold fronts and a thick layer of clouds, weighed down by the promise of snow. Indeed, it was snowing when Ciel opened his eyes, a little less than an hour before dawn, stirred awake by the shift in temperature as Sebastian's warmth disappeared from the bed beside him.

"Where on earth do you think you're going?" Ciel asked, too sleepy to really sound incredulous, but incredulous just the same.

"I must wake the servants and begin preparations for the day," Sebastian answered, too dutiful to really sound reluctant, but reluctant just the same.

"It's still dark out," Ciel protested. "Surely preparations can wait."

Ciel rolled over to see that Sebastian had sat up, turned, and put his feet on the floor, but had made no other move to leave. Ciel reached out in the still darkness and found Sebastian's back, walked his fingers up the notches in Sebastian's spine and whispered,

"At least kiss me before you go. It is my birthday after all."

Sebastian turned back around and kissed Ciel, quite a few times- he did much more than just kiss Ciel, in fact. And if it meant that the servants were allowed to sleep ten (or fifteen) minutes longer than usual, then so be it.

That morning, a cloud of silence hung over and around the breakfast table at the Phantomhive manor, a quiet that permeated the air between all those who were gathered. It was not an uncomfortable silence, but simply the sort of silence that cold mornings have been known to bring. There was no conversation, only the clinking of silver on china as the morning meal was consumed, cup after cup of tea and coffee served to stave off the chill that clung to the very walls of the house. Still, the silence was companionable, no one feeling the need to speak uselessly, sharing only small smiles and knowing looks between family members.
Francis Midford watched her daughter carefully, and her nephew more carefully still. He sat with an intentional sort of posture, not quite as if her were attempting to hide something, but rather as if he were attempting to portray something else. Perhaps ease was what he now tried to consciously convey, how contended it made him to have his family with him, how happy he was to sit at the table with his beloved fiancée. He looked at her with eyes that were far away, as if he were imagining the two of them, years from now, after a thousand breakfasts as husband and wife.

Elizabeth, if she was aware of his mental absence, said nothing of it; she seemed perfectly amiable to his silence, and, placing a hand over his on the table between them, continued to eat her breakfast without saying a single word, something that Francis had rarely- if ever- known her daughter to be capable of doing.

So close was her study of the two, that Francis was aware of the very second that Ciel's eyes strayed from Elizabeth's face, barely wandering around the room at all before they found the face of another.

Francis has never given much thought to the butler Sebastian Michaelis, other than to think his hairstyle deplorable. She had, however, notices his unfailing loyalty, how unwavering and unquestioning his service to Ciel- and thus to the Phantomhive name- had been over the years, years when loyalty was much needed, for the sake of Ciel's well being and the wellbeing of his family's legacy. Sebastian had no doubt earned Ciel's complete trust and confidence by this point in his servitude. It gratified Francis to know that he daughter would be marrying into a household with such competent and trusted staff.

As she watched Ciel's face, she noticed a similar look in his eye to the one he'd had when he'd looked at Elizabeth just a moment ago; one of consideration, one of looking into the future as well as looking at the present. One thing that differed in this look was the affection- it was a sly sort of affection, but it was there in abundance, much more in abundance than in the look he'd given Elizabeth. Francis blinked, unsure of just what she was seeing, and ventured a glance at Sebastian.

She found that the affection in Ciel's eyes was returned, and returned tenfold.

It was immediately impossible to know what to make of such a look- Francis turned once more to Ciel, but he had already looked away, the strangeness of the moment passing with each knock on the dining room door. Everything that happened after this happened so fast, and all intention of deciphering Ciel's thoughts vanished from Francis's mind.

Ciel waved his hand toward the door, and Sebastian went to open it. In came the maid, who looked nervous and unsure and worryingly pale- of course, Francis had only ever seen her look nervous and unsure and worryingly pale, so perhaps that was just the poor girl's natural complexion.

"Mey-Rin?" Ciel had evidently picked up on her insecurity as well. "What's happened?"

"There's someone here for you, sir," Mey-Rin answered apprehensively. "He's at the front door."

"Someone here?" Alexis wondered, gesturing to the window and the frozen white world beyond it. "Who would have come through all this weather?"

"It must be something of great importance," Ciel replied, tough it seemed obvious to Francis that he was really only talking to himself. Whatever the case, he didn't seem all that surprised by this unexpected arrival. "Show him in," he said then, to the maid.

"Yessir." She curtsied, and her face seemed to go even paler than it already was, colour leeching from her skin as she turned from the door.
"Do you think-" began Sebastian, part of a conversation that was clearly not meant for everyone present to be privy to.

"No, I don't." Ciel stood, rounding the table and readying himself to receive this surprise guest. "He wouldn't just knock on my door while I was having breakfast. Would he?"

"Would who?" Elizabeth asked what the rest of them were thinking. "Ciel, what's all this about?"

"Perhaps he would," Sebastian countered, ignoring Elizabeth entirely. "It would be in keeping with what we know of his character."

"Melodramatic," Ciel said, and Sebastian smirked.

"What the hell is going on?" Edward demanded.

Ciel didn't look at him- he looked only at Sebastian. Francis felt as if it had been this way for quite some time, as if Ciel's perfect focus on Sebastian was the summation of their entire relationship, of Sebastian's position in Ciel's life relative to everyone else. What exactly that position entailed was still unknown to her, and once again, she was not to be given the chance to find out.

The dining room door opened once again, and the maid stepped in quickly, looking at the floor as she all but hid behind Sebastian, who stood, statuesque and still, eyes affixed in shock at the man who had just entered the room.

Francis had never considered herself, nor had she ever really been, the type of woman to faint after having had a great fright. But now, when the man pulled down the hood of his heavy winter cloak and looked around, she felt the blood go from her head such a sudden rush as might have caused her to collapse, had she not already been seated. For seeing the face of this man was seeing the face of a ghost.

Ciel, after a collective gasp had passed through the room, was the one to break the silence. He stepped forward, reached out in horrified wonder, and asked,

"Father? Is it really you?"

And the ghost of Francis's brother replied,

"Hello, my son."

Chapter End Notes

10/14/16:

Chapter eleven is next, and then chapters twelve an thirteen (the epilogue) will be posted together. We're SO CLOSE! Thanks to each and every one of you for your continued support. You can come talk to me anytime on my Tumblr (totheendofeverything); I love answering questions about the writing process, yapping on about my head canons, or just saying hi to others in the fandom!

Also, check out this this incredible art of Ciel done by thetououace on Tumblr! I've been gazing lovingly at these drawings for six months now! If any of you guys ever do something like this, be it art or an edit or a playlist for this fic, tell me about it in a
comment here, or send an ask on Tumblr when you post it and tag it #tteoe or #tteoeart, I'll be sure to reblog it and add it to the awesomeness!
"I don't believe it," he said without thinking, something he so rarely did. "It can't be true- you died."

Chapter Notes

Words: 8k
Chapter Warnings: Me, the writer, flagrantly ignoring canon. But this *is* fanfiction after all, so I feel like that's par for the course at this point. For example, my Vincent Phantomhive bears little resemblance to the one you've seen in the manga. Also, standard warnings for violence but whatever, you know the drill.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS SINCE THE LAST UPDATE! If you're still here you're a stronger person than I am lmao. As always, I am my own editor, so apologies for any spelling boo-boos or grammar snafus.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- October Thirty-First, 1875 (TWENTY YEARS AGO) -

Beyond the walls of his dining room, Vincent Phantomhive could plainly hear the sounds of a party in full swing, music and voices and laughter all melting together in a harmonious chorus of diverted and distracted guests, all of them ignorant and careless of the meeting taking place not far from their place of reverie.

"Good evening," he greeted the small group of men gathered around him. "Thank-you all for taking time from your evening to meet with me."

"Of course, my lord," said one of the men, Sir Lorris, whose face was covered by a mask made to look like a boar. "It was gracious of you to host, what with the Lady of the house being so expectant. How is she, if I may ask."

"She is well. The doctors have cautioned that she not tax herself too much in these last few weeks of her pregnancy, which is why she could not be in attendance at tonight's event."

"Certainly. It is the hope of everyone that she remain healthy, and that your child be healthy also. May she bear a son, so that the honourable Phantomhive name will be carried on."

"My thanks for your best wishes, I shall pass them on to my wife. I'm told that one of our maids has a sense about these things, and she believes that the child will indeed be a boy."

"A toast to that," proposed the Viscount Druitt, an aging man with a round face and an ill-fitting
white suit. "To the lady's health, and may the child have his father's wits."

"Here, here," said all of them in unison, raising their glasses and drinking together.

"Now," Vincent began, "I'm sure that you must be wondering why I've asked you to meet with me in secret. It is my hope that we may have a discussion about something that has been troubling me these last few months."

"And what would that be?" asked Druitt, adjusting the mask he wore- a silver fox, covering the upper half of his face.

"The future," Vincent told them, motioning to the man on his left. "Gentlemen, might I introduce Sir Arthur Randall, a well-respected member of Scotland Yard. Grandson of the late Lord Peter Randall, fourth in line for the Lordship after his brother and two nephews."

"Ah, Sir Randall," Druitt nodded, "I knew your Grandfather well. He was something of a mentor to me, and always a friend to the House of Druitt."

"Yes," said Sir Arthur, shaking Druitt's hand, "he spoke of your chess matches with great fondness." It was somewhat amusing, to look at him next to the lavishly dressed Druitt- Arthur Randall was the only man here not outfitted in the called-for attire of the occasion. On any other day, Vincent would respect the man's discipline, his lack of whimsy- but there was something about his refusal to conform, tonight, had put Vincent on edge.

"I'm sure that many here can attest to Lord Randall's sage wisdom, God rest his soul." This came from a Lord named Breton, whose costume was fashioned after a court jester. "However, I am most interested to hear what Lord Phantomhive and Sir Randall have planned for us."

"Yes, yes of course," Sir Arthur said- if he was off-put by the interruption, he did not show it. "Lord Phantomhive, if you will."

"We here are all men of great fortune," Vincent began. "Some greater than others." A chuckle went up from the group. "In this room stands the collective wealth and power to protect our empire for generations to come. As you know, I have been in the employ of her majesty for some time, as was my father and his father before him. My family has always served whatever monarch sits on the throne by sacrificing whatever is needed; life, limb, even morality, if the case calls for it. My hands have become bloody so that those of the sovereign can remain clean."

"And in my pursuits of justice, I have seen the true face of London, of all Britain's criminal enterprises. There is an evil in this world, gentlemen, one that defies what reason would have us believe."

"You don't mean-"

"Occult forces," Vincent confirmed.

"Hearsay," Breton scoffed.

"Are we not all God-fearing men?" Vincent asked, looking at each of the men in turn. "Do you not all believe in an all-powerful creator? A creator who crafted not only the angels, but also the denizens of hell, the demons both within and without that plague man with sin and suffering. Are not men's hearts susceptible to the influence of such darkness? Should we, men with the power and desire to do good, not do all the good we can?"

"What exactly are you proposing? That we gather once a week to pray for the safety of the
republic?” asked Sir Lorris, skeptical as they all were.

"Not at all sir. I for one am not given to bouts of prayer. What I am suggesting is far more simple- that we open our eyes to the truth of the power that exists- and use it to protect the sovereignty of our Queen and her kingdom, that we help it to prosper, and that we then reap the harvest of that prosperity."

"It seems to me as if you have this plan of yours all sorted," noted Breton.

"What, then, is it that you need us for?” wondered Druitt.

Vincent merely smiled. "I have reached out to each of you because each of you possess qualities that I believe might help me- help us- in this endeavour. Some of you have access to materials, ancient texts and artifacts- that will aid in research. Some of you have your hands in realms of commerce that our new friend Sir Arthur and the whole of Scotland Yard would most certainly take offense to.” A few of the men cleared their throats or shuffled their feet, disquieted by having their guilt made known.

"But for the sake of the knowledge and influence these dalliances have granted you," Vincent added, "he is willing to overlook your misdeeds in favour of the greater good."

Vincent paused and basked in the silence- every man's eyes were sliding over one another, wary and appraising.

"What, exactly, are you asking us to do?” Lorris asked, timid.

"Grant favours." Vincent watched the men all still, all listening intently. "I ask that we all lend a hand to each other when it is needed, and that we meet regularly to discuss the state of things and plan our future undertakings. Any further details will be discussed once we have reached an agreement. I stress that none of you are obligated to accept my proposal. If you do not wish to participate further in any of this, then you are free to leave and never think- or speak- of this again."

Vincent waited, and waited, and not a single man left the room.

"Excellent," he smiled. "Let us continue."

- PRESENT -

Ciel had never put much- or any- stock into anything beyond what he could see with his own two eyes and touch with his own two hands. Because of the things he had seen and felt and done in his lifetime, the realm of believable possibilities was somewhat broader than it would be for most people. He could accept many things, however fantastic or ridiculous or impossible as they might seem.

Even so, the sight before him now had him very close to doubting even his own senses, the only things he had always been able to trust.

"I don't believe it," he said without thinking, something he so rarely did. "It can't be true- you died."

"Very nearly.” It was uncanny, to say the least. Ciel may not have heard his father's voice for an entire decade, but there was no mistaking it now, no mistaking the striking line of his jaw or the unique shade of his hair, both traits that Ciel saw whenever he caught sight of his own reflection. It
was difficult to dispute this man's claim. One thing that gave Ciel pause, however, was the lack of-

"Scars," he pointed out. "You say you survived the fire that destroyed this very house, and yet you haven't a single blemish on your face, no marks from burns you were almost certain to have suffered."

The man who claimed to be Vincent Phantomhive simply smiled, as though he was impressed by how observant Ciel was, or perhaps proud of how skeptical Ciel had grown up to be, even of his own flesh and blood.

"Very good," he praised, and removed his cloak. As he did so, a great and terrible scar was revealed over the side of his neck- the marred flesh was twisted and discoloured and it covered more area than Ciel could see. When the man removed his gloves, it became clear that his left hand was barely functional, just a gruesome, deformed vestige of what it once was.

To Ciel's right, Francis gasped, reminding Ciel of the others' presence in the room. His next move was to look at Sebastian, who had a grim look in his eye. Ciel raised an eyebrow, asking a silent question to which Sebastian replied with a slight but definite nod.

Damn.

- January, 1878 (SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO) -

It was a bitterly cold night on the London waterfront. A long bout of freezing rain had killed the charm of winter, washing away the purity of the recent snowfall, leaving behind only the icy winds and early sunsets of mid-January. The river Thames was restless and loud, waves splashing against the docks with many great chops and crashes. It would be foolish to be caught out in this weather, especially in the dead of night, especially for no good reason- and so the entire area remained apparently deserted.

Vincent did have good reason for being out in a storm so near to the witching hour, and so he felt less foolish- though he doubted Rachel would see it that way if she knew. He had waited to leave until after she was asleep, Ciel curled up in bed beside her- he was often a fitful sleeper, only calming in the presence of his parents, and so he went to bed with them more often than not. Vincent knew the day would come when he could no longer permit his son such luxuries, but for now he was content to picture his wife and child in a state of peaceful slumber. And here he was out in a maelstrom, dressed like a dock worker no less. The absurdity of it lingered in his mind for a moment, and he smiled.

"Is something amusing?"

Vincent looked up from his thoughts and met the eyes of Sir Arthur, narrowed against the wind, or perhaps narrowed at Vincent's admittedly odd countenance. Sir Arthur's face was lit only by the lantern he carried, which cast a flickering circle of light around the two of them, holding the inky black of night at bay. Despite this, Vincent felt no protection from the small flame, nothing but a sense of wariness that made his shoulders tight and his eyes shift across the shadows around him. He hoped they would not be here much longer.

"Nothing in particular," he answered finally.

"This is the place then?" Sir Arthur asked.
"Yes," Vincent confirmed. "My contact says that this is where all the opium dealers on this side of the river go to purchase their product. This is perhaps one of the biggest supply hubs in the entire city." He craned his neck, staring up at the high windows of the derelict warehouse before them. "I've also been reliably informed that there are many other kinds of contraband- stolen goods, illegal weapons and such."

"A prize worthy of our attention. Well done, Phantomhive."

Vincent bristled at the use of his name so casually by someone who wasn't even in the direct line of succession for a lordship. Though Sir Arthur would never admit it, Vincent knew that this fact was something Sir Arthur begrudged, leading him to compensate and act above his station. He seemed to believe that, since he was a ranking officer in Scotland Yard, and that he was older than Vincent, that he somehow had the right to treat Vincent as an equal, a colleague, or worse- a subordinate.

Vincent's inbred sense of aristocratic propriety was offended by this slight, but his common sense knew that the Yard was difficult to deal with at the best of times, and that Sir Arthur was an unfortunately valuable ally to have.

"Yes, well, it's not done yet," he said as he swallowed his pride. "According to my information, there are twelve men in the warehouse. The warehouse has six sets of doors through which an escape could be made, and then there are the windows. Though once we begin, I do not believe that the windows will be a viable option. We should move as quickly as possible- the longer we wait, the higher the probability that something will go wrong."

"Very well, then." Sir Arthur nodded. "Let's begin."

Once the lantern was extinguished, the two men were left in near total darkness- close and yet vast, oppressive yet forlorn.

Vincent could barely see Sir Arthur as he moved away toward one side of the warehouse; Vincent turned on his heel and went in the opposite direction, already drawing a knife from inside his coat and a stick of chalk from his trouser pocket. The warehouse loomed even larger as he approached the first set of doors. Despite having done things of this nature before, he still half expected them to fly open, to be attacked by the very same criminals he was here to apprehend.

It was difficult to see what he was doing, but this ritual was performed by memory as much as it was by sight. Vincent smoothed his hand over the surface of the door, finding the center point and drawing a circle around it. He then proceeded to add a larger circle around the first one, and one more circle around that, connecting them all by several intersecting lines. The spaces between those lines he filled with symbols, letters of an ancient alphabet that he understood only enough to use for this purpose. When the drawing was done, he took the tip of the knife and put it to his hand, drawing enough blood to paint one last symbol at the center of the first circle, completing the sigil.

There was no change, no physically perceivable difference- just a shift in the air, or perhaps only in Vincent's mind. Some low current of power running through him. He shuddered, looked over his shoulder, and continued on to the next door.

The next two doors he did just as the first, quickly and without ceremony or interruption. His finger ached and stung, an open wound in the cold, and he rushed toward the last door, eager to be finished, to be home in bed asleep with his wife and son.

He had just drawn the final symbol on the final door when things went awry.

First, there was shouting. Then a gunshot, then another. More and more followed, the shouts...
growing louder until finally silence fell, heavy and menacing. Vincent was startled at first- felt every muscle in his body seize up, the current of energy in his mind flaring to a searing flame. He drew his gun and waited, for any sign of life, any sign of danger before he proceeded.

"Phantomhive!" Sir Arthur shouted, voice muffled from within the warehouse. "Get in here!"

Vincent raised his hand, smudging the blood on the door to deactivate the sigil. He hauled the door open, finding Sir Arthur on the other side of it, having entered through a door on the opposite end of the room.

"What happened?" Vincent asked.


The scene was one that Vincent had seen before, but not in such a context, not when the worst that should have happened was paralysis, the men merely trapped and incapacitated and ready to be taken into police custody.

"The spell appears to have malfunctioned," Sir Arthur was saying.

"Oh, undoubtedly," Vincent walked to stand among the bodies, avoiding the blood that pooled around his feet. "You do have such a keen sense of observation, my friend."

"Now is not the time for flippancy, sir." If Sir Arthur treating Vincent like a subordinate was an annoyance, then Sir Arthur being facetiously respectful was an absolute nuisance.

"Do you think something went amiss with the sigils?" Vincent asked, leaning in close over one of the bodies, frowning and poking, pretending to check the man was dead- he knew how his lackadaisical attitude toward death never failed to get a rise out of Sir Arthur's temper.

"Nothing went amiss with my sigils, I can assure you." There it was- Sir Arthur's indignant sort of anger, the kind that never truly boiled into outward rage, but was born from rage all the same.

"Did I suggest that something did?" Vincent paced around the mess, stopping at the other end of it, looking pointedly at Sir Arthur over the spread of bodies. He was quite enjoying the red hue of Sir Arthur's face when he suddenly noticed that the bodies were arranged in a pattern.

"They didn't kill each other," he blurted.

"What?"

"Look- they were all facing this way when they fell, toward where I'm standing now." He knelt by the nearest body, pulling at the shoulder of the man's coat and rolling him over. "This man wasn't killed by a bullet. There are slash wounds- these were made by something sharp." He stood and looked over his shoulder. "There are bullet holes in those crates behind me. They weren't firing at one another- they were firing at someone else."

"Don't be absurd, Phantomhive," Sir Arthur hissed. "There was no one else. There couldn't have been."

"No, no, you're right," Vincent conceded. "It wasn't someone. It was something."

"What the devil are you implying?"

"Oh, now, that was a humorous choice of words."
"Get to the bloody point, Phantomhive."

"I was against the use of blood in the sigils." Vincent frowned, his tone sobering abruptly. "The chalk sigils worked fine-"


"You wanted to make them stronger. But blood magic is old. Older than the human race, perhaps. All of our research has suggested that blood magic isn't primarily used for binding spells, but for summoning."

He expected Sir Arthur's face to go pale, for the man to show fear, to show horror at the possibility of what had just transpired. He merely scoffed.

"You aren't suggesting that one of those things-"

"A demon." Vincent let the word fall out into the open air, allowed it hang in the flickering light, revelling in the dawn of realisation on Sir Arthur's face. Vincent knew that any mistake in a sigil could alter the affects of the spell said sigil was meant to cast- and he knew that he had not made any mistakes on his sigils tonight.

"The others must never know of this," Sir Arthur finally said. "You mustn't breathe a word."

How pleasing it was, to have Sir Arthur at his mercy. To have Sir Arthur know it. Vincent smiled.

"I assure you, good sir- my lips are sealed."

- PRESENT -

"Tanaka," Ciel said, "Please take my guests down to the kitchen."

"What?" asked Edward, sounding offended as always. "The kitchen?"

"I'd like to speak with my father in private, if you don't mind," Ciel told him, never taking his eyes off the demon claiming to be Vincent Phantomhive.

"Yes, but the kitchen?" Francis protested. "Surely we could-"

"Francis," Ciel said, taking a deep breath and blinking as if he were holding back tears. "Please. I'll send Sebastian for you in a little while."

Francis paused, considering her brother and her nephew, eyes locked on each other in a way that betrayed an unsettling sort of single-mindedness, one that didn't give the impression of father and son reunited, but of enemies standing off at ten paces, about to draw their weapons.

"Very well," she said, unable to account for her trust in Ciel's judgement but willing to trust him nonetheless. She took Elizabeth gently by the arm and led her to the door, Alexis and Edward not far behind.

"If you should need us, for any reason, do not hesitate to call," she said quietly, unbidden, once again unsure of what had prompted her to say it.
Elizabeth cast one last, long, worried look in Ciel's direction. He didn't appear to notice. She hung her head and followed her mother from the room.

- August, 1882 (THIRTEEN YEARS AGO) -

Vincent's footsteps echoed around him as he strode along the underground passage. The way before him was lit by torches, bracketed to the wall in rusted iron rings that betrayed the age of this place as much as the very air did with its smell, musty and wet and full of something unnameable- death, perhaps. A network of catacombs and burial chambers beneath an aristocratic mausoleum- truly a fitting place for the coalition to keep their headquarters, even of most of them dreaded having to step foot into the dark and dingy tunnels.

The meeting room itself was as about as far removed from a tomb as it could be, being that it was still within the crypts. It had been carved out of the earth, as had the rest of the tunnels- but this chamber was hung with richly coloured tapestries and rugs to hide the roughly hewn walls, though the smell of clay, damp and thick, could not be cleansed. Candles burned in every nook and cranny, some perched high on poles, some sitting on low tables, melting over the rims of their intricately carved votives. Various wingback chairs were arranged around the room, all of them large and decadent and out of place in a room such as this.

As usual, Vincent was neither the first man to arrive, nor the last. Half of the chairs were already occupied. Vincent took his place near the center of the gathering; a seat reserved for him by virtue of his hand in starting all of this, though that was where the limit of his influence laid. Everything was decided by vote, and no member's vote was meant to have more sway and any other's- such was as Vincent had intended it to be.

Soon after Vincent came Druitt, and he was not alone- his son trailed him, this being his third coalition meeting- Druitt saw this coalition as a part of the family business, and so his son must learn it. Vincent saw no real harm in this; the boy- young man, he corrected himself- had all of this father's enterprising spirit, as well as his bent for the profane. The resemblance ended there, however. Where Druitt the elder was pudgy and short and mostly bald, Druitt the younger was tall and willowy, his long hair almost white in the light of the flickering flames. How lucky the young Druitt was, Vincent mused, to have taken after his mother in this way.

Ciel was still far too young to have any knowledge or understanding of this, but Vincent had already decided that this too was to be part of Ciel's birthright. Not for many more years, of course, Lord willing.

The room was full of whispers, as per the usual- small talk, for the most part, society gossip and tasteless jokes between fat old men. Vincent had no taste for it when it did not serve a purpose.

When Sir Arthur arrived, every man in the room got quickly to his feet, falling silent as the grave they were gathered in. Half of the gossip going on this evening had been about the very recent, very terrible death of Sir Arthur's brother. The whole family, in fact, had perished three days earlier in a great blaze that took their town house and the two houses next to it. Fortunately, none of the neighbours were in town at the time, and so the only other losses were of property and not of life.

And so, the lordship had passed on to Sir Arthur.

"Lord Randall," Druitt said, bowing as low as he could over his own giant belly. "Condolences for
"your most untimely and horrific loss." The rest of them murmured similar sentiments and affirmations.

"Gentlemen, you have my thanks."

Sir Arthur, now the sole heir to his family's title, took a seat in the chair next to Vincent's. No one else moved; they all seemed unsure how to proceed.

"I imagine you prefer not to speak more of it," Vincent offered, truly meaning to be civil, if not kind. "A man in your position might easily find himself overwhelmed with his new responsibility. Should you need any assistance, I do not doubt that the rest of us will give it." Solemn nods and solemn faces.

"I never imagined that this burden would fall to me," Sir Arthur said. "Certainly not under circumstances such as these."

His eyes betrayed nothing. Most would have been certain of the hidden grief, and Vincent was sure most of them were. But Vincent himself remained skeptical, as always, of anything and everything to do with Sir Arthur.

- PRESENT -

"Mey-Rin," Ciel said, now that she was the only one left to hear him. "Find Bard and Finny, take them downstairs, and get my family out of here, quickly. I don't care if they argue, they must be taken as far from here as possible. All of you are to go with them and keep them safe- at any cost. Is that understood?"

"Yessir." The girl who left the room was the one Ciel had hired for her ruthlessness, for her accuracy and efficiency. He knew she would not fail him.

Ciel waited for the click of the door closing and drew his revolver from the waist of his trousers, pointing it square at the demon's head. He was equal parts relieved and dismayed that the demon had a revolver pointed at his head as well, just as he was equal parts relieved and dismayed that this thing was not really his father. It meant that this wasn't quite over yet.

"What use could a creature such as yourself possibly have for a mortal weapon?" Sebastian wondered.

"Insurance," the demon answered, all pretense of normality gone. "You could attack me, but I possess the same quick reflexes that you do. As soon as you move, I'll pull the trigger." He illustrated his point by pulling the hammer back with a loud and piercing snap. "Please, for your master's sake, do not doubt that I will pull this trigger."

"I assure you, such a doubt never crossed my mind," Sebastian replied; it was clear to Ciel that Sebastian didn't doubt it, but he didn't seem to care much either. "I simply think that after all of this subterfuge, after months of playing at some great game that is only just now reaching its final stage, you choose to resort to such a pedestrian method of violence."

The demon shrugged. "Needs must when the devil drives."

"Quite right," Sebastian agreed, and then he lunged.
Ciel flinched when the gun went off, and his only hope was that the gunshot did not draw Lizzy and the others back into the room.

"Sebastian, are you alright?" he asked, not wavering his stance.

"Yes, quite." Sebastian sat up from his prone position on the floor, a smoking hole in his breast pocket. In his hand he held the bullet. "This weapon was not meant for me. And now," he addressed the demon this time, "I have the higher ground. You'll have to go through me to get to him."

Even as Sebastian stood, the demon retrained his weapon, on Sebastian this time. As Sebastian was speaking, the demon was once again pulling back the hammer on his revolver.

"You are only partially correct," he said, calmly. Too calmly. "That bullet may not have been meant for you- but this one is."

- June, 1883 (TWELVE YEARS AGO) -

Yet another tiresome meeting was over with, and Vincent could not have been more relieved. When he'd suggested the formation of this group, he had at least hoped that the common pettiness and bureaucracy of England's politics would not follow them down into the caverns of their meeting hall- he had been too optimistic.

Vincent sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose to combat the mounting pressure behind his eyes. He dreaded stepping out into the daylight, where the sudden burst of brightness would no doubt fan the flames of this headache into a raging inferno. He wasn't looking forward to the heat, either, the likes of which London did not often see. If only he could linger here, in the cool darkness of the underground, until the summer had passed and the sun was replaced by an overcast autumn sky.

Lost in thought, Vincent had taken a wrong turn down a short hallway that led off the main passageway- all of these tunnels, despite his familiarity with this place, looked similar at some point or another. As it was, he has been meaning to explore this place more thoroughly- once had had realised his mistake, he deigned this the perfect opportunity for such an excursion, and continued along his current path.

The light was increasingly bad the farther along he went- there were sconces drilled into the walls with candles that were overdue for changing, barely any wax clinging to the wick. The bronze plaques that marked the graves reflected what little light there was, leaving the impression of glowing windows along the walls. There would be a hanging cloth every so often, pennants with the family trees and family crests of the dead.

Vincent lifted his hand, anticipating the need to feel his way as he passed beyond the light's reach. His fingers caught on one of the pennants, and instead of flattening to the cool, hard clay beneath, his hand pushed into the cloth, into a space behind it that should not have been there.

This is why I should have mapped this place out years ago, he thought to himself, pulling the pennant aside and stepping into the room behind.

The chamber in which he found himself was small, well lit, and incredibly cluttered. Vincent did not know where to look first. There were several diagrams pinned to the walls, as well as maps of the city, lists of names and things in languages Vincent did not recognise. Most of it seemed to be an extension of the research he and his colleagues had done in the beginning, deciding which spells
would best serve their purposes, crafting sigils and incantations based on ones that had already existed for thousands of years. But this level of obsession was something Vincent had never encountered.

There were two desks piled high with books, ancient tomes with crumbling leather covers and spines that didn't look like they had much life left in them. There was an array of glass jars on a table opposite, each full of odd specimens, different dried herbs and the husks of small, dead creatures, all labeled in Latin.

Vincent stood there for a moment, for two, overwhelmed by confusion, his mind flooded by questions he did not know how to ask himself. He began to rummage through the materials, scanning for passages in a language he knew, careful to put everything back just as he had found it. The parts he could read spoke of demonic summoning, demonic possession, control, the idea that one could harness the power of hell itself. Bile rose in Vincent's throat- he could scarcely believe it was possible. Summoning demons and harnessing their power was certainly plausible- but who in the coalition had the mind to do all of this? Who had a reason to? Vincent was at a loss.

And then he felt it- a dread that was not of this world, deeper than could be caused by his discovery. There was a feeling of flames, locking at his skin, the soft sound of a distant forest fire, the unmistakeable stench of sulfur and smoke.

He turned to the opposite wall, on which hung a heavy Persian rug, yet another curtain hiding some fresh horror. Vincent could barely fight the urge to flee, to leave this cursed room and not look back, but he knew that if he left, it might spell unspeakable horror for the future he had been trying to build all this time. And so he reached out, took hold of the rug, and tore it from its place on the wall.

Some part of him had known what he was about to behold, and yet he still could not have been prepared for what he now saw. An iron cage embedded into the earth, resolute and impenetrable, bars crafted to hold in one thing and one thing only.

The creature was nearly formless, haloed in dark smoke and clouds of ash. Embers flickered from within the haze, floating glowing and never dispersing. Vincent could see very little of its body- the vague line of shoulders, a jaw, the glint of teeth and the barest shape of horns, black and shimmering, curling around its head. This was truly a monster from hell, made of the things of hell itself, fire and brimstone and agony and darkness. This thing had been born from fear, and so Vincent could not stop his body from going cold.

"What are you?" Vincent asked, curling his hands around the bars of the cell, if only to steady their shaking.

_You know what I am_ , the demon spoke, its voice only heard within Vincent's mind, formless as the creature itself.

"Who trapped you here?"

_One of your brethren. You know this also._

"Yes," Vincent admitted, "but which one of them was it?"

_I am unable to describe him_ , replied the demon. _In this form, I am incapable of discerning faces, such as they are. I can tell you that his soul was old in a way that his body was not- withered with bitterness, full of greed and deceit and pride. I wanted to devour it, but I was trapped._

"By the holy oil." Vincent pointed to the ring of fire surrounding the billowing fog that cloaked the
demon's body. "Why did he trap you?"

_He wants the words to a spell, the steps to a ritual that is older than the foundations of this earth._

"Will you give it to him?"

_He knows that holy fire can harm, can kill one of my kind. I will have no choice but to tell him, should I wish to survive._

"What does he want with the ritual?"

_He seeks to gather a power greater than any man has ever known. He seeks to wield it, to reshape your world into his image. That is his purpose. The demon's head seemed to tilt, if a head without a skull could do anything of that kind. I have been listening through the walls of this prison- watching around corners. I have discovered the purpose of others as well. What is yours?_

"To protect my kingdom, my family. To serve my family name."

_You speak of such lofty, naive goals, and yet I can see in your soul that you are not naive, that there is no weakness in your character. This fascinates me. What is your name, mortal?_

"Vincent Phantomhive." He fought against his own mouth, but it was too late- he had been ensnared, entranced by the demon’s voice- this was the way of these creatures, and he had fallen right into its ancient trap. "What is yours?" The question was a last attempt to fight this manipulation. It was as if the demon laughed, then, a strange caress in Vincent's mind that frightened him with its softness.

_I have had many names. But I am without a master, and so none of those names remain mine. I shall die nameless._

"What would you do," Vincent wondered, "If I were to release you from this trap?"

_I would flee_, the demon said without hesitation. _I desire no part in my captor's plans, either as a hindrance or a help._

"How can I believe what you say?" Vincent had found his senses- or, they had been given back to him. "How do I know you won't kill me the instant I set you free?"

_You do not_, the demon told him. _But know this- my kind do not lie._

Logically, Vincent knew he could not trust such a statement, could not trust anything the demon had told him. But he could not let the man who had trapped the demon have continued access to its knowledge, its power.

"I will free you," he finally said.

_What would you ask of me in return?_

"Nothing."

_My kind are makers of contracts, drivers of bargains. You are performing a service for me. What service might I perform for you?_

"I ask for nothing," Vincent replied once more. "There is nothing that I want."

A pause. _Very well._
Vincent turned to the table behind him and took hold of the first book his hands touched. It was large, bound in green leather. He shoved it between the bars and dropped it onto the flames, hoping against hope that it would not immediately burn. The leather began to crack and char, to shrivel and pop in the unearthly heat- but for a moment, the perfect circle was broken.

_Know this_, the demon said. _No debt goes unpaid._

And then, just as surely as the demon had been there, it was gone. The room was both lighter and darker for it. There was no longer the tang of sulfur stinging Vincent's eyes, his throat- whatever trance he had been caught in was lifted, though his fear remained.

He took one minute and no longer, gathering whatever materials he thought might lead to the perpetrator of this scheme- papers ripped from walls, something that looked to be a journal- and left. But not before he used a cask of the oil to set fire to the rest of the room.

_- PRESENT -_

Ciel didn't have time to flinch when the gun went off this time- the demon had barely finished his sentence before he fired, and by then it was too late for anything to be done.

Smoke curled from the barrel of the demon's gun as Sebastian pitched backward, a bloody, jagged hole blown through his shoulder. The bullet itself had fractured, pieces of it whizzing past Ciel and dropping to the floor with quiet pings that echoed through the ensuing silence.

"Sanctified bullets," Sebastian mused, voice strained. "There's the artistry I missed before."

The demon was clearly waiting for something. He said nothing, focusing an appraising and expectant glare on Ciel, as though the obvious thing should be for Ciel to cry, to show weakness, to break down and concede. It made Ciel want to laugh.

"I am growing impatient," the demon finally announced. "Shall we get on with it?"

"Certainly," Ciel allowed, very cordially he thought, before he looked to Sebastian, whose head was bowed, white glove stained red as he clutched his wounded shoulder.

"Sebastian," he said, "that looks terribly painful."

"I've had worse, sir, as you well know," Sebastian responded. "If it's all the same to you, I'd rather stay where I am. You are more protected this way."

The demon had grown more impatient, snarling until his teeth showed, sharp and white and completely inhuman. It was becoming easier with every passing second to forget that this monster had ever resembled Vincent Phantomhive.

"Even so, Sebastian, there's no reason for you to suffer when the solution is so simple."

As he spoke, Ciel shifted this stance, tilting his head to the right and turning his body to the left, all while keeping his aim steady and true. This was a gamble, but it was the only move he had left to make.

"Sebastian," he whispered, "come here."
"No!" the demon shrieked, but everything had already been put into motion. Sebastian whirled around, pulling Ciel close and biting into his neck, drinking deeply until he could feel the wound in his shoulder closing up.

At the moment Sebastian's fangs pierced Ciel's skin, both Ciel and the demon pulled their respective triggers. The demon's bullet missed, whizzing past Sebastian and burying itself in the far wall. Ciel's bullet, however, hit its mark- the demon's gun hand exploded on impact, fingers cracking and breaking off. A spray of blood hit the floor, along with the gun, shortly followed by the demon’s knees as he fell with a cry of shock and agony.

"Sebastian," Ciel murmured, mouth pressed to Sebastian's ear. He could feel Sebastian's sharp teeth, still sunk into his skin, and Sebastian's tongue moving against his throat. He lifted his hand, playing his fingertips along the back of Sebastian's neck. "Are you alright?"

Sebastian pulled away, licked once more at the wound, and smiled.

"Quite alright, darling," Sebastian answered, "though I find myself tired of this game- it has cost me far too many suits already."

Ciel rounded on the demon. "Shall we finish it, then?"

"Yes, my lord." Sebastian took the demon by the hair, forcing its head back as Ciel took the revolver from the floor, covered in blood and presumably full of four more sanctified bullets.

"I must admit I'm a little disappointed," he confessed, wiping the gun clean with the hem of his shirtsleeve. "I had thought you'd be a little more intelligent than you've proven to be. To come here with a weapon that could be used against you was foolish."

The Demon met Ciel's eyes and grimaced, cradling the mangled remains of his right hand. "It was only foolish if I had any intention of leaving this place alive."

"Why are you here?" Ciel demanded, bewildered. "Who are you really?"

"Ciel," the demon said in that voice, that dead man's voice, suddenly sounding so real, so comforting, though it was a monster who looked at Ciel with those crimson eyes. "Who does it look like I am?"

"My God," Ciel breathed. "You really were him, once, weren't you?"

The demon did not answer. He did nothing but meet Ciel's eyes, and that alone was answer enough.

"Tell me what happened," Ciel demanded. "Tell me all of it."

"Would that I could," the demon said woefully, suddenly penitent, "but there is no time. He is coming, and he intends to kill you, to put an end to the Phantomhive bloodline once and for all."

"Tell me how you know this."

And so he did. The demon began his story, the forming of the coalition and their plans, of his good intentions and his foolish optimism. Ciel was most surprised to hear of Sir Arthur's involvement; the man he had known would never have been party to such things- but this too had been a lie. Everything Ciel had thought and understood about the circumstances surrounding his parents' deaths, the event that had defined Ciel's very existence- he was woefully unprepared for the truth he had been searching for these last several months. He listened in a stupor as the story took its turns, careening toward the inevitable climax.
"By the time I discovered his plans," the demon said, "it was far too late. He had already gathered a following, members of the coalition who believed in his cause, as well as fanatics, religious zealots, anyone he could ensnare in his web of madness."

"You still haven't told me who he is."

"It took me two years to uncover his identity. I could no longer trust anyone, and so I was forced to investigate in secret, listening at keyholes and intercepting correspondence." He seemed so tired, this shade of the once proud Vincent Phantomhive. He looked as if he had not slept one night in all of this time. "But finally, finally I discovered him."

"Who is he?" Ciel demanded. He knew that threatening violence would do no good- threatening death would be more futile still. This creature, this monster, whatever was left of his father, had no further desire to live.

"It was the single greatest and most terrible moment of my life. Finding the truth is what damned me to this fate. I came here to protect you from that same curse."

"You came here to kill me!"

"I came here to kill you so that he could not," the demon explained. The blood dripping from his hand had begun to turn black- the demon's very life-force was beginning to leak out onto the floor. Ciel knew he didn't have much time left at all.

"If he had gotten to you, he would have fulfilled his purpose, he would have done to you what he set out to do all those years ago. I had to stop him, even if I am the thing I set out to destroy, I thought- I knew that stopping him was all that mattered."

He was delirious now. Expecting him to answer even the simplest question was foolish at this juncture. Ciel continued to ask anyway.

"Who is he? Who is the Father? You have to tell me- tell me who he is."

"He's coming." The demon's voice was a rasp now, low and dry and failing him. "It's too late, he's coming, I warned you he'd come, he is, he's coming, he's coming he's coming he's HERE."

Ciel opened his mouth to speak, but then a number of things happened at once.

There was a muffled bang and a loud crack- the demon's skull exploded outward, blood and brain tissue splattering the front of Ciel's clothes- the sudden sight and smell of it made him wretch- his stomach ached with it, and he turned, falling to his knees and vomiting bile onto the floor.

"Master." Sebastian was there; Ciel could hear him, feel him, kneeling down at his side and putting a hand on the back of his neck, thumb stroking over Ciel's hairline. There wasn't time for this tenderness, Ciel knew. Whoever had fired that bullet was here, on the other side of that door.

"Sebastian, please I'm-" he was about to say alright, but then he saw it- the blood, red and warm and fresh, blood that did not belong to the dead demon on his dining room floor. Blood that was his own, coming from the bullet wound in his stomach.

- December Fourteenth, 1885 (TEN YEARS AGO) -
Vincent was aware of being pulled, dragged under the arms down a hallway, perhaps, somewhere with close, dark walls- or, maybe it was an illusion, a trick of the smoke that choked out light and fooled his eyes, filling his lungs and addling his mind. Perhaps he wasn’t moving at all- perhaps there was no smoke. Perhaps he was only dreaming.

He tried to reach out for Rachel, but found himself unable to do so- his arms were too weak, too strained to move, and his voice was a rasp when he attempted to speak. His thoughts came slow and thick, dull and heavy, useless to him just as his body had become.

Someone was calling to him, he realised, but they were far-off and getting farther away- or perhaps he really was the one moving, and the person calling for him would never know, never find him.

Father, they shouted, they screamed. He tried to reply but could not recall what name he should shout, what reason he had to fight the darkness that consumed him. The voice grew in desperation, a heartbreaking pitch that pulled violently at Vincent's mind.

But he was already lost.

Chapter End Notes

06/11/18:

As always, many thanks for your simple presence on this web page, reading this story and these useless author's notes. Gods bless you. I'm not good at endings so I'm sorry if all of this is anticlimactic, or if it's not what you imagined- it's not quite what I imagined either. But for better or worse, we're almost there.

Comments are the stitches holding my sanity together :)
Chapter Summary

And then Sebastian began to speak, in a slow, hushed tone, chanting a spell in a language Ciel did not understand. It was like music, more beautiful and haunting than any Ciel had ever heard. He felt a power wash over him, the pain in his body beginning to ebb, his heart beginning to slow, his limbs going colder, cold and then numb.

_So this is dying_, he thought.

Chapter Notes

Words: 17k

**PLEASE READ THIS PART------>** if you're an old reader of the fic, know that I very recently went back and edited all the chapters, stretched out the timeline and aged Ciel up a couple of years. Some references to poeple's ages etc. in this chapter will be REALLY confusing if you haven't re-read the fic, so at least go back and re-read chapters 10 & 11 if you don't wanna do the whole thing thanks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The countryside was truly dismal this time of year. A white and frozen view of the winter wasteland greeted Abberline through the bars of the jail wagon. He and his men had loaded up two wagons in the inconsistent light of pre-dawn, their breaths nearly crystallizing in the frigid air.

They had barely left the city before the wind had picked up, whipping the snow into a frenzy, making it nigh impossible to traverse the country roads. Though dogged, the horses pressed on, taking them all closer to their ultimate goal.

Abberline was glad he had aired on the side of caution- bringing so many men with him might not have been deemed necessary by others in his position, but he intended to bring the entirety of Ciel's household into custody until everything had been sorted.

Now, with the weather having taken a turn for the worse, it looked as if they might have to keep Ciel under house arrest until the squalls had passed.

Another gust sent a barrage of snowflakes in through the bars, pelting Abberline's face with stinging bits of ice. He did not feel the cold- he was warmed by his resolution, steadfast in the knowledge that this was what he was meant to do. He closed his eyes and took in a cold breath, remembering in vivid detail the grueling torture of Sir Arthur's last moments. He exhaled, fist closing around the eye patch in his coat pocket, and felt more determined than before. This was the right course of action- for his city, for his country, for Sir Arthur's legacy.
They had made it down to the kitchen by the time the first gunshot rang out, distant but unmistakable.

Lizzy gasped, looking first to her mother, who had a solemn expression, as if she'd somehow known that gunshots would be an eventuality. Her father looked worried, Edward looked shocked.

Wordlessly, Lizzy turned for the door, but her way was blocked as Mey-Rin entered the room.

"What's happening?" Lizzy demanded. "What's going on?"

"The Master has it well in hand," Mey-Rin responded; Lizzy realised with a start that the Mey-Rin who stood before her now was not the dowdy, clumsy maid she had come to know over the years. This creature was a different breed, grave and stoic; and, Lizzy was willing to bet, not nearly as clumsy as her more endearing persona.

"We should help him!" Lizzy exclaimed. "We should -"

Another gunshot.

"We have to go," said Bardroy, already by the back door. "The weather has let up for now, but we won't have much time before the snow returns and the roads become completely impassable."

"Go?" asked Francis. "Go where?"

"Back to London," Mey-Rin answered, watching the horror dawn on Lady Midford's face. "We've been instructed to get you all to safety."

Two more gunshots in quick succession, the silence after pierced by screams.

"I am not leaving him." Lizzy planted her feet firmly on the ground and pointed toward the hallway. "Ciel is in trouble, and we have the means to help him, and I will not leave my fiancé at the moment when he needs me the most!"

"Look, we know you care about him," Bardroy said. "We all do. He's the one who gave us all another chance when no one else would even spare us a second look. We owe him our lives. Which is why we would sooner die than fail him. He's trusted us to protect the people he cares about the most in the world, and that's what we're gonna do."

"Why?" Lizzy cried. "Why would he send us away?"

"Perhaps he wished to spare you from witnessing his darkest moment." This from Tanaka, who had appeared, as always, out of thin air. "The shadows over this house are far deeper than you can ever know, Miss Elizabeth."

The back door to the kitchen flew open suddenly- everyone jumped back as the bundle of snow-covered wool that was Finny tumbled in out of the cold.

"The horses are ready," he announced, brushing himself clean. "We have to leave. Now."

"We have to help!" Lizzy insisted.

"We have no weapons," Edward snapped.

"Well, that's not quite true," Bardroy admitted, hoisting a large bag over his shoulder, no doubt a cache of guns and ammunition. "But still, we can't stay here."
"Quite right," Edward echoed. "Ciel has clearly gotten himself involved in something highly dangerous and has lied about it for who knows how long- why should we risk our safety for him?"


Her mother reached out- "Elizabeth, listen to me-

"No!" Lizzy lunged out of her mother's reach, pushing past Mey-Rin and out into the hallway.

And then she was running, feet pounding on the floor and heart pounding in her chest. She gathered her skirts in her arms and took the stairs two at a time, shouldering through the door and into the main hall. She could hear footsteps on the stairs behind her, her family and the servants no doubt giving chase, but she stayed her course, scanning her surroundings as she ran for anything that could be used as a weapon.

There, on the wall, a pair of rapiers hung on a gilded crest, a low table below it. Lizzy sped up, gave herself more than a running start and leapt into the air, vaulting herself from the table and pulling the entire crest from the wall. It fell with a deafening crash, pulling her down with it. She quickly regained her balance and planted one foot on the gold sculpted metal to give her leverage as she prised the sword free. The blade screeched against its confines but gave way, and soon Lizzy had both of the swords in her possession. They may not have been intended for combat, but they had been forged just as any other weapon was forged, sharp and well-balanced and deadly in the right hands. Already, she felt the encroaching fog of helplessness begin to dispel.

"Elizabeth!"

Lizzy sighed heavily at the sound of her mother's voice. She lowered her weapons and her eyes, ready to be scolded but not ready to give up her fight.

"Mother, you have to let me-" the words died in her mouth when she saw the rifle in her mother's hands, the pistol that her father held. Indeed, everyone was armed to the teeth. The servants no longer seemed like they had ever been meant to clean house, to cook meals and tend the grounds. With weapons in their hands, they seemed more real than she had ever seen them.

"I'm not about to abandon my only daughter," her mother said, pushing the butt of her gun into the cradle of her shoulder. "Besides, I didn't spend my youth learning to shoot for no good reason."

"It might too late to leave, anyhow," Bardroy interjected. "The roads could be snowed over, they won't be passable until the storm ends. And the house is surrounded. I don't know who they are or how many they number, but look." He gestured to the tall windows that lined the hallway. Outside, the world was awash in white and grey, wind and ice and cold so biting, one could feel it through the glass. And in the storm, among the flying flakes of snow, there were shadows moving, lines of them, slowly growing closer and closer.

"And they told me that a woman could never have use for such a skill," Lizzy's mother scoffed. Next to her, Mey-Rin smiled, a bright, ferocious thing.

"If you want to help Ciel, miss, this is how we do it," Finny told her.

"We fight."

The bullet had fractured as it passed through the demon's head- burning shards of lead had torn into Ciel's flesh and were still trapped there, embedded in his body. Sebastian could count five separate wounds, small but deep, when he pressed his gloved hand to Ciel's blood-slicked skin. He could feel
Ciel's body grow more tense with every breath, controlled and forceful through his nose as he forced himself to remain conscious through the pain. His agony must have been incredible- what was more incredible still was the burning rage Sebastian felt, toward himself and toward the man that had done this.

"I cannot imagine the loathing and shame you must feel toward yourself in this moment," the Father said, stepping into the room. "To have failed at your life's most basic purpose- having failed to protect him, and having failed to see the danger that was right before you all this time."

"I admit I am at a loss to understand how you could have evaded me for so long," Sebastian confessed. "I have always known myself to be an excellent judge of character- one could say I have a preternatural affinity for such things. To have misjudged your character is a wound to my pride from which I might never recover."

Ciel scoffed, which had not been wise. He began to cough uncontrollably, a wet, hacking cough that only led to blood spraying from his mouth. He spat more of it onto the floor and raised his head, looking over his shoulder and into the eyes of his greatest enemy.

"How many ghosts then, Sir Arthur, must you raise before all of this is over?"

In the hallway, there was a crescendo of shattering glass, a hail of gunshots, and the shouts of familiar voices. Ciel closed his eyes and hung his head. He'd had no hopes for himself, going into this day- he knew he would not survive it, one way or another- but he'd at least hoped that his family would be safe. That Lizzy would be safe.

"It seems as though we've started," Sir Arthur remarked. "A shame that you had to drag your only remaining family into this, but I suppose it's more convenient to do away with you all at once, save myself the trouble of it later."

"So this is it," Ciel observed. "Your final play. You've brought your entire army, just to defeat me. I'm flattered."

"I did bring the majority of my forces, yes. But this is not my final play. This, I assure you, is only the beginning."

Sir Arthur strolled around the room, as if he were surveying it, judging the colour of the walls and the texture of the curtains. He seemed unhurried, unruffled, despite the sounds of war being waged just outside. He must have known what Sebastian was before he arrived. He must have known that Sebastian could kill him in a second, that turning his back as he was doing now would be unimaginably unwise.

Under other circumstances, perhaps. Ciel didn't think Sebastian would leave his side, even if ordered to- not when Ciel was bleeding this badly.

Sir Arthur took a flask from inside his coat pocket. This was odd, as Ciel had never known Sir Arthur to carry one. When Sir Arthur opened the flask and began to pour it out onto the floor, Ciel understood.

"Into the circle. Quickly now, please." Sir Arthur said to Sebastian. "Surely you know what sort of bullets I have in this gun."

The end of the barrel, still warm from its last shot, dug into the back of Sebastian's neck. He did not move.

"Ah, yes, I should have realised. Forgive me." The gun moved from Sebastian's neck to Ciel's head.
"Perhaps this will offer you better motivation."

"Sebastian," Ciel hissed. "Don't do it."

But he did. And the moment he crossed into the trap, the flames sprung to life. It was the first time Ciel had ever seen Sebastian powerless. Alone. Afraid.

"I'm sorry to have cut the reunion short." Sir Arthur gestured to the would-be body at his feet, now only clothes filled with nothing but ash. "Unfortunately, some things just cannot be avoided."

"There wasn't much of a reunion," Ciel told him. "He said he came to kill me, to save me from you. My question is, did he come of his own accord, or did you simply send him to draw out this farce?"

Sir Arthur considered this question for a moment, grinding some of the demon's ashes into the floor with his heel.

"I suppose he might have believed he was acting on thoughts and feelings that were his own," he finally said, "but that man- that monster, I should say- hasn't done anything these last ten years without my permission or direction." He paced as he spoke, rounding Sebastian's trap before coming to stand in front of Ciel once more. "Of course, I should have predicted the mockery he would make of our history, and so I am now obliged to set the record straight."

"For what purpose?" Ciel wondered. "You obviously don't intend for me to survive this ordeal. I'm bleeding to death already-" he spat out the admission as if it meant nothing- "why not just finish me and be done with it?"

"Are you so eager to throw away your opportunity to finally learn the truth- the full truth of your greatest tragedy? Is this not the end you have been pursuing since the day of your parents' deaths?"

"In all honesty, I don't much care anymore." That was only half-true, but Sir Arthur needn't know that. "I'm almost certain that it won't bring me peace- I've come to understand that there is no peace for me, not even in death." Ciel sighed. "It is true that I have been searching for it all my life, but I find that my priorities have shifted in recent days." He spared a glance at Sebastian, and realised that Sebastian's eyes had not left him once.

"In that case, I will tell you anyway, if only as a means to increase your suffering." Sir Arthur leaned over Ciel, noting the glazed look settling in over the boy's eyes. "Do try to pay attention, Phantomhive."

"To start off, I never did care for your father. As haughty and entitled as any heir to a Lordship ever was. I have often seen in you the same despicable behaviour I saw in him; treating every crime and misfortune he saw as his own personal puzzle, his own personal hunting ground, all of it a game, all of it orchestrated for his own amusement. But, he was in service to the Crown, and so I endeavoured to work alongside him with the utmost professionalism."

Ciel wanted to roll his eyes, but he felt so close to fainting that if he did, his eyes might roll right back into his skull, and then he would be done for.

"When he approached me with his idea for this alliance, this 'coalition', as he called it, I was admittedly intrigued- if only just to see how far he would go before his actions were exposed, and he was branded a mad heretic for his usage of occult rituals. I could at least appreciate his desire to clear out the filth from the roadways and waterways of our great Empire, and so I obliged him. I had long seen the flaws in our nation, whether it be the opium epidemic or the ongoing wars within the colonies, exposing our weaknesses and opening us up to destruction. What I could not have known
then was that I was being called upon, by forces much greater and more divine than myself, to serve a much greater and more divine purpose than I could ever imagine."

"I soon realised that, while your father's beliefs in the powers our group utilised were genuine, he did not fully comprehend the absolute depth of these powers, nor how even the darkest magic could be used to spread the cleansing light of holy vengeance. I, on the other hand, was willing to use any means necessary to accomplish my objectives- I remained unburdened by his fear, his superstitions, his spinelessness, and began to experiment with these forbidden rituals right before his eyes- he never even suspected."

"I recall one night, a strike on a warehouse near the river; I modified one of the sigils, mostly out of curiosity, and I inadvertently summoned a creature which was able to dispose of several armed criminals within a matter of moments. Vincent accurately surmised this much, but never conceived that I might have willfully brought such a thing about. This was when I knew for certain that he was too weak, that he could never be brought to see the truth of things, and so he must eventually be eliminated. However, it was not so simple at that time to have him killed, or even removed from power- he was one of the coalition's founding members, after all. So I waited, bided my time, continued my research."

"As the years progressed, our numbers grew. Vincent believed himself to be a lightning rod of sorts, a unifying presence drawing all of these good-willed men together- but I was the one gaining allies within their ranks, establishing my doctrine, creating my own dogma and doxologies within this collective mind. It was around this time that my research in the field of demonology led me to the rumor of a ritual, one that could grant immense power, the likes of which had not been wielded for millennia."

"A demon army," Ciel said. "But you couldn't perform the ritual. You weren't a demon."

"He still isn't," Sebastian pointed out. "I would have found him out long ago if he were."

"True, I lacked the ability to devour the soul of another, or to harvest it, to mold it into the weapon with which I was destined to remake the world in my image."

"I knew that this rumoured ritual must be modified to accommodate my specific set of circumstances. But to modify such a ritual, I must first possess it in its original form. And who better to explain the me the ancient practices of demons than a demon itself?"

"My first attempt was unsuccessful, of course. I was able to trap the creature, but your father quite literally stumbled upon my work room and freed the demon before I could torture the information out of it. Vincent burned my research and set me back some time. It was then that I knew the time had come to plot his end."

"It took me months, but eventually I learned the details of this ritual, the rite meant to change a human soul into a demon. I knew that my being human meant that my blood lacked the power required for this magic, and the incantation would hold no sway in my mortal voice. But in learning about the creation of demons, I knew that a tortured soul could turn under the right circumstances, even with the simplest of spells. And once I had one demon, made in the manner of Hell itself, I could enslave it to harvest and turn as many souls as I needed to populate my glorious army. And who better to help me build this future than the man who was doing his best to dismantle it?"

"Of course," Ciel whispered, disgusted.

"Yes," Sir Arthur answered, apparently pleased that Ciel was following his perverted train of thought. "Haven't you ever wondered why I had you and your mother taken as well as your father?"
could have left you both to die in that fire. I had used fire for this purpose before, when I grew tired of my brother squandering of our father's fortune, wasting the influence associated with our father's title."

The fact that Sir Arthur had killed his own brother for his Lordship was the least shocking part of the story that Ciel had heard thus far. Brother turning on brother for power, for a birthright- such a thing was Biblical in its predictability.

"It was simple to stage such an enormous tragedy. The same went for your family, in this very place, on this very day, ten years ago. But that fire was merely a distraction, to hide the true and greater purpose of your family's disappearance."

"While I knew that torturing Vincent would be a fitting punishment for his slights and crimes against me, his physical pain would not suffice to twist his soul to the point of breaking. I had him beaten, to be sure, chained and kept like a rabid dog in the sewers below the city- but the real torture was your mother's to bear."

Ciel felt again as though he wanted to wretch, to vomit- he would have, if his stomach were not already empty. His chest ached and burned alongside his wounds- it was as though his very heart were trying to claw its way up his throat and out of his mouth.

"I won't bore you with the details." Sir Arthur was there again, close, leaning over him, gloating. "We were never brutal enough to kill- she lived, remained conscious through most of what was done to her. Until she begged to die. Until your father, on his knees, begged me to kill her out of mercy. And do you know, Phantomhive, what I did then?"

"No," Ciel replied, even though he could guess. "No."

"I handed your father a gun and allowed him the privilege of putting her out of her misery. And he did."

Ciel did wretch at this- blood was all that came up, a dark, rich red that he might have thought beautiful, once. His vision swam, darkening around the edges.

"In that moment, his soul was broken. He turned the gun on himself, unaware that a sigil had been etched into the floor beneath him- the moment he pulled the trigger, he became a demon."

"I had finally achieved what no man had achieved before. All I had to do was stretch out my hand and take hold of the future I had envisioned for all those years. And I had you, caged and alone, ready to serve my purpose."

"You were going to turn me. Use me for your army," Ciel said.

"Yes, but you were destined for an even more important duty. You were to be my spy, my wolf in sheep's clothing, living among the nobility, carrying out my will in the marbled halls and the underbelly of London. And when the time came, you would have taken control of the very nation, silencing the frailty of the monarchy and ushering a new age of demonic rule- all of it under my control."

"And it seems to have worked out so well for you." This came from Sebastian, who had leveled a scathing glare at Sir Arthur. Ciel could feel Sebastian's power pushing at the boundary around him, a steady beat of fists pounding against glass. A heartbeat, of sorts. Ciel closed his eyes and breathed, as deeply as he could with his wounds limiting his movements. As strong as Sebastian was, as hard and heavy as his power radiated, there was nothing to be done against the holy fire. Sebastian was
trapped, and he was not pleased.

"If it weren't for you and your foolishness, your incurable hope for survival, this wouldn't be happening to you now," Sir Arthur told Ciel, ignoring Sebastian entirely. "Even your father bowed to me in the end. Even he gave into the true ways, and served the purpose he was meant for. But not you, you stubborn, stupid boy, daring to hope that you could be saved from this, from me."

"You are mistaken, Sir Arthur," Ciel argued, however feeble his voice sounded. "It wasn't hope that prompted me to reach into the depths of hell and shake hands with a demon. Nothing so pure as hope could have allowed me to willingly damn myself. No. The reason I escaped you, the reason I survived- it was simply because I refused to die on any terms but my own."

Sir Arthur said nothing, but he lashed out with a swift kick to Ciel's ribs. The noise Ciel made was not a human one, not one that even Ciel recognised- it was the cry of some wounded animal. He fell onto his side, pulled his knees up to his chest, still clutching at his wound. Sebastian snarled, and his power flared- for a moment, every light in the room dimmed, shadows appearing in the corners out of nowhere, snaking toward the flames, but it was still not enough to free him from his trap.

"Who do you suppose it was that gave you that mark?" Sir Arthur prodded Ciel's ribs once again, sending a jolt of pain through Ciel's bones. "It was there before his," he said, reaching down to tear Ciel's eye patch from his head, "and it will be there long after."

"You still mean to enslave me."

"That has always been the plan. And I would have succeeded so much sooner; even if you had escaped by some power of your own, I would have hunted you. There would be no haven to which you could have fled, no rock under which you could have cowered. But you, a child, a weak and shrivelled thing, managed to retreat to the only place where I could not follow."

He gestured to Sebastian, who, though he was loathed to admit it, somehow admired the poetry in Sir Arthur's description of the contract.

"After all this time, so many hours in thought and study, I still cannot comprehend how you knew, how you managed to entice a creature such as he, at the last possible moment before your inevitable fate."

"If I arrived at the moment he most needed me," Sebastian interjected, "perhaps the fate you believe to be his was not, in fact, inevitable."

Miraculously, Sir Arthur ignored Sebastian's comment in favour of continuing his tirade.

"You forged a bond that was nigh unbreakable. You re-entered the world and rebuilt your family's name, and for a while believed yourself to be indestructible. But your growing attachment to this creature, and his to you, has exposed weaknesses where I had almost despaired of finding any. But I have been patient. I have bided my time and now, now I shall set the course of time right once more."

"You see, I finally have the means to sever this bond, to render this contract null and void. Ten years ago, on this day, on this spot, I put my plan into action. And having waited ten years to the day for my return, my power is now at its greatest."

The memory of the child-killer, the one Ciel had caught all those months ago, came unbidden to Ciel's mind. That case was unconnected to this one, Ciel was sure- but that same depravity was there, that same relentless drive to harness the power of the divine- to conquer that thing which all men
fear- their own impotence, their own mortality.

"Your soul will be mine, as it was always meant to be," Sir Arthur was saying, as he lifted his revolver and aimed it squarely at Sebastian's head. "If you've any last words for your master, demon, I should think now would be the appropriate time to say them."

Sebastian turned his bowed head- Ciel raised his chin, and their eyes met. Ciel could feel the mark of his contract humming, some forlorn song, the same siren call that had always drawn he and Sebastian together. He remembered their first night, blood-soaked in the bath, gentle and yet ravenous. The dancing lesson, months and months ago, the first time he had noticed the way Sebastian looked at him- he thought of this morning, Sebastian above him, around him, inside him, moving with such tenderness and care; such simple and quiet devotion, haloed in the light of the gathering dawn.

"There is nothing left for me to say," Sebastian whispered. "Everything I am, everything I might have been- he already knows."

"Touching," Sir Arthur remarked, derisive. "Who would have guessed that such a monstrous, thieving creature could be hiding such a human heart? How unfortunate that it did not serve you in life, as it will not serve you in death. You-"

There was a sudden thud, the cracking of metal against bone, and Sir Arthur crumpled to a heap on the floor. Behind him stood Lizzy, skirts torn, hair askew, having just struck Sir Arthur with the heavy end of her sword's hilt. When she saw who it was that she had attacked, she gasped and backed away.

"Sir Arthur! But I thought- I only saw him from behind, and the gun, and Sebastian and I-"

She stepped back once more and stepped in the ashes of her once uncle- when she realised this, she shrieked.

"What- Ciel, what is happening? Those, those things out there, they've set fire to the house- everyone is fighting but there are so many of them and- Ciel! You're hurt!"

Ciel was crawling, however slowly, ignoring his pain and her rambling as he went, shuffling on his knees toward the ring of fire surrounding Sebastian. He pulled his sleeve down over his hand and began to swat at the flames until some of them went out. Sebastian reached through the gap Ciel had created, took Ciel's hand in his- and then he was on the other side of Ciel entirely, as if he had vanished from one place and appeared in the other, right before Lizzy's eyes. Lizzy blinked, more mystified than ever.

Ciel wanted to yell at her, wanted to scream, to ask why the hell she wasn't miles away by now- but he didn't think he had the strength.

"Sebastian," he said instead, gesturing to Sir Arthur's prone form. "Is he dead?"

"Not yet." Sebastian collected Sir Arthur's gun from the floor beside him. "Would you like to do the honours, sir, or shall I dispose of him for you?"

Ciel wordlessly extended his hand, and Sebastian placed the gun into his palm.

"Ciel, what are you doing?" Lizzy asked, her voice timid and shaking, childlike with the terror that had rose up in her throat.

"This man is not who any of us thought he was, Elizabeth." Ciel felt weak, impossibly tired- his gun hand shook with the effort of holding the weapon in his outstretched arm, and yet he felt alive,
invincible, for what would perhaps be the last time. "This man has done unspeakable things to
countless people, to me, to my parents, and he plans to an innumerable amount more. I'm going to
end it. I'm going to end him, once and for all, after all this time."

There was a thundering crash from somewhere above- the walls shook and the ceiling caved in, a
mess of debris and flames coming down on their heads. Burning beams and smouldering chunks of
stone knocked Ciel off his feet. He lunged away and curled instinctively into a ball on the floor,
covering his head and crying out in shock and pain as he was nearly crushed by the crumbling
Phantomhive manor. He should have been hit, too- but he was covered at the last second.

"Sebastian?" he asked, not recognising the weak, raspy voice that came from his own lips. He
couldn't see Sebastian through the cloud of dust kicked up by the collapse, so he reached out, feeling
for the line of Sebastian's shoulders, the shape of his face. "Are you alright?"

"Of course, sir." The dust was clearing now, and Ciel could see that Sebastian was no worse for
wear. His clothes were covered in a layer of grime, as was his hair, but he was uninjured. Truthfully,
it wasn't Sebastian, resilient as he was, that Ciel was most concerned for at the moment.

"Lizzy," Ciel said, as Sebastian helped him to his feet. "Did you see where she fell? Did you see-"

"I'm here!" Lizzy shouted, her disheveled blonde curls appearing from behind a pile of rubbish,
followed slowly by the rest of her. She was unharmed, to Ciel's immense relief, apart from a large
scratch across her cheekbone, blood already drying on her skin. Sebastian assisted her in climbing
out from her hiding place. As soon as her feet were back on solid ground, she flew into action.

"We have to get to the stables," she told them, picking one of her swords up from where she had
dropped it in the chaos- the other had vanished somewhere in the mess that used to be Ciel's dining
room. He surveyed the damage with a tired sort of resignation- this house was clearly not meant to
stand. The table was broken, the chairs smashed- everything glass was shattered, and great heaps of
broken furniture from upstairs were strewn about, along with the upstairs floor, the walls- when he
looked up, he could see clear to the roof of the house, which was miraculously still intact.

"Our group was separated almost as soon as the fighting began," Lizzy was saying. "The servants
got cut off from us in the hallway by several of those- things-" her eyes flickered over Sebastian's
face. "Before we were split up, we all agreed on the stables as the rendezvous point. I imagine they
won't leave without us, but the longer we keep them waiting, the more danger they're in."

Ciel looked behind him, through what was left of the dining room windows and out into the snow.
He wanted to point out that trying to navigate the road back to London in such weather was
dangerous enough, but their options were scarce at this point.

"Sebastian, go check that the hallway is clear," he ordered. Sebastian, though he looked physically
pained to leave Ciel's side at this juncture, bowed slightly and did as he was told, leaving Ciel
propped up against one of the broken bed frames that had fallen through the ceiling.

When Ciel looked back at Lizzy, he found her tearing her skirt into strips.

"What are you doing?"

"Your wounds need to be dressed. I have to staunch the bleeding." She proceeded to peel Ciel's
bloody shirt away from his skin- he half expected her to scream, or cry, or faint, or some unholy
combination of all three. Instead, she made a face, appraising more than concerned- it made her look
older than she was, more stern- the spitting image of her mother, Ciel realised.
"Where did you learn to do this?" Ciel grimaced and tried not to cry out in pain as Lizzy began to wrap the strips of cloth around his body, tying them tighter and tighter as she went, binding his torn flesh together.

"I've read several books about medicine." She finished off the dressing and sighed. "I suppose that will have to do."

"Thank you," Ciel said, still in a daze. "Your dress is ruined."

Lizzy smiled, a small and fragile and tentative thing. "Just because something is beautiful doesn't mean it can't also be useful." Her smile faltered, and she once again looked older than her years. "Ciel? What is going on? What are those monsters out there?"

Just then, Sebastian appeared in the doorway.

"The hallway is empty," he said. "Their numbers seem to have converged on the main exits of the house- the way down to the kitchens is clear, though I don't know for how much longer. We might be able to head them off, but we must move quickly."

Ciel nodded, then looked back to Lizzy. "I promise, I'll explain everything after this is over. All I ask is that you trust me."

"Oh, Ciel, of course I trust you." She took his hand. "I wouldn't have come back if I didn't."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow at this- and Ciel's unusual bandages- but he said nothing, simply coming to Ciel's side and gathering Ciel up into his arms.

"I can walk," Ciel claimed, too boldly for Sebastian's taste. He opened his mouth to protest, but Ciel stopped him with a finger to his lips.

"If you say 'your safety is my highest priority' even once more-"

"But Sir-"

"You'll need both of your arms free," Ciel pointed out. "Something tells me that this fight is far from over."

Sebastian sighed, but put Ciel back on his feet. Ciel looked toward the pile under which Sir Arthur was trapped- the only part of him visible was his hand, ghostly pale and deathly still. Unmoving and empty.

"Is he dead, Sebastian?"

"He will be," Sebastian promised. "But you must first survive this day is you wish to see it happen."

The hallway was indeed deserted, and in shambles as well- there were gauges out of walls, panes of glass in shards on the floor- frost was sticking to the empty window frames, snow piling in corners an swirling through the air. The cold was bracing, bringing some of the colour back to Ciel's cheeks and some clarity back to Ciel's mind. The pain of his injury was still present, inescapable but duller than it had been before- he had no way of knowing if this meant that he was somehow getting better, or if he was getting worse.

Ciel adjusted his grip on the gun in his hand and blinked hard against a stiff gust of wind. There was no other wound as the three of them moved down the hallway. Sebastian ducked into every room they passed, making certain that there were no demons lurking, ready to ambush them.
"If they've gone to the exits, then they must know we're still inside," Ciel observed, just as they were descending the stairs toward the kitchen. "Why would they go to the front doors, the other exits, but not the kitchen door? Unless-

In the kitchen, a hoard of demons waited for them, each with shining eyes and gleaming claws, razor sharp and ready.

"Go back upstairs," Sebastian said, already across the threshold. "Get as far up as you can. I'll deal with this."

"Sebastian-

Before Ciel had time to protest any further, the kitchen door was slammed in his face. He knew that magic held it shut, so there was no use in pushing, no use in doing anything other than what Sebastian had told him.

"Ciel." And there was Lizzy, a bright spot in the darkness, previously untouched by misfortune, thrust into the middle of this tragedy, the one and only thing Ciel had wanted to keep her from. She had been the only thing left to protect, the only thing in his life that was not already doomed.

He allowed her to take his hand, and they ran. His body moved sluggishly, but he gritted his teeth against the pain and tried to keep pace with Lizzy. His breathing turned to wheezing as they mounted the stairs, and by the time they had reached the top he was leaning heavily on her shoulder. He looked down the hallway to his right, toward the dining room, toward the place where Sir Arthur must still be trapped, and felt the rage still there, in what blood still remained in his body.

"What did Sebastian mean?" Lizzy asked, frantic. "How can we go any further up when we saw the upstairs floors collapse?"

"We don't know that all of it's gone," Ciel pointed out. "There's a servants staircase," he said, gesturing toward the dimly lit hall to his left. "It leads to the bedrooms in the South wing." Sebastian wouldn't have sent us this way if he didn't think there was somewhere to go." He tried not to think of the demons he'd seen in the kitchen; their numbers, their bloodthirsty eyes, their razor sharp claws. "We have no choice but to try."

The stairs were miraculously still standing, as was the hallway beyond. The boards creaked with their tentative steps, but none of them showed signs of falling out from under their feet.

"Ciel?" Lizzy's voice sounded as unsure as her footfalls on the stairs. "How are we going to get out of here? If we can't go back the way we came, we'll be trapped up here. And what if this floor collapses too? What if."

"Sebastian will get us out."

Ciel pulled Lizzy through the first doorway they came to. It was one of the bedrooms, small compared to the others Lizzy had seen on her visits, with only a bed and a wardrobe, not even a dressing table. Even the fireplace looked smaller, even, and the mirror above it was tarnished. Everything else was draped with white dust cloths, the ghosts of disuse, bright in contrast to the dark green walls- even the rug had been rolled up and tucked away in the corner.

Lizzy watched as Ciel leaned against the wardrobe and began to push, and sighed. She knew better than to try and stop him, even if his injuries should have prevented him in the first place. So instead she helped Ciel move the wardrobe in front of the door, wincing at his low grunts of pain.

"Lay down," she told him, guiding him gently toward the bed. "Rest a moment." She watched him
lay down, wary of the pallid colour his cheeks had taken, the sheen of sweat stuck to his brow, the bloodstains blooming slowly through his makeshift bandages.

"Ciel, how could Sebastian fight all of those-" she still didn't know what to call them- "things, and win? How can you be so sure that he'll come and find us, that he'll even sur-"

"He'll be here," Ciel snapped, then sighed when Lizzy flinched away from him. "I'm sorry. I know that I haven't given you much reason to trust me, or him."

Lizzy perched on the side of the bed. "He's not an ordinary butler, is he?"

Ciel almost smiled. "He's not an ordinary anything." His eyes swam with something like fondness. He took her hand, and his eyes cleared. "I'm sorry."

"You're repeating yourself," she teased.

"It bears repeating." He met her gaze an held it, and her heart skipped a beat in her chest.

"Ciel, I-"

"Whatever happens now," Ciel interrupted, "I want you to know how much I do care for you."

"Nothing's going to happen," Lizzy insisted, wishing she felt as sure as she sounded. "You were right. Sebastian will come, and we'll find the others, and we'll make it back to London." She swallowed, tamping down the panic in her throat. "And then you and I will be married, in the spring, with white roses, your favourite."

"Of course. White roses," Ciel answered, distant. His eyes were closing now, slowly, his hand going slack in hers.

"Ciel, wake up!" Lizzy ordered, shaking him by the shoulders. "Ciel-"

The wardrobe at the door came toppling over with a heart-stopping bang. Lizzy screamed, jumping to her feet and raised her weapon in the direction of the breached barricade.

Sebastian stood in the doorway. His suit jacket was in tattered, his face beaten and bloodied; he limped a little as he walked, favouring his left leg over his right. He had one hand pressed to a wound in his side, but it didn't seem to be bothering him all that much.

"You're hurt." Ciel was awake again, but slow, pushing himself up on weakened arms to look at Sebastian.

"Not severely," Sebastian assured him, stepping over the wardrobe and going to the window. He threw open the curtains, dust falling to clouds at his feet. He opened the window next, leaning out as if to gauge the distance to the ground. Lizzy shivered as the cold air seeped in, gathering around her ankles and climbing up her legs. Sebastian nodded to himself, and her shiver became one of fright.

"Take her first," Ciel said, confirming Lizzy's fear. She felt the blood draining from her face, and thought she might faint. Absurdly, after everything she'd seen this morning, she was more afraid of this than anything else.

"But Sir," Sebastian said, two words making his argument perfectly clear.

"Sebastian is right," Lizzy said. "Ciel, you should go first, your injuries- you need to get out of here more than I do."
"Sebastian." Ciel ignored her completely. "That's an order."

Lizzy had no time to prepare herself before she was swept off her feet, lifted effortlessly into Sebastian's arms.

"Hold onto me," Sebastian told her.

When he stepped up into the windowsill, Lizzy squealed, clinging to his shoulders and closing her eyes- she braced herself, her stomach swooping into her throat as the ground disappeared from beneath them-

- And then they landed, much softer than she had anticipated. Somehow, she knew it hadn't just been the snow that had cushioned their landing.

"Your family is that way." Sebastian set her on her feet and pointed into the white beyond. "They're heading toward the road. You should go. The master and I will follow shortly."

She wanted to ask him how he knew which direction she should go, or how he had controlled gravity itself to slow their descent- but then the worst happened.

She didn't see how it started, but as soon as she heard the first groan and crack of breaking wood, she spun, her eyes glued to the window they had just jumped from. The roof above it began to sink, and the window frame bowed in, shattering and spraying glass as it finally collapsed.

Lizzy watched in helpless horror as the bedroom Ciel was in became a crumpled husk of itself, broken beams and crumbling stone. It all seemed to happen slowly, as she watched, unable to stop it- but in reality it had all fallen in a moment, with incredible concussive force. She felt this force in her own chest, an invisible fist seizing her heart in a vise grip. She wanted to cry out for Ciel, but did not- could not- her voice had been stolen from her throat.

"Sebastian," she croaked, when she realised he wasn't moving. He stood, transfixed, as if he had been turned to stone by the destruction he had just witnessed.

"Go," he told her, his voice weaker than hers.

"I can't leave him." She felt her whole body go cold, colder than the air around her, colder than a body should ever be.

Sebastian turned to her, and though he appeared no different, Lizzy no longer saw anything human when she looked at him.

"GO!" he snarled, and the ground shook, knocking Lizzy off of her feet. She scrambled to regain her footing. She had just enough time to watch Sebastian launch himself into the air before she turned and ran.

Ciel had managed to stand and prop himself up against the bedpost before the collapse happened. It was over in the blink of an eye, so quickly that he hadn't even felt himself falling to the ground, nor noticed the moment a length of wood pierced his skin. He didn't think it went all the way through, but he couldn't have moved to find out, even if he wanted to. He could only hear a loud, rushing white noise, a rolling river or a great wind. He moved his fingers blindly over his wound, feeling the slick heat of blood and the jagged, rough edge of the wood that protruded from his body.

And then he saw Sebastian's face, blanched white with horror as he knelt next to Ciel, hand hovering over his wound- even he was unsure of what to do, Ciel realised.
"You look frightened, Sebastian," he observed. "Terrified, in fact. But that can't be right, since
demons don't feel such human things as fear."

"I never felt anything human at all until I knew you," Sebastian answered. "And now my only fear is
knowing you no longer."

"Ah, well. Can't have that." Ciel, now delirious with pain and blood loss, waved a hand as if to
dismiss Sebastian's concerns. "And here I always thought you'd have no trouble swallowing my
soul."

"I haven't earned your soul, my lord- I have failed you, in every way possible."

"Shh." Ciel held a finger to Sebastian's lips. Sebastian turned his head and kissed Ciel's bloody palm.

"Don't you know," Ciel whispered, "that no one ever really gets what they deserve?"

Sebastian could have laughed.

"I had scarcely dared to hope you would come to that conclusion."

"We should have done it sooner," Ciel mused. "Then this wouldn't have been a problem."

"I had thought you were ready to hold up your end of the bargain," Sebastian remarked, grimacing in
sympathy as he laid Ciel down on what was left of the bed, almost expecting Ciel to scream in pain.
"You seemed resigned to your fate."

"To hell with fate." Ciel was panting now, words coming out in short bursts. "New contract. I want
to live. Preferably with you. Preferably longer than the next thirty seconds."

Sebastian smiled, a small and fragile thing. "I agree to the terms."

"Good," Ciel grunted. "Get on with it then."

Sebastian reached a bloody hand toward Ciel's face, but Ciel caught his wrist and held it there, eyes
clear for one brief and shining moment.

"She has to believe I'm gone," he ordered- perhaps the last order he would ever give. "Once it's
done, you have to get her out, get all of them out. There can't be any hope that I survived." His eyes
grew dim once more. "Promise me."

"Of course, my lord."

Sebastian's gloves were sodden in blood- he stripped them off, grateful to be finally rid of them, once
and for all. The skin beneath was red as well, as if Ciel's blood had soaked his hands to the bone. He
smeared some of it across the mark of his contract, feeling his power begin to stir.

Throughout all of this, Ciel's face had miraculously remained clean, unblemished and unwounded.
Sebastian marked it now, biting into his own thumb and spreading his blood over Ciel's eyelid.

Ciel blinked when a soft, warm wetness touched his eye. He look up at Sebastian's face, at every
emotion present there, and thought to himself that Sebastian had never looked more truly human than
he did in that moment.

And then Sebastian began to speak, in a slow, hushed tone, chanting a spell in a language Ciel did
not understand. It was like music, more beautiful and haunting than any Ciel had ever heard. He felt
a power wash over him, the pain in his body beginning to ebb, his heart beginning to slow, his limbs
going colder, cold and then numb.

So this is dying, he thought.

Sebastian watched Ciel carefully, waiting for the right moment to perform the last step of the ritual. Ciel was nearly gone, but not close enough yet to the moment of death- not yet, but soon.

"Sebastian," Ciel spoke, suddenly, voice resolute and firm even as the last of the life in him faded. "I love you."

Sebastian opened his mouth, as if he meant to say something, but not a single word came to mind. The moment had arrived for the final step of the ritual. His fingers were coated in blood, blood that was theirs both; he painted it across Ciel's lips, then kissed them clean, savouring the soft push of Ciel's mouth as Ciel lifted his head and returned the kiss with what little of his strength remained.

"You said you'd never need to say it," Sebastian whispered then, his lips still close, able to feel the final laboured breaths that passed from Ciel's lungs.

"I didn't need to." Ciel stumbled over his last words, his eyes already drifting closed, too soon, Sebastian thought, too soon to be the last glimpse of blue, blue that he would never see again.

"But I wanted to."

As soon as Arthur opened his eyes, he knew that he had lost the battle. If his current condition- bruised broken and trapped- wasn't evidence enough of this fact, then the absolute silence that surrounded him proved it beyond the shadow of a doubt. There were no screams, no more smashing of glass or blasting of gunshots. There was only his own breath, coming fast and loud in his ears- the wind, whistling through broken windows, and the crackling of distant fires, parts of the house already burning.

He had been abandoned, left for dead by his own children- he knew this to be true, as he had been laying here for some time, unaided and forgotten. Yes, yes, the battle was lost. The best he could do now would be to survive, to carry on, to re-establish his army and finish this war, once and for all, with or without Phantomhive at his right hand, held by Arthur's puppet strings.

He couldn't imagine that the boy had survived anyway, what with the wounds Arthur had inflicted. He had always been weak, like his father.

The immediate challenge would be getting free of his current entrapment. He found himself pinned by various beams and joists, sections of plaster from the upstairs walls, and what was left of a settee, the weight of which was resting painfully over his left shoulder. Broken, almost certainly, but the damage to his body was inconsequential. A vessel could be repaired, even replaced. With his right arm he lifted as much debris away as he could, cold air hitting his skin as the rest of the room came into view.

He then pulled his left arm free, grunting at the exertion and the agony, and noticed that his right leg, trapped beneath a particularly large beam, would not move. He had no choice but to roll free, over his shoulder, the pain once again flaring. By the time he was on his feet, it was clear to him that his right leg was wounded, blood already pooling on the dusty rug beneath him. When he took a step, his knee nearly gave out- broken as well, then. His steps would be hobbled and agonising, but he had no choice- he must find a way to walk.

He pried a length of wood free from the wreckage, leaning on it as a make-shift crutch. He had his purpose. The Lord was with him. He would not fail.
The horse whinnied and stomped, hooves making soft puffs in the powdery snow. Finny cupped a hand over its nose and whispered some nonsense to it, coaxing it to stay still while they waited.

"Bloody hell," Bard muttered, watching the Midfords as they all but clung to each other, looking toward the house where Miss Elizabeth and the master had yet to emerge from. "I hate to think the worst, but the time for meeting has past. If Sebastian hasn't been able to get the two of them and meet up with us, it's not likely they're comin' at all. We've got to get movin' before the weather takes a turn- or before more o' those things show up." He turned up the collar on his coat and lit another cigarette- he was on his third, and there was still no sign of anyone coming out of that house.

"If you wanna tell Lady Francis that, then be my guest," Mey-Rin said, adjusting the strap that held the rifle on her back. "I wouldn't put money on her leavin' here anytime soon. Not without her daughter."

"Can't say I blame her," Finny agreed. "I hate to think that we'll have to leave the master behind."

"He's got Sebastian, at least," Bard pointed out.

"We're leaving Sebastian, too," Finny argued, but quietly.

"We must not forget the duty with which the master has entrusted us," Tanaka advised, breaking his usual silence. "And if that means we must be must be cruel, even if to save what remains of the master's family, then cruel is what we must be."

"Well, I'm not tellin' her." Mey-Rin raised her hands. "You boys can draw straws."

Finny began to seriously consider the suggestion, when there was movement in the distance, coming from a southwardly direction.

"There!" Bard pointed. The Midfords had already noticed- Lady Francis broke free from her husband's embrace and ran towards the approaching figures, who, as they drew closer, Finny saw were only two in number.

Sebastian, carrying a shaking, silent Miss Elizabeth in his arms. The master was nowhere to be seen.

"Sebastian!" Bard called, raising a hand in grim greeting. When he reached them, Finny could see the blood on his hands, his suit, smearing even his neck and face. He didn't think much of the blood could possibly be Sebastian's.

"Where is the master?" he asked.

Miss Elizabeth's shudder and the haunted look in Sebastian's eye were answer enough.

Even Bard looked dismayed. But, ever the military man, he kept his composure and said,

"The road is a little less than half a mile east of here. From there we can begin the trek to London. We won't make it by nightfall, but our route will take us past a couple other estates. We should be able to impose upon someone's hospitality."

*Especially when they find out what's happened,* Finny thought, but did not have the voice to say out loud. He gave one last look toward the house before tugging on the horse's reins and following the rest of the group.
One morning, not long after All Hallows Eve, Ciel had woken on his own, to the bright autumn light flooding thought his window, the supreme smoothness of the sheets nestled around him, the crackling of a fire in the hearth and the smell of good, strong, earl grey tea. Ciel had kept his eyes closed, listening to the sounds of Sebastian moving about the room- putting the tea tray down, laying out Ciel's clothes for the day, and finally, finally leaning over Ciel to smooth a hand over his brow and press a kiss to his temple.

*I would sell my soul over again*, Ciel had thought then, *just to have this, always.*

In the memory, Sebastian spoke. Ciel could hear his voice, clear and crisp as a church bell on a clear morning, a calling, a reckoning.

"Master, it is time to wake up."

The wagon came to an abrupt stop. A few of the men, who had been drifting off, were jarred awake by the jolt, the horses' whinnying cutting through the eerie silence. Abberline, eager to have reached their destination, flung open the back door to find one of his sergeants already waiting for him.

"We've arrived, yes?" Abberline inquired.

"Almost, sir," the sergeant said, pointing oddly off into the distance. "You need to take a look at this."

Abberline frowned at the sergeant's less than helpful answer, dismounting the wagon and turning to look in the direction the sergeant had indicated.

Their caravan had come to a stop at the top of a hill, about half a mile off from the house; the road ahead- though not currently visible- sloped downward and into the slight valley that marked the edge of the property. The storm had stopped, at least for the moment, leaving the earth in a sterile sort of stasis, frozen in time, the clouds above lightening so that they were the same colour as the ground, priming the whole world like a blank canvas.

From this vantage point, one could see clear across the countryside. This, of course, meant that Abberline and his men had the best view possible of the carnage. What Abberline saw he could not have predicted, anticipated, or otherwise foreseen.

Phantomhive manor was in ruins once again.

Whole sections of the outer walls were gone, portions of the roof either caved in or missing entirely. Flames leapt from every window, spitting towers of black smoke upward, stark in contrast to the bright white landscape surrounding it.

"My God," Abberline whispered, "how-"

"Sir!" one of the men called, pointing down the hill. Several figures were approaching, some on horseback, all of them looking dirtied and downtrodden.

"Lady Elizabeth!" Abberline rushed forward when he saw her, wide-eyed and shivering, her dress tattered and singed- huddled in Sebastian's arms. He placed her gently on the ground, at which point she fell in a heap to the ground. Her father knelt at her side and lifted her once more, taking her off to where the men were already offering blankets to Lady Midford and her son.

"Sebastian, what's going on?"
Sebastian said nothing. He looked forlorn, stricken of all purpose, certainly more out of sorts than Abberline had ever seen him.

"The house was attacked- some kind of hired gang," explained one of the servants, Bardroy if Abberline was recalling correctly. "It seems that the master was close to uncovering the identity of that murderer, the one you've all been hunting."

"Sir Arthur," Elizabeth said, and lapsed back into silence.

"Sir Arthur is dead," Abberline argued. "The man is dead, I saw him die."

"She speaks the truth." Sebastian's voice was thin, his shoulders low, holding none of his usual strange charm. "I saw him as well. This conspiracy goes deeper than you know, Detective. You were misled. We all were."

An overwhelming dread filled Abberline at the realisation that he had been wrong, that his mistake may have somehow caused this- it washed over him, waves from a dark ocean, until he was pulled under when he realised who was missing from their group.

"Where is he?" he asked, barely able to raise his voice above a whisper- he already knew the answer to his question, though he wished to God he could somehow be mistaken once again. "Where is Lord Phantomhive?"

No one answered him- answer enough.

Abberline's dread turned to rage, the helpless sort the boiled in his stomach and clawed up through his throat. This, he turned on Sebastian.

"And you left him? You, who was closer to him than any other, who was sworn to protect him with your very life- you abandoned him to die-"

"His wounds were extensive," Sebastian replied quietly- he was unable to look anyone in the eye, his back to them all, eyes fixed on the house. Abberline was in disbelief at Sebastian's attempt to justify his actions. Still, he seemed regretful, perhaps even ashamed. "He had moments left to live. His last order to me was that I ensure Miss Elizabeth's safety. I intend to return and retrieve his body."

"I'll go with you," Abberline offered, though he didn't intend to allow Sebastian to decline the offer.

In the distance, there was a loud bang, followed by a sickening crack, the unmistakable sound of weakened wood giving way- they all watched in horror as the South wing of the house fell entirely, giving in on itself, pieces of it sliding outward into the soft bed of snow.

Sebastian was off like a shot toward the house.

Ciel was burning.

He felt it first in his chest; where his heart had once been, there was only a flame- no pulse of blood through his veins, only a high and steady heat spreading outward from his core. He took a breath, his human instinct left intact, and felt the air pass through him, cold and unneeded and smelling only of death. The fire from his chest had reached his legs now, and his arms- as soon as it reached to the tips of his fingers, Ciel opened his eyes.

The world that greeted him was altogether different than the one he had bid farewell to mere
moments before- his sight was infinitely keener- light was brighter, the shadows deeper. In the dark corners of the room, he could make out shapes, presences lurking between one world and the next. Sunlight flooded in through the open window, refracting through what was left of the glass. Such colours; Ciel hadn't known there could be so many.

He perceived the cold that seeped in across the floor, but he did not feel it. The fire within him was only growing stronger. He looked down at his hand, expecting to see some manifestation of such power- but it was only his hand, albeit clean and new and stronger. He felt along his chest, his stomach, finding no wounds, no blood, no scars, no clothes even.

Ciel frowned, envisioning a suit, the one he had been wearing this morning that had been so crudely destroyed- and then he was dressed in it, deep blue and pristine, everything buttoned and in place without so much as a crease. The fabric felt real enough beneath his touch, but somehow he knew that it was made of the same stuff he was, just another form that his new body could take. It would do for now.

He went to stand and found himself on the other side of the room. Something like a laugh bubbled out of his throat- he no longer knew his own strength, or speed- the slightest inclination of movement could send him farther and faster than he would have ever dreamed.

Ciel's head whipped around when he saw something move, felt it, at the edge of his perception. It was only himself, his reflection, caught in a piece of broken mirror that still clung to the wall.

He looked as he always had, with only one difference. His eyes were red, glowing like embers in the night.

He paused for a moment, and the world seemed to pause with him. He wondered if this is how it had always been for Sebastian when he moved- if he manipulated the world around him, becoming part of it, rather than simply passing through it. And then, a memory came to him, still fresh, but soft and faraway, something like a dream.

"Master," Sebastian said, leaning over him. Ciel's body was broken, unmoving, his life within it having ended only moments ago. Sebastian couldn't have expected Ciel to reply, but he spoke to him nevertheless.

"When you awaken, please, indicate that you have done so, and I will return to your side. Some sort of theatrical display should suffice- I have no doubt that you will be able to come up with something."

"Vague and unhelpful, as usual," Ciel said to himself- his voice had changed as well, he found, though perhaps it was only that he was hearing it differently- in any case, he sounded powerful, the timbre of his voice more pronounced, each syllable rife with potential.

He thought for a moment, about what sort of sign he could send, and then smiled. He listened to the house, to the weaknesses in the floor, and with all of his newfound strength, he stomped his foot as hard as he could.

In a moment, the entire South wing of the house was destroyed. He stood on the edge of the wreckage, in the gaping maw of an upper hallway, looking down into the chasm he had created with inexplicable delight. He looked eastward, to where he knew the others would flee, and could see the clear shapes of them in the distance, much clearer than any human should be able to see at that distance. He could just make out the shapes of his family, of the servants- Lizzy's golden hair, bright in the sun- and the black smudge on the landscape that was Sebastian. Ciel's heart thrilled as the smudge moved, a blur that began to make its way toward him.
"Soon, Sebastian," he whispered. "I have one more appointment to keep."

He had made it to the foyer before Ciel caught up with him.

From the moment he had awoken, Ciel had been immediately attuned to the presence of every living thing, both within the house and beyond it. His hearing and sense of smell were now uninhibited by human limitations, able to pick up the signs of life and track their movements with as much ease as breathing.

And as he stretched out his senses, he found the house devoid of life- all save one- a wretched, miserable, disgusting life that would very soon come to an end. The demons had all been killed, or had fled- but their master's heartbeat still echoed through the halls, growing louder and louder with every step Ciel took in his direction. He had run through the house, stepping quickly through space itself, to be there in an instant- but he slowed down now, finding that even though he had been waiting so long for this moment, he still wanted very much to savour it.

It was a pathetic sight to behold- bloodied and bruised, covered in dust- Sir Arthur had been brought so far down from the House of Lords, so far from the stature he once had. There he was, using a length of charred wood as a crutch while he hobbled along with a fractured shoulder, his full weight on a broken knee, an open wound in his leg leaving a streak of blood behind him on the black-and-white floor. Ciel could hear the splintered bones grinding against themselves and smiled at the pain Sir Arthur must be in. That pain was nothing compared to what he would feel before Ciel was done with him.

Sir Arthur didn't see Ciel at first- he was almost to the front doors, and Ciel was behind him, coming down the grand staircase, taking it two steps at a time. He'd never felt so light on his feet- all those years he'd walked with a cane seemed infinitely more distant now.

The moment Sir Arthur became aware of Ciel's presence was a moment Ciel would cherish for all eternity. His whole body when still as he quit his limping and turned slowly, already afraid of what he knew he would see when he did. The look on his face was one of abject horror.

"No," he blurted. "This- this was not foretold! This cannot be!"

Ciel paused at the bottom of the stairs, leaning casually against the banister.

"It seems to me that not very much was foretold concerning me. I've just kept foiling you at every turn. Maybe your God doesn't favour you as much as you've been led to believe."

Ciel lifted a hand, and Sir Arthur fell to his knees. The broken one broke even further with the force of the impact- the sound Sir Arthur made was almost childlike.

"When I set out to find you all those years ago, to take my revenge, I was never under any illusions. I knew that it would cost me my life- my soul. I knew that my parents could never be brought back, no matter what I did. But there was one thing I wanted so much, that none of those truths mattered. One thing I wanted badly enough that I would willingly walk- run- right through the gates of Hell itself."

"What?" Sir Arthur's voice was defiant, still. No matter- Ciel would fix that soon enough.

"I wanted him to beg," Ciel answered, crossing the floor to where Sir Arthur knelt. "I wanted the man who killed my parents to beg for mercy, as my father begged, as my mother begged, and as I begged."

He lifted his palm and thought of fire, the fire that had began it all, but his own fire, a thousand times
more powerful than any flame Sir Arthur could have conjured. The flame appeared in his hand, blue and burning and beautiful as it kissed his skin, his own creation, his own control.

"Beg," he commanded, baring his teeth, feeling them sharpen, the beast within him rearing its magnificent head.

Sir Arthur only met his eyes, full of fear but tinged with resolution, spat at Ciel's feet and said, "Never."

Ciel took Sir Arthur by the throat with his burning hand lifted Sir Arthur from the ground, holding him up with his newfound strength. He could feel the man's skin rippling and melting beneath his touch, cutting into the very place where Sir Arthur had stolen the souls from countless others.

"You have tried so many times to destroy me with fire," Ciel observed. "And every time, fire has been my rebirth." With his free hand, he gestured to himself. "The mark you left on me is gone- I have been cleansed, given new life- but not by you."

He watched the agony in Sir Arthur's eyes as it surged and then faded- he felt the moment that Sir Arthur's soul was destroyed, razed to nothing by Ciel's hand, as was the rest of him. And when the burnt husk of Sir Arthur's corpse fell empty at his feet, Ciel let the fire go from his control. He closed his eyes and smiled as the entire world around him was consumed.

Abberline grabbed the reins of the nearest horse, making to follow Sebastian, but Tanaka put out an arm to stop him.

"Best not, Inspector."

"But if he goes back, he'll die!"

"I believe Mister Michaelis is aware of that, yes."

"But-" Abberline looked back to where Sebastian had been, but he was gone, already disappeared into the distance.

Before Abberline could consider the unbelievable speed such a feat must have required, another, even more unbelievable thing happened. The house, or the part of it left standing, exploded.

For a moment, the shape of it remained, burned into Abberline's mind forever- the sheer might of it, the grandeur and the magnificence- and then it was gone, all at once, in one great ball of flame, the hue of it blue and bright and unearthly. The heat was so intense that Abberline could feel it on his face, even at so great a distance. The trees, frozen and bare, were knocked askew or caught aflame, burning along with the husk of Phantomhive manor, chunks of the stone foundation spread in one enormous circle of destruction.

It was quiet, Lizzy observed. It had been quiet since Sebastian had appeared and carried her to safety, since they had reunited with her family- since he had disappeared again for the last time.

There was a loud white rush in her ears, a river of noise that built into a monotony of deafening silence.

Minutes after the explosion, Lizzy's father had guided her to one of the police wagons, lifting her up to sit out of the wind, and left her there. She could see the others through the bars of her cage, her fortress, and though their mouths moved, turned down in sober concern, she did not hear the words
that were being said. Distantly, she supposed that they were recounting the events of the morning-
the day. She looked up into the sky, squinted at the high sun and realised how much time had passed.

"Miss," someone said, the softness of their voice melting away the ice building up around her. She
blinked, and realised that the servants had all approached her, sticking their heads into the wagon. They looked timid, unsure- but most of all, they looked unbearably kind. It made her want to cry. But even as the hours had dragged on, she had not found herself able to shed a single tear. She had no doubt the tears would come, and she would weep with perhaps enough force to crack her own ribs. Part of her was looking forward to it. But for the moment, the rest of her, body and soul, was numb.

"We made some tea," Finny said, offering Lizzy a steaming tin mug. She stared stupidly at it, not understanding how tea could possibly remedy anything that had happened.

"Is she alright?" Finny whispered to his companions, when it was clear that Lizzy wouldn't- or couldn't- respond.

"Of course not," Mey-Rin hissed in disapproval, shoving Finny to the side and climbing in the wagon to sit on the bench across from Lizzy. "The things she's been through, and all in one day-it's no wonder she's catatonic."

Lizzy said nothing as Mey-Rin unfolded a blanket and draped it around Lizzy's shoulders, the material scratchy and thick as she tucked the corners in to hold the heat. She then took the mug from Finny and pressed it into Lizzy's frozen hands. The hot metal burned at first, one extreme touching another, but eventually, her skin warmed, the blood beginning to move through her fingers once again. The silence began to recede.

"Thank-you," she said belatedly. "I don't- I'm sorry-"

"You ain't got nothin' to be sorry for," Bardroy interjected.

"The man's right, for once in his life," Mey-Rin said in firm agreement. "Now, you drink that, or you'll catch your death." Mey-Rin's eyes widened, and she clapped a hand over her mouth. The expression was ill-timed, but her sudden realisation of it made Lizzy want to laugh.

"Thank-you," she said again, and she meant it more this time.

"Anytime, miss," Bardroy said, nodding. Finny bowed slightly, and Mey-Rin, stepping down from the wagon, curtsied before the three of them wandered off.

Alone again, Lizzy waited for the silence to return, for her shock and despair to creep back in, but the tea, however weak, was enough to keep the shadows at bay. They stayed behind her, but right behind, whispering in her ear, reminding her of all she'd lost, of all the questions she would never have answers to.

He had promised to tell her the truth, when it was all over. She trusted him- she believed that he would have told her everything, that he was finally ready to trust her with the things he only entrusted to one other person. But the two of them were dead, now, gone, and the truth had gone with them.

"My lady."

She looked up again to see Tanaka peering into the wagon, eyes squinted nearly shut like always. He looked weary, too, somehow. She didn't think she knew Tanaka well enough to tell, but it was plain to see that the ravages of the cold and the day were taking their toll on him.
"What is it, Tanaka?"

"I have come to inform you that you will be departing soon."

"Departing?"

"Back to London. Detective Inspector Abberline had some men scout the road- the snow appears to have been cleared by the wind, to such a degree as it is safe to travel. The detective inspector no longer requires your family's presence, as they have given their accounts of this morning's events."

"But I haven't."

"I believe Mister Abberline does not want to tax your nerves unnecessarily, miss."

Abberline tilted his head, a sympathetic gesture. "You have perhaps suffered the greatest today. Any questions he has for you can be answered at a later date, perhaps when you have at least had a good night's rest."

Lizzy didn't want to tell him that she was afraid she might never sleep again, so she said,

"Of course. Tell the detective inspector that I thank him for his courtesy."

"Of course, my lady." Tanaka bowed, and then reached into his jacket. "There is once other order of business I must conduct, one which I feel is far more important than the matters concerning Scotland Yard."

The thick envelope he offered her was sealed with blue wax, pressed into which was the Phantomhive family crest. Lizzy nearly spilled her tea as she placed it on the bench beside her, hands starting to shake as she reached for the letter.

"Ciel wrote this?" She tore through the seal in an instant and unfolded Ciel's final missive, running her hands over the familiar, immaculate curves of his handwriting, spread over several pages, an entire story waiting to be told- the only piece of him that she had left on this earth. "How long have you had this?"

"The master entrusted it to me no less than one week ago," Tanaka divulged. "He instructed me to deliver it to you should the time come when he was no longer able to deliver it himself."

Lizzy stared at the page, unblinking, suddenly terrified to read the words Ciel had penned for her.

"You mean- he knew he was going to die?"

Tanaka shook his head. "I do not know what fate the master believed himself destined for- whether he was certain of his forthcoming demise, or merely cautious of it, is beyond me. I do, however, harbour some suspicion that the answer to this question, and others, is contained within that letter."

Lizzy pressed her lips together steeling herself. "Thank-you, Tanaka."

"You are most welcome, miss. I shall ensure your privacy."

She nodded, feeling no repetitive thanks could express her gratitude. She waited until he had gone out of sight before turning back to the letter, and with one deep breath, she plunged head-long into it.

My dear Elizabeth,

If the moment comes when Tanaka places this letter into your hands, then it is the moment you will realise that I am truly gone. I sincerely hope that this moment never comes, if only so you never experience the grief I so fear you must be experiencing now. However, I have set these words to
paper in the belief that you must hear them, one way or another.

I have never been as attentive as I should have been, nor as affectionate. I have never been able to give you the things that you deserve, and it is my greatest regret. I do not mean to make excuses for my shortcomings, but what follows is somewhat of an explanation. I owe you so much, and the truth is the very least of it.

I must ask that you keep an open mind when you read what I have written. Know that all of it is true—trust that I am not a mad man.

I must also ask that you burn this letter, whether you finish reading it or not. No one else could possibly believe what I am about to tell you to be the truth, and though I trust you most implicitly, my trust does not extend to those around you who have the power to destroy my name now that I am no longer there to protect it. I cannot bear to think that my name might be tarnished, that it will not outlive me in at least this way. I obviously have no control over what you might do, with whom you might share this. I only hope that I was right to trust you.

Lizzy couldn't possibly have guessed what truth might have been so dark, so ruinous that he feared its revelation. She had never known Ciel to be so desperate, but then, he had written this with the belief that he was not long for this world.

The more she read, the less she understood. She had known her uncle and aunt to have died in a tragic accident, not a heinous murder. And Ciel himself—held captive, starved, tortured—she cursed herself for not seeing his pain, or at least not working harder to help him heal from it.

Though it had been ten years that fateful December, Ciel wrote with enough emotion to make her forget that even one day had passed. He wrote that he had been so consumed with rage, that he had forgone all else in his life, forsaken any pursuit of joy or pleasure. This, she knew. This, she believed. He told her that it had not been her fault, that there had been no flaw in her, that the onus for all incompatibilities between them had fallen to him.

And then, she knew why he had asked her to burn it.

Sebastian, as you have no doubt observed, is no ordinary servant. In truth, Sebastian is my saviour. He is the one who pulled me from within the shadow of death, the cage where I had been left to rot. When I called out to him in my desperation, willing to give my very soul to survive, to see vengeance brought upon my enemies, he is the one who answered me. He came from the depths of hell itself, a place even worse than the one he saved me from, and he has served me ever since, not only in every day of life, but in the pursuit of my revenge against those who took my parents from me. In return, my soul is his. As I am now deceased, he has no doubt collected his reward and moved on to his next contract.

He went on, describing more of Sebastian's true nature, and then the truth of the man who called himself the Father, publicly known as the Murderer of Midtown—leader of a cabal intent on entrapping and perverting the very souls of the innocent, so as to amass a force strong enough to overthrow the monarchy, upend the empire and throw the world into a state of chaos.

All at once, memories came rushing back, of All Hallows Eve, the attacks, inhuman creatures—those creatures today, horrid and evil—of course she believed Ciel's explanation. To deny it to herself would be to deny her own senses. But she also knew why none of this could ever see the light of day—why it could never be known that Ciel had died trying to stop it.

I cannot foresee the circumstances of my own death— I do not know if I will survive past my birthday—I only know that Sebastian will not allow me to die until the terms of our contract have been fulfilled.
Therefore, rest assured that if I am gone, this tremendous evil has been ended. My death will at least have served a purpose.

Lizzy read the letter again, and then once more, hanging onto every word, once again tracing them with her frigid fingertips, committing every loop to memory. After this, she was finished. She would never be content, never satisfied, as he was no longer in this world and she must live on without him. But she had loved him so much, for so long- and so she could do nothing but honor him, in life and in death. She lingered on the last page and tore it, so only the final few lines remained. Those she kept, as they contained nothing of the truth he had entrusted her with, and as they were words she could not ever bear to be parted with.

*I wish that I could have offered you more comfort than this. I wish so many things. I wish that you will live a long life, that you will be loved, that you will be surrounded by things as beautiful as you have always been.*

*Farewell,*

*Ciel*

She arranged the rest of the pages in order, folding them and placing them back into in the envelope. She tucked her secreted missives into her bodice and rose to her feet, teetering only a little as she climbed down from the wagon.

The servants were gathered around the fire they had started, dead branches shook free of ice and snow, cracking and burning and throwing bitter clouds of smoke. She stood before the flames and placed the letter in, watching as the paper curled and blackened, turned to ash; watching as the wax seal of the Phantomhive crest was melted away.

None of the servants said anything, and she was beyond grateful for their silence. For the first time today, she dared to think of the future, and hoped they would be a part of it.

She then approached her parents, still in conversation with the detective and his officers.

"Ah, Elizabeth," her father greeted, warmly but sadly. He put an arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into the embrace. "We are departing soon, my dear."

The silence was returning- the overwhelming quiet, the impossibility of her own circumstances opening like a void, waiting to swallow her up.

And so, just as Lizzy had known she eventually would, she began to weep.

The sun was beginning to set behind what little was left of Phantomhive manor. The beauty of such a clear, burning sky was in stark contrast to the ruin of a once great seat of aristocratic power.

The Midford family had departed for London as soon as the weather permitted. Abberline had sent some of his men back with them- not only for protection, but to notify Scotland Yard of the developments in the case- the horrific, unforeseeable resolution to a months-long investigation, along with a request to send more men and supplies to the site of the once proud Phantomhive estate.

Abberline knew that a second-hand message would not go over well with his superiors, and that they would soon demand answers to questions he himself had only started to ask.

He was still at a loss to understand how Sir Arthur could have survived the attack on All Hallows Eve, how he could have been committing such evil acts without anyone suspecting- without *Abberline* suspecting. He was out of sorts, to say the least- set adrift, without purpose or the drive to
find it. But he knew that he must accept the truth, however impossible it seemed- Sir Arthur, a man he believed to be dead, was responsible for the carnage that had taken place here today. The Midford family had no reason to lie in that regard- no reason to protect Ciel, if Ciel had been the one who had attacked them, no reason to lie out of fear now that he was dead.

Abberline could scarcely believe his own foolishness- how could he have allowed anyone, even someone he had respected as much as Sir Arthur, to poison his mind, to manipulate him into ignoring his instincts, which had only ever told him that Ciel was above reproach in all of this, that he could be trusted when no one else could be. Now, Abberline's instincts told him that the Midfords had spoken only the truth. And what a cost the truth had demanded.

The servants had stayed behind. Abberline had already obtained their statements, and he had no legal reason to suspect or detain them, and had suggested they return to the city with the Midfords. But they had remained, out of some remaining obligation to their master, Abberline guessed. They would camp here overnight, and in the morning they would assist with investigating the ruins of the manor.

It was clear they had been prepared to flee, prepared for the journey back to London. Bardroy, formerly of Her Majesty's Armed Forces, had a full pack of supplies; blankets, matches, rations, even a set of cast iron pots. He and the others had managed a fire and a pot of tea, that, while weak, was piping hot, warming the hands and bellies of Abberline's men. They were, all of them, huddled around said fire, talking quietly amongst themselves. The tones of the conversation remained somber, and yet carried a sense of camaraderie that was something of a balm to Abberline's wounded mind.

Abberline himself, however, did not feel right joining the ranks- he could not tear his eyes away from the Western horizon, the blazing red and bleeding orange of the sunset taking the place of the various burning pieces of the manor that had been reduced to blackened embers. He did not move from his vigil, not even when Tanaka joined him on the crest of the hill.

"The feeling will pass with time," Tanaka said, coming to stand beside Abberline.

"What feeling is that, sir?" Abberline asked.

"Whatever feeling it is that you are feeling at present," Tanaka answered sagely, his breath clouding like a puff of pipe smoke from his mouth. "I do not presume to know the mind of a seasoned detective such as yourself, but I can imagine the guilt you must feel for the role you believe yourself to have played in the master's demise. I can assure you that you played no such role. I believe your guilt is similar to mine in this regard."

"A kind sentiment, but I am more to blame than you ever could be." Abberline withdrew the eye patch from his pocket, holding it out so Tanaka could see the depth of his shame. "I was coming here today to arrest him, despite my superiors' orders to the contrary, despite the truth that I refused to see, all because a villain, a monster of a man told me that Ciel should be mistrusted rather than protected. And I believed him."

Tanaka nodded, as if none of this information was new to him. "I must assure myself that, either by my actions or inaction, I am not responsible for this terrible tragedy. There is only one man responsible, and he has been sent to face the Almighty and be judged for his crimes. For these crimes, he has paid the highest price. That, at least, is of some comfort to me."

"You may be right," Abberline conceded.

"Besides," Tanaka continued, "it would not have behooved the master to die in such a way without simultaneously exacting revenge on the person responsible. I believe you know this."
Abberline found himself almost laughing; a sort of harsh cough that crackled through his chest.

"He did always have a flare for the dramatic."

Tanaka nodded. "A family trait." He squinted harder against the sunlight. "I have seen some of it in Lady Francis, and Miss Elizabeth as well. I suppose I shall continue to serve them as I have always served the house of Phantomhive."

"You don't think this might be a good time to retire? Something of an omen, perhaps? You have served this family through so many catastrophes- how can you continue?"

"I could no more retire after such a catastrophe than you could resign your position at Scotland Yard. There is yet more important work to be done," Tanaka told him. "Abandoning one's duties- this is not in our natures. Just as it was not in Mister Michaelis's nature to remain here- to remain alive- after the master had departed this world."

It was Sebastian, Abberline finally realised, who had killed Norman Hague in that hideout in the sewers. Hague, who had faked his own death and taken Ciel, perhaps hurt him- of course, there could be no more grievous sin in Sebastian's eyes.

Above them in the bare branches of a nearby tree, a raven crowed, a wretched, mournful call, perhaps to its own kind, perhaps in vain.

This finally drew Abberline's attention away from the sunset- he cast this gaze upwards to the solitary bird, its glassy eye glinting in the dwindling light, almost glowing red as it caught the last of the sun's rays.

"He did always say that he would follow Ciel anywhere," Abberline recalled. "I suppose he kept his promise, one way or another."

The raven cried out once more and then took flight, soaring toward the dying sun before it disappeared from view.

"To the end," Tanaka murmured. "To the very end."

The raven circled the wreckage, gliding lower and lower until the ruined ground came up to meet it. Before its talons could touch the blackened earth, the raven exploded into a halo of shadows and feathers, a whirlwind of darkness that whipped up clouds of ash and dust, all of it coalescing into a veil that lifted to reveal Sebastian, as he had and always would be. Not a hair was out of place on his head, not a single scar or smear of blood; he was dressed as he would be on any other December day, his midnight black overcoat buttoned up to his chin.

His footfalls were uncannily silent; they left no trace, no imprints as he strode through the graveyard that this house had become. He surveyed the damage with a steadiness, a detachment that befit a creature such as himself. This place no longer held meaning for him, and so he felt no grief at its loss. His path criss-crossed through a maze of debris, pieces of the foundations and sections of the outer walls that had been scattered by the explosion.

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To any other set of eyes, his wandering appeared aimless- no one would realise that he was being led, pulled by a tether inside of him, leading him deeper into the ruins, toward the epicenter of the devastation, to where the ground had been scorched the deepest. Here, Sebastian's wandering came to an end. The tether remained, a presence that surrounded him, as though someone were standing beside him, tapping somewhat insistently on his shoulder.
"Ah." Sebastian sighed, relieved when he hadn't known he was worried in the first place. "There you are."

A gust of wind once again swept past, lifting the ashes into a hypnotic waltz. It should have been freezing, the bracing cold of winter- instead it was a warm breath, the early morning whispers of a lover, the promise of a far-off shore. The dancing ashes continued to twirl until they were glowing in the sunset's light, new life breathed into them.

In an instant, the swirling mass caught fire, the same bright blue flame that had laid the house to rest. It took the form of two great wings, angelic in their beauty while demonic in their power. The wings closed to form a cocoon, and when they opened-

"Ciel." There he was, crowned in unholy fire, even more magnificent than he had been in life. A resplendent phoenix, risen from the ashes of his own making.

Ciel rolled his eyes a little, clearly having picked up on Sebastian's thoughts. "I had hoped for something darker; something with more intrigue, perhaps." Ciel tilted his head, and his fiery wings vanished. "I must say, however, that being to take on whichever form I wish is quite wonderful."

"And you seem to be catching on rather quickly," Sebastian noted, as Ciel shifted his appearance, opting for apparel not dissimilar to Sebastian's, his long winter coat a beautiful shade of cobalt rather than midnight black. He looked down at himself, obviously still entertained by his ability to simply will something into existence. For Sebastian, the change had been so long ago, and not nearly as pleasant, and so he never had the opportunity to marvel at it himself. He was more than happy to watch Ciel do it now.

"I'll spare you a moment," Ciel allowed, noticing the distance in Sebastian's eyes, "If you need time to grieve?"

"Grieve?" Sebastian tilted his head in confusion.

"For the loss of my soul," Ciel clarified, hands on his hips, feeling his body hum in tune with the earth under his feet. "You won't ever get to devour it now."

Sebastian was on Ciel in a moment, crowding him against the nearest shred of stone wall that was left standing. He captured Ciel's mouth and kissed him, harder than he ever had, and Ciel began to realise how much Sebastian had been holding back before, how many limits there had been between them. He felt those limits being easily surpassed, and he moaned wantonly into Sebastian's mouth.

Truthfully, I find this arrangement to be much more preferable, Sebastian said without speaking, his voice in Ciel's ear without his lips leaving Ciel's at all.

The sun was setting- darkness has begun to swallow the earth, but when Ciel's eyes met Sebastian's, he could see an undimmed light, burning forever in the shadows. He knew that light now burned in his own eyes as well.

"I can hear you," Ciel whispered, awed, fingertips dancing over his own temple. "I can hear you in here."

Sebastian smiled, bumping his forehead against Ciel's. "Yes, that has been known to happen. Sometimes, the connection of a mating bond is so deep that those who are bonded become of one mind."

Ciel pulled back in surprise. "You never mentioned it was a mating bond." He didn't seem the least bit upset- his smile was splitting his face in two.
"I never lied," Sebastian offered. "When I told you that the original ritual was used by more powerful demons as a method to create underlings for themselves, it was not untrue. But the reason for the original creation of the ritual, forgotten to almost all, was that a very powerful demon had grown so attached to a soul, and the human to which it belonged, that they never wanted to be parted." He repeated some of what he had said in that ancient language, when Ciel had been on the verge of death. "Those words specifically are a vow to take the transformed soul as a mate."

"A vow;" Ciel said the word slowly, tasting it with new lips. "Does that mean you tricked me into marrying you?"

"You agreed to be bound to me for all eternity, did you not?" Sebastian asked.

"An extension of the contract between us."

"Is marriage not a contract?"

"This is more than that," Ciel said. "More than a contract. Certainly more than a marriage."

"Certainly," Sebastian echoed, feeling, for the first time in a thousand years, as if he were off balance, as if a single gust of wind could send him falling headlong into the warmth of Ciel's eyes. "I suppose, then, that you'll want to forgo the honeymoon, since no human concepts or customs could possibly encompass-"

Ciel kissed Sebastian again, because it had been several seconds too long since they had stopped- it had the added effect of shutting him up, however fleetingly.

-the depth of our connection to each other, Sebastian finished the thought.

*I never said that*, Ciel replied, even as he bit Sebastian's lip, daring himself to draw blood. You love putting words in my mouth.

Would you rather I put something else there?

Obscene demon, Ciel purred, a teasing caress, invisible but potent. *All that I am is open to you- you tell me.*

Sebastian lifted Ciel, pinning him to the wall, hips to hips. The heat between them was not only physical, not only blood and hearts racing, skin itching to be touched, but their true forms intertwining, aching to be released. He gripped Ciel's thighs hard enough that they would have bruised, had Ciel still been human. Fragile, so fragile- but no more. Sebastian would have to try much harder to mark this body, new and fresh as yet unscarred. He began by leaving a number of bite marks down the cold, pale line of Ciel's throat, every taste of blood leaving him feeling drunken and wild.

You would have me take you right here, he thought, repeating Ciel's own desires back to him. Quickly and roughly, like the beasts that we are. So hard and so swift that the very earth beneath us would shake.

Yes. Ciel pulled Sebastian's hair in silent reply. But you would rather wait- have there be some ceremony to it, some control. You would draw it out, make it last until I absolutely could not stand it. And you'd do it somewhere grand, somewhere warm. Somewhere with a bed. And you think humans are the sentimental ones.

Sebastian lifted his mouth to Ciel's once more. My last master was a man of great wealth. I did become accustomed to a certain lifestyle.
Ciel couldn’t help but laugh at this, breaking the kiss when he could no longer contain himself. Sebastian laughed along, easing Ciel back onto his feet.

“Your last master,” Ciel said aloud, if only out of habit. “And now your mate.” Every inch of him sang with the power of that word. “Very well. A honeymoon, then. But I want to go to Europe. Paris first- I’ve never been. Then the Riviera. And the whole of the Mediterranean after that.”

“So demanding,” Sebastian accused playfully. “Some things never change.”

“Well, you can't rightly call me master anymore,” Ciel pointed out. “Some things do change.”

There was more to do here. As much as he wanted to leave and never return, to begin anew in a world that was theirs alone, Ciel knew that his purpose here was not over. Sir Arthur’s hands were not the only ones soaked in innocent blood- the other members of his coalition, lords of Her Majesty’s court, still walked the earth, unpunished for their part in his crimes.

“They will be relieved, when they hear of what happened here today.” Sebastian said in response to Ciel’s train of thought. “With you dead, there is no one left to hunt them. Let them rest in their complacency for a while- it will make their fear all the more sweet, when they realise you have returned to take what is owed you.”

“Perhaps you're right.” Ciel found it much easier to admit now. He stooped to touch the ground, pushing his fingers through the ashes of his human life. A final farewell.

“I've had enough of this place to last me a lifetime,” he said a moment later. It had been the fate of his forefathers to die in this land. He had demanded something greater for himself.

“Let's go, Sebastian.”

Sebastian put a hand over his heart and bowed one last time, a final salute to his former role.

“Of course,” he vowed, with his most devilish smile, “my love.”

Chapter End Notes

10/30/18:

Three years and three months to the day since I posted chapter one- how about that! I’ll save my big sappy thank-you speech for after the epilogue- meet me there when you’re done :)
Epilogue; Amor Fati

Chapter Summary

"It was a little like Faust in the end, wasn't it?"

Amor Fati - "love of fate" is a Latin phrase that may be translated as "love of fate" or "love of one's fate". Moreover, amor fati is characterized by an acceptance of the events or situations that occur in one's life.

Chapter Notes

Words: 1k
Warnings: me being emotional cause IT'S ALL OVER YOU GUYS!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

- December Fourteenth, 2020 -


The cemetery was unusually lively, as cemeteries went. There used to be nothing more than rampant green meadows on all sides of it, a sort of picturesque and restful place to be interred, the only sound being the cooing of mourning doves and the wind ruffling the leaves of far-off trees. Now, busy streets and many-coloured row houses surrounded three sides of the graveyard, passing cars easily visible through the high wrought iron fence that marked the border. The fourth side opened up to a sprawling park, full of willow trees whose hanging branches were weighed down with crystalline droplets of ice, the trees themselves becoming sparkling chandeliers in the midday sun.

In the far corner of the park, groups of children played, running in wide circles around the swing sets and climbing frames that sat unused during the winter months, abandoned for the building of forts and battles waged across the snowy field. Standing in the midst of the cemetery, one could hardly hear the children's joyful shouts and raucous laughter; their overtures became like the chirping of birds, the nearby rush of traffic a steadily streaming river. It remained restful, in its own way.

A young man, perhaps in his mid twenties, strolled among the oldest of the tombstones, observing that the ancientness of this place had become somewhat of a curiosity to the modern world. No one alive today had been alive then to mourn those who had been put to rest beneath this ground. There were nearly a dozen people spread out around him- tourists, a couple of photographers, holding their large cameras at strange angles to try and capture the final repose of the dead, to paint this morbid picture in as flattering a light as possible. They would trade the vibrant colours of their photographs for sepia tones of ages past; it was ironic that those in the present should be so eager to return this place to how it had once been.

No one noticed this young man as he made his way across the cemetery, though if they had, they surely would have stopped to stare. He walked with far more purpose than any of them, cutting through the rows of graves with long, smooth strides. His face was an old portrait come to life; his
features were timeless and without blemish, as if they had been sculpted from the finest clay. It could be imagined that some artist’s caring fingers had smoothed over his skin, forming the line of his jaw and the curve of his mouth, the gentle shape of his cheeks, pale skin that somehow remained untouched by winter’s breath.

His hair looked nearly iridescent in the sun- a sudden breeze whispered through it, whispering strands across his face. Altogether it swayed, the shimmering colour of a stormy sea- the uniqueness of it complimented the young man’s otherworldly presence, his unnatural beauty. It certainly stood out against the deep grey of his coat, the long sleeves and wide lapels of which almost seemed to dwarf him, lending a childlike quality to his appearance even though his gait exuded authority. His sharp, quick eyes were of a deep reddish hue, another unnatural attribute that seemed to make his gaze pierce everything it touched.

The young man stopped in front of a large tombstone, perhaps the strangest in the entire cemetery- the stone itself was unfinished, a rough and rounded boulder with one side cut smooth for the inscription. A red marble crown rested atop it, carved from the same colour of stone. The hilt of a sword protruded from within the ring of the crown, an Excalibur that could never be removed from its mantle.

"Where are you?" The young man asked no one, idly running his foot over a soft swell of snow that had piled up at the foot of the tombstone.

*Behind you, to your right.* The voice that answered was both heard and felt, shouted across a bridge between two minds, whispered on the breeze, guided by their attachment.

The young man turned, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of said person.

A man had entered the cemetery through the far gate, a man whose looks could be described as being unearthly in their beauty, but also as subtly intimidating in their flawlessness. Unlike the younger, this man turned the heads of everyone he passed by. His presence garnered much more attention, though he was no more or less beautiful than his counterpart. Perhaps it was that his ability to be noticed came from his allowance of it. His face seemed carved from the smoothest stone, porcelain skin almost shimmering against the darkness that made up the rest of him. His long coat was the deepest black, as was his hair, falling just so across his face, touched but not undone by the sporadic gusts of wind.

He seemed to glide rather than walk, and anyone who saw it could only call it mesmerising. His knowing eyes matched the colour of those of the man who waited for him across the cemetery.

In one arm, the man carried a large bouquet of roses.

"So that's what took you so long," Ciel remarked, referring to the ridiculous number of roses that Sebastian had brought with him. Eleven, he counted- five white, three blue, and three black, the rich coloured roses leaping out against the soft snow-like ones. He imagined everyone who must have seen him walking the streets, wondering and envying whomever would receive such a lavish gift.

"It is customary to leave a floral arrangement at the grave of a loved one," Sebastian answered simply, kneeling to place the roses before the tombstone.

"Loved one- hardly," Ciel scoffed, though he was hard pressed to disguise the smile that hinted at his lips when Sebastian presented him with a single red rose, the colour of fresh blood, the petals soft and supple to the touch.

"He may have been... difficult, at times, but in the end, I *was* rather fond of him," Sebastian intoned,
bowing his head and placing one hand over his heart and the other on the tombstone in a theatrically false display of emotion. Ciel laughed. Sebastian could still see the flicker of the contractual seal behind the light in Ciel's eyes.

*May you be in heaven an hour before the devil knows you're dead*, read Ciel's tombstone, the words carved in simple letters, and below it:

*The Earl Ciel Vincent Phantomhive*

*1875-1895*

"It was a little like Faust in the end, wasn't it?" Ciel wondered suddenly.

"How so?" Sebastian asked.

"Only that I was saved from my fate. I'm here to mark the anniversary of my own passing- one hundred and twenty-five years later- when I should be nothing more than a pile of bones, rotting away in the very ground beneath our feet."

"Perhaps this was your fate all along," Sebastian surmised. "Perhaps you and I were always meant to be this; eternally bound to one another."

"In that case, I was saved from nothing," Ciel concluded. He absentmindedly twirled the rose between the tips of his thumb and forefinger, barely noticing when one of the thorns sliced into the pad of his thumb. He held his hand over the grave, watching the blood bead brightly on his skin and drip onto the snow.

"When I was human, it was always something of a comfort to believe that things only ever happened as they were meant to. Nothing more, nothing less. I suppose that hasn't changed."

He turned to Sebastian and touched his face, smearing blood across Sebastian's bottom lip. Sebastian licked it clean, taking Ciel's wrist in hand and turning his head to kiss the palm of Ciel's hand.

"Don't look now, but it would seem we're being watched," he said.

Ciel had already noticed- the pair of tourist photographers, standing several yards off, had stopped taking pictures of the graveyard, lowering their cameras to sneak glances and whisper to each other. They were clearly speculating about the two beautiful men standing together among the tombstones, what their relationship could possibly be and what their reason for coming to the cemetery was. Neither Ciel nor Sebastian were either surprised or bothered by this- they were no strangers to attention- when they were seen together, others always seemed to look on in awed curiosity, wondering about the energy that surrounded the two of them. It had always been this way- always, since the very beginning. And Ciel knew this too was something that would never change. What had changed was Ciel's ability to listen to people's conversations from a great distance away.

"I can hear what they're saying, can you?" Ciel rolled his eyes, mostly amused. "Honestly, the perversion of some people-"

Sebastian interrupted Ciel with a kiss, obviously more than happy to give these people the show they had apparently been waiting for. Ciel was certainly happy to kiss Sebastian for whatever the reason- it took nothing for him to make a spectacle out of it- he returned the kiss with abandon, throwing his arms around Sebastian's shoulders, holding him close- Sebastian spread his hands over Ciel's hips,
holding him even closer. He licked into Ciel's mouth, his tongue still tasting of Ciel's blood—Ciel had long since gained a better understanding of Sebastian's appreciation for that taste.

"I believe that should suffice," Sebastian supposed, reluctantly breaking the kiss and lowering his hands from Ciel's waist.

Ciel smiled and looked over his shoulder, waving at the photographers with a teasing flick of his wrist. One of them had gone bright red in the face and was pointedly staring in a different direction. The other was still gawking, pale if she was anything, and for a moment, Ciel thought she might faint.

"She looks like she's seen a ghost," he remarked, watching as the red-faced photographer dragged the pale one off by the arm.

"Cemeteries are as good a place as any to see the spirits of those who've passed on from the mortal world." Sebastian reached down and took Ciel's hand. "And in a way, isn't that exactly what she did see?"

He let go of Ciel's hand then, in favour of putting his arm over Ciel's shoulders. Ciel's arm curled around Sebastian's waist, and they walked off into the bright winter afternoon, toward a boundless future, their feet stepping perfectly in time with one another's.

Chapter End Notes

10/30/18:

Okay, since I can't resist telling you how clever I am, here's the thing about those roses Sebastian brought to the grave: a bouquet of eleven roses ensures the receiver that they are deeply loved and treasured. White roses mean purity, innocence and youthfulness. Black roses (which don't exist in nature and can only be made artificially) mean death and "farewell" (obviously). Blue roses (which are also made artificially) denote impossible and unattainable nature of something. A single rose means utmost devotion, and the colour red means passion, respect, and love.

ALSO: STAY TUNED for "To the End of Everything: The Appendecies", a behind-the-scenes look at the writing process and the inner workings of an exhausted author's mind—deleted scenes, original outlines, moodboards, inspirations and more. I'll be posting it as a fic some time in the near future here on AO3. If you have any questions you would like answered, leave a comment below or submit them to my tumblr, totheendofeverything.tumblr.com

End Notes

10/30/18:

The image of demon Ciel being given roses by Sebastian while standing at his own grave on
his one-hundred and twenty-something birthday is an image I'd had in my head for a long time (since the beginning of 2014, going on five whole years ago)- I considered just writing the scene down and posting it as a standalone vignette. But as I thought about it, I couldn't help wondering what events had led Ciel and Sebastian to this place at this time, having been together all these years with an eternity still ahead of them.

I imagined a few different nondescript scenarios, just to placate my imagination, but I soon felt compelled to get it all on paper, to answer in the form of an actual coherent narrative the question of how Ciel and Sebastian came to be where I first envisioned them. Fast forward through months (years, actually) of blood sweat and tears and here it is, the longest fic I've ever written, the longest story of any kind that I've ever finished.

Writing To The End of Everything has helped me prove to myself that I can in fact write a novel-length story- I've improved as a writer in many ways throughout this process, learning lessons about editing and continuity and even simple grammar, as well as how to keep readers interested throughout a lengthy plot. It hasn't been easy- it's the hardest I've ever worked on something in all the years that I've been writing.

My life has not been an easy one these last few years- I've had to experience the messy ends of important relationships, contend with physical and mental illnesses that kept me from working on this story for weeks (or more often months) at a time. There were many moments when I didn't think I'd make it to the finish line, but there was one thing that made me persevere, that made me strive to write my best, even if it took me a long time to do it: you, the reader, without whom this whole process would be meaningless. I'd of course like to think that I could have written this story solely for my own enjoyment- writing things that I want to read is certainly what plants the seeds of inspiration- but knowing that there are people out there who also want to read the things I write is what nurtures that seed and makes it grow into something beautiful.

So on that note, I'd just like to say thank-you. Whether you were with me from the beginning, waiting weeks and months (and years) between updates as I struggled just to pen another word, or if you joined in reading this story somewhere along the way- even if you're reading this weeks, months, or years down the line, when this story already been completed and you could read it all as one massive whole- I am sincerely grateful to and for each and every one of you, and it's my greatest hope that you've enjoyed the fruits of my extensive labour.

Much love, lord_is_it_mine

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!