Smoke From This Altar

by SofterSoftest

Summary

(“You are young and broken. I could eat you whole.”)

Violet Baudelaire, recently orphaned, meets a secretive man in the Eliade Cathedral. Everything goes downhill from there. Rated M for smut and foul language.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Part One, Chapter One

"In the slaughterhouse of love, they kill only the best, none of the weak or deformed. Don't run away from this dying. Whoever's not killed for love is dead meat."

— Rumi

She daydreams of being interviewed and breathing.

Violet Baudelaire sits on the stage at the Eliade Cathedral, her peers at her feet. Beside her is a faceless interviewer, their voice as monotone as her third period instructor. The interviewer waves to her as if beholding some sacred specimen, says, “Soooo, oxygen. How’s that feel?”

Violet, honest, says, “Like having an alien in your chest.”

The crowd laughs merrily, as if such an idea made her an amusing outsider.

“Let’s see you breathe-” the interviewer says. “Go on. Lung up!”

So she does, long and slow, inhaling and exhaling to riotous applause.

This daydream works to keep her calm as the other orphans light their votive candles and the altar server lights his incense, the smoke hanging like doom in the dim cathedral. Envisioning her interview, imagining someone saying, “Keep breathing, slowly now, calm-” keeps her from focussing too heavily on the flicker of hundreds of candles, from the smoke and the flame. If she does she knows she will only see the charred remains of her childhood home and the faces of every family member she has lost because of it. And if she does this, she will panic, will feel lost and choked in all that residual grief.

And so, Violet dreams of breathing.

She tugs on her pleated skirt, or fiddles with her stockings, or winds and rewinds the ribbon around her wrist. She dreams her responses, “I can even hold my breath- and whistle- watch this-” and keeps calm, waiting.

And then Isadora arrives late to sermon, as she always does, to distract her.

“Hey,” The girl’s face is bright with a secret as she slides into the pew beside Violet. Her dark eyes are mischievous and smug, even as she tugs her wrinkled blazer from her satchel, as if completing her uniform would make it less obviously rumpled.
Plenty of other orphans had settled into the pews around them whilst Violet had been lost in her mind. The sanctuary was almost entirely full. From where she sat near the back, Violet could hear the dreaded voice of Carmelita Spats saying loudly, “I hear he was voted Most Handsome and Talented Individual Involved in Local Theatre by *The Daily Punctilio* !”

“Hi.” Violet says, grateful for her friend’s arrival. Seeing the smirk on Isadora’s face has a questioning smile gracing her own. “What’s that look? What secrets have you got?”

Isadora tilts her head as if about to deliver some grand joke. From the breast pocket of her blazer she withdraws a small, well-worn notebook that Violet feels she’s seen at least a thousand times.

Isadora clears her throat theatrically, flips to her latest page, and recites,

> “Because of some actor and his theatre troupe,

> I’ve been hearing nothing but giggling girls on loop.”

Violet frowns, confused. “A theatre troupe? Here? At Eliade?”

Isadora nods and glances around to their peers in distaste. Violet follows suit, eyeing the large crowd of orphans with their clean uniforms, their shiny hair, their bright faces painted with perfect cosmetics. It seems a stark contrast to how most of the young women had behaved months ago upon their arrival from Prufrock Preparatory School to Eliade. New orphans, she had learned, tended to disregard hygiene when battling constant grief.

“That’s what these girls are so excited about. Some actors are going to be working here for awhile. Apparently their leader is handsome, if you trust Carmelita.”

Violet, annoyed at even Carmelita’s named, glances away and mutters, “Absolutely not.”

“Smart of you.” Isadora says, just as venomous. Her eyes, dark and heavy with emotion, glance to Violet’s hands which rest gingerly in her lap. Before she can ask the latest details of her punishment, the lights dim even further in the sanctuary, leaving only a faint spotlight before the altar table and the glow from the candles. At this swell of darkness, the chatty room quiets. Isadora flips her notebook closed.

“Wait, where’s Duncan?” Violet whispers as the very back doors to the sanctuary open with a grating squeal. High-pitched gasps echo against the stained glass ceiling as several orphan girls turn to sneak peeks.

“He’s in his bed. Still sick. Eliade’s sending a doctor next week.”

Violet hums, concerned. “You think a doctor can help?”

“I hope.” Isadora says. “I’ve tried everything, even begging. We’re seventeen, nearly full adults, and he still refuses to leave his bed like a child. He’s been getting more of those threatening letters from his instructors saying grief isn’t an excusable-”

A sharp wail cuts through the room, high-pitched like the shriek of car tires before a crash.

“Quagmire! Baudelaire! Stop with that girlish chatter!” Vice Principal Nero barks as he lumbers past
to the front of the room, his beady eyes red-rimmed, his violin perched in his arms, the obvious source of the offending noise.

Both Violet and Isadora had learned many months ago that arguing their innocence made no difference when it came to the swift punishment that the Eliade Cathedral was prone to giving.

“Sorry, sir.” They say in unison. In the startled silence, their voices carry, properly diminutive in the large, open space.

“Sorry, sir.” Nero parrots in his usual high-pitched mess of mockery. When no one responds, he comes to stand before the crowd of orphans at the edge of the altar. His violin is lowered in his grip and his stature is irritated, as if any time standing in front of an audience deserved devotion entirely to his heinous musical exploits.

“Orphans!” He barks. The sound carries harshly. Violet is relieved to notice she is not the only one to flinch. “I’m afraid there is going to be a change of schedule to your schoolwork regimes. As you know, due to the abnormal influx of tragedies, you orphans have been housed in the Eliade Cathedral of the *Mysterium Tremendum Et Fascinans* while our Prufrock Preparatory School undergoes extensive boarding extension. There is no date on when the renovations will be through, so for now you will be stuck here indefinitely. However, your instructors are getting fed up with the long hike from the school to the cathedral, and they’ve gone on a strike to have one extra free day to themselves. So, Wednesdays will furthermore be used at your leisure- which means on Tuesday you will receive lots of busywork.”

A small titter of distaste rose through the general crowd of orphans.

“Also,” Nero says, louder than before. “We have some extremely talented visitors, who are not as talented as me, that you will be seeing throughout the place. Olaf!”

At the name, a small gathering of people emerge from the back door and trudge their way to the front of the room. Chatters rise from the orphans like an audience’s excitement just before a big show.

“Hello, hello, hellooo…” A loud voice purrs as the crowd struts to the front. “At least, that’s what the Count would say, if he were here.”

A tall, lanky man with hooks for hands and a multitude of facial scars leads the strange Troupe. He is dressed in a pinstriped button-up and black pants, with large sunglasses covering his eyes even in the dim sanctuary. The troupe trailing behind him seems dressed for the theatre, each person bedecked in odd costumes. One tall bald man wears a tracksuit and a turban, while a different person of indeterminate gender wears a tight pink skirt, a blonde wig, and glasses. Two white-faced women take up the back of the crowd dressed as movie theatre concierges.

The man in the lead turns to face the crowd of orphans and smiles.

“The Count regrets to inform the orphans that he is not able to attend this meeting because he didn’t want to come. In any case, I am Fernald and this is the rest of his theatre Troupe!”

Each person bows at the same moment as if they had rehearsed it extensively.

Nero frowns at the oddly-dressed gathering of actors before addressing the orphans. “Anyway, Count Olaf and his Troupe will be using the basement theatre which, *reminder*, is strictly off-limits to you orphans!” The man says, wagging a fat finger.

At this, Violet and Isadora share a hesitant glance, the same idea passing unspoken between them. *Better be careful.*
“And if you’re lucky, Count Olaf has agreed to give us a preview of his play. He will be visiting classrooms around this institution to perform. If you’re lucky.” Nero grimaces as if disgusted to be holding the attention of so many orphans and speaking to them civilly.

He looks to Fernald and says, “Do you know when that will be?”

“Er, I’m not sure actually,” The man says, scratching his chin with a hook. “You’ll have to ask him. Also, hey, what religion is this place for? Like, what god?”

Clearly thrown off course, Nero claps his hands together and sighs. Finally, he says warily, “You can worship whatever beast you’d like here at Eliade. Whatever hierophany you seek, you can find within these walls. In any case, orphans, stay out of the theatre. Do not be alarmed if you see strange individuals in costumes wandering around. And do not show up for classes on Wednesdays. Understood?”

“Yes, Vice Principal Nero.” The entire congregation responds at once in the same bland tone.

“Now I obviously need to meet this Count, so my performance for this evening will be canceled. Now get out of here.” He waves a hand to the rows of orphans then turns to talk quietly with Fernald. The orphans waste no time scrambling to get their bags and hurry from the sanctuary in fear that Nero would change his mind and reassemble them for a concert.

“How lucky that the Count cancels Nero’s performance by not showing up.” Violet says as she follows Isadora down their pew.

“How lucky,” Isadora mutters, sounding unsure. Once they shuffle through the pew, she turns to regard Violet sadly, glancing from her face to the mess of gauze looped thick around her knuckles. “You’re still bleeding. What was it for today?”

Violet blushes, embarrassed and ashamed at the brutality obvious on her body.

“She hid Remora’s planner underneath my pillow, then said I stole it. Naturally, Nero didn’t listen and I got ten cuts with the cane. Good start to my morning.” Violet mutters sarcastically, trying to swallow her shame. “I wish I knew what her angle was. Why she’s singled me out.”

Isadora, her eyes heavy with pity, shrugs. “How many times has she framed you for stealing from the Cathedral? Four?”

“Three.” Violet corrects, wincing at the memories of Nero and hot blood dripping sticky down her palms and into the sleeves of her Prufrock blazer. “If only she was kind enough to let the others heal before she did it again. Now they won’t stop bleeding.”

She flexes her knuckles and sighs in frustration when a new small dot of red seeps into the thick gauze.

“Should we go to your place?” Isadora asks quietly as they shuffle into the long line of orphans fleeing from the sanctuary.

Somewhere, they can hear Carmelita shouting, “I’m going to see the Count first and then he’s going to be the Most Handsome and Talented Individual Involved in Being My Boyfriend!!”

Violet shakes her head. She turns, seeing Nero and the rest of the theatre troupe exit towards the hall behind the altar’s small stage. Light red as wine spills into the sanctuary the moment Nero cracks the door. Beyond it, Violet can see only blackness and the distant glow of an exit sign as the Troupe trudges single file into the dark.
“No,” she says regretfully, “Nero’s probably going to find the Count in the basement theatre now. There’s no way we could sneak past them. I’ll have to go tomorrow night.”

Beside her, Isadora winces as if she had stepped on something sharp. “I promised Duncan I’d tutor him tomorrow since he’s missed so many classes. Remora’s short story theme for this semester has been about why individualism and free thought are worthy of jail time. I think some of those bananas he eats constantly are laced with something. Either way, Duncan’s got at least three essays to write.” Isadora sighs, rubbing her face wearily as they pass through the enormous wooden doors of the sanctuary and into the heart of Eliade.

To their left shine Eliade’s front doors painted white as salvation, the panes decorated with the same stained glass in the ceiling of the sanctuary. On one door a choppy collection of colors depict a bottomless sea in deep blues and purples and black. The other pane shows a skyline shimmering with the colors of young girls, all vicious little pinks. Carved into the space above the door are the same words the Cathedral was named after: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Nearly every time Violet reads it she imagines Klaus defining it like a reflex, like compulsion, “A mystery before which man both trembles and is fascinated, attracted and repelled. Popularized by Rudolf Otto as a concept of God. Why do you think they would name this place after Mircea Eliade then use Otto’s philosophies, Violet?”

To their right, a winding staircase leads up into the orphans’ quarters then further still to the instructing rooms, the libraries, the study rooms, the washrooms, the large clock tower. Overall, the institution is vast and seemingly expansive. Many times Violet has hurried through the halls hoping to avoid Carmelita only to find a room she had never before noticed. Eliade was one mystery she could never fully fathom.

“You’ve got at least three essays to write then, you mean. You know I love when you can come with me, but I don’t really think this can wait until tomorrow. I’ve gone through a whole roll of gauze just this week.” Violet mutters as they turn and stomp the cramped stone stairway. She eyes the growing bloom of red atop her knuckles against the handrail, already feeling the new scabs split the more she moves. “I’m not sure when Carmelita’s going to mess with me again and I need these healed as fast as possible. Can’t afford to wait.”

Isadora sighs as they reach the top of the stairs where the hall branches between orphaned boys’ and girls’ quarters. She flicks her long hair over her shoulder and cocks her hip, appearing aggressive and collected all at once.

“Wish we could get her back. She’s got it coming.” She eyes Violet’s face with pursed lips, as if she were ready to shout and defend at the first sign of refusal to fight fire with fire.

“This will end somehow. Maybe Nero will break my knuckles and send me to the hospital and we can get the police involved.” Violet says, knowing the attempt at optimism was misplaced, yet also knowing there was absolutely nothing she could do. Even in Eliade, standing before her best friend, she was powerless against reality.

Isadora glares at her, dissatisfied. Violet ignores this, instead glancing down the long hall that led to the cool safety of her bedroom. “Either way, go visit Duncan. I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you.”

That breaks the dissatisfaction. Instead it is replaced with exhaustion, far too much, Violet thinks, for any young woman to tolerate yet she feels it as intimately as Isadora- that weariness like another skin.

“I’m sure he won’t be happy to hear about your morning. He goes crazy sitting in that bed all day, and hearing about your issues just makes him want to run out and give Carmelita swift and unruly justice. But you’re right. He needs me to write those essays. I’ll meet you in the Hall for dinner.”
“Alright. Oh, and-” Violet meets her eyes, hoping to appear reassuring and grateful. “I won’t tell Duncan I know about that book until he’s the one who mentions it to me.”

Isadora smiles but it is bitter at the edges. “Thank you. I know he won’t be happy with my meddling, but… Okay. Next time we go to your place, we’ll think of someway to get him to show it to you. Maybe before his doctor’s visit? I don’t know. We can plan more at dinner, yeah?” Isadora has already turned her back and trotted down the hall by the time she finishes her sentence. Violet glances down to the gauze growing red and worries her bottom lip as she walks to her room, concerned for her wounds and the constant sting of them.

She reaches her door, a little plaque by the knob gleaming ROOM THIRTEEN, and hurries inside. In the six months Violet has lived within Eliade, her bedroom has remained as bleak and cramped as when she arrived. She has not taped photographs or newspaper clippings or letters on the walls like her peers, has not stitched blossoms into her bed sheets or snuck in candles from the many supply closets off the sanctuary. Instead, she lives in a barren bedroom, dreaming of the moment she can sneak downstairs to take centerstage.

Unwilling to be left with her thoughts in the dim, quiet room, Violet toes her shoes from her feet, wriggles the skirt from her hips so it drops flat to the floor, tosses her blazer, and crawls into bed. She hopes that her friends are there to welcome her at dinner and, if she must dream, that it is devoid of fire and ash.

Violet settles into her starched sheets, closes her eyes, and imagines herself standing before the altar, right where the Count’s Troupe had been, breathing to unruly applause.
The first time they meet, Violet is where she shouldn’t be, sneaking centerstage like a phantom.

Her footsteps are light and practiced as she sneaks through the cathedral, watching the uneven stone floor for tripping hazards and sticking to shadows the color of heavy rain.

Her satchel digs like fingers into her shoulder, yet she clutches it to her side so it will not swing. Through the front pocket, she palms a small black pouch that holds her extensive collection of shiny little lock picks.

Violet turns a corner and the darkness deepens into the next hall. No spray of stained glass windows checker the floor. The only light comes from a red neon sign hanging above a large metal door reading BACKSTAGE in large, blocky letters.

Stepping into the darkness, Violet flips the palm-warm pocket up and slips her picks free. They catch the meager light, glinting. Time has not worn their shine. Isadora had given them to her once she had first arrived at Prufrock Prep, right before they were all sent to Eliade, along with a set of see-through little locks to practice on. Once the orphans were in their rooms by curfew, Violet would sit with her back towards the door, fiddling with the picks beneath the tough wool of her blankets and hoping no stray religious authority wandered the hall to hear the sharp click of a sprung lock.

Weeks beneath the bed sheets have turned her hands practised and sensitive to every stuck pin no matter how many locks she attempted. She became a master lockpick in very little time, and through this talent and much patience she found her own sanctuary.

The door is cool beneath her palm as she steadies herself and crouches to examine the lock. Violet can feel the tip and drag of the back of her skirt brushing the stone floor. The basic rake pick easily enters the slim keyhole and only when she fiddles with it for a moment does Violet realize the door is already unlocked.

She flicks her wrist, the heavy face of her watch swinging up to read 11:38PM in bright green type. Confusion warps her features into a frown as she stands and extracts the pick. When she tries the handle, it gives easily. This small detail begins a pricking of caution at the base of her spine, throbbing and insistent. In the six months she has been at Eliade, the backstage door has always been locked. She thinks about Nero’s summoning, about the acting Troupe, and shirks away the caution as a forgetful actor in a hurry to leave.

Violet opens the door, makes sure to close it softly, then hurries down the dim stairwell. The wooden steps have peeling gray paint down their middles from decades of performers and stage crew and sneaky schoolgirls out after hours. Violet quickly taps down the stairs and examines the large door at
the end. When she tests the handle, she finds it unlocked as well. Unease straightens her spine yet again, but she shakes it off, takes a deep breath, and heads backstage.

The familiar smells of old paint, musty theatre chairs, and sawdust greet her. She no longer wastes time hunting for a lightswitch. Months of sneaking have taught her to take exactly sixteen steps to her left, turn into the long hall, and find the very first door to her right. A large golden plaque nailed askew to the door labels it: THE DIMMER ROOM. Violet enters carefully, stepping over mounds of wires to peer at the little tags on a large electrical board. Each switch is labeled with a small stretch of masking tape, and on her very first visit, after spending nearly her whole time limit finding the correct light, Violet finally grabbed a red pen and scribbled the edges of the label she needed. Since then she barely needs to glance before flicking it.

Through a large plexiglass window above all the switches, she sees the dim backup lights blink awake. When she exits, she leaves the door cracked and hurries centerstage.

It takes only a moment for disappointment to settle like a cold stone in her chest.

Looking up, she can see the trapdoor that served as the entrance to her hidden room and the scrap of ladder beneath it rolled into a ball, exactly as she had left it.

The problem was a large stage light that now sat right beneath the trap door, blocking her from reaching the ladder. She had tried to move those lights before, in the first week of her finding the spare attic above the stage, but could never figure out how. A tangle of pulleys most likely her issue still sags uselessly in the space off the left wing.

Frustration simmers in Violet’s throat like bile. She slumps, tapping her foot impatiently against the green hardwood as if waiting for an idea. With every tap, her pleated skirt swishes against her thighs, sending up a cloud of sweet altar smoke, sunk in from hours of religious ceremonies.

Her problem was the pair of unlocked locks.

Her problem was the heavy, tangled pulleys.

Her problem was-

“Hello, hello, hellowoooo,” A deep voice purrs from somewhere backstage, reverberating low through the empty theatre, and Violet flinches so badly she nearly spills her picks.

In that moment, she knows she will be expelled.

The panic she has been suppressing for the last six months since her arrival at Eliade rises in her. She feels breathless, almost as if she is drowning. Violet has no clue where she will go, has never had to live without home or family. Before she can react, a figure emerges from the back hall.

He steps slowly into the warm light. It cuts his stubbled cheekbones in shadow, snags the streaks of grey at his temples, and lights up the amused, near predatory smile. He is dressed in a white button-down rolled to the elbows, black trousers, and dark shoes. A tiny pin in the shape of an eye is fixed to the breast pocket of his shirt. Around his neck hangs an Eliade lanyard, emblazoned with the cathedral emblem and his scowling photograph in miniature. It reads OLAF: PLAYWRIGHT/IMPRESARIO in intricate type.

Olaf tilts his head, examining her. She can feel his dark eyes like a hand going up her ankles, her black stockings, the pleated skirt, the pale white buttons of her top before settling on her face.

And then their eyes meet.
A strange, hot embarrassment burns low in her stomach. Red blossoms behind her eyes as if a vein has burst.

Feverish realization has Violet sure in a single instant: she is intensely, uncomfortably aware of her attraction to him.

Before being placed in Eliade, Violet had dealt with attraction before. There had been a boy, once, but she had never felt overwhelmed, standing still in shock, completely dumbfounded attraction. She can feel heat buzz along her skin, can sense every inch of space between them as if it were electrified.

_Oh no_ , she thinks, a plea and a prayer.

“A little orphan is out after hours?” Olaf says, slowly traveling downstage one careful step at a time. His shoes tap against the wood like a metronome. “How exciting.”

Violet realizes she has been completely silent, yet cannot seem to find anything to say, cannot force herself to vomit a worthy excuse. She wracks her brain and the only response it can give her would be grabbing the hem of her short skirt and lifting it like an offering. Even the thought has her cheeks blooming pink.

“I’m- um-” She stammers. Seconds gather in the space between them. Violet looks to the empty lines of seats and imagines them full of patrons come to watch her breathe atop this very stage. She crosses her arms at her chest and tilts her hips in a way she has seen Carmelita do when pouting. In an instant, she decides on honesty. Hoping he will not betray her, she says, “Sneaking.”

Olaf hums in thought. He smiles to her as if they share a secret and only then does Violet allow herself to look him in the eye again. His gaze is heavy with amusement when he asks, “Oh? And what has you sneaking?”

She points to the small trapdoor. Against the lights, Olaf squints. His knuckles are bruised and a dot of ink mars the left cuff of his shirt.

“See that little door? And the ladder? That’s… That’s my secret place. I was going to go there tonight but your Troupe must have moved the lights because now I can’t get in.”

“ _My_ troupe? What makes you think they’re _mine_?” Olaf mutters. His eyes are still on the door when Violet responds, “Your tag. You’re Count Olaf, aren’t you?”

The man glances down to the lanyard as if he had forgotten it was there. “Of course. You’re sharp, sneaky girl.”

At his words, a thrill of heat passes straight through her. The title blazes like a brand in her mind, and she can feel the words roll atop her tongue, teasing. _Sneaky girl._

They share a look that is not fully a smile.

Olaf places his hands on his hips and tilts his head again, looking smug. “At least _you_ have a valid excuse. Right before your wretched curfew I caught a different girl sneaking around here just to see me. I don’t blame her. As you can see, I’m rather irresistible, but I had to send her away. Perhaps you know her? The ugly one with the nose and the red hair? Voice sounds like a dog toy?”

Violets grins, satisfaction at the shared loathing of Carmelita Spats swelling in her chest. “Ah. Carmelita was here then.”
“Carmelita.” Olaf spits, face puckering in distaste as if he had just bitten a lemon. “What a disgusting name.”

“She’s pretty disgusting.” Violet agrees, unable to smother her grin.

Olaf’s eyes pass over her again, an idea within them. He glances from the ladder to her face and says, “Listen, orphan. I’ll cut you a deal.”

Violet remembers her thought from earlier and her hands itch to raise the hem of her skirt. The reaction itself is startling, and horrid confusion twists within her. Never before has she felt such immediate attraction, immediate willingness to offer herself at the feet of a stranger. Despite it, she imagines the thud of her skirt hitting the stage, of his hands on her. Heat burns up her neck to pool beneath her freckled cheeks. She nods.

“I’ll assist you in getting to your lair, but only if you tell me your name.”

“My name?” Violet repeats, flummoxed. “That’s it?”

Olaf smiles wickedly, as if he has caught her in a trap. He claps his hands together, then twines his fingers, looking delighted. “That’s it? What more would you expect of me, orphan?”

“Violet.” She says, voice strong despite the heat in her face. “My name’s Violet.”

“Not bad.” The man says. Without warning, he crosses one arm over his chest, extends the other to his side, and bows low before her. She can see the top of his head, the carefully styled waves in all that dark hair. The collar of his shirt droops revealing a strip of white skin the color of new roots and a smattering of chest hair.

“Loverly to meet you, Violet. I am Count Olaf - incredibly talented and handsome director and star of the play soon-to-be housed in this odd religious institution of yours.” He rises with a wink and a smirk.

“Nice to meet you, too, Olaf.” She says, not knowing what else to say. “Even if we’re both where we shouldn’t be.”

He holds up one slender finger as if to correct her. “Wrong. I’m definitely supposed to be here. Come on, Violet. I’ll show you how to move the lights.”

Olaf nods backstage and Violet follows him into the shadows. She feels better now that she’s not centerstage beneath that huge light, feeling like a bug pinned to place by Olaf’s gaze. Queasy relief has mixed with the desire in her gut now that she knows the man cannot expel her. They huddle close together in the left wing where the pile of pulleys slumps to the floor.

“No you’re not.” Violet says, eager to annoy him, to tease him, to get some reaction she has not yet seen. “Visitation hours ended—” she checks her watch—“two hours ago. And as you’re not living here like me, that means you’re past curfew.”

Olaf rolls his eyes at her as he kneels at the pile of soft rope. “And yet here we are. My associate and I stayed late. We had to finish our competition of seeing who could spit the farthest from the catwalk. I won by the way, aren’t you impressed? He left moments before you got here. I was rummaging backstage when you showed up fumbling in the dimmer room.”

Violet only hums as she settles to her knees beside him.

“Alright, look.” Olaf says, grabbing a rope from the pile. It is only then that Violet notices that the
thick tangle has been shorn off and lies in a heap beneath the freed ropes, their loose ends tied in knots the size of her fist. “I forced my associate to spend hours untangling this mess. It was especially difficult considering he has hooks for hands. Each rope is now labeled with a little tag, see here?”

He reaches behind the knot of a rope and tugs free a small tag held in place by an elastic band. The typewriter ink atop it is blurry but Violet can easily read: CENTERSTAGE LIGHTS (ROW TWO).

Olaf passes the rope to Violet. The spot where his hand had been is warm on her palm.

“Now pull it with all your little orphan strength and listen.” The man steps away, his hands behind his head as if about to enjoy a show.

Violet does as she is told. She stands, tugs up the edges of her slipping stockings, rubs her hands together, grabs the rope, and heaves it towards the ground. No metallic clang of shifting lights echo in the theatre, only her shoes squeal faintly, only a huff from her lips sounds as she struggles. After a few moments of desperate tugging in which she feels her pride shrinking, Violet looks towards the Count who wears a dark smirk.

“Are you going to help me or not?” She snaps but there is no heat in it.

Olaf shrugs. “What’s wrong, Violet? In need of a strong, handsome man?”

“Will you shut up?” She snaps again, annoyance at his teasing, her weakness, and her new blush coloring her tone. “If you’re so handsome and strong, then help me!”

The Count heaves a put-upon sigh and mutters, “Fine.”

His arms come around hers as he stands at her back. The tops of her sleeves brush the backs of his as he tugs so quickly she can’t keep up. She merely lowers her hands, caught beneath his chest and the rapid rope, listening to the squeal of lights overhead and feeling Olaf pant behind her. It is only then that she realizes how tall the Count is, how his height dwarfs hers entirely. She feels lost in his shadow. His harsh breath tickles the hair at her neck and she cannot suppress a shiver.

After a minute of working the pulley, a deep bang sounds and Olaf drops his hands to his sides. He nods to the stage. A prickle of sweat beads his hairline.

“Is your lair open?” He asks.

Violet hurries to the stage, eager to put some distance between them. She looks towards the ceiling and the disappointment she had felt earlier buoys into delight.

“Yes! Thank you, Olaf.” She smiles at him, grateful. “Want to see how I get in?”

The Count comes to stand beside her on the stage and even then she can see the stark differences in their height.

“Duh.” He says.

“Well, did you ever have one of those slap bracelets when you were younger? The kind that you could bend straight like a ruler and then, once you snapped it over your wrist, it curled into a bracelet?” Even at the first question, the Count was already shaking his head.

“No. My childhood was not spent fiddling with slap bracelets.” Olaf mutters. Something in the way he says childhood has Violet sensing some negative weight, yet she dismisses it out of courtesy.
“But I understand what you mean.” Olaf concedes. “Continue.”

“It works kind of like that.” Violet leaves the Count standing where he is to reach into the left wing, just beyond the curtains. From there she withdraws a long metal hook which has always reminded her of a shepherd’s staff. She swings it towards the stage, causing Olaf to flinch.

Before he can tease her, she quips, “I know what I’m doing,” and returns to her place beside him. Violet braces the enormously tall hook against the floor and taps at the thick roll of the ladder until it swings free from its perch and, with a series of sharp clicks, unfurls to the stage. Violet hands Olaf the hook and places her hands on a rung.

“Once I get up there, I press a weak point on both sides and the ladder will bend in and curl up. The same thing goes for down here. Once I come down for the night, I just press it and it’ll go back where it belongs.”

Olaf runs a finger down the cool metal of the ladder. He looks to her face and his eyes carry a question she can tell he won’t ask.

“Impressive.” Olaf says. “And you made it?”

“Yep.” Violet tightens her grip on the ladder and steps two rungs up so they are the same height. She meets his eyes easily, yet she cannot quite read them. “I’m an inventor. My inventing room is up there.”

“Well,” Olaf crosses his hands behind his back and steps away from her. “I’ll leave you to it, little inventor.”

Sadness flares in her. She wonders if this is the last time she will truly see the Count, alone and unburdened by the fuss of Eliade and its many occupants.

“Goodnight, Count Olaf. Thank you for your help, and…” She smiles at him but it is pinched with worry. “Please keep my secret. I need this inventing room and I need to be able to sneak around.”

That brings a smirk to the Count’s face.

“Do not worry, sneaky girl.” That same thrill runs through her, leaves her nearly breathless. “I’m very good at keeping secrets.”

Relieved, she quickly climbs the ladder, feeling his eyes on her the whole way up. She heaves open the trapdoor, crawls inside, and turns to find the man staring at her, face open and calm. She wonders at his thoughts, but feels it a hopeless venture. Instead of asking, she merely presses both sides of the ladder and watches it curl up and lock into place.

When she peeks down, Olaf is still watching her from centerstage and Violet can sense the acute pressure of it even as she flips the door closed, feeling his eyes sear holes into her like a large magnifying glass beneath the sun—intense and wild and simmering to a slow blaze.

Chapter End Notes

For once, I didn’t allude to anything. I hope you enjoyed the first meeting of our pair. This is the only other chapter I will publish this week, and then I’ll keep with the probable schedule of one chapter per Saturday.
Last year on this very day, I turned 21 and the ASOUE Netflix special premiered. Now, it’s my birthday yet again and I wanted to get this out into the world.

If you wish to interact with me, I have two different tumblrs through which we can chat! My main is holy-weak, but I am in the process of making a new one purely for fanfiction/Snicket things called s-softersoftest. It looks terrible for now, but it will do.

Thank you very much for reading this tale so far! Please let me know what you think!
Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Three-

Despite the midnight sneaking, Violet does not soon find herself in Olaf’s company.

Each time she fumbles in the dimmer room, she half expects the man to be standing centerstage, waiting for another chat once the lights begin to glow, appearing mysteriously as premonition.

Privacy with the Count has been impossible, yet Violet’s stomach turns every time she picks the lock and tumbles down into the theatre, dreading and hoping for his presence. Proof of the man and his Troupe litter the stage each night she shows up. Cans of paint appear in odd places, scraps of fabric hang on a racks along the stage, and boxes of overflowing props stack crooked in the wings like anxious stagehands.

Just once, Violet finds a note atop the electrical board. It is placed right above her switch, a small, crumpled thing, written in dark blue ink.

Moved the lights before we left, orphan. You can thank me later. -O

Violet, heart pounding, folds the note very carefully and places it in her satchel pocket right by her picks, two secrets cradled in the very same spot.

She tries not to be too annoyed with herself for brushing her hair and scrubbing her face in the communal bathrooms before each visit to the basement theatre. Attraction, Violet learns, turns her feverish, turns her heart more sensitive than nerve.

Weeks pass.

She sees Olaf plenty, of course. Between classes, in the dining hall, going opposite ways on the staircase, she sees the man and always someone from his Troupe trailing like a shadow. He does not always spot her back and Violet thinks this has something to do with his propensity to wear sunglasses indoors, but when he does, the man always stops what he is doing to wave. Or, when they are in close enough proximity, to speak.

If there are other students around he will simply nod, a delighted grin on his face, and say, “Orphan.”

Other times, if it is Olaf by himself, but Violet has Isadora at her side, he will nod to both of them and say, “Ladies. Enjoy your days in this theological mess.”

Or, if they pass one another without anyone by their sides, his voice will go quiet and he will mutter, a wicked smirk at his lips, “Hello, little sneak.”
“Hello.” She always responds, voice calm despite her internal turmoil. They would never chat past that, too focussed on the constant wheeling of the clock and their strict schedules.

Three weeks pass since their first meeting. The doctor sent for Duncan cancels and reschedules, cancels, switches doctors, reschedules again. Isadora is constantly worn by harassment from Duncan’s instructors, from the doctors, and from Duncan himself.

This chaos is why, on a warm Spring Tuesday, Violet finds herself hurrying upstairs to the orphans’ quarters, bits of the night’s dinner folded into her satchel. Even from upstairs, she can hear the chatter from the dining hall, the clink of silverware and the voices of her classmates distorted by distance.

Violet enters the boys’ hall which is dark and cramped with shadow. She peers to the back of the hall where she knows Duncan resides, surprised to find Isadora standing before her brother’s door as still as a gargoyle. A similar expression warps her features, drawing her eyebrows down, her eyes heavy with thought, her mouth pinched in anxiety.

The only source of light is the wide window at the end of the hall which glazes every surface in pink from sunset. The backs of Isadora’s calves are pink as peaches, her profile dusted with color as though sunburnt.

In the back of her mind, Violet notices this contradiction- the pearly cast to the other girl’s skin warring with the malice of her expression- but then Isadora’s eyes fly to her and the malice flips to impatience. Violet quickens her pace, the same anxiety on her friend’s face blooming fresh in her gut.

Before she can ask, Isadora says, “They’ve kicked me out. Eliade sent for a doctor and they’ve kicked me out.”

“A doctor? What kind of-?”

A frustrated roar echoes from Duncan’s bedchamber and straight down the hall, ringing like gunshot.

“Please! Just- Just let me see!”

“Duncan?” Isadora yanks on the doorknob which does not give. “What are they doing? And why did they lock me out?”

Either from ignorance or inability, her brother does not answer. A collective grumble comes from other voices in the room, deeper than Duncan’s, and hushed. Isadora yanks on the doorknob again uselessly.

“I just want to see it. Why won’t you let me see it?” Duncan pleads.

The weight of repercussions makes Violet’s fingers hesitate against the pocket of her satchel. She can picture each pick in her collection, eager for use. Isadora yanks at the door and a sharp crack resonates as bits of wood splinter around the knob. White flakes of paint flutter to the emerald floor like dead cinders.

A fist pounds sharply at the door hard enough to make the two girls flinch away.

“Knock that off, girl!” Nero hisses. Even his voice is enough to make Violet’s knuckles throb.

Ignoring the twinge of fear in her belly, she sweeps her lockpicks free and kneels before the door. The sunset catches on her rake, a glint like glass reflecting off the metal.

She has just barely placed the rake to the lock when Duncan shouts again, desperately, “Just show me your ankles! Let me check for a tattoo and then we can continue! If you don’t have one, we-”
A cool hand settles on Violet’s shoulder, summoning her to her feet. Isadora will not look at her. The other girl merely shakes her head, ashamed, and looks down to the city below as if it could help her.

“Nevermind.” Isadora says, “It’s part of his…” She gestures in a wild flip of her hand as if swatting away a troublesome bug.

Violet nods, steps away, and replaces her picks. She feels as if she has swallowed a simmering coal, stuck in the center of her throat and burning, once she realizes what Isadora means.

The door flies open so quickly Violet is grateful for her earlier retreat. Vice Principal Nero marches out of the dark room looking as displeased as always. The hall window casts him in the same glaze that had turned Isadora soft, only on Nero it looks swollen and angry. Behind him follows a tall, pale man in a long doctor’s coat. His ashy hair is mussed and greying and deep purple rings hang around his eyes. Violet cannot tell if this man has been the victim of two black eyes or if he merely has not had a proper night’s sleep in months. With the haggard look and violent bruises, he reminds her distantly of Fernald. The man’s name is sewn into the pocket of his white coat, reading crookedly in thread as red as a clown’s nose- LARRY.

Larry thrusts a stack of papers into Isadora’s hands. The two men stand before them, looking grave.

“Miss Quagmire,” Larry begins, and Violet is surprised by the gentle melancholy in his voice. “I was summoned here today because Eliade is concerned for your brother’s health. But from what I see he shows no signs of malfunction, malnutrition, or malady of any kind.”

The man pauses and Isadora nods in acceptance. Her face is stoney, reserved.

After a moment of silence passes, Larry continues, “In fact I think his affliction is more of a… maladaptation. Your brother was, obviously, not prepared to lose his home, his parents, and your other sibling all in one day. The lifestyle shift and the grief. I think those have caused him some… stress.”

Isadora nods. She admits quietly, her voice still strong, “His grief makes him delusional. Makes him imagine conspiracies.”

Larry frowns at her regretfully. “I wish I had known that before examining him. I fear I’ve caused him even more stress. Truly, Miss Quagmire, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize this was a sad occasion.”

Startled, Violet and Isadora share a quick glance, both annoyed that Duncan’s illness be labeled like so many other things throughout Eliade- A SAD OCCASION.

“It’s alright. You had no way to know.” Isadora says, unsure of what else to say. “What are these papers?”

Larry glances beseechingly between the two girls as if they were pulling a practical joke on him. A few moments of silence pass, the next more awkward than the first, before Larry sighs and mutters, “These are legal documents, Miss Quagmire. Simply stating that, since your brother is an orphan, he can be adopted by the state and placed in a new home if his condition does not improve.”

For the calamity the news suggested, Isadora regarded it with only a small narrowing of her eyes and a subtle bracing of her shoulders, as if ready for a battle. A cold sweat prickles at the back of Violet’s neck as if she were touched by a phantom. Doom seems to settle between them as if it had never left.

*We don’t need to lose anyone else*, Violet thinks, and begins, methodically, to breathe.

“I won’t sign it.” Isadora says, glancing between the two men to stare them both in the eyes.
“There is no need for your signature. You are not a legal adult and hold no claim over his care. But I can attest to the care he would receive elsewhere. We are in contact with plenty of noble families and other volunteers very willing to care for him.” Larry says and again his voice seems heavy with a meaning they do not understand.

Isadora clutches the papers to her chest, speechless.

Nero sneers, “Prufrock and Eliade are institutions of learning. If your brother sits sulking in his room all day with an imaginary illness then he doesn’t need to be here.”

“Fine.” Isadora says, voice calm. Violet can not bring herself to look at her friend for fear of what brokenness she might see. “I understand.”

“We’ll leave you then.” Larry says yet he pauses again, waiting for a revelation. Isadora is silent. Nero has already started hurrying from the orphans’ quarters as if allergic.

“Thank you for your visit, doctor.” Violet says eventually.

Larry nods, looking disappointed in some visceral way she cannot pinpoint. “Of course. Have a nice evening, ladies.”

Duncan’s room is dark when they enter. A small bedside light casts an orange glaze to every surface like an outdated streetlamp. He sits sideways on his bed, bare feet flat against the hardwood. Despite the hour, he is still dressed in crumpled pinstripe pajamas. His head is hung in his hands, exposing the pale curl of his neck, drooped and fragile as a wilting lily. Sweat and heat fog the air like smoke.

Violet stays beside the door replacing her picks while Isadora stands right before Duncan with her arms crossed as if a wounded mother waiting for an excuse that will not be enough.

Tense moments pass while Duncan does not move, while Violet feels evermore like an intruder. Finally she reaches into her bag and withdraws a chunk of bread wrapped in napkin and a plastic bag of stew still hot. She places them at Duncan’s side like an offering.

“Do you know what these papers are?” Isadora says, voice low and controlled. When her brother does not respond, she drops them with a harsh smack atop his head. The stack slides fast down the hill of his spine to splay across the messy bed. The action is harsh enough to startle him into eye contact.

“Do you know what these papers are?” Isadora repeats.

“I heard the doctor.” Duncan mutters. His voice is worn from shouting. “You were right outside my door.”

He glances from his sister to Violet and smiles politely but it is a little lost.

“Thank you for the dinner, Violet.” He says, nodding gratefully before reaching into his nightstand and withdrawing a spoon. Duncan breaks his bread, crumbs scattering across his bed and the traitorous papers.

“So?” Isadora demands. “What do you think?”

“It’s… regrettable.” Duncan says, then stuffs a large chunk of bread into his mouth as if it is all he has to say.

“Regrettable?” Isadora parrots, offended. “They’re going to take you away from me and you think
it’s regrettable? You’re not scared; you’re not upset? You don’t want to- to get over it so we can stay together? We’re a family, Duncan! All the family we’ve got left and- No! Don’t you give me that look!”

“But Isadora-” Duncan pleads. His voice holds a weariness Violet has never heard before and it sounds so deep and desperate that she can feel it in her own heart like a terrible compassion. Isadora turns to Violet, angry tears bright in her eyes.

“Duncan thinks our brother might still be alive.”

The world around her changes after that. There is a temporary instant where her situation is final and concrete- their families have died in terrible, remorseless house fires. Then there is the instant afterwards that breathes wretched hope into Violet, that leaves her aching and furious with herself for doubting reality.

“What?” She squeaks, throat suddenly constricted with emotion.

“Don’t tell her that.” Duncan hisses, glaring at his sister with such anger Violet feels as if she’s seeing a whole new person sitting on Duncan’s bed and wearing his pajamas. “That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just possible. But- Quigley’s body was never found. If our parents were in this organization maybe they were prepared for fire. Maybe they, I don’t know, got him out somehow.”

“How?” Isadora challenges, voice tight with repressed fury. Her tone is particularly cruel when she says, “A secret tunnel? A hot air balloon? You’re delusional, Duncan. This is insane.”

Outside in the city below, someone blares their horn. A squeal of tires follows. Duncan, losing his thought, glances to Violet who sees him with sudden clarity.

“Duncan-” She says, a particularly cruel snag of sunlight splintering in the room. She reaches for him like a reflex, the way one goes to tongue a fresh burn in the mouth. “You’re covered in bruises. What-? How did this happen?”

She crosses the room on knees weak with sympathy. Her own wounds enter her vision- thick gauze stained by sores- as she reaches for Duncan’s face wanting, stupidly, to cradle it like a mother or a saint. Wanting to capture and protect.

Duncan flinches away, eyes suddenly wide and worried as if Larry had returned with adoptive parents at his back. The closer she gets to the bed, the more her eyes adjust and she can see that he is not purpled with bruises or shadows but covered in fingerprints of ash as if he had been drawing with charcoal.

“Not bruises.” Duncan grumbles. “It’s ash from my book. The doctor arrived early and I didn’t have time to wash up.”

“Ash from what book?” Violet asks although she already knows the answer.

Duncan pauses, glancing to Isadora with a frown as if she had surprised him. Isadora stands at the wall, silent with hurt. She glares at her brother with frustrated tears brewing in her eyes. The tough flex of her jaw tells Violet she’s biting her tongue.

A moment passes. The Quagmire siblings speak without speaking.

“Duncan?” Violet asks.

Duncan turns that fierce look onto her, then between the girls steady and suspicious as a prison yard
spotlight. His tone is bitter and frustrated when he sneers, “Oh, I’m just surprised my sister here
didn’t spill her guts to you about it. She’s been a mess of worry thinking I’m dreaming conspiracies.
Thinks I’m sick with grief. How could you stand it, Isa?”

“Don’t call me that.” Isadora snaps, fast with repetition. They have had this argument before.

“What can’t handle a nickname? Lighten up. Maybe you wouldn’t have such a stick up your ass if
you could be a bit more charismatic- more likeable. Then you could get some actual friends instead
of harassing me when I’m obviously ill!” Duncan slaps his hands against the bedsheets sending a soft
spray of ash floating into the air like atomic fallout.

“Meanwhile you’ve got all the charisma of a dead rat.” Isadora hisses. Her face is red with anger.
Fists clenched, back braced, she looks to be seconds from launching herself at her brother, who
slumps on the bed as if sitting upright taxes him to his limits.

If this had been any other argument between siblings, Violet would have mumbled an excuse and
fled to give them privacy. Instead, she stays put hoping to see this mysterious book Isadora has
described, a tool she had feared and anticipated since their arrival at Eliade.

“A dead rat? A dead rat?” Duncan is angrier than Violet has ever seen him, chest heaving and red
with fury against the soft curve of his pajama collar. He twists and hauls a blackened pillowcase from
behind his back, tossing it to the floor between them like a weighty accusation. “Without this book
we’ll be good as dead rats! We’ll be dead as doornails, dead as yesterday! Dead as our families, if I
don’t figure this out. To protect us.”

“From who?” Violet asks, confused, desperate.

Isadora laughs as if through pain, as if gravely injured and fending weeping.

“Isn’t that the question?” She asks.

Duncan glares at the book on the floor, betrayal on his face. He speaks like cutting teeth.

“I… don’t exactly know. But they have this symbol. Or, symbols. Of eyes. A few different versions
and they’re tattooed onto their ankles. But a name, a brand, an ideology? I don’t know that yet.”
Duncan hides his eyes, glaring at the pillowcase instead of acknowledging their hurt.

“So what do you know?” Violet asks, as kindly as she can.

“I know our parents were in a secret organization. And I know it has something to do with these
fires. That book, I found it in the ruins of our house. And it’s called THE INCOMPLETE
HISTORY OF SECRET ORGANIZATIONS. And- and our parents are in it. Go ahead and look.
Page forty.”

Violet kneels to the floor, feeling the give and warp of Eliade floorboards, and carefully tugs the
book free. The cover, once leather, is now black and charred. The pages peel at its spine with rotten
glue. Each sheet is feathered with destruction, black as death. She feels sick touching it.

The cover turns with an audible struggle. Inside, a gleaming flyleaf displays the title in faded golden
ink. She flips to the fortieth page and, for the first and only time, comes face to face with the
Quagmire parents.

They are tall and slender like their children, dark-haired and bright-eyed. In what is left of the
photograph, they stand with their backs pressed together like warriors. In her hand she holds a ready
grappling hook. In his, a bottle that the small caption calls a Molotov cocktail.
“They’re beautiful,” Violet wants to say like a respectful mourner, but keeps her mouth shut. Instead she just stares, hoping her friends will help her make sense of a senseless tragedy.

“So what does this mean?” She asks.

“That book mentions fire as a weapon and a metaphor and a tool constantly. It’s likely that if our parents were in this organization then they were... murdered. That all these fires are arson.” Duncan says.

“Then it would be the same for my family too.” Violet says, acknowledging what they hadn’t wanted to admit.

“But-” Isadora decides to speak, startling the two of them like gunshot. “If our parents were in a secret organization don’t you think we’d notice? That we’d have some hint?”

“That’s the thing about secret organizations,” Duncan says, calm where she is not. “They’re secret.”

Isadora sneers, that same wounded tone in the gruffness of her voice. Out of the corner of her eye, Violet sees the girl raise her foot and reacts instantly, pulling her hands away as Isadora lurches forward and kicks the book so hard it skids under the bed and cracks against the wall.

“Isadora!” Duncan cries in alarm.

“Duncan!” Isadora cries in return, her voice warbling with repressed emotion. Violet watches the way her eyes fill with more tears and her chin quivers like a child and feels motionless against the barrier of someone else’s grief. “If our parents were in this organization then they would have seen this coming. They would have educated us and protected us. End of story.”

She stalks to the door, ignoring Violet kneeling on the floor, and yanks the knob which has loosened from the power of her earlier rage. At the sight of his sister crying, Duncan is similarly powerless. He sits mutely on the bed.

“If you keep digging into this it could get us into trouble.” Her back is braced and hunched through the maroon blazer of her uniform. Isadora looks, suddenly, very young. “Don’t lose your head so they take you from me.”

She leaves them sitting in the dark room, Duncan’s head spinning with plans, Violet’s hands covered in grime, each one thinking the same fearful thoughts about a shadowy organization hidden in the bodies of their parents and wondering, if anyone, who they could trust. Silence settles ceaseless as sickness.

In the aftermath of Isadora’s denial they are already quiet with the things they will no longer say.

Chapter End Notes

_The Incomplete History of Secret Organizations_ is mentioned within the ASOUE Netflix series. Those of you who have seen it may also recognize our visiting doctor.

Thank you muchly to those who have commented and messaged me so far. I appreciate
it endlessly, as always.

Please let me know what you think!
Chapter Four

The next time she meets the Count, two more weeks have passed and they are both in hiding.

Violet is hurrying through the ground level of Eliade, passing scattered instructors, empty classrooms, and walls glittering with religious iconography. It is the fifth Wednesday the orphans have had to themselves. Some have used the time to rest in their bedrooms, to have quiet hours of peace with their friends. Others take the city busses to the local market in search of food and shops and freedom without harsh rules and overseers.

Others, like Carmelita Spats, cause trouble.

Others, like Violet, avoid trouble.

Her footsteps echo in the empty hall against the ornate tile floor. She rounds a corner, nearly trips over a large wooden crate, one of the many anonymous prayer boxes scattered around the building, and hurriedly flings open a small exit door. She hopes Carmelita will think she wouldn’t exit Eliade, would continue down the hall in a rush of avoidance and altar smoke.

Violet’s lungs are suddenly full of greasy city air as she stumbles down three uneven steps and into a cobbled alleyway. It is pressed thin between the cathedral and the newsprint station for *The Daily Punctilio*.

Usually it is crowded with garbage and shadow and moss. She finds all those things there, yet what she finds in addition is a familiar man sitting on an overturned wine crate, clutching a newspaper. His dark eyes fly to hers, narrowed and ready for a fight, before recognition sparks in them.

Olaf mutters, “Orphan,” in greeting, but Violet can sense the implied question at the end.

The best she can give him is a pleading look and a breathless, “Hi, Olaf,” before she stumbles to crouch behind a row of grimy garbage cans. Violet can feel the confused weight of his eyes through her hiding spot but before he can ask a single question, the door flies open yet again and another familiar face glares into the alley. Her mouth is pinched into a snarl and her red curls are frizzy as if the malice burning within her has fried them.

“Count!” She chirps, her furious demeanor shifting to sickly sweet. Olaf’s glare shifts to rest upon the other girl. Even through the fear in her gut, Violet remembers the first words Olaf had said about Carmelita- “Voice sounds like a dog toy?” - and feels reassured by them. “Have you seen a cakesniffing orphan pass through here? I saw her sneaking around my room… And what are you doing all alone out here? Meeting someone?”
A harsh sigh of annoyance leaves him. Through the gaps in the garbage cans, Violet can see Carmelita’s pale face is calm and open. There seems to be a moment of pure consideration on Olaf’s part. He stands, languid and slow, folding his newspaper across his forearm and watching the other girl with a tight, suspicious look around his eyes.

“I’m not meeting anyone. Not that it’s any of your business, but this is hardly a private place for associates. Can’t a man read the paper outside in peace?”

“I think it would be my business. Considering.” Carmelita sniffs, a hint of annoyance to her tone.

“Considering.” Olaf repeats, monotone with displeasure. “Considering what? Your penchant for harassing your schoolmates?”

“I’m not harassing anyone.” Carmelita insists. “I just didn’t know if you had seen someone come into the alley. Have you?”

Violet shifts in time to catch a glimpse of Olaf rolling his eyes. Gravel pops as the man drops to his seat and yanks his newspaper open with a crisp crack of pages.

He says like finality, like fact, “Fuck off, orphan. Take your schoolyard tiffs inside and leave me be.”

Offense changes Carmelita. Appalled at the adult language, her brown eyes blow wide with shock before she glares with a ferocity Violet nearly envies. She flicks her hair and puts one hand on her hip as if Olaf were a challenge easily solved by a tantrum.

“I’ll have you know,” Carmelita hisses, voice pitched high and whining like the buzz of a mosquito. “I’m only here because of-”

“I don’t care why you think you’re here.” Olaf mutters. He turns a page Violet is sure he has not read. “Have you forgotten you live in an extension of an orphanage? There is no one here to protect you. To defend you. And anyone who might feel the need—” He meets her eyes with a knowing glare. Carmelita shifts, her expression paling, her posture sinking with diminutive acceptance. “—is not around. Hold your tongue, orphan. And get out of my sight.”

With a frustrated huff of defeat, Carmelita backs away and slams the door shut. Silence hangs in the alley like another visitor until Violet rises from behind the garbage can.

“Thank you, Olaf.” She says, grabbing another wine crate and dragging it over to sit beside him in the sunlight. Now that Carmelita has gone, so has her fear. In its place is a wired, sharp awareness that she is, again, alone with Count Olaf who is sitting with his long legs crossed at the ankle, with his sleeves rolled up, and smudged ink at his wrists and she is, again, uncomfortably, achingly attracted to him.

The sun has just begun its slow sink over the city. Through the cramped alley, it casts the pair in gold and sends their shadows to the ground as if someone had cut their silhouettes from golden silk and stretched them through the backstreet.

“You’re welcome. You’ve said that to me twice now, y’know. Pretty soon you’ll have to buy me a personalized cake as thanks. It will be raspberry flavored and the frosting will be white with black letters and say, Count Olaf, thank you for being so handsome and saving my ass and also being very handsome. Love, Violet.” The Count quips, still clutching his newspaper the way some nervous drivers clutch a steering wheel. He sighs in lamented, sarcastic wanting and mutters, “Or wine. With the same thing on a card, of course.”

“I would, but I can’t buy wine yet.” Violet says easily. She looks to Olaf’s newspaper, which he
promptly folds and tosses away. It skitters down the alley, its edges brushing broken glass.

“Ah, right. I was meaning to ask you, Violet…” The Count shifts his crate to face her, puts his elbows on his knees, and laces his fingers. He looks to her seriously despite the odd circumstances of their second private meeting, as if she were a riddle he was trying to solve. Being the sole focus of his attention makes Violet want to squirm, yet she holds still and listens.

“I meant to ask you before, but never found the right time. You don’t look young enough to be in an orphanage, even one as half-hearted and repressive as this one. How old are you, dear thing?”

Despite her excitement at the affectionate title, supreme disappointment manifests itself like a physical weight in Violet’s chest. She feels her shoulders slump slightly, feels distaste twist in her mouth as she says, “Seventeen.”

“Seventeen.” Olaf repeats. Violet had expected him to turn away, to at least redirect his attention to the street or the trash or anything else. Instead, the man smiles, looking villainous and bold and, Violet thinks, absolutely irresistible. “Not quite legal yet, are you?”

‘Does it matter?’ The thought comes to her, heaves itself at the backs of her teeth, yet she forces it down. Not trusting herself to speak, Violet shakes her head. From where he has shifted, the sunlight warms half of her face and she closes her eyes against the feeling, wondering how many months it has been since she was outside and coming up empty of memory.

When Olaf doesn’t speak, she finally says, “Not yet. One more year and I can leave.”

“To where?” Olaf asks.

Violet has wondered the same thing. Since the very day she became an orphan, that was always her biggest mystery. She thinks of Duncan and his book of secret societies, of his grief twisted into conspiracy, and the ways misery and blame so often arrive together. Without her family, she wonders what is next. Not why they are gone or who could have hurt them.

“I’m not sure,” She admits. She still has her eyes closed against the sun and although she can feel Olaf looking at her, she does not feel the need to open them. “I’ve wondered, but never decided. I can’t think of anywhere… else. Nothing has much appeal anymore.”

The Count nods although she cannot see it. He says, “You could always join my theatre Troupe, you know.”

Violet snorts, opening her eyes to roll them. “I’m not much of an actress, Olaf.”

The man smiles as if sharing a private joke with himself, all crinkled eyes and a sly grin she has never seen before.

“What?” Violet demands, suspicious and endeared all at once. “What’s that look on your face?”

“You wouldn’t have to act.” He says through that grin, a warmth to his dark eyes.

Violet feels as if he is hinting something she is too thick, too inexperienced to realize, yet quells that thought with doubt. He could never want her, could never desire her. She is scrawny and weak, and hides from girls like Carmelita, and feels free only when trespassing alone. She spends too much time in Eliade and has no real goals, no future. She is merely the victim of an unfortunate tragedy, and it has derailed the course of her life so brilliantly that she has lost herself in its aftermath. Her home and her family are gone and Violet is left with nothing to prove she had ever truly had them.
“A traveling inventor would be handy, I guess.” She admits, feeling embarrassed for a reason she cannot pinpoint.

It is Olaf’s turn to roll his eyes, which, like anything else, he does dramatically. He sighs as if world-weary and mutters, “Oh, Violet. I called you sharp before, don’t make me take it back.”

“Okay.” Violet scoffs, her heart skittering high in her chest. “Then why would you want me around if not to builds your sets?”

Olaf eyes her critically, searching for something. After a few moments he says, voice calm and low, “Is it such a surprise I would want you around?”

“Yes. Definitely.” Feeling overwhelmed, Violet stands. Beyond the shadowed alley, cars glimmer and glide past, their windows down, lofty music floating from dozens of radios.

“Going somewhere?” Olaf asks, his voice nearly a purr. Violet watches his gaze travel slowly up her legs to meet her eyes.

The words come to her like compulsion- “Not if you kiss me.” - but she swallows them the way she has grown accustomed to suppressing physical pain. Violet clenches her fists at her side and watches the cars go by so her eyes are not drawn to the man beside her.

“I wish I didn’t have to.” Violet admits. Knowing she must leave a perfect opportunity to chat with Olaf alone and in the sunset has her stomach sinking with regret. “But I’ve got to get to my lair before Carmelita finds me.”

Olaf hums, crossing his arms. He glances from the cars to Violet’s face as if he doesn’t quite believe her. “And what has you so scared of a scrawny little thing like her?”

“That’s a fair question. It’s better if I just… show you. Won’t take long.”

Violet returns to her perch on the wine crate and begins unwinding the gauze at her left hand slowly. “To put it simply, Carmelita keeps framing me. Every week or so we have a visiting speaker and usually she steals their notes and hides them in my room. One time she stole four bottles of the communion wine, drank them gradually, then hid the bottles under my bed. Neither Carmelita nor the staff can prove that I actually did anything, but they believe her without any doubts. No matter how much I protest.”

Unexpectedly, Olaf is silent in the stretch of time it takes her to fully unroll each strip. Violet doesn’t spare a look to his face to see what his reaction might be, merely focuses on the repetitive unwinding, the tension of the gauze.

The space around her knuckles is paler than normal in the golden sunset. Pink lines of pressure have been pressed into the flesh from the tightness of her bandages. The skin looks almost like a roadmap, lines crossing and scattering until they, inevitably, end at the deep red of her wounds.

Most recently, she had received five cuts from Nero for scribbling unkind things within the notes of their upcoming speaker, a local rabbi explaining the importance of the Festival of Sukkot. She never learned what she had supposedly written, had merely been summoned to the Vice Principal’s temporary office by Mr. Remora and once she had arrived, had found herself placing her hands flat on Nero’s desk, his thin, flexible cane flashing through the air before she understood what she had supposedly done.

The five cuts were quick but, unlike the last session which had wielded ten, these were more painful because of the leftover reminders of her previous supposed transgressions, not yet healed into scar.
Violet still had yet to learn why Nero seemed so sure of her rebellion, but since the very first time she was framed, she learned that any kind of protest, plea, or even a squeak of pain resulted in more cuts. And that was the last thing she wanted.

Violet flexes her fingers, hoping the air will do some good. Thin strips of split skin cross atop her knuckles, surrounded by bruises and small blood vessels ruptured under force. At first, she could count the number of lashes. Now, they blend together in multiple lines. A swell of blood cracks free at her flex, yet she feels no pain, only the relief of a taught scab splitting.

Beside her, Olaf is still and silent. She wonders then if she had made a mistake, if sharing a problem so physically evident had crossed some invisible line of acceptable conversation, but then the Count speaks.

“Carmelita. Is this her fault?” His voice is deadly quiet. Violet finally ventures a look to Olaf’s expression, expecting disgust or annoyance. Instead she finds him stoney-faced, like a warrior. There is a hard quirk to his mouth as if he is bracing for a fight. His dark eyes have gone flat and cold.

“Well, yeah. I don’t know why she does it. But Nero never listens, even if I-” She spits the next word like spitting a tooth, as if sacrificing some primal slice of pride with it. “Beg. He just canes me more.”

Olaf has his eyes closed when she glances his way. His posture is rigid and his jaw is flexed as if he is trying to suppress some upheaval of emotion.

“He makes you beg?” Olaf asks, voice tense.

“No, he doesn’t.” Violet admits, standing yet again and wrapping her gauze back around her sore knuckles. “But sometimes I can’t help it.”

Olaf stands beside her, quick and snappy, as if someone had just challenged him to a fist fight. He is so tall he blocks the sun from her face. Coolness drops like sudden rain.

“Can’t you do something? Threaten Carmelita? Or Nero? Get them off your back before you die of blood loss?” Olaf questions, insistent and brutish. Violet merely laughs and shakes her head.

“I’m flattered you think I could threaten anyone. Can’t really get Nero into trouble for disciplining his influx of orphans. And Carmelita isn’t going to stop. None of my instructors will listen to me. I think it’s smarter to tough it out instead of make a fuss. Plus-” fear strikes straight to her dropping stomach as if she had just leapt off a very tall diving board or into the empty gut of an elevator shaft. “Nero said next time I’m caught he’ll make sure I remember it, whatever that means. I don’t want to accuse him of- what, abuse?- and get him even angrier with me.”

Violet worries her bottom lip and fiddles with the loose end of her gauze. The setting sun has dipped further and their shadows have slowly stretched throughout the cobbled alley. Spring chill begins to settle in for the night, cool and thin. She wonders at the time and if she is late for dinner, if Duncan and Isadora wait at their usual table.

“Violet,” Olaf says, breaking her thoughts. They meet eyes easily and a strange authority burns in the man’s gaze. “You don’t have to be the one making threats. If you need them off your back, tell me.”

The Count leaves his speech at that despite the obvious intrigue on Violet’s face. She wonders at his life, at the meaning behind his willingness to threaten others on her behalf, yet suppresses her questions. She can tell by the avoidant tilt of his shoulders that he doesn’t want to elaborate, yet she finds herself again questioning if this will be their last time alone together, if it will be their last time
ever speaking.

“I will.” She steps away, reluctant to leave his shadow. “And if you ever help me again, I’ll get you
that cake.”

That makes the man grin wide and amused. “Remember what it says?”

Violet smiles back and trots up the little steps that lead back into Eliade.

“Something about a handsome ass?” She teases, catching the narrow-eyed smirk of the man as she
turns and opens the door. Olaf has his hands in his trouser pockets and his shoulders turned inward
as if bracing against a chill. His head is tilted, chin at an angle. He looks down his nose at her, as if
sizing up an opponent.

“Cheeky. Don’t forget it.” He says.

“Goodnight, Count Olaf.” She says, stepping inside, casting him one more grateful look.

“Goodnight, Violet.” He returns, and then she shuts the door between them, blocking out the smog
of city air and leaving the man in darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I didn't make many references this chapter. That will soon change.

As for me, I am about to read Snicket's newest tale The Bad Mood and the Stick. I'm
sure it will not be lacking.

Again, much thanks! Please let me know what you think!
Chapter Five

They meet again the very next day, first thing in the morning.

Though Violet’s morning proves stressful before she even lays eyes on Olaf, due to the despairing reality that she wakes to find her hair ribbon missing. It does not encircle her wrist with its familiar pressure, does not sit coiled like a serpent on her nightstand. Panicked, Violet had stripped her bed bare, had searched her meager room, had even tracked her footsteps to the communal bathrooms only to go to breakfast empty-handed.

Isadora had sensed her woe immediately. And, after shoving a small mountain of strawberries into her mouth, had set off to hunt for it herself.

“You can’t afford to get caught somewhere you shouldn’t be, or even show up late to class. Not with Nero’s last threat. Eat your breakfast. I’ll try to show up before the bell rings.” Isadora had said, standing from their usual table. “Besides, you need it. It’s the last thing your Dad gave you, right?”

“Right.” Violet had said, surprised and grateful that she had remembered. “I’ll try to keep Mrs. Bass off your back.”

Isadora had hurried away without another word.

She does not return before the first bell.

Violet sits sweating in her first period classroom. She worries the hem of her skirt and itches to pull her hair back with the grey velvet ribbon no longer in her possession. Her schoolbooks are placed in perfect lines atop her desk and she sits primly as if her straight posture could somehow quell the storm she feels sparking like so much static in the air. Before any other orphan, Violet had shown up to class early to appear especially faultless. Mrs. Bass had glanced at her neutrally before setting up for the morning’s lesson, pulling odd artifacts from a large sack by her desk. Orphans filed in slowly.

Carmelita sits near the classroom door where the light shines in and sparkles against the curls of her ponytail which have lost their frizzy edges. Even Violet can tell from across the room that she wears a new hair ribbon. Carmelita usually wore silk in bright colors or thick, lacy bows. Instead, a cobalt silk ribbon curls along the deep drop of her hair.

Violet thinks of the previous evening, of peeking between a high brick wall and the ridged backs of garbage cans to see Carmelita reaching open-palmed and gentle towards Olaf. A flitter of jealousy makes her teeth ache for a moment, as she remembers. Inevitably she thinks to later, to the stricken look on the girl’s face once the Count had hissed fuck off, and the odd smile he had given her after saying, You wouldn’t have to act.

Mrs. Bass stands at the front of the little room, a stack of rulers in her hands like a bouquet. Without
any instruction, she passes them throughout the class. Not conventionally instructive, the woman was fond of having the orphans measure whatever she pleased using the metric system and nothing else. Today, this included a box of pencils, a picture frame, a dirty frying pan, and a dusty skeleton of a cat among various other oddities. Once the trinkets have been passed around, Violet sets a notebook and the dirty frying pan on Isadora’s desk and begins to measure the pencil box while the room fills with bright chatter.

Several minutes later, after Violet has measured the pencil box, the frying pan, and the cat skeleton, Isadora enters the room and hurries to her desk, unnoticed by Mrs. Bass who sits behind her desk staring out a window to the bustling city far below.

The girl slides into her desk, frowning at the dirty frying pan, and sets her bookbag down with an exhausted thud. When she glances to Violet, her eyes are defeated but bright with determination.

“Well?” Violet asks.

“I hunted heaven for it.” Isadora says, stiff yet untroubled. “No dice.”

Violet, confused, stares at her friend, waiting for explanation.

“I begged the earth empty of it. Death believes in us whether we believe or not.” Isadora says, handing the notebook back to Violet and placing her own onto her desk. “It’s a poem. Sorry. That’s how it felt, though, wandering through this cathedral- like I hunted heaven for it. I looked everywhere I could. The Sanctuary, the downstairs library, and even your secret place. No dice. I’m sorry.”

Violet sighs, disappointed but unsurprised. “We can keep looking. Thank you. I know it could’ve gotten you, and especially Duncan, into just as much trouble if you were caught sneaking around.”

Isadora tosses her hair, smug. “Didn’t get caught, did I? I might not have found your ribbon but I did find ten dollars and lots of prayer beads. I’m putting that money towards going to the city market soon. I think we should get lunch together and then-”

The two girls set to measuring and chatting as early morning sunlight floods the room. Violet is so grateful for Isadora and their happy conversation that the sting of her absent ribbon feels small and unimportant, like a smarting papercut instead of a deep wound.

“Oh! I wrote a new couplet today. Thought it up while I was climbing your ladder.” Isadora says as she carefully measures the curl of the cat’s spine.

“Let me hear it then.” Violet pens her measurements into her notebook which has quickly become crowded with useless information. Isadora glances across the room to where Carmelita is measuring the dirty frying pan with a scowl.

“It would be a stroke of luck

if Carmelita were hit by a truck.”

“Love it.” Violet snickers, sharing a mischievous smile with her friend. “We should submit it to The Daily Punctilio .”
“How convenient. Right next door.” Isadora mutters, playing along.

The two girls joke for most of the period. Eventually they swap their props while Mrs. Bass sits slumped at her desk, still peering out the large windows and into the city.

A loud knock at the door breaks the cozy monotony of measurement. Several faces turn to peer towards the hall. Mrs. Bass rises as Count Olaf flings open the door and enters dramatically, his arms thrown wide, his chin tilted, a practiced distance to his eyes.

“Sorry I’m late, I didn’t want to come.” He says in greeting. A long coat intricately-patterned hangs from his shoulders despite the rising temperatures and sunglasses rest in the dark waves atop his head. Golden rings glint against each of his long fingers. He looks like a practiced parody of wealth, like a caricature of a successful man.

Violet can see his shiny eyes scanning the crowd of orphans. Before they come to rest on her, her stomach drops in anticipation. Even the man’s presence has her suddenly nervous and giddy. Beneath that, though, there is a slight bloom of relaxation, of safety. She knows that, with Olaf, she is at least free from Carmelita’s meddling until he turns away.

Olaf’s eyes finally come to rest on her. Recognition and amusement brighten in them as he smirks, claps his hands together, and says, “Nevermind. I’m glad to be here.”

“Students,” Mrs. Bass says, voice dull and tired. “Count Olaf is here today to make an announcement about his upcoming play.”

“Correct. As you orphans should know, I was voted Most Handsome and Talented Individual Involved in the Local Theatre by The Daily Punctilio. This fact alone should convince you to attend, yet-” He grabs a ruler from Mrs. Bass’ desk and slaps it quickly against his palm. Uncomfortable awareness blooms low in her stomach as Violet’s mind is filled with lecherous ideas of her bent across a desk, or his knee, the ruler heavy and fast in his hand.

“Wait, why do you have so many rulers? What could you possibly need to measure?” The Count asks, distracted. He glances to Violet as if he expects her to answer, yet Carmelita raises her hand into the air and does not wait to be picked before she speaks. It seems Violet is not the only one to be fascinated by the instrument in the Count’s hands because Carmelita rushes, voice high, “Count Olaf, I could use it to measure your-”

“Cockeyed orphans should keep their rulers to themselves, I think.” The Count snaps, cracking his own ruler against his palm once more. Startled silence settles over the classroom and Violet has to stare at her desk and bite her lip to keep herself from peeking at Isadora, knowing that if she does she will lose herself in laughter.

Carmelita, face red with humiliation, sits quietly at her desk with her hands flat against its face as if she no longer trusts them.

“Orphans, I cannot tell you what this play will be about because it’s a secret. Only that it will be wonderful and perfect and wonderful because it is starring me. But, we are prepared to give you orphans a demonstration of our talents, especially mine. Troupe!” Olaf calls towards the door and, on cue, his Troupe members shuffle inside.

The white-faced women enter first dressed in frilly pink gowns, their white hair stacked high upon their heads. They walk with their shoulders pressed together, trailing rose petals like flower girls in a wedding. After that, the individual of indeterminate gender enters dressed in a long judge’s robe and a tall white wig. They come to stand next to the Count with a calm expression, as if already in-
character. The bald man shuffles into the room, his arms full of props. A large stack of paper is tucked into the junction between his chin and shoulder. After a few seconds, another man shuffles in. He wears a groomsman’s suit and large, white gloves covering his hooks.

Amusement makes her bite her lip to keep from grinning and once she glances to Olaf she realizes he is already watching her. Their eyes meet and a strange little thrill passes between them, invisible as a radio wave. By waiting for her to see his Troupe and catch his eye, they had both acknowledged their conversations, those small moments cut away from the reality of Eliade where they had spoken freely.

A giddy feeling like joy bubbles up in Violet’s throat, making her want to sob or laugh or choke on it as long as she could. Tender affection spikes high in her like fever, flushing her with heat.

“The musical that we will be demonstrating is a previously-performed masterpiece by the genius Al Funcoot. It is called *The Marvelous Marriage*.”

Excited chatter flickers through the room. Girls are leaning between rows of desks to whisper between themselves, grinning. Isadora meets her eyes with an easy nod and a flick of her hand as if to say: *Anything’s better than measuring.*

“Yes, yes, orphans. It is quite exciting. The premise is this: an extremely handsome man wishes to marry the woman he has survived an avalanche to be with. The scene we will be performing is the moment they are bewed. As you can see, I will play the groom.” The Count bows so low Violet almost expects the sunglasses to topple from his head. More excited whispers ring throughout the room. When the man rises, he waves a hand to his associates and says, “We also have two flowerwomen, a judge, my groomsman, and a lowly props consultant. But the question is, who will be my bride?”

The man pauses dramatically, a sneaky smirk on his face. Sick anticipation makes Violet’s stomach drop so quickly she feels ill. She knows she has no real hold on him, cannot expect the man to pick her out of an entire classroom of willing young women. Visions of Olaf with other faceless girls spring to her mind, other girls backstage, pressing against one another to tug a pulley, or sitting close in an alleyway comparing wounds like children, like cohorts. Embarrassed and frustrated at her mooning, Violet smothers the emotion and tries to gaze at the man calmly, as if they are strangers. She can sense that he is carefully not looking at her.

“Do I have any…” Here Olaf pauses again, although something in his tone feels heavy with a meaning she does not understand. “Volunteers?”

Dozens of hands shoot into the air. Violet keeps hers securely in her lap.

The man takes his time looking around the room as if he were actually choosing a suitor. He hums, tapping his chin, and every time he glances in one direction, several girls gasp quietly in anticipation.

Violet looks out the window to the bustling city below, doing her best to appear disinterested, yet she can feel the moment when those shiny eyes settle like a touch against her.

“You.” He says simply.

A clap sounds through the room as Carmelita stamps in fury.

The weight of Olaf’s gaze has not left her.

Violet remembers the very first instance she ever laid eyes on this man and the panicked, wild
thought she had, as if she knew that her battle fighting her desire for him was already over. Oh no.

Another slap, much closer, makes her flinch as the bald man drops a script atop her desk and says, “Page sixty.”

Violet rises from her seat, avoiding Isadora’s eyes, and comes to stand next to Olaf before the stunned classroom. She breathes slowly, that same smoky haze between them, and envisions him as her imaginary interviewer, pacing her to calm the frantic bursting of her heart, his gravelly voice saying, “Breathe deep for me, sneaky girl…”

When they meet eyes, Olaf’s are amused and warm and she cannot find it in herself to be angry with him.

“Page sixty, orphan.” He demands, all serious business now that they are supposed to be acting. Violet fumbles with her script and finds the page easily. It is already dog-eared and waiting. A quiet hush falls over the class as they anticipate the coming show.

Olaf waves to his Troupe and they take their places. The person of indeterminate gender stands at the front of the class as if they are supposed to be teaching, their face as neutral and serious as when they arrived. They hold a large book with golden pages split in their stilled hands. Olaf stands slightly before him and to the side, facing the audience yet not in the way of the judge. The white-faced women rush to Violet’s side and pluck tangles of baby’s breath from their bouquets to place in her hair. Music starts from a small speaker that the bald man holds to the side of the room. It is a fast-paced and boppy, not something Violet would have expected for a wedding scene.

This thought occurs to her and then, an instant later, she realizes the immensity of her situation. She is standing between two of Count Olaf’s Troupe members, a script in her hands, marching to music to meet him before a judge as if they were about to be wed, about to commit their hearts so wholly it would change their entire lives.

“My love,” Olaf purrs, loud enough for the entire room to hear. A violent blush blooms atop her cheeks, yet the feeling is broken into distraction when the screech of a chair sounds and Carmelita Spats yells, “Bathroom!” and hurries into the hall with a slam of the door.

Not to be outdone, Olaf begins again. “As I was saying … My love.”

He kneels to the floor and takes her hands in his, careful of her gauze. The look in his face is genuine, not like the careful mask of acting he wore upon entering the classroom. Violet feels as if she has taken a jump into an elevator shaft and will never stop falling.

“I know our time together was cut short all those years ago because of the avalanche. But now I am here, before this entire congregation, to stop your wedding to someone who is not me! I survived, I fought my way through disgusting amounts of dirt, and I wish to marry you, here and now!”

“Oh, Ol- uh-,” Violet glances to her script. “Gunther! How could I have known you survived the avalanche?”

“You should have sensed it!” The Count snaps, still kneeling. “You should have been able to tell that your boyfriend was alive after the incident. In my wounded state, thoughts of you were the only thing that kept me going! Well, you, and money. Lots of money that we will share once I sue the park ranger who led us on that hike into the Mortmain Mountains! What do you say?”

Someone had drawn little poses into her script beneath certain lines and she moved to follow them with careful precision. Violet wrenches her hands free from the Count’s loose grasp and drapes one
hand over her face as if a damsel in distress.

“Oh, Gunther! How could I ever resist you? And lots of settlement money? Let’s get hitched!” She smiles down at him, her voice too quiet and taught to be considered a worthy actress, yet Olaf beams at her all the same.

“Hooray!” The entire Troupe yells in sync.

The man pretends to slip a ring onto her finger and rises. He places an arm around her shoulder and pulls her so close her cheek rests against the soft fabric of his elaborate coat and she can again smell the charred campfire scent of him.

“Then let us dance!” Olaf cries as the bald man cranks the little speaker and that same boppy music grows louder. The man spins her before her crowd of schoolmates and fragile joy makes her laugh, loud and round and delighted. They continue to spin wildly and the Troupe soon follows suit. The white-faced women dance with each other and the person of indeterminate gender sways, yet keeps their spot before the crowd as if unsure if their character is expected to dance. Even Fernald hooks into the sleeves of a startled Mrs. Bass and they twirl fast, arms fully extended like delighted children.

A handful of brave students stand in unison and soon the room is crowded with dancing orphans and swirling skirts and laughter. Isadora finds her to take Olaf’s place as several girls swarm around him, desperate for a dance.

There is a fractional second where Isadora twirls her and she can see Olaf reaching for her hand again, his eyes annoyed at the swarm of other girls, where Violet is completely happy.

That moment dies as soon as the classroom door is flung open and Vice Principal Nero stands before them.

The bald man cuts the music and tense silence settles like dust or death or ash.

“Pardon me, Mrs. Bass, for interrupting what I’m sure is a very educational measurement lesson.” Nero sneers, glaring at Mrs. Bass, who quickly drops Fernald’s hooks. She straightens her posture like an ashamed child and looks away.

“Where is-? Ah. You.” Nero spots Violet standing across the room, her hands in Isadora’s. Her best friend and Olaf stand between them like protective gatekeepers. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about the flooded baptismal pool in the sanctuary?”

Before Violet can even answer, the man shakes his head as if she is particularly disappointing.

“Of course not. I’m going to go see if Mr. Remora has managed to stop the flood and you-” He points directly at her and Violet can feel it as if he had jabbed her in the chest. “You’d better be in my office by the time I’m done.”

The man looks around the room once more before turning to leave. He pays no mind to Mrs. Bass, yet he turns with a wicked smile once he reaches the door and sneers, “Do not be late, Ms. Baudelaire.”

A subtle choking sound grates in Olaf’s throat and when she turns to look at him, his eyes are wide with shock. He stares at her as if she is a stranger or a phantom, as if he has never truly seen her. His hands are fists at his side and his jaw is clenched as if she had just wounded him in some primal, irreparable way.

But Violet has no time to reflect on the bizarre look on Olaf’s face.
In the stunned aftermath of Nero’s exit, she gathers her things and rushes into the hall towards his office feeling as though she were running straight to her own execution.

Chapter End Notes

The poem Isadora quotes is Pietà by Kevin Young.
Gunther was Olaf’s disguise in The Ersatz Elevator.
The extended edition of the 2004 ASOUE movie contains a long clip where Jim Carrey acts as Olaf for forever and he mentions somewhere an avalanche being part of the plot for The Marvelous Marriage. Wasn’t as random as it might have seemed.
The Mortmain Mountains were also first mentioned in The Ersatz Elevator as the home of the last safe place before its destruction in Book Ten.
The odd list of items the orphans measure were all measured by odd orphans within The Austere Academy.
Al Funcoot is one of the many anagrams used by Count Olaf for his theatrical work.
Isadora’s couplet is an improvised version from The Austere Academy, but instead of starring Coach Genghis I made it Carmelita.
Due to life being busy next weekend, I’m posting next week’s chapter today. Just so ya know.
Please let me know what you think!
In his mind, he sees her smiling.

It is the only vision Olaf can conjure as he paces an empty corridor in the uppermost floor of Eliade-Violet, her warm, affectionate face pinched with hesitation, with unfamiliarity. He sees the kindness, the gentle nature of her, the foolhardy resilience. He remembers how she looked at him the previous night during their hushed conversation in the alleyway, with that grateful tilt to her smile as if he were the only source of kindness left in the world.

_What a twisted reality_, Olaf thinks as he paces. He can almost taste the ash in his mouth, can almost feel residual flames searing straight up his back.

“Baudelaire.” He mutters to himself like a curse. “Violet Baudelaire.”

He thinks of his youth stuck in odd classes, stuck in tired duels of wit with Bertrand, stuck on missions with secrets like teeth, like blood in his mouth. He thinks of growing up in an organization that had turned him cruel, how he had fallen head first into that deep lake of suffering, wanting to drown in it. How he had learned to love that suffering, to control it, to inflict it upon others.

Olaf realizes this in a singular moment, in a heartbeat: He is sick with sentiment for Violet Baudelaire.

He has had suitors before. Plenty in clandestine amounts and situations and levels of commitment. He has been in love, maybe, once. Yet even the memory of that—small, hot hands, a glint of glasses, her voice calm and smooth over poetry ("The mind has a thousand eyes/ and the heart but one/ yet the light of a whole life dies/ when love is done.") it sears him, yet feels pale and shallow next to the wound Violet has gouged in him.

The realization is an odd feeling. A little like panic.

Olaf tries to think of a moment where she did it, where she entranced him so helplessly. He thinks of her standing centerstage alone, theatre lights catching golden in her hair, before a word had passed between them. He thinks of her unrolling thick gauze revealing wounds the size of quarters and blood red as he’s ever seen it and the brittle shame worn weary onto her face. He thinks of their dance and the one moment she seemed happy and thinks, maybe, that was it, but then a thousand other moments rush to mind and he loses his pinpointed time the way an astrologer might lose the position of one bright star for the glittering hoard of them.

He feels obsessed. Deranged.
Olaf keeps wearing down the carpet of Eliade as he paces, praying he does not destroy her the way he seems to destroy everything else as if it is an inevitable epilogue.

The sunset through the windows, slowed in the dying season, leaves the Count’s anxious pacing looking as though he were chasing his shadow every time he turned around. He notices this and distaste quirks in him- he has always disliked being followed- and turns down a random string of halls, all empty.

He focuses on his feet and the shine of his shoes moving fast over dull carpet. He gets halfway down the hall before he hears Nero’s voice from the farthest door.

“*When-*” A crack like gunshot, like an uneven bow rebounding after a wayward arrow.

“*Will-*” Another sick sound, like a punch to a brick wall, unyielding force against bone.

“*You-*” Another, and a whimper splits between them. Even in the slight sound, Olaf recognizes that voice and cold dread roots him to the spot.

“*Learn-*” The sound of the cane is drowned in a ragged sob. Even from his place down the hall, he can feel in his chest what that noise cost her, how releasing it had torn pride from her and replaced it with absolute humiliation.

“*Wasn’t me*, I swear, Carmelita- *I don’t know why*- but-” A shriek, like jumping into ice water. Another sob so deep she coughs and chokes on it. Olaf thinks of how Violet had hissed the word *beg* and the look on her face as if she would never try it again, yet he is standing in Eliade hearing her sobbing ring like church bells through the hall. He feels sick wondering what Nero had done to push her to that point.

“*Baudelaire?*” He ends his question with a harsh crack and Violet coughs through another set of sobs, fast and in rapid succession. He can hear her sniffing as there is a lull in discipline. He imagines Violet’s wrecked hands flat on Nero’s desk, of her forehead resting on the polished wood, hiding her face as she cries.

Olaf shifts to step closer to the door and only then does he realize that he is disgustingly, painfully hard. His cock strains against the tight zip of his trousers, eager for attention. Knowing that he cares for the young woman weeping down the hall, yet feeling the way each anguished sob and sniffle goes straight to his groin has villainous disgust boiling in him, yet he is, ultimately, unsurprised. He palms himself once through his trousers, breath catching at the pressure, and wills the arousal away.

He thinks of Violet stumbling into the hall to find him aroused at the sounds of her punishment and knows she would never forgive him. Imagining the betrayed look on her face is enough to send his new erection wilting. Olaf sighs, well-worn disgust hanging like a weight on his shoulders.

Nero’s voice rumbles through the hall yet it is quiet enough that he cannot understand it. Violet’s voice is tiny and exhausted in response. He can hear the teary catch in her tone, yet her words are lost to him.

Down the hall, the door to the man’s office swings open silently. A large window pane in the center of the door shows him Violet cast in shadow through the frosted glass. She is facing the man in the office and Olaf holds his breath enough to hear her say, “*Goodbye, Vice Principal Nero.*” and the parroted, whiny reply, “*Goodbye, Vice Principal Nero.*”

She closes the door gently and stumbles into the hall, exactly as he knew she would. Olaf’s eyes go to her hands first. They are small as ever, yet no new wounds crack across her knuckles. It looks as
though her gauze has not been touched, the same rusty blots of blood still above the knuckles she had shown him the previous night.

Confusion and concern makes the man narrow his eyes at her. When he glances to her face, she is already looking at him. She is pale, too pale, and her eyes are ringed with red. Even the ever-present pink of her lips is drained to almost nothing. Her hair is mussed and frizzy with distress. They meet eyes and humiliation tries to burn atop her cheeks, but warps into tough red splotches.

“How long-?” Violet whispers, but her voice cracks and dies.

Olaf shakes his head, ignoring the question. Instead he walks forward, arms extended, and stands before her. It takes only a moment’s hesitation before Violet presses her face to his chest and sags against him. He can see the snag of her breathing, can feel her face hot- a blazing coal, a fresh match-where she rests against him. Her breath hitches suddenly in a suppressed sob and Olaf wants to touch her, wants to run his hands through her hair, but then the young woman pulls back, fixes him with a determined expression, and says, “I need to get to my place. Will you help me?”

Count Olaf thinks of his youth with Beatrice and Bertrand, of all of their damaged history, and although he sees traces of them in their eldest child, he looks at Violet Baudelaire and knows he would lay himself like a sacrifice at her very feet should she demand it of him. He is unaccustomed to this sacrificial desire, to his tenderest of emotions, and they feel uncomfortable and unfamiliar to him, like phantom limbs aching.

“Of course.” Olaf says.

Violet nods like she had expected that. Her eyes are dull with pain.

“I know a way we can go so none of my classmates will see me.” She mutters, voice low. She looks wiped out and ready to collapse, but stands still on strong legs and meets Olaf’s eyes easily. He thinks of Beatrice and sees her stoney resilience resurrected in her daughter.

“Lead the way.” Olaf has to bite his tongue around the titles he has given her, sneaky girl and little inventor waiting ready in his mouth. He knows this is not the time for affection or gentleness- Violet is focussed on survival, of getting to her sanctuary and saving her pride.

Violet hesitates, fear replacing the dull look in her eyes. She glances from him to the floor and begins to lead the way. It takes only a moment for the Count to realize why she had hesitated, why she hadn’t wanted him following her.

Still-wet trails of blood leak from under her skirt to drip down the backs of her legs and stain the white of her ankle socks. He hisses in shock, in visceral pain, at the sight. In the silent hall, the noise sounds like a gas leak fogging the air. Violet shoots him a glare over her shoulder, angrier than he’s ever seen her. This anger has no words, no correct diction or language, is all instinct and fire- Do not speak.

Olaf keeps his mouth shut until they reach the backstage doors. They can both hear his Troupe onstage practicing without his direction like good little actors.

“Troupe!” Olaf shouts. His legs feel powerful beneath him and his voice is loud with purpose. “I have just been informed that a certain member of our organization is in town, intent on hunting us down and blaming our hides for any miserable suffering he has been wrecked with. Now leave.”

“But, boss-” Fernald starts. “We were just about to test the-”

“Leave it.” Olaf snaps. “You want him to know all about our play before it can even be performed?”
Silence hangs like a knot in the theatre, as intricate and twisted as the Devil’s Tongue.

“Of course not. You’re right. We’ll get going.” Fernald hauls himself onto the stage and the rest of the Troupe, situated like audience members in the first row, soon follow suit. In minutes, the theatre is calm and by the time he calls for Violet, he has already extended her ladder like a gentleman throwing his coat over a particularly nasty puddle.

She steps to stage as if acting, straight-backed, her chin high. Color has found its way back to her face, but it is warped and uneven. Violet climbs the rungs, muttering “thank you,” as she goes. Once she reaches the top, he kneels to press at the sides of her ladder, and then, from above, like a celestial intruder, “I still need your help, Olaf... If you can stay a bit longer?”

He thinks of his will, can feel it burning to ash in seconds.

“How could I resist?” He asks, but it does not come out as sarcastic as he had planned. He climbs two rungs, shifts his weight from foot to foot, and then nods to himself. “A solid ladder, little inventor.”

Violet does not respond, merely waits kneeling at the trapdoor. The Count reaches it, places his hands on either end and hauls himself inside, closing the door behind him after the ladder rolls into place.

The first thing he notices is the smell. Heat and dust, like an old attic. The floor is polished smooth. Long, thin slices of wood line the floor in the average earthen color, unlike the emerald wood that slicks the halls of Prufrock and nearly every other institution he has ever entered. Dusty windows let in the dreary shadows of midday thunderstorms. Rain drums its fingers quietly at the windows.

Violet stands before him, looking lost. Her skirt is rumpled and half the pale collar of her shirt is flipped up towards her jaw. From where he is sitting, Olaf’s hands itch to touch the tender skin of her ankles, to run his fingers up her shins. She seems dazed, as if she had not truly prepared for another person to enter her sanctuary and is shocked at the turn of events that forced her hand. Olaf meets her eyes and holds them for a moment, questioning. The eye contact startles her into a small, “Oh! Right. Lights.”

With the flip of a switch, the little place is swamped with strings of festive lights. They hang like moss from where Violet had taped them to the tall slope of the ceiling. Olaf realizes then that they are in the abandoned bell tower that hangs right above his theatre’s emergency exit. He had spent enough time in that back alley studying its surroundings to recognize the tower instantly, and a distant reminder to find out what was inside checked itself off his mental list.

There is a tiny desk, low to the ground before the windows. It is made from discarded plywood and stacks of the very same wine crates he had been perched on the previous evening, only now he can read the label cauterized into the wood, THE VINEYARD OF FRAGRANT GRAPES. Seeing it brings back a memory, still bright as ever and fine, every detail right in front of him as if that day had no depth, no shadow, because he was moving so quickly- a stolen wedding invitation in his sweaty hand, the ink smearing onto his palm, Beatrice and Lemony- Love Conquers Nearly Everything.

Only to find that no volunteer, villain, or ignoble bystander was in the vineyard. He had burnt the wedding venue to the ground anyway, while humiliation burned within him because he had fallen for their trick. Snicket had known he would intercept his mail and would want to see them aflame and dying on what was to be the happiest day of their lives- and they had fooled him.

Remembering it makes Olaf’s skin itch. He runs his hands over his thighs, fixes his hair, and pushes the memory down as quickly as it had surfaced.
Violet has her back to him. She is busy lighting candles in the little room, tiny ones with weak wicks sat on upside down soup cans, their labels peeled in fraying strips. He can still see the blood on her legs, grown sticky and dark.

“Violet,” Olaf says and his voice sounds odd in the cramped room, too big and bold in the intimate little hideaway. She hums in questioning. He smells the familiar scent of a match just-struck clouding the air. “How do you put up with it? Carmelita? I would have hurt her by now, somehow.”

She turns to face him, leaning against the winged back of a ratty pink velvet chair. A dead match is still smoking in her hands when she braces them against it and examines him quietly.

“Do you want the real answer or the generic ‘I just tough my way through it’ answer?” Her voice is calm but holds a derision he has never heard.

“Well, the truth. Duh.” The Count says. His voice has matched hers, has shrunken itself to sound calm and smooth.

Violet nods, no longer looking to him. Instead she spins the chair around until it is in the center of the room and steps slowly over to where he is still sitting beside the trapdoor. She holds out her hands and Olaf does not even think before he reaches up and cradles them in his own.

When they meet eyes, hers are tender with sentiment and melancholy. Olaf remembers his thought from earlier, of himself waiting ready at the feet of Violet Baudelaire, and wonders if it had been a premonition. Candlelight flickers across her face as she smiles and tugs on his hands.

“Come on, Count. Take your place on the throne. I still need your help.” He rises from the floor at her tugging and sags into the chair, crossing his legs like a king. He places his fingertips together and mimes a crown atop his head. Olaf asks, “Where is my crown, little inventor?”

Violet grins and rolls her eyes at him.

“Fresh out,” She says. Violet turns from where she stands at her little makeshift desk, a box in her grip. “But I do have this.”

She tosses a thin first aid kit his way. The white paint atop it is scuffed and the latches have been worn to bare metal from use. Olaf uncrosses his legs and places it flat on his lap. When he pops the lid he is surprised to find it well-stocked and organized. A strange, hot feeling sparks in his belly.

Hushed music sounds from a beat-up radio on the cluttered desk. Violet extends its antenna with a practiced snap, takes a deep breath, and comes to stand before him.

“I usually mend my wounds on my own.” She begins. The words sound practiced and effortless, as if she had planned them in the silence on their walk to the theatre. “On my knuckles it’s easy. But, as you’ve noticed, Nero did end up making this time worse. Much worse. And I don’t have a mirror, so I can’t- and there’s no nurse here since it’s a cathedral- and I don’t want to run through the halls to find Isadora, so… Can you help me?”

Humiliation flushes Violet’s face and her eyes are pleading and open. Her fingers clench around the hem of her pleated skirt.

“You want me to… tend to you?” Olaf’s voice is painfully rough. His mind is suddenly flooded with arousal, with images of the young woman before him lying bent over his lap, one of his hands in her hair, the other on the swell of her wounded bottom, his voice wicked and slow in her ear, “Does my sneaky girl need tending to?”
She nods, unaware of the risks of trusting him. “I don’t want to make you uncomfortable though. If you don’t want to-”

If he were religious, Olaf would be praying for salvation, for forgiveness of sins he has not yet committed.

“Violet-” He says, but his voice fails in his throat. He wonders what he would say, what warnings would spew from his mouth should he give them a chance. He meets her eyes and tries to ignore the lust burning in him as quickly as any house fire. “Turn around.”

Her breath hitches and she nods, turning. Her thin fingers come to her side, picking free the little zipper and dragging it down. There is a painfully long moment where all Olaf can see is the slow drop of that zipper and the mocking hiss of it.

Violet’s skirt hits the floor.

“Oh, Violet-” He mutters, his wince evident in his voice. Phantom pains ache atop his skin in empathy, something he has never bothered to feel before.

“Is it that bad?” Her voice is small. He almost doesn’t hear it over the music.

Five thick gashes split the tender skin of her bottom. The bleeding has stopped, but the line of her panties has worn into three wounds which are red and swollen.

“Here, let me-” Olaf says and, with gentle hands, tugs at the hem of her thin, white panties until he can see the gashes fully. Violet releases a small, nervous giggle.

“Didn’t think you’d have to give me a wedgie.” She jokes. “But that feels better. That skirt was rough and then the hem of my-... It just hurt. And it feels better already, so. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet, sneaky girl.” Olaf says. He knows his voice is breathy and more growl than anything, but he cannot disguise it no matter how much training he has gone through. He can feel that traitorous erection swelling beneath his trousers again, and has to bite his lip to focus. Twin wars of hedonism and whatever shreds of propriety he has left twist in his gut. He thinks maybe he should regret this, should be able to resurrect the disgust he had felt earlier, but his grip on it has vanished.

“Right… But, uh, you had asked about Nero and Carmelita. How I survive it.” Violet says. Her voice sounds stronger now, less afraid.

“I did.” Olaf grabs a small packet of disinfectant cloth and tears it free. He places one hand at the small of her waist to hold her still and he swears he can feel her breath catch again. Although the wipe is cold in his other hand, he does not warn her before he places it against the thin skin of her ankle. A shiver goes through her, travels straight up her spine and has her trembling in his grip. Gooseflesh sprouts up her legs.

It takes little time to work the dried blood free from her legs. It smears rusty against the wipe but once it is off, he tosses it to the floor, releases his hand from her hip and sighs. Olaf is unsure of how to progress, not with an erection straining painfully behind his zip, with Violet Baudelaire’s bare skin inches from his face. He is not a man used to denying himself. His hands tremble against the soft velvet chair and he cannot bring himself to take his eyes off her, off the deep curve of her side, the crumpled white button-up, her cheeks straining against the cotton panties. He wants to tear them off, wants to bend her across his knee and touch her where he’s absolutely sure no one has ever done before.

Olaf opens his mouth to say something, but Violet beats him to it.
“I imagine breathing. That’s what I do to calm down. I imagine I’m up on some huge stage, being interviewed as the only person in the entire world who can breathe. My interviewer asks me to inhale for the crowd and they’re fascinated… I’ll take deep breaths and hold them for as long as I can. And it helps control my breathing if I feel myself getting too nervous.”

Hearing her voice has the Count snapping free from his daydreaming to gently run his fingers over the swell of her bottom, just light enough to tickle.

“Interesting. And this interviewer… paces you? Helps you?” He asks, then adds in warning, “Bandages next.”

“Yes, they… Help. When I first got to Prufrock Prep, I could hardly be alone or see smoke or fire because of… what happened. What left me an orphan. A house fire. But now I’m better about it and the breathing interview helps. Isn’t that silly?”

Olaf places a bandage on the first wound carefully and smoothes his fingers across it to keep it in place. He lets his touch linger but only long enough to feel the heat of her bruised skin. He continues with the next bandage and says, “I don’t think so. Not if it’s helped you.”

Violet accepts that with a small nod. He can see the candlelight catch in her hair and light up strands in gold. The music has smoothed out into something silken and sultry. Rain still taps at the windows like an uninvited visitor. He moves to the third wound.

“Y’know,” Violet says, her voice heavy with humor. “It’s funny. This isn’t how I imagined you would ever see my butt.”

He has closed the fourth gash. Olaf takes a deep breath and restrains the wild urge to bring her down atop his lap and kiss the soft skin of her neck. Instead, he lays both hands flat against her bottom and squeezes the skin gently.

“So you’ve imagined this then? You bent over, your ass in my hands?” He tries to keep his voice calm and neutral, as if he has not imagined the very same thing. He squeezes her again and feels drunk and elated and unbalanced at the sight before him.

“Um-” Her voice has gone as breathy as his. “Well. I didn’t mean to-… If I made you uncomfortable, I’m sorry. It… I know you couldn’t- want me.”

He smooths the last bandage over the fifth cut, but does not move his hands away. Instead, he keeps gently brushing his palms over her skin, wondering if the rest of her is just as soft. Olaf smooths his hands up, scraping her shirt with his fingernails before grabbing both her hips and spinning her around to face him.

Violet’s face is flushed in a way he has never seen it and her dark eyes are ready and honest. She stands straight before him but her chin is dipped to meet his eyes full-on. He moves his touch from her hips to cradle her hands again. Her eyes wander his body, down the harsh line of his jaw, the flat slope of his stomach, and widen at the pressed print of his erection.

“So your cuts feel better?” The Count asks, voice gravely but gentle. Violet nods silently, her eyes still wide. Her hands are sweaty in his.

“Have I tended to you well?” At that she nods again, mutters, “Yes, very. Thank you.”

“You are very welcome. The pleasure was all mine, as I’m sure you can see.” He glances to his trousers and that lovely blush darkens on her face as she snickers, uncomfortable and exhilarated all at once.
“Now. About this business of not wanting you.” He clears his throat like an actor about to take the stage. “Although you’re sharp, I’m afraid you’re quite wrong. I am intensely, uncomfortably attracted to you. I have wanted you since the moment we met, little fiend.”

Confusion twists on her face, her eyebrows drawing together. She frowns, just slightly.

“But you’re so-” Violet stops, unsure of how to continue. “So…”

The same steely resilience resurrects itself on her face. She suddenly pushes his knees together, sending the first aid kit clattering to the floor, places her hands on both arms of the chair, and hauls herself onto his lap. Her shins rest on either side of the plush velvet cushion, her bottom a slight pressure on his thighs, her palms flat on his shoulders. Olaf’s hands come instinctively to rest on her sides. He thinks then that she could learn so much, could be so good for him.

“If you’ve wanted me why didn’t you tell me?” Violet says. Her face is so close he can see the wild pulse of her heart through the veins in her neck.

“Has anyone ever touched you here?” Olaf asks instead of an answer, brushing his fingers over her lips. Violet nods and waits until he draws away to explain, “I’ve been kissed. One person.”

Olaf nods, unsurprised that he is not the first one to recognize the beauty of her. He was impressed, however, by her openness, how she looked him in the eye, didn’t turn away or fidget or stutter.

“Has anyone ever touched you here?” He runs his hands up the backs of her thighs gently to brush her bottom. Her skin is still hot from the wounds. Violet’s eyes roam his face and they make solid eye contact as he continues a steady rhythm, down her thighs and back up, feeling the curve and the catch of each bandage before roaming back down.

Finally she says, “No. Not before you, today. Now.”

He can tell she has more to say and imagines it would be something like, And you haven’t even kissed me yet. But Violet bites her lip and waits. He knows she is smart and calculative, and wouldn’t want to break the moment by pressing for a kiss like a child with fantasies of true love and a map of exactly how it must go. Olaf can imagine how someone with that mentality might explain its process in a voice oddly like Carmelita’s: First you go out on a date, nothing too fancy, just to get to know one another, and you’ll giggle and play with your hair and later he will take you home and you’re to only kiss him once! And that’s your first date, then the next one-

He has never valued simpering dolls with dreams he could never make real. But Olaf looks at Violet, sees her biting her lip, her eyes resting on his own hungry mouth, and thinks maybe he doesn’t have to.

He moves one hand around to rest on the front of her cotton panties. “Here?”

She shakes her head and he can feel a tremble quiver in her belly but from nerves or excitemt he cannot tell. “No. No one.”

Olaf nods and returns his hand to her thighs. He says quietly, “That is why.”

Violet reaches behind herself to grab his wrists, stilling them. Her face is pinched, offended. “You want me, but you won’t have me because I’m not experienced?”

“That’s not it.” The Count rebuts immediately, frustrated with himself. She releases his hands, and he places them at her hips to rub his thumbs appraisingly over her hip bones. When they meet eyes, his are serious as the grave. “You are young and broken. I could eat you whole.”
“Broken?” She asks. A certain flame seems to have been extinguished in her, some spark she had felt now dead as ash.

“By grief.” Olaf nods. “It has ruined you. I am not a noble man, Miss Baudelaire—” he says and continues through Violet’s quick, “Don’t call me that right now.” - “and I could ruin you just as well.”

“Why do you think I’m broken?” She asks, voice hushed as if confessing to some grave sin. Olaf remembers the faces of her parents, round with youth and mischief, and cannot see Violet Baudelaire as an outlier.

Knowing he is poking at a wound, Olaf asks gently, “Before you became an orphan would you have hidden from a girl like Carmelita?”

Violet understands where he is going and a ruddy heat builds atop her cheeks. Her hands flinch at his shoulders, brush the skin of his neck. Shame dulls her voice, makes it meek when she says, “I’d maybe have outsmarted her some way. Or discovered what she was up to beforehand and prevented it every time. But I would have done something.”

“Before becoming an orphan, would you have isolated yourself in a church attic for days on end or would you have explored the town? Made more friends?” He asks. Violet’s eyes are bloodshot. She looks away from him and out the window.

“Well if I wasn’t an orphan I wouldn’t need to be here, but… both, probably. But you’re right, I would have… gone out more. Explored. Made more friends than Duncan and Isadora, maybe.”

“Before becoming an orphan, would you have leapt into the lap of a man more than twice your age?” Olaf asks, voice low and cautious. Only when Violet turns to glare at him does he see that he has made her cry. Tears slick her cheeks, looking like little opals in the low light. The sight makes him breathless, makes a little knife of pain twist right under his ribs. Only then does he truly realize how beautiful she is. He knows this is fucked, knows that it is cruel and heartless to find beauty in seeing his words turn Violet to tears, turn her angelic with grief and shame (and something else, some foreign, tender emotion, savage in her-) but he cannot help himself.

“If you’d have me.” She spits, voice waspish. Those brief tears slip to bloom against the collar of her uniform. She juts her chin forward like a stubborn child as if daring him to argue.

“Oh, I would have you.” He assures her, trailing his hands firmly up her thighs again, delighting in the fierce shiver that runs down her spine. Violet examines him with a small frown, despite her tears and the gooseflesh sprouting beneath his fingers. The burn that he had expected to see on her face is absent, instead she looks as though she has caught him in a lie, or watched him destroy some holy treasure.

“But would you ruin me?”

“You misunderstand me, little orphan. I could ruin you. Easily.” Here, Olaf pauses, unsure of how to continue. “I would not intend to, of course. Not with you. But many times I have noble intentions and things turn wicked. Or I turn wicked. Something goes wrong and then I have to—” The man stops before he can damn himself. “To cover my tracks.”

“To cover your tracks from your own wickedness?” Violet asks. Her voice has taken on a daring edge. She uses the back of her hand to swipe at her cheeks, quick, as if embarrassed by her tears. The gauze, already so stained, absorbs her tears easily.
The Count nods. Candlelight throws their shadows to the floor. He can see the flutter of Violet’s eyelashes, the quick working of her throat against more words.

“Would kissing me be wicked?” Violet asks, voice almost professionally intrigued, an inventor weighing an idea. Her hands flutter against his shoulders.

Olaf doesn’t think, doesn’t have time to react to the thrill-like terror, like grief-dropping through his entire body. He says, as if it were that simple, “Well it wouldn’t be noble.”

She smiles, coy. She seems to have already forgiven him for making her cry and Olaf wonders if part of her is relieved that he has already seen the damage in her and does not find it reason enough to turn away. “Then let’s not be noble together.”

And then Violet Baudelaire is kissing him. She wraps her hands around his throat, not tight, not to choke, but merely to hold him still. The same soft music plays and she is so warm against him. He hesitates for a moment, long enough for the radio to warble, “-and if I break you, are you mine?”

Olaf thinks of all the useless, evil things his hands have done. And then he brings them to the sides of Violet’s soft face, fits his thumbs between cheek and jaw bones, winds his fingers into the hair at her temples, and kisses her back.

It is an aching kiss, and it gives him the same feeling he can imagine the young orphans in Eliade must feel at confessional, kneeling. Surrender as an action, like sacrifice. Violet presses so hard against him that for a moment their teeth scrape, and then he turns his chin, and they are kissing again, again, again and it is perfect.

Against his neck, her hands tremble. He can feel the heat build in his body, his wilted erection stirring slightly once more, and he feels as if she has stuck a knife as sharp as his own in the centre of his chest and sliced him open, feels as if he is bleeding out onto his lap, onto Violet’s bare thighs and the ratty velvet chair. He grips her tighter, pulls away.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Olaf’s voice is gruff, a growl in the small space between them. Violet frowns, annoyed, yet keeps her eyes closed and strains against his grip.

“I thought I was kissing you.” His grip on her face warps her pout into something comical, her cheeks puffing from between his fingers. Chuckling, Olaf slides his thumbs forward until they press against either side of her swollen lips, causing her to look like a fish. Violet sputters and pulls away laughing.

“You must not have been kissed much before, orphan. Which is a tragedy, absolutely. But-” Olaf extends a finger like a lecturer, looking smug. “An easy issue to remedy. If you had been kissed as thoroughly as I feel you deserve, then you would at least know that a first kiss should possess an ounce of couth. Of proper timing. Of, dare I say, romance.”

“Romance?” Violet scoffs gently. She waves a hand towards her little desk, which is glowing with candles while the radio hums with music. “This place seems plenty romantic to me. But you don’t seem like the type to care about something like that anyway.”

“And that is where you’re wrong, Miss Baudelaire. I am an actor. We all have a deep appreciation for the theatre, for its classics. Its tragedies and romances. Of course I care.” Olaf motions for her to stand and, reluctantly, Violet frees herself from his lap and rises, waiting. The man does not follow suit, merely sits inspecting her. She does not tug her rumpled white shirt down to try to hide her panties from his sight, does not shirk away. Instead she glances around, a bit uncomfortable at his full attention, his stillness, but does not hide. This pleases him, sends a jolt of pride straight to the softs of
“Unfortunately, I must ask that you put that skirt back on.” The Count offers no other explanation, merely stands and crosses the room to her desk. He goes to crank the radio dial, but is distracted by a smattering of notes and tools. He catches sight of an intricate cursive scrawl, “-as a hierophany, which can arise such pleasure but also great suffering-” and picks up the paper to hold against the faint light. The same swoops and curls of Bertrand’s handwriting are mirrored in Violet’s- all proper calligraphy and a right slant that boasts strong lessons. Olaf admires this for a moment, this little bit of Bertrand that has survived through his daughter, but the candle closest to him sputters and Olaf’s attention is drawn to a cluttered notebook flat atop the desk, previously hidden by the scrawl in his hand.

Seeing Violet’s drawing felt akin to what the Count might feel seeing a man in public commonly thought to be dead. A betrayal, an infestation. He sees the very same insignia that is stamped like a brand onto his left ankle reflected back in the careful loop of Violet’s hand. He thinks of those hands-tiny, tender- and how they had touched him, just the barest brush of softness, as if she thought she could break him if she pressed too hard, and feels ill that those same hands had drawn such a twisted symbol. He wonders what she knows, what that eye means to her. Questions stick like ash in his throat.

Even from atop the desk, he can nearly feel the insignia charring the air as if cursed. Scattered, half-thought words consume what is left of the page. It looks as though a physical manifestation of the frustrated, morose clutter in Violet’s mind. She writes- Duncan’s insignia research…? Secret society? Obscure literary references? Trapdoor under house? And then, much smaller, as if she can’t bear to know- Who starts the fires?

Olaf knows he has stood at the desk just a fraction of a second too long. He can feel the alert weight of Violet’s eyes on the back of his neck as she zips her skirt, can see her lips part to rebuke him. Before she can speak he says, the insignia still bright in his mind, “Such pleasure but also great suffering.”

“Oh.” Violet’s voice is plucky with relief. “My homework. A hierophany.”

“Gesundheit.” He mutters sarcastically, and cranks the radio’s dial even as his stomach churns with anxiety and his mind clogs with questions the way he is sure that Violet’s must. He replaces her homework and turns to stand before her, arms crossed, head high, every bit of the actor he must be in order to fight his desire to drop out of the tower with Violet in his arms, away to some safe place where no volunteer could ever find them.

“You know some men might take advantage of this situation. A young girl, pretty as high heaven, throwing herself into their laps. A little orphan with no guardian to protect her.” Olaf says, voice oily and smooth. Violet stands before him looking confused at his change in demeanor. A nervous frown plays at that swollen pout. If she retreats one more step she will be standing atop the trapdoor. The Count wonders if the weight of her would be enough to splinter the wood, to send her falling to the stage below. “Yes, some men might take advantage. But I, Violet, would like to take centerstage. Get to it.”

“Yes, sir!” Violet snaps, teasing, relieved. She kneels before the door and hooks her fingers beneath it. At her first tug, golden light swamps the room. Dust whirls in the eaves. Violet shifts to unfurl the ladder, reaching into that golden pit, and her skirt follows revealing four of the Count’s bandages and the bruises rising violent between them. He wishes he could see his own fingerprints dusting her body in every place he has yet touched her. She rises slightly, looking over her shoulder as if feeling his gaze on her. Violet does not break eye contact. She tugs the front hem of her skirt up mid-thigh,
just enough to reveal the milky white skin, smooth with muscle, before she swings her legs around and drops straight into that golden light like an elevator with cut cables.

Olaf dives after her, hands extended as if to grab- Hair? Ribbon? He could not say- but when he reaches the trapdoor, he sees Violet safely on the stage, a smug grin on her face.

“Don’t attempt that. You can’t do it.” She teases, shifting her shoulders to the music, which had grown fuzzy with distance and radio static. “Takes practice.”

“Little orphan, thinks she’s so smart.” Olaf grumbles as he shifts down the ladder. “Don’t jump, old man, you’ll fall to your death.”

Violet giggles and something about the sound of it in the empty theatre makes his pulse spike and an awareness of something soft ache in his chest.

“You said it, not me.” Violet says, and Olaf wants to kiss the smirk from her mouth. He reaches the foot of the ladder and looks out to the sea of plush chairs, all empty. He imagines a choir in them, singing something profoundly old, some ancient war song for them to dance to like a ritual. Instead, they have a slow little tune, heavy on the piano, that sparks a brief flash of recognition in him, but the memory is long gone.

“I’ve heard this.” Violet says. She pauses where she had been twirling slowly on the stage, feeling those beams like sunlight on her face. “My mother had it in a music box. But I don’t remember the name.”

“No need.” Olaf says, blinking against the memory rising in his mind- Lemony Snicket kneeling before Beatrice, his bowl-shaped hat atop his knee, presenting an engagement ring in a lovely little music box. Kit had recounted it to him in great detail for nearly three days afterwards, brimming with excitement for her brother. (“Oh, the box was made from oak and had these beautiful copper inlays that looked like vines twisting ‘round the whole thing, and I think the tune was called.”) “Epilogue. I know it too.”

He remembers it now, how Kit had played that song over and over- How could he have forgotten?- how it had floated mournfully down the staircase at her cluttered apartment, how it had pressed its heavy fingers into his lungs and stolen his breath. He remembers the lines that had split him open, word for word, as they float down from Violet’s sanctuary like a celestial warning, “Here’s to us/Here’s to the ties that I’ve cut/Along the way/Here’s to the eyes that I’ve shut-”

“It is not a very romantic song.” Olaf says, voice gruff, apologetic. Violet stands before him, very close, and he wonders when she crossed the stage. An impish, amused little smile plays at her lips. She grabs his hands as if she is already used to touching him.

“Who needs romance? Aren’t you supposed to be kissing me?”

He feels as if that song has sobered him, has turned him tender and vulnerable. For once he has no witty reply. He merely places his hands where they had been, his thumbs beneath her cheekbones, the lights warm on the back of his neck, and dips to meet her pretty pink lips.

Unlike their last kiss, this one is slow and careful. An affirmation of desire. Violet wraps her fingers around his wrists to keep his hands in place. They sway slightly to the music, hips pressed together for balance, the empty theatre an audience of ghosts. The song pitters out into static and they do not stop kissing. Violet makes soft little breathy sounds against his lips, and Olaf wants to tuck her into his chest like a second heart, to steal her away from Eliade and Nero and Carmelita and the eye staring from his ankle to the slow twirl of their feet atop the stage.
Count Olaf wants a great many things.

Yet he releases Violet Baudelaire with a soft pop of their lips and a brush of fabric as her flushed fingers uncurl from his wrists. Her eyes are wide, wild. She looks a bit disoriented, as if she had lost herself in his arms and the tune from her mother’s music box. Like with her previous tears, Violet looks beautiful and sweetly broken in the aftermath of a kiss.

“Goodnight, Miss Baudelaire.” Olaf says, bowing. He knows it cannot be past noon, but feels satisfaction in their repetitive departure this way.

She smiles softly, looking, very suddenly, exhausted.

“Goodnight, Count Olaf.” Violet says. She places one hot hand in his and squeezes once before making her way back up the ladder.

A realization comes over him as he watches her rise. “You know, I could see right up your skirt that first night. That first night on this stage.”

Violet throws him a grin over her shoulder that he has never seen before. She reaches the entrance and hauls herself inside. When she pokes her head back into the light, she is still grinning like a delighted trickster.

“That was on purpose.”

She shuts the trapdoor, leaving Olaf centerstage to sweat out his imagination, the feel of her hand still hot like a coal in his.

Chapter End Notes

The poem Kit quotes is The Night Has a Thousand Eyes by Francis William Bourdillon, recited by her in The End.

Both The Vineyard of Fragrant Grapes and the text of the wedding invitation are present within The Unauthorized Autobiography.

“And if I break you are you mine?” is a line from Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts by Jorie Graham.

The song Epilogue is by Keaton Henson. There are numerous songs that have inspired me throughout my time writing this and I've been toying with the idea of creating a playlist to share. I'll keep you guys updated through tumblr (@s-softersoftest) more frequently, or in these end chapter notes.

Sorry this is so long, they wouldn’t shut up. Let me know what ya think!
Chapter Seven

Instead of fire and destruction, Violet dreams of her family.

They are crowded into her inventing room so tightly her mother makes a comparison to sardines in a can, layered one right next to the other with no space between them. She does not hear her mother’s voice, can no longer seem to resurrect her exact tone and diction, yet the words are said and the Baudelaire family laughs together.

Violet can feel the sturdy presence of her father before her and her mother beside her and Sunny’s breath tickling her face from where Beatrice holds her. Klaus’ elbow presses into her side and he is saying something too faint for her to make out, some comment like, “Really, Violet, these string lights can’t be safe-” and the moment is so sweet she finds herself weeping. Her family does not see, cannot sense her brokenness. As she feels Sunny’s soft fists tangle in the clutch of hair at her temple, or her mother’s soothing hand steady on the small of her back, they do not feel the tremors that shake her to her core.

In this dream her family stands together, alive, and Violet is already mourning, already bursting with wretched, ugly grief. But the hatch of the trapdoor swings open with a bang beside her father’s foot and Bertrand draws his attention from fiddling with her grey hair ribbon to the floor where Count Olaf rises like a specter from the grave. He stands taller than all of them, dressed in the same button-down with the pin of the eye he had worn when they first met. Beatrice and Bertrand do not react but Violet can feel their eyes on her, concerned and wary.

In the next moment they are gone.

Sunny’s fists have left her hair, Klaus’ voice no longer holds her name, her hair ribbon is at the floor where her father stood, and the small of her back is still warm from her mother’s palm. Only Olaf remains and he stands beside the trapdoor watching her weep, expression empty.

A loud crack has her awake before she knows it, and Isadora peers at her from the trapdoor, visible only from the shoulders down, a neatly folded note in her hand.

“Christ, Isadora-” Violet hisses, voice foreign and thick. She skitters away from the other girl, sending a small stack of papers toppling to the floor. They fall atop her legs, tangling in the deep nest of blankets.

Isadora climbs into the sanctuary and lowers the trapdoor softly behind her. Violet crosses her legs, realizing distantly that she had fallen asleep in her uniform instead of changing into a set of spare pajamas tucked into one of many cluttered boxes. Thin light shines through the windows, a powdery blue flecked with gold. Sunrise has just barely peeked inside.
“What’s this note?” Isadora says, instead of a greeting. Violet reaches to take it, face towards the sun, and only then does she notice the tears that slick her cheeks. Her tongue feels foreign and folly in her mouth, her eyes swollen and hot. She remembers her dream instantly and feels a wave of violent nausea as all that grief sinks her belly. Embarrassed at being caught so vulnerable, she swipes hard at her cheeks with the wrists of her uniform before taking the note.

Isadora sits beside her, tugging free a swatch of dark blanket to cover her legs. Her voice is kinder when she says, “I thought it might have been for me, so I read it…”

“V, ” Violet says, reading aloud to steady her voice even as it warbles, “Seeing as I find you unearthly charming, I demand the opportunity to take you out. Meet me in the alley at half past six. Wear that short skirt from-” She pauses, pointedly not looking at Isadora, her earlier embarrassment shifting into something deeper. “from the night we first met. I want to see the proof that I have touched you. Don’t be late. O.”

Silence smothers the space between them, heavy and awkward. Violet tries to summon humor in her tone but it is forced. “Well Isadora, I think I have something to tell you.”

Isadora laughs but it is weak and confused. “You don’t say. Who’s O?”

“Uh, he’s-” Violet stutters, unsure of how to continue. An image comes to her of the man’s shiny eyes, narrowed and amused, as if he were overhearing this very conversation and delighting in watching her squirm. Unsure of its consequences, she decides on honesty. “It’s Count Olaf.”

To Violet’s surprise, a slow, self-assured smile glides across Isadora’s face. She nods, smug. “I had wondered. He had already made up his mind to dance with you yesterday. It seemed like you two already knew each other.”

Pleasant shock steals the words from between her teeth. Violet looks at her friend with a hesitant smile, feeling unmoored. She had not prepared for this conversation.

Isadora continues, “But I wasn’t positive. I thought you would have told me something about that. About a boy. Well- he’s not really a boy, is he?”

Violet says, “I thought about it, but we hadn’t really, er- We didn’t ever… Our first kiss was just last night.”

Isadora nods at that. She frowns slightly, her eyes far away as if snagged on a troublesome poem. Thoughts still hidden, she asks, “How old is he?”

Dark humor glides across Violet’s mouth pulling that wicked smile tight as she quips, “How old was your dad?”

“Violet Baudelaire!” Isadora shrieks, laughing, faux outraged. She swats aimlessly at the blanket they share as Violet giggles, relieved, her dream already shoved to the back of her mind. She scrambles from the floor, hurrying to place Olaf’s note somewhere precious, but the sudden movement tugs at her torn skin and, in an instant, the laughter dies.

She makes an odd, strangled sound that warps in the cramped room. Isadora is beside her in seconds as she leans against her desk of wine crates and clutter, eyes closed, trying to keep her composure. “Are you okay? What happened? Did he-?”

“Nero.” Violet hisses, directing her repressed pain into a single name. She sighs deep and long through her nose and when she opens her eyes, Isadora stands before her, worry pinching her delicate mouth.
“I was going to ask you about that.” The other girl mutters, glancing out the window to the back alley.

“It’s a long, awful story with a happy ending, I guess. I’ll tell you on our way to the market.” Violet says. She fumbles through the clutter atop her desk, finding no suitable place for the note.

“The market? You need to go, too? Duncan’s been begging for me to buy him a magnifying glass.” Isadora says, grabbing a roll of tape and presenting it to her. Violet takes it, confused. “Tape it to the window. It’ll look nice and you can read it whenever you want.”

“Good call. Where should we tape it?” Violet unfolds the note carefully and drags it slow over the edge of her desk to smooth the creases.

Isadora hums for a few moments before finally deciding, “Here!”

She points to a junction of warped window panes where the note’s right corner could sit flush against the wood. “And if he ever writes you more you can add them to it.”

“Oh. That reminds me. I already have one.” Violet digs in her satchel which is slumped to the floor like a melted candle, eventually pulling free a small yellow note. She unfolds it to smooth atop her desk, the ink still blue and perfect in the man’s handwriting: Moved the lights before we left, orphan. You can thank me later. -O.

The rising sun shines warm on Violet’s face as she drags over the pink velvet chair and hesitantly, slowly, stands atop it before the window. As Isadora hands her cuts of tape, she imagines the Count sitting as calm and cool as he had been the previous evening, like a carefree king on his throne. She stands barefoot on the arms of the chair, the velvet soft beneath her soles, and imagines how the man might run his hands slow and teasing up the backs of her legs, might play with the hem of her skirt dipping right before his face. She can almost hear his voice, low and coy, “Are you teasing me, little inventor?”

“There.” Violet mutters, and if there is a tremor in her voice, Isadora does not comment. “All done.”

She clambers down, mindful of her cuts.

“It looks dreamy. His handwriting’s pretty spidery, isn’t it?” Isadora says. For a moment there is silence as they both examine the Count’s intricate penmanship, backlit by sunshine. Her first initial is whirled with loops and twists as if a display of affection all its own, while his O is clean and neat. Violet knows there will be ample time to examine every detail of this letter later, alone, so she hums in agreement, turns away, and tidies her mess of blankets from the floor.

“Do you have money or will we need to stop at the bank?” Isadora asks, still examining the note.

“I’ve got some. I don’t use my allowance much.” Violet mutters, grateful for the reminder, and reaches into a stack of books on the floor.

On her very first night in Eliade, before Isadora and Duncan had arrived, Violet had wandered the halls to get acquainted with the old cathedral and had found herself in a rarely-used library off the West Tower. There was no librarian or orphans or religious officials of any kind. Unlike the other libraries she had seen throughout the place, this one was not focussed on numinous texts and instead displayed a collection of random literature.

Thinking of her brother and their home library, Violet had sat between the shelves and found comfort in the smell and the silence. She had dozed for an unknown amount of time, carefully not remembering her family even as grief bent her spine, her head resting on her upturned knees. Only
when she heard the faint beginnings of dinner did Violet turn and gaze sleepily at the shelves. The first book she saw was very thin and battered, yet the title still gleamed golden along the cracked spine: THE LOVE SONG OF J. ALFRED PRUFROCK.

Before she had fully read the title she was hearing her father’s voice, rich with reverence, “Let us go then, you and I/ When the evening is spread out against the sky-”

She had taken the book knowing it would never be returned. It is within the snug library checkout pocket pasted onto the very first flyleaf that she hides her allowance.

Most orphans received an envelope of money once a month from accounts their families left behind, a small income to purchase necessities from the local marketplace or throughout the city. Violet, as reclusive as she had grown to be, had used hers sparingly and only on toiletries or invention materials she couldn’t salvage from back alleys or dumpsters.

Violet retrieves the precious book from its place among the stack and opens the cracked cover carefully. Her funds are still tucked inside so she places it in her satchel and stands ready before her friend. She says, “Let’s get going. You ready?”

“Of course.” Isadora steps close and muses Violet’s hair, tidying it. “You’ll have to get ready for your date, won’t you? Can I help? I’ve got some rosewater spray and-”

“Sure.” Violet says. The word date had drawn nerves out of her as if she had seen a spectre. The word sticks in her throat like sickness, aching. Again she imagines Olaf’s smirk and it both soothes and further unnerves her. “Now let’s head out.”

“Right,” Isadora says as Violet opens the trapdoor and places her feet on the first rung. “Let us go then, you and I/ When the morning is spread out against the sky-”

“Clever.” Violet mutters. Her lockpicks jingle as she slides quickly down the ladder to a silent theatre. She lands flat-footed and easy, hearing Isadora laugh on her own way down.

Hours later they are sitting outside sipping a single root beer float between them. Their lunch has already been hauled away, leaving the two girls to wilt in the heat of mid afternoon sunshine in the city. Isadora’s hair had gone frizzy long ago, leaving her looking stressed even as she swirled her straw against Violet’s and sat at a deep angle in her chair, a relaxed smile on her face.

Despite being away from her sanctuary inside Eliade, Violet feels as renewed as Isadora. The fresh air has done her good, and she hadn’t even wanted to argue when the other girl insisted on lunch at a new café. The food had been charming and much better than anything she had eaten in the cathedral. She feels renewed, invigorated, and at peace in a primal way she had only ever felt before the fire. As Isadora swirls her straw, Violet wonders if this was how normal teenage girls were supposed to feel, as bright and tender as a firework just sparked.

“Thank you for a fun day, Isadora.” Violet says as she leans across the table and steals a sip from her own straw. “I… really needed it.”

Isadora meets her eyes which seem to hold the same simple spark as hers. “You’re welcome, silly.
That’s what friends are for. Now let’s get you back and dolled up.”

She rises with an excited slap of her hand against the cool metal table, as delighted as if she were the one going on the date. The wind tosses her hair evermore, and a few patrons at other outside tables turn to glance as her chair scrapes the ground.

Violet cannot keep the affectionate smile from her face when she says, “We will soon. But first we have to wait for my- Oh! There’s our waitress now.”

A woman wearing a neatly-fitted white shirt and a small black apron hurries to their table, threading through the masses of other patrons, a white box in her hands. She has sandy blonde hair which is tied up in a neat bun, and a plain face behind her glasses. The closer she gets, the more aware the two girls are of a tune upon the air, one as familiar as a nursery rhyme.

Their waitress continues whistling even as she sets the box down between the two girls and steps back. After a few moments, Violet asks, “Mozart’s 14th symphony?”

The waitress smiles but it is pinched with a negativity Violet cannot place.

“Sharp mind. Most people wouldn’t recognize it.” She says, placing a different bag atop the table. Violet can see her order through the thin plastic, bright and sleek in its tube.

“My parents whistled it every once in awhile.” Violet offered, glancing at Isadora, who nodded and said, “Mine too.”

That same bitterness twists on her mouth, a disappointment to her dark eyes. “Your parents must have been very noble people to know such an odd tune.”

Confused silence smogs the air as the two girls glance from each other to their waitress, who gazes across the street to the thick rush of passersby.

Finally the waitress sighs and says, “Enjoy your evening, ladies. Watch for taxis.” She turns and hurries away as quickly as she came, whistling the same tune but slower and sadder, as she unties the apron at her back, ignoring the summons from her other tables, and enters the little cafe.

“That was weird. We don’t even need a taxi.” Isadora says, frowning, as Violet sips the dregs of their root beer float. She nods in agreement and stands, taking her box carefully in hand.

“You’re right. But let’s not worry about it too much. We’ve got to catch the trolley back to Eliade.” Violet says and Isadora nods but the frown does not ease from her face until they have boarded the trolley and even then she is silent, thinking. Violet cradles the box in her lap, that old tune stuck in her head, and watches the faces of citizens blur as she passes.

Isadora walks her to the alley like a concerned mother. They pass quickly through the halls, their reflections warped against the intricately-tiled floors, and bicker.

“What if he tries to kiss you? I mean really kiss you?” Isadora whispers, feigning ignorance.

“He has already really kissed me.” Violet returns, glancing for any adults and finding none waiting ready to question them.
Isadora, nonplussed in her endeavor to embarrass her friend, tries again. “What if he tries to take your top off? I mean really.”

“Then I’ll let him.” Violet quips, a smirk on her lips.

“Violet Baudelaire! You naughty girl!” Isadora chides, although she cannot keep the amusement from her tone.

In the year that they had been friends, their conversations had always been abnormal. Violet and Isadora were serious girls by nature, so their talks had consisted of classes, poetry, inventions, and Carmelita. When they went deeper, they would discuss grief, their families, Duncan’s conspiracy. Violet had known that they were good friends, but to have an excuse to giggle with Isadora about romance instead of mysterious plots was refreshing and fun.

“Or, you could always surprise him and take your own top off.” Isadora offers as they pause before the door to the alleyway. Violet snorts and rolls her eyes, one hand cradling the white box, the other smoothing the pleats of her skirt.

“Please be safe. Don’t stay out too long or I’ll worry.” Isadora mutters, eyes downcast, fiddling with Violet’s hair.

“Alright, mother.” She jokes, voice light. “I’ll be fine. And then I’ll come back and tell you everything.”

“You’d better.” Isadora smiles, stepping away. “I hope he likes his gift.”

“Me too.” Violet says, settling one hand atop the handle and sighing deeply, hoping the racing of her heart is not as evident as it seems. She spares one last glance to her friend before muttering, “Bye.” and stepping into the warm summer air.

The door closes firmly behind her, the sound echoing faintly in the cobbled alley. The same trash litters the ground, but the mosses have grown greener and longer, stuffed between cracks in the scuffed brown bricks. The upturned wine crates are where Violet and Olaf had left them weeks ago, only now a rolled up copy of *The Daily Punctilio* lies between them.

Curious, Violet sets the box atop the stoop and grabs the paper for herself. She returns to her spot on the very first step, sitting slowly, her skirt tucked beneath her, and opens to the first page.

To her surprise, the first article displays a large cover photo: the splinters and ash of a mansion recently burnt to the ground. The headline reads, *Vigorous Fires Destroy Much of Town! Influx of Orphans Sent to Local Preparatory School and Partnering Cathedral!*

Unease prickles in Violet’s gut, feeling too deep and ominous for her to examine fully with her limited timeframe. She reaches into her satchel and checks her watch which blinks 6:29 PM. Resolving to examine it later, perhaps with Isadora and Duncan, Violet begins folding the thick print only to pause when she meets eyes with a familiar face, printed miniature and colorless.

Olaf’s photograph smirks at her from a side column, looking devilish and proud. Above his head, the article’s title hangs in swirly, dramatic type: *An Interview with The Daily Punctilio’s Most Handsome and Talented Individual Involved in the Local Theatre.* The interviewer begins with a brief description of Olaf’s attributes, his talents, his previous theatrical endeavors.

Violet scans the interview, feeling foolish and fanatical, until the crunch of gravel under tires scatters her attention. A long black car glides smoothly down the little alley, very quiet. The outside is clean and gleaming, its windows tinted. Violet’s heart flutters in her throat when it stops just before her
stoop. The driver’s side door opens and Olaf stands before her, a delighted, amused smile on his face.

He wears trousers as black as his car, and a gray shirt rolled to the elbows. On his face are sunglasses so large they blight the rest of him in comparison. The man shuts the door without a word and, although his eyes are concealed, she can feel that gaze like a physical weight traveling up her ankles, her crossed legs and pressed uniform, before settling on her face. Olaf slowly crosses before his car and makes his way to her stoop.

Violet stands, a grin on her face she cannot seem to quell.

“Excuse me, sir.” She says. “You’re that actor, aren’t you? The one voted Most Handsome in The Daily Punctilio? May I have your autograph?”

Olaf smiles when he reaches her, his toes brushing the bottom step. Even like this, she is the barest measure taller than him.

“I was also voted Most Talented. But you didn’t seem to notice that part.” He says, reaching out to take her free hand in his.

“Oh, who cares about that?” Violet teases, grinning so widely she fears she may look unstable.

“Silly girl.” Olaf mutters, removing his glasses and placing them on the top of her head. He lowers his hand from the sunglasses, down the crown of her head, and softly, to her jaw. His fingers are gentle and cool against her face.

“Oh, of course you can have my autograph.” He mutters, leaning close to kiss her quick on the apple of her cheek, as if he couldn’t resist. “Have you got a pen, Violet?”

The way he says her name- reverent, fragile- stuns her into silence as she reaches into her bag, feeling a delicious curl of heat in the pit of her belly. She hands him the pen and the newspaper and watches as he lays it out flat against the hood of his car and bends atop it, scribbling.

She waits a few moments, once she has digested the butterflies in her stomach, and teases, “That’s a lot more than an autograph, Olaf.”

“Are you ungrateful?” He quips, finishing with a flourish. Dark lines of scribbled words cross atop the page of his interview, and Violet aches to know what he has written her, but then the man folds the paper and hands it back. He says, as if having read her mind, “Don’t read it until I drop you back off.”

Violet sighs, frustrated and endeared all at once. She says, more serious than she’d intended, “I promise.”

“Good.” He smirks. The man examines her outfit carefully, eyes heavy. “You wore the skirt. What an obedient little orphan you are.”

Embarrassed, Violet fiddles with the hem of her skirt, tugging it down reflexively. Unsure of what to say, she turns, grabs her box, and cradles it closely as she taps down the steps and into the alley.

“What’s this?” Olaf asks, drumming his fingers atop the box.

Violet smirks, glad to have the upper hand. “It’s a surprise. And you’ll get to see it once we get to wherever we’re going.”
A delighted grin glides across the Count’s face. “Let’s get going then. The sun is setting more quickly than I had expected. I’ve got a place to show you, Violet.”

“A place? Oh, thank you.” She adds as he directs her to his car and opens the passenger door. She clambers inside, careful of her skirt.

“Yes. A surprise.” He leaves it at that, shutting her door with a sharp clap. Excitement erodes Violet’s nerves, leaving her jittery. She fiddles with her seatbelt and taps her feet softly. Olaf climbs in beside her momentarily. He starts the car, which remains as silent as if he had never turned the key, but does not move.

“It’s good to see you, little orphan.” He says, reaching for her free hand. She whips it away quickly, aware of her clammy palms.

Confusion piques Olaf’s features, draws them upward. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone prudish now.”

“No,” Violet says, painfully aware of her reddening face. “I’m just, uh, nervous. And sweaty.”

“Nervous to be alone with me, Violet?” Olaf asks, voice quiet and low. His eyes have grown heavy and teasing, a weighty accusation. “I can’t imagine what thoughts might have been running through that pretty little head of yours all day.”

He snakes a hand to the top of her knee, fingers brushing the barest stretch of thigh.

“I’ve been with Isadora all day.” Violet retorts. “I’ve hardly had any time to think of you at all.”

“Why does that sound like a lie?” He teases, leaning ever closer.

Violet ignores this, instead focussing on the man before her and the heavy racing of her heart. Violet Baudelaire realizes this in an instant, in a heartbeat: Lust has no mercy.

She kisses him so quickly he grunts in surprise and pulls away, a wild shock to his eyes. Violet wonders if he had never expected her to be brave, to initiate. Olaf looks as though he is grappling for a witty remark and is coming up empty. Her kiss, however brief, had stunned him.

Violet unbuckles her seatbelt and places her knees flat against the bottom of her seat, rising, neck bowed, to gaze at the man before her. Heat blazes between them, as humid as ever.

“Don’t tell me you’ve gone prudish now.” She says, voice soft and simpering.

“Anything but.” Olaf says, his voice answering in its depth and gravity. “I’m merely surprised that you would be so forward when we’re right beside your school.”

“...Oh.” Violet mutters, craning her neck to glance towards the door which remains firmly shut. A slow blush crawls up her neck to bloom, hot as a wound, atop her cheeks. She slides back down into her seat, face in her hands. “I didn’t even think of that. I’m so stupid. And embarrassed.”

“Don’t forget nervous and sweaty.” Olaf adds cheerfully as he plucks the sunglasses from her head and holds them before her like an offering. “Take these, you sultry little orphan. You’ll need them. Plus you’ll look a lot cooler.”

“Thanks.” Violet mutters through a weak smile as she takes the sunglasses and places them on her face. She turns to face him as she again buckles her seatbelt and asks, “How do I look? And where are we going?”
“Very cool.” Olaf says, giving her a quick once-over before grabbing a set of spare sunglasses for himself, just as large as the ones he had given her. Small golden text shines on the right temple of his glasses, gleaming in the bronzed sunlight: THE HOTEL DENOUEMENT.

Instead of answering, Olaf throws the car into gear and speeds down the rest of the alley, spraying pebbles and dust behind them. He cranks the radio, which is upbeat and dramatic. “We’re going on a date, of course!”

The speed has Violet’s stomach soaring to her mouth amidst a mess of excited giggles. Exasperated, she swats the man on the shoulder, mirth in her voice when she demands, “To where?”

“Violet!” Olaf cries, mocking her exasperation. He makes a turn into the busy streets, the sunset low and bright in the pink skyline. “I’m taking you to the beach!”

Chapter End Notes


"Let us go then, you and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky." These are the first two lines that Violet recalls.

I desperately did not want to end this chapter here, but the next one is already too damn long. If anything, be comforted by the fact that next week’s chapter will be at least twice as long as our couple have their first date.

Let me know what you think!
Chapter Eight

High tide has come and gone by the time they hit the shore.

Bits of coral and tiny creatures swim suspended in the puddles left behind, looking slick and bright. The shiny scales of dozens of fish catch the setting sun and glimmer like an oil spill as Violet passes, grinning like a child, scouring the remnants for treasures.

Olaf had driven them to a remote stretch of beach, right into an unmarked trail, his only explanation, “I did some training here when I was younger.” Their car ride had been loud and enjoyable, the radio cranked, the windows down. Songs she had known and forgotten returned unbidden like old friends. She sang loud and rough, uncaring of her tune or the hair she kept having to spit out.

The Count had teased her the entire ride, in more ways than one.

He would hold a spare comb beneath her chin at random intervals as if it were a microphone and say, “Sing for me, Violet! You know this song, I can tell!” If he wasn’t holding the comb, or had to pay more attention to the road, his free hand was always touching her somewhere maddening—rubbing his thumb over her knuckles, rolling them, or brushing his fingers lightly on the bare juncture between knee and thigh. Just once, he had brushed her hair aside and placed his hand on the back of her neck, using his thumb to tickle a line from jaw to collarbone, resulting in goosebumps and a deep shiver she couldn’t control.

“Hey!” Violet had whined, perplexed and concerned by the arousal that coiled in her belly immediately after. Olaf had grinned, unapologetic, and returned his free hand to the wheel, apparently satisfied. It had taken a few minutes before Violet felt comfortable enough to resume singing.

Olaf had parked crookedly on the beach, right before where sand met sea. Violet had thrown open her door and run for the retreating tide, calling, “Olaf! Come look!” He had followed her dutifully.

They had combed the beach for nearly twenty minutes when Olaf asks, “You realize these will die soon? As the tide retreats further?” He struggles to follow her between tide pools in his shiny shoes. Violet ignores him, hopping effortlessly across the sea-slick stones.

She disappears behind a large boulder, crusted in wilting coral, and by the time he appears next to her, she is rising with a bright orange starfish in hand. She smiles up at him, her balance uneven and precarious.

“Could you throw this into the deeper water?” She asks, presenting it to him like a gift. Olaf, wincing, examines the starfish which flails its legs weakly in Violet’s grasp. He strokes one finger atop the rough surface of it, debating.

“Throw it how?” He asks, opening his hand. The starfish slides into his grip.
“Like a frisbee.” Violet says, demonstrating with an empty shell. It skips across the water once before sinking a pitiful distance away. She jokes, “And that’s why you need to throw it.”

Olaf adjusts his footing and grips the starfish near its middle. He crosses his throwing arm carefully over his chest before flinging the starfish high through the air. They both watch in tense silence as it spins exactly like a frisbee before sinking into the deep green water.

“You did it!” Violet cries, her hands raised in victory.

Olaf runs a hand through his hair and strikes a pose. He sighs dramatically and laments, “The things I do for pretty little orphans.”

Violet grins, reaching to thread their fingers, cautious of the act. Giddy satisfaction blooms in her chest when she is not rebuked. To hide her ridiculous grin, she leads them to the shore like an expert navigator in a mysterious submarine, her back to the man the entire trip.

“I didn’t bring you out here just to chuck starfish back into the ocean, you know.” Olaf chides. He stands taller and prouder once returned to solid land, his balance restored. Sea breezes toss their hair, tangling. Violet wishes for her hair ribbon for the first time since Carmelita had stolen it.

“Well what else should we do?” Violet asks, bundling her hair in a loose knot. For a few moments, the only sounds are the repetitive lapping of waves on the shore. Olaf stares to her, a proposition in his shiny eyes. A lecherous grin spreads slowly across his face as Violet blushes so deeply she wonders if her cheeks emit heat waves.

“What should we do?” She repeats, unafraid of him even as her nerves return to drop her stomach. Despite her best effort, a small tremor still quakes in her words. Olaf smirks wider at this, and Violet wants to fling herself into the ocean after the starfish and never resurface.

The man takes mercy on her eventually. He drops the smirk and reaches to crush her against his chest, as if to squeeze the embarrassment from her. He releases her so quickly, Violet wonders if he doesn’t trust himself to truly release her once he has her. Olaf turns and heads towards his crooked car. Wind warps his voice when he calls, “I’ve got a place to show you.”

By the time she catches up to him, he has already pulled two bottles of wine from his car with a set of glasses to match. They are round and stemless, the glass blown thin.

Olaf stands before her, a bottle in each hand. When they meet eyes, his are serious and calm. “Now, seeing as this is a date, and that dates are supposed to be romantic, I brought wine. But seeing as you’re underage, as we know, I also made purchase of sparkling juice if you find you prefer that instead.”

Violet doesn’t hesitate before she says, “Bring the wine.”

“I figured you’d say that.” Olaf mutters. His mouth has a strange quirk to it as if he is trying to suppress a genuine smile. “Seeing as you’re out with me, I didn’t think you were one to care for an age law.”

“Yes, definitely not.” She agrees, doing her best to suppress her own stupid grin. “But thank you for your consideration.”

He waves her thanks away with a roll of his eyes. His hand waits empty in the air for hers. “Come along, Violet. To the cathedral! Hurry up!”

“Hurry up and wait!” She says, flinging open the passenger door and carefully retrieving her box.
“Ah, my surprise. I can hardly contain my excitement.” Olaf says, wiggling his fingers impatiently.

“Alright, alright.” Violet hurries to lace their hands, box propped on her opposite hip. “Show me this cathedral.”

They walk in silence. Sea air and sunset kick up the sand and blow it across the shore, a faint hiss in the background. The beach is bordered by stretches of thick, humid forest. Vines wind between trees so densely that Violet doesn’t notice the cathedral until they are nearly at its base. Wooden slats have been boarded over high curved windows, uneven enough to snag the sunset and glow with deep blues from stained glass. The building is so tall, Violet cannot see through the trees to the top spire. She feels humbled and awestruck at the size of it, as if this religious establishment were a manifestation of its focal deity.

“Are you ready to do some urban exploring, little inventor?” Olaf asks.

“Oh yeah. But how do we get inside?” Violet worries. She could imagine tugging free a loose board and shattering the old windows, an act from which her conscience would never recover.

“If my memory serves correct…” Olaf mutters. He grabs her hand more tightly and leads them down and towards the shore. They work slowly, stepping through overgrown shrubbery and crumbling debris.

“I would have worn pants if I had known we’d be exploring. Not this flimsy little skirt.” Violet says, mostly truthful, partly wanting the Count’s reaction.

“You’re doing as you were told. Although, I hadn’t considered these.” He kicks down a particularly large vine hindering their path, “Last I was in the cathedral, it wasn’t overrun with greenery. You should be fine once we get inside.”

“Alright. But if I get poison ivy, I’m giving it to you.”

Olaf laughs at that and trudges forward. Eventually they reach the very corner of the cathedral, and the crumbling set of stairs that leads to the massive doors at its front. The man climbs nimbly up the stairs, which are uneven and slick with moss. After seeing him struggle on the rocks at low tide, Violet wonders how frequently Olaf visits the abandoned cathedral.

“Come here often?” She asks, trying to keep her voice casual.

“Not often enough, evidently.” Displeasure darkens the Count’s tone as he stands with his back to her, hip cocked, his arms folded across his chest. Violet hurries up the last few steps to stand beside the man, peering at the vast wooden doors.

Unlike the rest of the cathedral, which was corroding and damaged, the front doors stand as thick and imposing as they once might have been. No lichen blooms atop the wood, intent on its decay. Golden letters curve along the top frame where wood meets stone, catching the sunset weakly, displaying CATHEDRAL OF THE ALLEGED VIRGIN.

The only oddities Violet could see were bits of smashed metal on the ground and, on closer examination, the remains of a typewriter hanging from the large metal handles.

“A typewriter?” Violet mutters, glancing to Olaf who wore a curious expression. The man seemed pensive, eyes far away as he stared at the smashed device.

“A typewriter.” Olaf agrees through a frustrated sigh. “As I said, I did some training here in my youth. I learned some of my very best acting techniques and became proficient in the use of veiled
“Veiled facial…?” Violet repeats, not following.

“This group was very secretive. And the only way to get inside this building was through a series of keywords that would change every so often. We would receive a letter, or be slipped a list at a restaurant, or find a hint in some publication, and type those words into the typewriter to get inside.” The man’s tone remains frustrated, still snagged on an idea Violet couldn’t guess.

Concerned, she asks, “Why are you telling me this, then, if it’s so secret?”

Olaf swipes his shiny shoes over the rubble, sending a spray of typewriter keys tumbling down the steps. “It was a long time ago when this was still used. As far as I know, this vernacularly fastened door was the only one that still worked. The words were years old, but… Whatever. Someone wanted it destroyed.”

“So what does that mean?” Violet wonders, pushing the typewriter aside to examine the large lock on the front. She kneels before the door, setting her box and her bag carefully on the stoop, and tries to ignore the prickling awareness of the Count standing at her back. “Why would anyone destroy an old lock for an acting school?”

“Acting school.” Olaf repeats to himself very quietly, voice neutral. “You’re asking all the wrong questions, Violet. But don’t worry. We can discuss my sordid past some other time.”

Before she could figure out how she had been asking wrong questions, Olaf continues, “Now. Why don’t you tell me what has you on your knees? Not that I mind the sight.”

“Oh! I, uh, I can pick locks. I figured I’d give it a shot. See?” Violet whips her kit free from her satchel pocket and holds it in the light.

“Impressive.” Olaf says. He kneels beside her, places the bottles of wine next to her bag, and holds the busted typewriter out of her way. “Think you can pick it?”

“Maybe. I’ve never tried one like this before. But there’s a flashlight in my bag. Could you shine it into the lock for me please?” Violet asks as she brushes her hair from her face, wishing yet again for her lost ribbon.

“God, Violet, you keep this in your bag? You could really hurt someone with this.” Olaf sneers as he does what he is asked. The large red flashlight looks enormous even in his hand. Its beam shines bright into the lock.

“Never know when I’ll need it.” She mutters, and places her choice picks inside.

For several minutes the only sounds are the distant waves on the shore, and sharp clicks of metal on metal as Violet works. Yet the flashlight never wavers in Olaf’s hand, even as he brushes her hair from the back of her neck and places his lips to her skin in a series of soft kisses.

Violet, stunned and suddenly covered in rapid goosebumps, asks, “Is this really the time?”

“Couldn’t resist.” The man says simply. His dusting of facial hair just-trimmed catches her skin as he speaks. Despite her uncontrollable shiver, he continues, trailing kisses along her shoulders, her neck, her jaw. Determined to ignore him, Violet resumes picking.

She fall into a lull, frustrated mind turning, picks snagging against rusty pins. She knows she is so close to hearing the lock snap open, but cannot get the last pin to move. Violet sighs, aggravated.
Olaf, bored and testing her, moves to the juncture between neck and shoulder, sucking lightly.

“Hey,” She says in protest, even as the act fills her with sparks as if she were a lighter just struck. “Don’t give me a hickey. That could get me in trouble, y’know.”

Olaf pulls away, yet she can feel his smirk. “I would never. At least not where anyone could see.”

Violet groans, dually frustrated. The picks falter in her hand. “Olaf, you’re making my fingers go dumb.”

“Oh, Violet.” He says, voice soft and close. “I could make all of you go dumb if you’d let me.”

Her reaction is immediate. Arousal drops straight and deep into her belly so fast she flinches, picks scraping harsh in the lock. The dead bolt snaps free. Olaf rises.

“You-! You fiend!” Violet accuses. She is still kneeling, still holding her picks in place, yet she glares at him with a face as red as if she had been sunburnt.

“I wasn’t teasing. But come on, let me show you around.” He holds his hand out to her and she takes it, shaky and grateful. Her joints crack into place as she replaces her picks, gathers her things, and rises. Olaf hauls the door open and waves her inside.

“Oh wow.” Violet breathes, her earlier embarrassment almost forgotten as she gazes around the cathedral. Light cuts in from the high domed ceiling where earlier boards had fallen away revealing the stained glass. The trees outside sway before it, making its blues shimmer against the floor. Pews thick with dust clutter crooked in the center of the room. Flakes of paint from the ceiling had fallen to split and crack beneath her shoes as she enters. Olaf closes the heavy door behind them. The drag of it echoes low, like the roll of a dense marble on hardwood.

“Ah, shit. This place got looted.” Olaf sighs. He crosses the room to stand beside her. “There used to be a huge pipe organ there. And then a marble baptismal pool. Those cads even swiped the giant cross at the front! Must’ve dragged it out across the beach. What an image.”

“Very biblical.” She agrees.

“Well, if this place got looted then there’s not much else to see... Besides the bell tower.”

“Bell tower?” Violet parrots, excited as a child.

“Yes yes, dear thing. Follow me further.”

They climb their way through cobwebs and dust, Olaf swinging the heavy beam of the flashlight up the tight spiral staircase. Darkness creeps so thickly around them that if Violet glances behind her she sees nothing but empty space, cannot even begin to make out the stairsteps down or the footprints she had left behind. On a private beach, in an abandoned cathedral, in the presence of a secretive man, she feels her nerves winding up, preparing for some great scare or sorrow.

What she does not know is that tragedy will find her much, much later. And that this is not the time for tragedies, merely ones in the making.

Cramps stick in the muscles of her calves by the time they reach the tower. Without announcement or preamble, the Count throws open the door and stumbles onto the belfry.

“We made it! I thought I was going to die from exertion!” Olaf-shouts. The sound rings throughout the high tower and resonates as if he had struck the very bell that hangs in the center of the open
“Uh, is this safe?” Violet asks as she tiptoes her way towards the low brick wall. Even from her perch by the door she can see the vast expanse of sea and sky and sunset, unhindered in any direction. The sight is enough to leave her breathless. Persuasive enough to let irresponsible indifference cloud her mind in favor of beauty.

“Nope. But who cares? We’ll be fine.” Olaf crouches near a break where the brick wall has crumbled away and sits to hang his feet over the edge. He kicks his heels casually against the tower and nods for her to join him. “If you’re scared of heights just don’t look down.”

“I’m not scared of heights,” Violet insists, slowly making her way towards him. “Just abandoned bell towers that could crumble any second.”

“Violet, you’re being dramatic. And that’s coming from an impresario.” Olaf says.

“A what?” She crouches beside the man and carefully places her bag and box to her other side. She folds her skirt beneath her, mindful of her wounds, and sits gingerly. For the time being, she sits cross-legged, sure that at their angles, the man couldn’t catch a peek up her skirt. She doesn’t trust herself to hang her feet from the tower like her companion.

“An actor, silly girl.” The man mutters. He grabs a wine glass and uncorks the first bottle with his teeth.

“Charming.” Violet teases. Olaf only hums in response as he pours her a generous glass and hands it over. His shiny eyes do not move away. He waits, watches. Condensation has already beaded atop the thin glass. Violet swirls the blushing wine in a way she had once seen her mother do, in a memory long-faded by time. Watching him back, she takes her first sip.

Violet grimaces. “That’s awful and I hate it.”

The man is nodding to himself and already reaching for the second bottle, muttering, “I had prepared-” but pauses at her laughter and her light touch on his arm.

“I was teasing, Olaf.” She says, taking another sip as proof. “It’s nice. Who wouldn’t like it this sweet?”

The man rolls his eyes at her and pours himself a glass. “Usually I prefer red, but I wouldn’t be opposed to sharing a bottle of rosé every so often.”

“Me neither.” Violet mutters, holding her glass out to him. “Cheers.”

“Cheers, Miss Baudelaire.” Olaf says, voice low and affectionate. Their glasses clink softly.

It seems as though that is the first real moment of their date.

The time before had been travel and preamble and fuss. Now, however, they are simply alone together, staring out at the beach and the bright pink sky. No curfew or administration hangs heavy as a threat between them. No timepiece sits ticking a countdown to when they must part ways. Instead, the slow slide of the sun and encroaching moon let them have their time.

“How are your cuts?” Olaf asks softly, glancing to her folded legs.

“Better, actually. Still tender. A mess of bruises, probably. I haven’t had the stomach to check on them. But, anyway, thank you. Isadora wouldn’t have done as well as you.” Violet rambles,
suddenly embarrassed.

Discussing her cuts has the previous night’s events replaying in her mind as if some wicked dream she had almost forgotten. The Count’s warm hands on her sore skin, the tickle of his breath on her neck, the way he had touched her with no fear or hesitation. For the absolutely dreamlike quality of her memory, she can still recall with clarity the way his voice had sounded (rough as gravel, smooth as marble-) “I have wanted you since the moment we met, little fiend.”

“The pleasure was all mine.” Olaf smiles but there is that quirk of roguish grin at his lips. “I am quite lucky to have had the opportunity to tend to you. No need to thank me.”

“Too late.” Violet says with her own teasing smile. She reaches for the white box and places it carefully in his lap.

“Ah. My surprise.” The man gulps the rest of his wine and sets the glass to the side gently. Those hands she had just been daydreaming about grasp the lid of her gift and flip it with a flourish. Almost instantly, an amused grin blooms on his face and he shakes his head, disbelieving. “You didn’t. It’s even word-for-word.”

“Count Olaf,” Violet recites, trying her own theatrical inflection. Her handwriting had been wobbly when she iced it herself, Isadora hanging over her shoulder. “thank you for being so handsome and saving my ass and also being very handsome. Love, Violet.”

“But is it raspberry flavored?” He asks, testing her. Violet reaches into her bag and withdraws two forks, silently handing his over. The worn metal catches the dimming sun as Olaf spears a chunk of cake and places it carefully in his mouth, as snobby and sophisticated as a seasoned sommelier.

“I was kidding, you know. Flirting even. But thank you muchly, Violet, for the cake. You’re both very sweet.” Olaf says. They meet eyes and Violet finds his strangely honest and calm, no joke or jest evident within them.

“You’re very welcome.” She replies, just as soft.

Without his usual teasing, Olaf places the palm of his free hand flat on the crumbling stone between them and leans in for a kiss. In that moment with the man tilting, preparing, Violet is suddenly stricken with a strange paralysis. Seeing Olaf with her gift in his lap, with his long legs dangling to the deep drop below, with his bright eyes on her and only her, has her heart constricting with jagged, painful sentiment.

She thinks back to earlier in the day, sitting and sweltering under the sun with Isadora, how she had felt so full of spark she could have burst. That feeling is similar in its intensity and buzz of sentimentality, yet, looking at Olaf simply wanting to kiss her, Violet feels her heart splitting at its seams.

He kisses her with all that same sentimentality, pressing his lips hard against hers as if pressure alone could be a measure of affection. When he pulls away, Violet’s lips taste of wine and frosting.

To disguise the ragged ache beneath her breastbone, she teases, “And finally I get a kiss. How long has it been since you kissed me on that stoop? At least ten years ago.”

Olaf smiles at that, yet hides it in the tilt of his wine glass just-filled. He takes a sip then glances to her glass which she has almost emptied.

“You may kiss me whenever you like. Wherever you like. And why-ever you like. No excuse necessary. And it was at least two hours ago, by the way. But don’t worry, I understand if my
incredibly good looks caused you to lose track of time.’’ Olaf quips. With a questioning look and her quick nod, he fills her wine glass. It brims almost to the top with wine as pink as the skyline, and Violet thinks somewhere deep in her mind that it is the first time she has truly appreciated the color.

“Guilty.” She says, holding up her free hand as if a criminal at gunpoint. “But if I’m allowed to make a request whenever … Would you kiss me again?”

Violet is distantly surprised by her lack of embarrassment. Instead of hesitancy and fretting, she is flipped confident and sure by the knowledge that Count Olaf wants her. That surety is secure and obvious enough that she feels no need for caution or doubt. She feels powerful, something she has not felt since the fire.

He kisses her just as forcefully as before, yet there is more heat to it, more promise. The chaste, shy kisses she had received before (a boy with a name she can barely remember, a face she can hardly recall, had said her name and kissed her quick, and the memory is small and worthless next to the full swell of Olaf’s lips on hers, of the soft growl in his throat-) were nothing in comparison. Violet feels for a moment as if the high bell tower tilts beneath them, and they are scraping the rest of the way to drop together into the dense forest.

She pulls away from him, head spinning. When she opens her eyes, the man is already staring at her, a crooked smile on his lips.

“I said anytime you like,” Olaf mutters, “And I’m not a liar.”

The sweet tension between them is so thick Violet’s skin nearly vibrates. Her heart stutters in her chest like a wild bird just-caged.

“Good.” Violet says, hoping it is true. “Now let us eat cake.”

They set the little white box between them and eat half of the dessert as they finish the second bottle of wine. Stars begin to poke like needle pricks in the pink fabric of the sky. Darkness creeps like smoke on horizon, as if their shadows had lost them along the drive to the beach and were just finally catching up.

“What is your play going to be about then? The one you’ve intrigued the whole cathedral with?” Violet asks, and then narrows her eyes at him as she swirls the wine atop her tongue. Carbonation fizzes against her teeth. Her stomach is full of sweets and song.

“Eager for a sneak peek are you?” Olaf chides, waving his fork at her like an accusing finger.

“Of course.” She says. “You’re my inside source. Now tell me all about it.”

“Unfortunately, there aren’t a great many details I can give you lest they change. The script and plot are still being solidified, yet I know the central themes will be… enthralling. We have yet to figure out a way to personify these urges the way we like. And so the play is hardly a play yet. Is that a good enough answer for you?”

Olaf sips his wine while Violet considers. It feels as though it takes a longer time than usual to answer his question. Her brain feels comfortably sluggish, as if a forced relaxation. The wine makes her giggle and excited and comfortable. She feels the way Olaf must under the eyes of a full stage-interesting, important, glowing. She wants to hold the man’s bright gaze on her as long as possible, is willing to bend like an amateur contortionist just to keep his attention a moment more.

“So what are your themes? Your urges?” She asks, a dare.
Olaf freezes, sensing the challenge immediately. He meets her eyes brutally over their little feast, unashamed. “Well, those are very different things. The themes for my play will be childhood trauma, manipulation by superiors, revenge, and a feeling of doom one can never avoid. But my *urges* are something else entirely. Ask me that question once more if you would like a demonstration.”

He throws back the rest of his wine and Violet feels as if her entire body is suddenly flushed with heat, swelling to burn beneath her skin. *Demonstration* - coming from anyone else the word would sound bland and stuffy yet from Count Olaf it is a proposition and a promise all at once.

“Childhood trauma, you say. I think I know what you mean.” Violet mutters into her glass before taking a long sip. When she looks up, Olaf has redirected his attention to the shore and the rhythmic static of waves rising and breaking.

“I’d agree. At last we’ve got that in common, hmm?” The man mutters. Hesitance quirks in her stomach, yet curiosity taps her shoulder like an impatient guest vying for her attention. Is childhood trauma too heavy a conversation for a first date? She wishes she had asked Isadora.

The moments where she could have questioned the man have passed by the time she realizes she should have. She reaches for her wine glass absently, searching for a distraction as she ponders how to bring it back up later, but realizes her glass is empty. Two clear bottles gleam at Olaf’s elbow, their long necks absent of wine the color of roses.

“Have we drank all the wine?” She asks, startled, distracted.

Olaf smiles at her, amused and endeared. “We have. How are you feeling?”

Violet considers this. “Well. My lips are a little numb. But I just feel pleasant. Tingly. Tender.”

“Wine feels that way.” Olaf says. He regards her more seriously, and she is aware of it in an instant. Her spine braces in anticipation for the words that come next. The man asks, smirking, a suggestion, “And what are your urges, Violet?”

The answer blurs from her mouth so quickly she hardly thinks. “I want to go swimming.”

“Swimming?” Olaf repeats. Surprise has wiped the serious look from his face.

“Yes.” Violet says. She rises, eager to get a head start, but feels a different sort of tilt beneath her feet as her mind sways. She clutches the thin wall and finds herself leaning, ragged and tipsy, to face the enormous drop to the forest floor.

“Whoa.” She mutters. Beside her, the Count leaps to his feet, panic draining the color from his face. He wraps one arm around her waist while his other hand grips tight just above her elbow as he hauls her upright.

“On second thought-” He grunts softly as Violet rights herself, twisting in his arms, “drinking atop a bell tower was not a good idea.”

“You think?” She quips, grateful for his steadying weight. “Let’s get off this nightmare and to the beach.”

“As you wish, dear thing.” Olaf says, but there is a nervous tremor to his voice that Violet feels much too smug about. They bump quick and loose-limbed down that same tight staircase, Olaf first, “So if you trip I can catch you, backwards.”

They leave their cake and glasses and bottles atop the bell tower, boasting a later date to retrieve.
them. It seems to take an eternity to hurry down the staircase and tumble like a diverted stream into
the open cathedral. Shifted sunset has changed the position of the light, so instead of blue-hued the
room glitters with red and yellow. The colors catch the dust they had kicked up and shimmer, hazy,
like a mirage.

The thought occurs to her suddenly- they are standing in a cathedral aflame- but before panic can rot
inside her, Violet catches the eye of a carving at the door. Her eyes adjust, her panic settles. Curious
familiarity makes her hesitate stepping towards it, even as Olaf trudges forward to grip their large
handles. He passes through the dazzling light, casting his shadow atop the wood, and she wonders
how she hadn’t noticed the carvings before, being so large they take up nearly the entire space. It is a
carving of an eye within a circular border, eyebrow furrowed, looking away as if watching its
nonexistent back.

Violet is admittedly not an expert at religious iconography, so the eye seems immediately foreign to
her, yet familiar in a way her fuzzy mind cannot grasp.

“What is that?” She asks Olaf, who freezes. Nerves stiffen the muscles of his shoulders. The emotion
is quickly masked as the man relaxes his stance and turns to look at her blandly as he opens the door
and holds it wide for her. He says coldly, clinically, “It was a symbol for the institution in which I
was taught.”

Sensing she is treading into murky water, Violet backtracks, adding it to her mental list of Questions
For A Later Date. “Ah. It looks a little intimidating. Just startled me, is all. To the beach?”

“To the beach.” The Count agrees, carding a hand through her hair as she steps outside. Violet
tumbles down the rest of the stairs easily, as if energized by the salt-laden air. She crouches at the
mess of smashed typewriter, which had lost its keys like an ancient skull with missing teeth. Violet
glances to where Olaf is fiddling with the great front doors and feels sentimental watching his
shoulder blades move like little wings beneath his shirt, and the slope of his long legs, tense and
braced as he tries to shove the lock into place.

Embarrassed at herself, she digs through the mess in search of souvenirs. By the time Olaf joins her
at the stoop, two typewriter keys are nestled in the front pocket of her satchel softly clicking as they
walk. She worms her hand into his as they trace their old footsteps through the dense forest. They
walk across the beach chattering about nothing in particular, sinking steps uneven, yet still clutching
one another for balance. By the time they near the car, Olaf’s hands are full of old buttons, worn sea
glass, the plump porcelain body of a headless figurine the size of the man’s pinky, a large coil of
various ropes and wire, and one marble die, its paint worn by salt and sea.

They reach the car, which has been warmed by long exposure in the sunset. Violet holds out a spare
pocket inside her satchel and the man dumps his palms into it, the found treasures clicking as they
settle.

“Thank you.” Violet says, happy with their finds.

“You’re welcome.” Olaf says, casting her a smile as soft as broken bread. “A little inventor must
have inventing props.”

“Of course you would call them props.” She mutters, hauling the strap of her bag over her head and
letting it drop heavy against the sand. The waves have calmed to a quiet lull, washing softly against
the shore. The sight looks so inviting, Violet can almost ignore the daring, violent pounding of her
heart. She summons her bravery, sighs to the bottoms of her lungs.

“I want to go swimming.” She repeats, watching Olaf. The man leans against the hood of his car,
arms crossed. He meets her eyes and lazily flicks his fingers at her. “Go ahead. I won’t stop you. Fortunately for me, I didn’t bring a swimming suit.”

Violet tries to swallow her tone she knows will be suggestive and fails. Blaming the wine, she says quietly, weightily, “Neither did I.”

Feeling like a performer, Violet steps away and turns so she is backlit by sunset. The warm weight of it on her shoulders is encouraging enough that she raises shaking fingers to her collar and picks free the top button.

Olaf’s body has gone still, like a predator sensing a single movement will scare away his feeble, brittle-boned prey. His shiny eyes are transfixed as Violet moves slowly, shakily, from one button to the next. By the time she reaches the hem of her skirt, she tugs free the wrinkled tuck of her white school shirt and lets it hang open. Straying to common ground, she picks free the zip of her skirt and drags it down slowly, watching, delighted, electrified, as the man’s eyes follow the slow drop of her skirt against the sand.

She steps away from her skirt, bending her knees one at a time, up and behind, to pick free her shoes and long socks, which she throws to his feet, spraying sand atop his perfectly-tailored trousers. The long white shirt billows in the wind like a cape, and Violet shrugs out of it, balls it up, and throws it towards him. It falls a pitiful distance away, and she sees the man’s careful, hungry gaze crack with amusement.

Frustrated that she cannot, for a single moment, be sexy without making this older, beautiful man distracted by her inefficiency, she reaches between her shoulder blades, scraping for the wretched hooks of her boring, skin-toned bra, and releases its teeth. The fabric bunches, gives. She grabs her bra, drags it long and slow from her shoulders, folds it halfway, and flings it at him like a frisbee or a starfish. Olaf grunts as it hits him square in the chest, yet his shiny eyes stay directly on her.

Violet shifts her feet flat in the sand, feeling wine stamp on her nerves, feeling vulnerable and alive in a way she has never felt. She knows she is not particularly womanly, cannot boast strong curves, or tempt the gazes of men the way others could. Yet she still stands, dressed only in thin cotton panties, before Count Olaf (talented actor, savior of pretty wayward orphans, secret-keeper, devilishly, deliciously handsome - her mind supplies) and his gaze slides over her skin hot and sharp as a blade.

She takes a few steps back, towards the lull of the sea.

“Are you coming?” She asks, cursing the tremor in her voice.

Olaf shifts his weight atop the hood of the car, sliding his hips forward and off the hood. There is a dirty smirk on his lips as he says, “Maybe later. We’ll see.” and kicks his shoes off. The idea of watching the man undress has queasy lightning forking through her stomach, so Violet turns and runs towards the waves.

Blissfully at ease, she wades waist-deep in the warm water, testing her limits. The cuts sting faintly, yet they are not as painful as Violet had expected. Pleased, she wades for a few moments before diving head first. The sea soothes a ragged ache in her chest she had not realized was there, a deep wound flushed with saltwater. Violet holds her breath in the green, green water and wonders back to Eliade for the first time that night, for the orphans that rise cross-armed and gasping from the baptismal pool, if this feeling was like being saved.

When she breaks the surface, Olaf is waist-deep, his own clothes a dark pile by the car, and walking slowly towards her. She wants to make a joke or to skip a smooth shell his way, yet the sight of him shirtless, covered in spray from the waves, his eyes on her, has her voice shriveling temporarily in
“God, look at you.” Olaf says, voice reverent and hushed. “You’re a siren. A snare.”

“Jailbait?” She quips, before she can consider the tact in it.

The man laughs, sharp, once, incredulous. He says, coming ever closer, “I hope not. I’m too pretty for jail.”

“Well you haven’t quite done anything to warrant an arrest.” She points out, standing so the waves brush the small of her back. The man stops before her, so close she can feel the heat radiating off him like a second sun. A peculiar smirk quirks the edges of his mouth. “You’re very wrong.”

“Am I?” She asks, unsure of what else to say.

The man only hums in affirmation. A small silence grows between them, not uncomfortable, yet there all the same. Olaf shakes his head as if to banish a thought, “My apologies, Violet, if I seem scatterbrained. There is a delicious little orphan standing half-naked before me that I can’t seem to take my eyes off of.”

“No need to apologize. I seem similarly transfixed.” She says, shifting as a particularly strong wave knocks her to the side.

“Are you?” Olaf asks, running a hand through his hair. It is the first time she has seen him display even a hint of nerves. Absent of words, Violet only nods.

“Then come into my arms, my beamish girl!” The man shouts, scooping her into his arms and dragging them further into the waves.

Violet can only yelp as she is pressed chest to chest against the man, her grip hooked around his neck, one of his arms looped around her waist, the other splayed wide on the flat of her stomach. They sink further into the ocean until their bodies are invisible to the neck down.

Without warning, Olaf asks, “Can you touch here?” and pushes her away.

“Hey!” She yells just before her head sinks below the surface. She reaches out, feeling for skin, and grips the man’s forearm, hauling herself back to the surface. Disgruntled, she wipes her eyes.

“I can swim, y’know. You don’t need to test me.” Violet pouts. The wine spins in her mind, dizzying.

Olaf takes her back into his arms, a wide grin on his face. He kisses both her cheeks, her nose, her lips. “My apologies. I merely wanted you to cling to me more.”

She wraps her legs around his waist, returns her arms to hook around his neck. As petty revenge, Violet turns her head quickly and delights in the soft smack of her wet hair against his cheek. Voice light, she says, “It’s fine.”

“You little tease.” The man growls, voice deeper and breathier than she’s ever heard it. The waves bob around them, sunset shimmering atop the surface. Olaf meets her eyes and in them she sees desire as she has never experienced. Heat flushes through her body, pooling just below her navel. Before he can act, she leans forward and kisses him gently in a soft catch of lips.

He reacts immediately, enthusiastically. Fingernails snag against the soft skin of Violet’s jaw, scratching down her neck, her shoulders. If she were wearing clothes (a blazer, a shirt, a bra- so
many needless layers-) they would have been torn from her skin, frayed with the proof of the man’s want.

Much too soon, Olaf moves away from her lips, kissing white-hot trails down her throat, across her collarbones, deeper, deeper, to the flat space between her breasts. Violet winds one hand into the cadence of curls at the back of his head, using the other to weakly, distractedly tread water. Beneath the waves, Olaf has snaked a hand beneath her panties to grip lightly at her bottom, squeezing gently, aware of the wounds that had placed her at his feet the previous evening.

At first they do not speak. There is only the rush of waves, the slick smack of salty kisses, the rapid beating of Violet’s heart in her ears, fast as a hummingbird.

She feels aflame, alive, an ember blazing brighter with every breath. She is a childhood home quickly burning. An adult standing in her own ruins.

One large hand skims up her stomach, causing a mess of goosebumps to rise with a shiver atop her skin, to brush her breasts hastily, as if he could not wait one more moment. The sensation is odd, startling. Violet feels as if she was never more aware of her body until this moment, as if she is a sudden stranger to herself as she feels the man summon sensations she has never felt in the seventeen years she had directed her body herself. It is only when he scrapes his teeth gently over the taut peak of her nipple does she finally give to her desire to shudder, whimper.

“Oh god-” Violet mutters, mortified. She does not bother to feel further embarrassment at the ragged breathiness of her tone, or the rosy heat of her cheeks. “Sorry, I- didn’t mean to- to- make that noise.”

“Please, make as much noise as you’d like.” Olaf says, his voice jagged as broken glass. He runs his stubbled cheek back and forth between breasts, slowly, so she can feel the catch and tug on her skin. “I want to hear you, Violet.”

“Okay.” She mutters, voice small.

Sensing her sheepishness, Olaf confesses, dragging kisses up her neck, “This is exactly what I wanted when I first saw you. You, standing on that stage, looking like an angel, like a vision of sin personified to tempt me.”

“Tempt you?”

“Oh yes.” Olaf spins her so they are perfectly face-to-face, her hips flush against his stomach. He grabs her by those hips, pushing down until she feels fabric, bunching, and she is flush against his constricted erection, bordered by panties and his own thin boxers.

“God-” she gasps. A sudden throb aches in the core of her, familiar in sensation but foreign and addictive in intensity. “You, Olaf-”

“Hmm?” He asks, toying with her, brushing over her nipples with soft, wicked fingers.

“You weren’t lying. You really can make all of me go dumb.” She laughs weakly, leaning forward to press her face into the skin of his neck.

“Yes,” He hisses again, as Violet tilts her hips, grinding against him slowly. “Let me, Violet- Let-”

The man backs away from her chest to kiss her once, quick, on the lips. The hand that had snuck beneath her panties slips away only to hook back in at her hip and tug them down slowly, questioningly, as if waiting for rebuttal. Violet curls her knees, shimmying them off her hips and the curve of her bottom. Olaf tucks the thin strip of fabric into the waistband of his own underwear like a
prize. It sways in the water beside him, bright and fluid as a koi fish. Cool water dribbles down the
flushed curve of Violet’s spine as Olaf brushes his hand over her back soothingly. Dually
embarrassed and unfamiliar with being near another person in such an aroused state, yet unbearably
willing to continue, Violet presses her face deeper into the crook of his neck and says, “I’m good.
Incase you were wondering.”

“How can you make me feel this way? I’ve never been able to-to do this by myself. Not like this.”

“My, my.” Olaf teases, faux scandal in his tone even as his fingers slip back and forth against her.
“Did the chaste little Violet Baudelaire just admit to masturbation?”

Violet blushes so violently she’s sure he can feel it against his throat. She scoffs to disguise a gasp,

“Chaste.”

“Of course.” The man says, working those skilled fingers maddeningly close to her entrance. “Does
that feel good?”

“Yes.” She sighs, as if answering an interviewer. That same frustration she had felt earlier at her lack
of sex appeal resurrects itself in miniature. She would have to do some research, would have to learn
how to receive and direct dirty talk.

“Here?” He asks, amusement to his tone. Before Violet, confused, can ask, “What changed?” he
drags his thumb up to rub gently on the inflamed swell of her clit, and she flinches as if shocked.
Betraying her dignity, Violet grinds against him shamelessly, her throat a mess of strangled
whimpers.

She feels as if her entire body has betrayed her to Count Olaf. But then, she concedes, hadn’t it from
the very instant she saw him? Hadn’t she itched to flip her skirt and present him with the very
opportunity they were enjoying?

All too suddenly, the man pulls his hand away. Violet makes a sound like a sob through a swollen
throat. Her mind is fuzzy with alcohol and arousal, and the only thoughts she has are bereft of diction
and direction. She feels like a firework burning rapidly through its wick, and the only way she will
not explode into a flurry of sparks is through Olaf’s hands on her skin.

“Why-?” She begins, but the man wraps his arm around her as he had before, and drags her towards
the beach.

“I need more of you to touch. We’ll drown if we continue in the sea.” He says and Violet cannot
argue with that. They wade through the water and when it is shallow enough for her to stand, Olaf
scoops her into his arms like a fresh husband with his bride, and walks them to the shore.

“You really didn’t have to carry me.” Violet says as Olaf hoists her further into his arms and marches
across the beach. He ignores this, and pauses to grab his bundle of clothes, throwing them atop the
hood of his car in the nook between windshield and the hood. He then places her gently atop it, her
back to the warm metal, like a parent offering their first child as sacrifice on some great stone. Violet
sits up almost immediately, her knees coming together, her arms crossing.
“Lie back.” Olaf mutters softly, holding the bundle secure to cushion her head. “Please.”

“Alright.” Violet concedes. Distantly, she is concerned by her immediate acceptance, her willingness to lie back at his mere request despite feeling like a bug pinned and squirming under some high lab light. She wonders what Olaf could ask of her that she would immediately reject and her mind rises empty and void.

A small squeal quirks the air as she wriggles her wet hips down to lie with her head on the soft pile of clothes. Her heels find perch on the front bumper, her bottom on the edge. Olaf kneels in the sand, as if in prayer.

“Stop me, Violet, if you get nervous.” He says, glancing up to meet her eyes.

“Shut up, you.” She says, a tremor to her tone, embarrassed at her evident nerves. A fine tremble shakes her bones, like the awareness of lightning fizzing the air before a strike.

He takes her advice and does not speak. Instead, he presses against her calves, pulling them apart. For a reason she couldn’t name, Violet had expected to see faint disgust or hesitation to look at her genitals full-on. It seems foreign to her, too intimate. Yet Olaf is alert and admiring. This small moment where the man could have been cruel or dismissive and instead is kind and eager has anxiety melting in her chest, replaced with some sentiment warm and glowing.

He replaces his thumb at the hood of her clit and again begins that wicked circular motion. Boneless arousal has Violet melting in seconds. Her hands rise to cover her blushing face, hiding from the sloping sun and the weight of Olaf’s shiny eyes.

“You’re slick, dear thing.” He murmurs, other fingers dipping teasingly at her entrance.

This feels like an accusation. She swallows the wild, ragged urge to shout, “You did this to me!” like some actress on a low budget television program. Instead, Violet quips, “What do you expect? For someone who has done this before you seem surprised.”

The man sputters indignantly. There is humor in his tone when he says, “I merely wanted you to know.”

Violet hums neutrally in response.

“When you masturbate,” Olaf asks suddenly, as if the thought were just occurring. Violet braces herself. “Does it involve penetration, or merely-” he releases his thumb, as if to prove a point. Frustration nearly overwhelms her enough to arch her hips wide into the air, searching for his hands. Sensing her internal struggle, the man continues as though he already knows, “Clitoral stimulation?”

“Er-” Violet mutters, unaccustomed to sharing such personal habits. “Clitoral. I’ve never tried it the other way.”

“Understood. Would you like to? Something easy?” He asks. Olaf rubs his whiskery cheek against her calf like some stray cat, his eyes finding hers at what she is sure cannot be a flattering angle.

“Go ahead. If you’d like.” She mutters to the sky, to its growing clutch of stars and darkness.

“*If I’d like.* ” The man scoffs. “Something easy then, to start.”

Violet merely nods and closes her eyes, focussing on her body atop the warm slope of the car, and the tipsy spinning of the world at her back.
Olaf runs his hands up and down her body soothingly, callouses scratching soft white lines into her skin, and the touch is enough to calm the nervous ache in her gut. He soon replaces his thumb, that quick twirl of pressure, and begins, very softly to press one finger into her.

Several minutes pass in mental examination and surprise at her own body’s reactions. By the time the man has two fingers gliding up and in, she is a trembling mess. Violet feels embarrassed at first, glancing to her wobbly knees, to her heels that had somehow found perch on the man’s strong shoulders, but then she sees Olaf’s expression, the almost childlike happiness on his face, his eyes heavy-lidded and glowing as if there were no other place he would rather be than kneeling between the legs of Violet Baudelaire.

“Soft and pink as rose petals parting-” The man breathes, and Violet wonders if he is reciting poetry.

“Olaf, I-” Violet says, unsurprised to hear her voice reduced to a teary, ragged gasp. She feels as though on the verge of sobbing, a pleasure so fierce it is almost pain. “I had no idea you could make me- Oh! F-feel this way. Th-thank you.”

“So you’ve said.” She can hear the smirk in his voice. Olaf says, cloying and low, “Violet. Could I try something?”

“Anything.” She breathes, riding out a particularly delicious curl of the man’s fingers. Before she can really consider what he means, the man withdraws his thumb only to replace it with the slick, hot press of his tongue. Violet gasps so deeply she can feel it to the depths of her belly- a gasp like drowning, like devastation.

Violet rises onto her elbows shakily to stare at the man (shut-eyed, rapturous-) languishing between her legs. To pet or provoke she could not have said, but Violet winds her trembling fingers to that lush hair and holds him. Olaf glances up at her touch, and the moment they meet eyes, he increases the speed of his fingers, plunging deep and fast. This sends another wave of feverish heat through her, one that she has felt alone, her hand working beneath the Eliade bedsheets, frame trembling. Heat flushes her neck to bloom atop her face.

From her new perspective, she can see Olaf’s arm pumping rapidly at his hips, working himself at the same speed his other hand dives into her. The simple awareness is enough to send her body spasming, the fevered flush of heat boiling in her belly rising, swelling.

“Olaf-” Is all she has time to say before she removes the hand from his hair to clamp it over her mouth, as if to smother the small whines buzzing at the back of her throat as her entire body spasms rapidly.

Olaf pulls away, mouth gleaming, eyes heavy. Tremors rack his own shoulders and harsh breaths erupt from his mouth. After a few moments of bliss, Violet, boneless, relaxes against the hood of the car, breathing heavily. The only sounds are her breath, her heartbeat loud as gunshot in her ears, and the fast pant of the man still kneeling in the sand.

“Violet Baudelaire-” Olaf pants, “You little vixen.” and then he is coming into his fist, body spasming, curling inwards. He rests his forehead on the bumper so all Violet can see is the very top of his head, sea-soaked and damp. After a few moments, his breathing evens out and he finally sighs in one great rush and clambers onto wobbly legs. When Violet looks his way, his boxers are perfectly in place as if he had never shifted them. He flops beside her onto the hood, staring up at the vast black sky and the moon shining like a stage light.

Violet summons the energy to roll onto her side towards him, startled at the stickiness of her skin.
against the paint. For lack of a better spot, she places her hand along the curl of his ribcage.

“I could have helped you.” She mutters, feeling indebted.

The man waves his hand lazily. “No need. Next time, perhaps.”

“Next time, huh?” She feels bewildered at the thought of experiencing pleasure with Olaf again, as if she is almost too lucky. Her mind swims with ideas of sensations she has not yet felt, but can now imagine with sharper clarity.

“Well of course.” Olaf purrs. He shifts his weight so they are facing one another, his elbow propped, jaw in his palm. Even in the darkness, Violet can see the possessive gleam in his eyes. “Now that I’ve had you, why would I ever let you go?”

Queasy delight soars in her stomach. The idea of someone wanting to be with her, to stay, makes the young girl want to sob with exhaustion. She tries to smother the hope that single sentence summons. Violet thinks back to early morning, all those hours ago, of her dream standing wrecked with grief between her family, how visiting them even in her mind had given her a single moment where she was not alone, but awake she was in absence of them or any familial security at all.

Sudden caution stamps quick on her hope. She wonders if Olaf knows the right words to use with an orphan, how to twist a phrase into an emotional snare. She could imagine the process as if it was all some big plot: Demonstrate acceptance, engage physically, nurture dependence, neglect emotionally, inspire hope, separate entirely…

She remembers, then, how before his death, Klaus had been interested in the cycles and patterns of common religions and their processes. Those were the exact words he had used to explain how various religious icons had gained followings and sycophants.

An image rises in Violet’s mind of Olaf in linen clothes, turning her glass of water to wine pink as sunset, saying, “Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.” and herself, a disciple at his feet.

She realizes that she is a little drunk.

Unsure of how to address the multitude of questions suddenly growing like teeth in her mouth, Violet settles on sarcasm. “Had me? You haven’t had me.”

That causes a narrowing of those possessive eyes, like Olaf had sensed her challenge even before she did. The man runs a hand from her collarbone, to the flat gap between breasts, to her stomach, which caves a bit as goosebumps sprout up her body. Beneath his hand, Violet shivers.

“No.” The man agrees, although he sounds amused. “But I’ve gotten a taste, if you will. And I am most willing, Violet, to teach you everything I know. Demonstratively.”

She recalls a sermon from early in her stay at Eliade, a Catholic priest standing tall and proud as a marble idol, his voice rolling low in the sanctuary, “The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces. Your hands have made me and fashioned me. Give me understanding that I may learn Your commandments…”

Isadora had met her eyes immediately, both sharing the same wordless idea: That was kind of sexy.

“I’m drunk.” Violet declares, forgetting what the Count had been saying. He gives her a puzzled look, and she recalls his words almost immediately. “Ah, but… You wish to demonstrate your urges, hmm?”
Olaf chuckles quietly, a grin on his lips. He snakes a hand around her waist and pulls her closer. She can feel his warm breath on her neck, the wet cling of his boxers at her thigh.

“If you’re willing.” He replies, not waiting for an answer before kissing down the line of her jaw and nuzzling against her neck.

“Oh, I am.” Violet assures him, suddenly very aware of her nakedness and the chill of the wind on her skin, still damp from sea and sweat. “But not tonight.”

Warm pressure slides against her neck as Olaf smirks. “I didn’t mean tonight, silly girl. As I said, I am quite satisfied with our progress thus far.”

Violet briefly debates her next sentence in her mind, unsure of how to avoid sounding maudlin and young. “So you wish to… see me again?”

“Oh, Violet!” Olaf cries, flinging himself so his back is flat atop the hood, one arm thrown across his eyes. His tone is melodramatic and silly when he shouts, “When are you going to get it through that thick skull of yours that I want you? Even in that alleyway when I barely knew you I said, ‘Violet Baudelaire, be my Countess as we travel the world as theatrical marvels’ and you said something stupid about inventing for me! Or when I danced with you as my bride before your classroom of undeserving orphans? Or tended to you, just last night? Or perhaps not too long ago, when I knelt before you in the sand intent on making you feel pleasure at my hand? Or maybe it will be clearer to you when you read the note I wrote in that Punctilio rag, sounding like a foolish old man charmed by a little nymph he can never have, lest she wander off like some cryptid. Yes, Violet, I want you. For as long as you’ll have me.”

Gracelessly, Violet flings herself atop him and winds her arms around any parts of him she can, snagging on his neck and chest. She presses her face into his shoulder, mute with gratitude. The man brings his arms up to wrap around her back, holding her in place.

“I’ll have you.” Is all Violet can think to say, and even then it comes out astonished and weighty.

“Delightful.” Olaf mutters. He drops a kiss to the top of her head, and Violet sighs, only then letting foreign hope and affection smother her. “Not to ruin our date, but it must be nearly midnight. I’ll have to get you back soon.”

Violet groans playfully, strengthening her hold on him. “Don’t make me go.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not up to me. Let me up so I can gather our clothes.”

To end their night, he drops her back off on the very same stoop. Their clothes are damp and sandy, their hair frizzy from saltwater, they both look as though they had been doing exactly what they had been, yet Violet has never felt more giddy and treasured.

Olaf parks and opens the door for her and Violet reluctantly exits. She stands before him silently, appraising the rumpled look.

“Goodnight, Violet.” Olaf murmurs, taking her pruney hand in his and bringing it to his lips.

“Goodnight, Olaf. Thank you for such a wonderful date.” She mutters, blushing for a reason she could not name.

“The first of many I hope.” He says, leaning forward to kiss her cheek, her nose, her lips. Violet nods at that, hoping the very same.
She leaves him in the darkness, standing next to his long black car, and sneaks into the shadowy silence of Eliade, feeling lighter and stronger than when she had left. Violet hurries to her room in the orphan’s quarters, shedding her damp clothes and crashing into bed, already plotting what to tell Isadora, and hoping that if she dreams, they are full of waves and wine and soft, soft wonder.

———

_Hurry Up and Wait_, which Violet quotes, is a fairly new product of Daniel Handler and Maira Kalman, with the most recent book called _Weather, Weather_.

Some liberties have been taken in the location of the Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin. In actuality, it is located off Lousy Lane near the Grim River, not a beach.

"Demonstrate acceptance, engage physically, nurture dependence, neglect emotionally, inspire hope, separate entirely…” When I was in school taking religion courses, this process is actually something I was taught to consider until one of my classmates later told me it's a line from a popular tv show. I still consider it worth considering.

The Scripture is 1 Corinthians 13:6 & Psalm 119:72.

The Beach by The Neighbourhood is a song I was listening to when the idea for this fic first materialized, incase anyone wants to give it a listen on this particular chapter.

I hope you sinners like this update. As always, I'm up for conversation through my tumblr (@s-softerssoftest) and would treasure any feedback.

Let me know what ya think!
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nine-

When Violet wakes it is to the sound of a funeral.

Organ music floats round and deep through her room to vibrate in her skull and rattle her teeth. It is an unforgettable tune, one she recognizes immediately from her family’s service.

Waking feels immediate, yet her mind still snags on a nightmare, her surroundings blurred, her thoughts tripping over themselves to catch up with wakefulness.

In her dream, she sees Eliade burning like a funeral pyre. And Violet, stuck in her own bed while flame glitters at the door, terrified of her heart turning to cinders, slipping a dagger from her pillow and slicing clean into her side, unobstructed by bone and muscle, to tug her heart free. It gleams clean as any professional dissection, yet it is only the size of a typewriter key. She rises from the bed, the wound in her side gushing the rest of her insides onto the bed like a birth, and walks to the window. Outside, the rest of the orphans and staff stand watching silently. She cannot spot singular identities in the crowd, just one mass of eyes on her through the smoke, yet she opens the window and throws them her heart all the same.

When she turns, the flames have eaten at the door and are tiptoeing inside. She returns to the bed, pushing aside her gleaming mass of organs, and reaches into the drawer on her bedside table. In one instance she is reaching, the next she is gulping painful swigs of gasoline from a depthless wine glass. The smell burns her nose, erodes the lining of her throat, yet she drinks and drinks, gas dripping down her chin, her chest, and when she can take no more, turns to spit a mouthful to the blaze at the floor. In her last moment, she hears the funeral music begin and true fear makes her gasp.

With a roar, she is smothered in fire.

She wakes and rises with a ragged whine, flinching away from the door. No flame chars the floor of her bedroom and no gasoline eats like acid at her tongue. Violet pants for a few moments in pure terror, bewildered by the music still trembling in the air. A few moments pass as her heartbeat calms. Instead of flailing like some trapped animal in her chest, it slows to a deep throb she can feel all the way to her toes.

It is precisely this moment when Isadora opens the door.

“Violet-?” Her friend shuts the door quickly, noticing the terror on her face, and sits beside her on the bed. She rubs her hands along the blanketed curve of Violet’s calf in an attempt to soothe her the way one might pet a terrified child. “Are you okay?”

“I’m-” Violet begins, but her throat closes as if choking on smoke. Her coughs punctuate the organ
music like a fast horologe. She could almost taste the char, as if someone had snubbed their cigar on her tongue. “Okay. Just a nightmare. Ugh. Sorry.”

Concern flips Isadora’s features, draws her eyes too large and her worried mouth pinched too small. “Did something happen last night? On your date?”

“No, no.” Violet says, surprised she hadn’t immediately thought to snub that idea. Before she continues, she heaves a deep sigh, calming now that she was sure she was awake. Isadora still pets her leg and that tactile sensation helps ground her away from the dreamy disaster she had been trapped inside. “Well, things happened, but nothing bad. I had a nightmare because of this song. It was played at my family’s funeral. Why are they playing it so close to the orphans’ quarters?”

“That’s what I came here to tell you about. The sanctuary was flooded, as I’m sure you remember. Nero found me earlier this morning and told me to get you and Duncan and clean it up before the next sermon. So they had to use the spare organ down the hall to practice.” Isadora says, avoiding her eyes as she rises. Violet follows suit, surprised at the languid, easy stretch of her body.

“Practice for what? Who died?” Violet asks and only when she stands does she realize she had crawled into bed entirely naked. Her clothes from the previous evening are strewn in sandy piles around the room. She glances down at her bare chest as if she had just noticed it. “Oh. Sorry. I’ll get dressed.”

Amusement lightens her friend’s tone when she says, “Don’t worry about it. Can’t wait to hear why your clothes are all sandy. But… Surely you’ve seen the Punctilio? Lots of people, sometimes entire families, keep dying left and right in the city. All from house fires with no direct cause. The papers won’t print it, but everyone’s starting to suspect arsonry. They’re rehearsing for all the funerals.”

“How morbid.” Violet mutters bitterly. The word arsonry summons an acrid taste in her mouth like bile. “I’ve skimmed the Punctilio. Should’ve actually read it but I was distracted. But I have a copy in my bag, so we can read it when we get to the sanctuary. How does Nero expect us to, uh, drain it?”

Violet is almost dressed when Isadora throws herself across the bed and burrows into her still-warm spot. The other girl draws the blankets to her chin and frowns. “No idea. I haven’t seen it. And, uh, Violet, don’t take this badly, but your butt looks like raw meat. What happened?”

“Oh. Right. You hadn’t seen what Nero did.” Violet twists her torso and cocks her hip, trying to get a better view of her wounds. The bandages that Olaf had carefully placed two nights previous are gone, likely drifting in an undertow. The gashes look better after being flushed with ocean water. The skin around them is dry and dull red, as if already beginning to scar. The pain had leveled out to a constant but dull tenderness.

Isadora cringes deeper into the blankets. “God. I didn’t think it was that bad.”

“It was that bad. But Count Olaf actually helped a lot. If he hadn’t been there, I’d have been a mess trying to patch myself up.” Violet sits on the corner of her bed to put on her shoes. Isadora scoots closer to curl around her even as she remains lying down, her stomach around the curve of Violet’s bent spine. “I want to hear all about your date.”

“You will, of course. I’ll tell you everything while we clean.” Violet says, standing. She yanks the blankets off Isadora and laughs when the other girl pouts.

Violet gathers her things, that heavy swinging satchel, and they make their way to the sanctuary. Large traffic cones blight the hall before the great wooden doors forbidding any roaming orphans.
from entry. Duncan stands to the side in his rumpled uniform, clutching the straps of his bookbag, looking as though he wished he were anywhere else.

“There you two are.” Duncan mutters as they tumble down the staircase and into view. “I’ve been waiting here forever!”

“Someone was still sleeping when I came to find her.” Isadora says, glancing significantly in Violet’s direction.

“Sleeping, still?” Duncan checks the watch tightly strapped to his wrist. Isadora heaves open the large doors and the three of them trudge inside. “It’s almost eleven!”

Violet shrugs, refusing to look sheepish. “I was out late last night.”

Dark and dampness greet them by the door. Violet fumbles for a light switch and, with a click, the large room is swamped with light.

“Why were you out so late? Were you two rummaging through the antique mall dumpsters again?” Duncan asks.

“Eew. Smell that? That’s years of tears and repression soaked into the carpet suddenly rising with the water.” Isadora says. Their shoes squish against the damp floor as they make their way towards the altar where a pile of cleaning supplies had been dumped atop the stairs.

“Wow.” Violet quips, ignoring Duncan’s question in favor of teasing her friend. “That was melodramatic. Do you write poetry?”

Isadora turns, a smirk to her face. She grabs a mop from the pile, the ragged end prompting an offensive sucking sound as it is peeled from the floor. She holds the mop like a weapon, body braced to spring. “One more jab like that and I’ll bruise your butt worse than Nero.”

Violet winces. Duncan casts her a disgusted, horrified look and says, “What does that mean?”

“You haven’t filled him in?” Violet asks, joining Isadora at the altar to take in their workload. The lighting is dim in the Sanctuary but the overwhelming smell of settled water and carpet is enough to estimate the damage. The baptismal pool sits to the left side of the altar, always on a low boil like a well-used cauldron.

Throughout an average day she has seen religious figures or even students visiting the altar simply to dip their fingers into the water like a good luck charm and continue with their lives. Seeing it silent and calm makes Violet wonder what its destruction has cost the residents of Eliade, if they have lost some sense of security once guaranteed.

“Didn’t know if you wanted me to.” Isadora admits. “I’m not gonna spill your secrets, even on accident.”

“You’re sweet.” Violet says, and means it. She eyes Duncan, who stands between the front pews looking lost and confused, his shoes gleaming with spilled holy water. “But you give him the details. I’m going to check out the baptismal pool.”

Isadora claps her hands together like a journalist having just found her next big story. “Ooh, Duncan, you’re going to be so surprised. Help me move these pews to the side, off the carpet, and we can talk. Let’s start right here.”

The mop in her hands falls with a clatter to the pile of other supplies while Violet crosses the small
altar. Even through the smog of humidity in the air, the candles atop the altar still flicker with flame.
A warm glow smooths over the damage, makes it seem lesser and meek, as if Violet’s shoes do not slip against ruined carpet and deeper hardwood with every step.

Although she had expected to find the pool empty, she finds it instead swollen to the brim with water. Intricate tiling, golden as sunlight, lines the floor. Violet breaches the surface with a hesitant finger, finding it cool, and watches the ripple shimmer across the tiles.

From across the sanctuary, she hears Isadora, “And then they danced together in front of the whole class, which you would have seen but you’re sick and skipping everything –”

Duncan groans. Violet cannot help but snicker.

Isadora continues talking as the two siblings push the pews against the walls. Violet stands still, looking at the machinery of the baptismal pool, wondering at the initial problem. She considers every jet and filter. Eventually her gaze comes to rest at the very last step of the staircase leading down into the water, where the drain rests. A wispy shred of fabric clogs it like shadow.

Sick apprehension curls in her gut as she shrugs off her blazer and places it at the altar table. She rolls the sleeves of her button up as far as they will go before kneeling near the staircase and reaching into the water. Recognition makes her wince as soon as her fingers brush the fabric. She yanks it free, water splashing onto the stage. The drain gives and gurgles.

When she stands, Violet rises with her wet span of gray velvet ribbon. Its edges are frayed with mistreatment, and it is only half the length she remembers, but it is still the ribbon her father had given her and having it in her hands again has wretched relief bringing tears to her eyes.

Duncan and Isadora have shifted nearly half the pews. She can hear Isadora still chattering, “Oh! But I forgot to say this. When I asked her how old Olaf is, she said ‘How old was your dad?’ Can you believe that? I was shocked but it was also kind of hilarious… I hope they get married.”

“Isadora-” Duncan cuts in, exasperated, but Violet interrupts them both, distaste souring her tone.

“Well. I found my ribbon.”

The Quagmire siblings stop and look in her direction. Confusion twists Duncan’s face while hard frustration blights Isadora’s.

“How convenient.” She hisses, leaving the pew where it is to stomp up to the stage. “Your ribbon goes missing. Carmelita gets pissed when Olaf picks you in class and hurries down here to clog this with your ribbon then runs off to tell Nero. I mean, we knew it was her. But this-” she nods to the shred of fabric still dripping in Violet’s hand. “Proves it wasn’t just some stupid accident. Because of course it’s not.”

Violet shakes her head bitterly. She balls the ribbon into her fist and wrings it out over the baptismal pool.

“Of course not.” She echoes, twisting to shrug on her blazer. “I just wish I had the other half.”

Isadora hums at that. Across the Sanctuary, Duncan has settled across a pew, his head propped on a stack of hymnals.

“Come over here and relax with me. We have much to discuss, I think, and there’s no way Nero actually expects us to clean this. It needs aired out or something. Not stomped on by three orphans.” Duncan calls.
Eager to quit, Violet and Isadora tumble down the small set of stairs and make their way across the room. Isadora drags their bags over and drops them onto the pew at Duncan’s feet. He sits up and grabs at the newspaper peeking out of Violet’s satchel. Flipping it open, he reads, “Vigorous Fires Destroy Much of Town! Influx of Orphans Sent to Local Preparatory School and Partnering Cathedral!... Death toll up to exorbitant amounts. Citizens advised to avoid anyone suspicious or who may be in disguise. Also advised to avoid flammable liquids, matches, sparks, dry foliage, or thought crimes, under punishment of law.”

“That’s depressing.” Isadora mutters from where she lies across her own pew, her head nearly brushing Violet’s.

“Is there anything not depressing in that Punctilio?” Violet asks, feeling worn by the further bad news. Duncan hums and slowly skims the rest of the page before flipping to the next. Several seconds of silence follow, long enough that Isadora feels the need to break it.

“So is Count Olaf your boyfriend now?”

Violet snorts, amused by her friend’s lack of tact. She takes a few moments to contemplate before saying, “I’m not sure. I mean, he said he wanted me. And he did say something about me maybe being his Countess someday, whenever. But I think that was sort of half-hearted. We’ve only been on one date. But... he could be? He said he wanted me, so that’s got to mean something.”

“He wants you alright.” Duncan cuts in, voice sarcastic and slightly cynical. “He wrote you a letter in this Punctilio.”

“Oh. Yeah, he did. I forgot all about that.” Violet mutters, a sudden blush coloring her face. As usual, Isadora misses nothing and raises one speculative eyebrow her direction.

“Read it!” She chirps, quick and scandalous.

“Well he’s obviously already read it! I’m sure it’s mortifying so just get it over with.” Violet waves a hand to where Duncan is sprawled belly up in a pew, a mischievous smirk at his lips.

“You haven’t read it yet?” He questions. Violet shakes her head, simply stating, “Olaf told me to read it later.”

“And you listened?” Isadora asks. “If it had been me I’d have snuck off to the bathroom first thing to sneak a peek.”

“We were on a beach and then in an old cathedral. There weren’t bathrooms or any really, uh, private places.” Violet mutters.

“Oh yeah?” Isadora teases, a wicked grin on her lips. “Not much privacy there on the beach, huh? Oh, but you went swimming, right? But you didn’t bring a swimsuit. If there wasn’t a place to change, I can imagine you just stripped naked and said, ‘Hey Olaf, fancy a swim?’ And then he ran after you into the sunset to-”

“Get a life, Isadora!” Violet shouts, amused and embarrassed all at once. “There’s no need to make up romantic stories about me and Count Olaf! Anyone who feels the need must not have their priorities straight! What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m right, aren’t I? That’s why you’re shouting at me, because I’m right! Prove me wrong then-” Isadora taunts, but Duncan cuts her off. “Do you want to hear what he wrote or not?”

“No!” Both girls shout in unison. Duncan snickers and shakes the pages of the newspaper, clearing
his throat like a performer. “Okay just for context, it’s written on an interview with him about acting. It starts off with a V written in loopy cursive. The man should really take up calligraphy. I’ve never heard his voice but I’ll try my best. Here goes, V-” He begins in a tone so deep his voice cracks. Isadora and Violet erupt into giggles, both insisting, “He doesn’t sound like that!”

“I’ll try again. V-” Duncan says, Violet interrupting immediately, “He doesn’t have an accent, Duncan!” To which he responds by throwing the newspaper into the air.

“Read it normally!” Isadora pleads.

“Fine.” Duncan grumbles, faux annoyed, and snatches the newspaper from the ground. He begins yet again, “V, thank you muchly for the absolute honor of taking you out. You are a beautiful, wondrous young woman and I am deeply entranced by you. Your mind as well as your body are spectacular to behold. I’m not quite sure why you seem similarly attracted to me- I am a villainous old man with a gnarled heart and bad history. We do not make a good match. Hopefully our date tonight will go swimmingly-”

“So you did go swimming!” Isadora cries, and Violet hisses, “It wasn’t his idea! Shut up!”

“...and we will see one another again. If this night ends in disaster, at least know that I am very grateful for the opportunity to take you out, especially when you look the way you do in that little skirt of yours, waiting so prettily for me on that stoop. Violet Baudelaire, you are so very charming. And then he just signed it with an O. But there’s more. P.S.- I was thinking of you in question number six.”

“Tell us, what’s question number six?” Isadora asks.

Violet rolls her eyes, slapping the top of her head lightly. “You’re having too much fun.”

“Let me be, Violet. Get on with it, Duncan.” Isadora waves to her brother impatiently.

“Allright, so it’s an interview question, obviously. Isadora, you come here and be the voice of the interviewer and I’ll be Olaf again.” Duncan says. The girl leaps to her feet and hurries to the pew like a delighted child. Violet sighs but she cannot find it in herself to be angry when the Quagmire siblings sit shoulder to shoulder, united more in their effort to embarrass her than any other time in their entire residence at Eliade.

Isadora grabs the Punctilio and clears her throat. “Now let’s get to the fun stuff. Olaf, as well as being voted Most Talented, you were also voted Most Handsome. That comes with some responsibility to the general public. Tell us, is there a lady lucky enough to be with you?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” Duncan says, aloof and flirtatious.

“Oh, give me something. Do it for the fans!” Isadora cries.

“I am helplessly entranced by a true delight. She’s beautiful and very brave. That’s all you need to know.” Duncan says and Isadora pretends to weep in disappointment. “Just wait until the readers of The Daily Punctilio see that!”

“Are you guys done humiliating me yet?” Violet mutters.

Before they can answer, the door to the Sanctuary is pushed open with a bang and Nero stands in the doorway, a thunderous frown on his flushed face. He points one fat finger their direction and they all flinch.
“You two. Quagmires. You’re needed in Remora’s class immediately to discuss yet another week of dismal attendance. And you, Baudelaire, I’m sick of seeing you. Go find a hole to hide in for all I care. You’ve barely mopped a drop and now you’re napping? The disrespect! And, you, Miss Spats, I expected better—”

Confused, the three friends follow the man’s gaze to the stage where Carmelita emerges from behind a broad curtain just past the altar. Her expression is flushed with frustration, her shoulders slightly hunched. When she sees Violet looking at her, a tiny smirk quirks her lips, one that promises only destruction.

It is a wicked thing to see, Carmelita standing suddenly proud and conniving in the Sanctuary, gleeful with threats she has not yet made. Violet can imagine the reality that follows- nasty rumors trailing her through Eliade, Nero punishing her for breaking curfew, for romantically associating with a guest of the cathedral, for anything he could ever dream. She could see Olaf losing his position as director, as impresario, losing the play he has worked so tirelessly to produce. He would resent her, would never forgive her.

Smirking on that stage was the biggest threat to Violet’s happiness.

Duncan replaces the newspaper into Violet’s satchel and they rise, following Nero to the door. They mutter quick, caustic words to her but she does not hear them, can only focus on Carmelita. She slips the strap of her satchel over her shoulder and rises on strong legs, moving slowly like a predator. Nero sweeps her friends into the hall and a small team of men hustle inside, carrying a large pew to join the stack, making room for the influx of orphans.

Carmelita rolls her eyes, flips her hair. “Didn’t you hear the Vice Principal? Cakesniffers like you can go rot. Me, on the other hand, I’m off to tell all of Eliade what a rancid slut you are—”

“Carmelita.” Violet says, voice a warning and a promise. She steps towards the stage. She has never felt this way, never felt true rage turn to an overwhelming desire for violence. She wants to hurt Carmelita, wants her blood in her hands. Violet can imagine taking a fist full of that shiny red hair and knocking her face against the pulpit. Even the thought makes her smile, flips her tone predatory and desirous. “You don’t need to pretend. I know you’re jealous.”

“Jealous?” Carmelita huffs, but her voice falls flat as if she knows she cannot deny it. “Nice try, Baudelaire. But you really know nothing about Olaf, do you? I’ve known him for far longer than you’d expect. We’re… associates.”

The girl smirks and waits as if she expects a grand meltdown. Instead, mild confusion blooms within Violet’s mind, but only enough to serve as a reminder: she will ask Olaf when convenient and he will tell her.

Violet shrugs, her genuine disinterest apparent. “I don’t care what you are to him. Your crush on Olaf doesn’t matter much to me anyway. If you were here long enough to hear about my affections, you certainly heard his. Or did you miss the part where he says he is hopelessly entranced by me?”

“I didn’t miss it.” Carmelita hisses. “Olaf’s handsome, sure. But he isn’t a good man. There’s not a shred of nobility in him.” That same maddening smirk appears on her face, as if she knows a heavy secret. “If you’re not careful, he’ll ruin you.”

That simple word ruin resurrects their scene high up in her sanctuary, Olaf’s voice so sure and simple, “You are young and broken. I could eat you whole.”

“No-” Violet spits before she is even sure she is speaking. In that moment she feels her bloodthirst
warping into furious shame. She is uncomfortably aware of the meekness in herself that Carmelita has seen, that Nero has seen, that Olaf saw from their very first meeting. All of them so sure that they could break her, could maim her, has indignant, self-critical frustration boiling within her. Violet is sick of feeling brittle and broken, of fretting Nero’s punishments and hiding from Carmelita.

Violet would not be ruined. Not even by Olaf. She would become strong and cunning enough to leave them ruined in wake of her however possible. Violet remembers Olaf, that strange authority burning on his face when he said, “You don’t have to be the one making threats. If you need them off your back, tell me.”

She would become strong enough to protect those she cares about and in this moment, Olaf’s livelihood is at stake and Carmelita would not steal it from him. From them. Because of this, it is as if she grows a spine in an instant. Carmelita has reminded her of her failures and threatened her with them and they would no longer control her.

“No, Carmelita. He won’t ruin me. But you’ve been trying to, haven’t you?” Violet advances slowly towards the other girl, supremely satisfied when she takes a few steps back. It is only when the other girl steps into a beam of light that Violet notices a familiar shimmer of fabric. Coiled inside the hip pocket of her cardigan is the other half of her ribbon, the gray velvet weakly catching the light.

“You’ve been stealing from me! And framing me!” Violet says, and with a speed so quick she surprises herself, lunges at the other girl, but misses the ribbon as Carmelita springs away. Absent of a rebuttal, Carmelita instead turns and darts through the curtains, disappearing into the dark labyrinth of halls behind the small altar stage.

Fueled by frustration and injustice, Violet follows suit, darting into the black depths. She listens for footsteps, for laboured breathing, and follows that trail. The only light is cast by a glowing exit sign very far away yet it glazes their bodies red as a crime scene, alights in the curls of Carmelita’s hair, turns her face gaudy and violent as she looks over her shoulder and eyes Violet with true fear as she runs.

Carmelita takes a turn so harsh the rubber heels of her shoes squeal. Foul words echo in the dark, cramped halls and it takes a few moments for Violet to realize they are coming from her- fast, jerky syllables and tasteless insults spew from her mouth as she runs and although she knows she is being cruel, Violet cannot stop, can barely even hear herself over the thrill of hunting Carmelita, over the delighted race of her heart in her ears.

Light bursts forth from the end of the hall as Carmelita heaves open an exit door and Violet follows quick on her heels, diving into that blinding doorway only to find that they are in the hall near the alley. By the time Violet’s eyes have adjusted, the other girl is close to rounding the corner and dashing to the dining hall to safety.

True panic freezes her to the spot as she glances around anxiously searching for a solution that would not let Carmelita slip away. Her eyes come to rest on the large anonymous prayer box beside her, to the heavy Bible on the surface of the little desk. Quick as thought, Violet snatches the heavy tome and launches it into the air.

She can feel the strain in her bicep and knows she has torn it yet the pain is minimal in comparison to the anticipation she feels watching the book fly through the air and hit home. The flat spine rocks into the back of Carmelita’s head so hard she loses her balance and tips head-first to the floor.

“You foul bitch -” Carmelita hisses, hands clutching the back of her head. She looks a mess- hair disheveled from running, her face red with rage. “Are you insane?”
“Give me back my ribbon.” Violet says, voice taut and cold. “And leave me alone.”

Carmelita stands so fast a button on her blazer bursts loose and skitters across the floor. She crosses the hall hastily, her eyes never wavering from Violet’s.

“This is what you want?” She asks, voice faux sweet as she pulls the ribbon from her pocket and holds it between them. Violet lunges to snatch it but Carmelita pulls away and puts it to her mouth.

For one bizarre instant Violet thinks she is going to eat it. And then the ripping begins. One end of the thick ribbon is bit in two by Carmelita then split quick down the middle with a tough yank.

Seeing her ribbon’s further destruction has Violet’s grief splitting open in her chest. If it were a physical wound she would be leaking through her uniform and bleeding out on the ornate floor tiles.

“My father gave me that.” She says, voice pinched. “A few days before they all died. It was the only thing I had left from him.”

Carmelita sneers and opens her mouth to hiss something foul, yet Violet is faster. She has never felt the need to strike someone before this situation. Has never felt bloodlust so keenly. Despite the torn muscle, Violet launches her fist forward with all her strength. It connects with a solid smack against the other girl’s jaw, sending her stumbling. Pain shoots up Violet’s knuckles and only then does she remember the healing wounds Nero has inflicted upon her.

Carmelita takes less time to recover from that hit. She marches forward, arm thrown back to return the punch, and Violet is ready, is willing to bite and scratch and tear if only for the sake of revenge.

A loud bang echoes in the hall yet Violet barely hears it. She can only focus on the ruddy scowl on the other girl’s face and the realization that watching blood drip from Carmelita’s split lip is the most fun she has had within Eliade her entire residency.

It happens too quickly for her eyes to truly see.

One second Carmelita is snarling before her, about to strike. The next she is being slammed against a wall and held by her throat by a man who had just leapt through the side alley door, his clothes covered in soot and ash. Olaf leers over her with a grimace so foul he even scares her. The other girl is sputtering, her face purpling.

At first Violet cannot hear what the man says, can only see the quick working of his snarling lips, intimately close. Carmelita coughs and twists in his grip, trying to get away, but Olaf only shakes her by the neck, raises his voice, “-don’t know why you’re here. Tell that godawful adoptive mother of yours that the plan has changed.”

Through the sputtering, a look of terrible surprise crosses the girl’s face.

“Oh yes .” Olaf hisses and watching him hurt Carmelita has Violet’s palms going sweaty, her heartbeat singing. “I know all about why you’re here. But that’s not the point right now, is it?”

Olaf turns so Violet is visible to them both and when he swings that hard gaze onto her, her stomach feels as though it has dropped to the floor. Strange, hot arousal roots her to the spot.

“The point-” He shakes Carmelita until she meets his eyes. Tears slip down her flushed cheeks. Her hands claw weakly where Olaf circles her throat. “-is Violet Baudelaire. You will cease torturing her. You will not speak to her, will not even look in her direction. If she tells me one more time that she has been sent to Nero because of you, I will make sure you regret it.”
The man’s tone has slipped into a soft, violent purr. Blood from Carmelita’s split lip dripping in a lazy crawl down her chin. Footsteps fast approaching enter Violet’s senses but she cannot seem to tear her eyes away from the scene before her.

“What-? What the-?”

Dread steals the air from her lungs. She recognizes Nero’s voice instantly and already her knuckles are aching in sick preparation. She wonders if he will insist on caning her palms as well, just to make her punishment that much worse. Surely she could not get away with chucking a Bible at Carmelita’s head or punching her in the middle of the hall.

Olaf glances away from her to regard Nero, but does not release Carmelita even as she flails. He says, loud and harsh enough that they can hear, “Do not test me.” before dropping the girl to the floor. Carmelita crumples, coughing, her own hands coming up to wipe her mouth, to rub her throat. When she looks up to Nero, Violet can see the handprint of ash Olaf left at her neck.

“And you.” Olaf grins wickedly to Nero, who blusters about, eventually spewing, “What is going on here?”

“I am making direct threats of bodily harm. And you’re next.” The Count stands before Nero, his shoulders relaxed, his eyes gleaming. There are singed patches in his clothing and he leaves a trail of soot as he moves. The air smells of altar smoke and blood and violence.

“If you ever strike that girl again-” He points Violet’s direction. She has a wild idea of walking over and taking that one finger into her mouth just to startle all of them, yet she fists her hands in her skirt and remains where she is. “I’ll kill you.”

The two men make eye contact for an oddly long time, as if testing one another without word or action. Carmelita weeps quietly on the floor, hiding her face in her hands, and Violet feels absolutely nothing towards her.

Nero, face white, eventually nods and mutters, “Understood.”

Olaf claps his hands together as if sealing a deal. “So happy we could all come to an agreement. Now, Violet.” He turns, regards her flushed face and wide eyes. She realizes that she has not moved or said one word since the man burst in through the alley door. When they meet eyes, hers are open and willing and subdued. She waits and listens. He holds his hand out for her to take. “Please follow me.”

She bends to gather the remaining shreds of her hair ribbon and reaches for the man’s hand. It is as easy as when they had walked along the beach, happy to be with one another, yet Olaf is covered in ash and Violet is wired on adrenaline and newfound bloodlust. She doesn’t look to Nero or Carmelita as she follows Olaf around the corner. Questions gather like dust in her mouth, yet Violet does not voice them, knowing there will be plenty of time in private.

He leads her to the very door she had entered and found him dwelling behind upon their first meeting. The same neon light shines BACKSTAGE as they pass beneath it, tumbling down, down, down in the cramped staircase.

Violet eyes the charred back of the man before her as they descend to the theatre, feeling relieved and cherished and empty all at once.
Chapter End Notes

Violet's nightmare was inspired by Julien Baker's song Funeral Pyre.

I received some very sappy comments about the last chapter, which I enjoyed immensely. How about some violence with our sex, hmm?

I've had this weird urge to write Violet getting into a fist fight for a long time. Please let me know what you think!
Chapter Ten

Once they have ascended the ladder and the candles have been lit and there is finally a moment to speak, Olaf kisses her instead.

His hands are black with char and his breath smells of smoke, yet as soon as they are truly alone, the man takes her face in his dirty hands and kisses her as if she is the only thing he has ever wanted. To Violet, who had been about to spew some embarrassingly concerned question - *Are you hurt? Do you need help?* - the kiss is a welcome distraction, one that answers before she can even ask. The kiss is a relief, like the cessation of a pain she has grown accustomed to.

Her hands rise to fist in the collar of his dress shirt, but the fabric crumbles beneath her touch. The man backs her up to her shoddy workbench so fiercely Violet's back brushes the cool tower windows. One hand leaves her face to grab beneath a thigh, lifting her. She follows his direction, rising to sit atop the desk, uncaring of the mess of papers and boxes of nails that tip to scatter across the floor.

Only when she has been kissed breathless, lips swollen, her chin chaffed and slightly red from his facial hair, does Olaf pull away to look her in the eye. She wants to insist that he shut up, that he continue to kiss her so perfectly, but patience and curiosity outweigh the arousal that has been itching beneath her skin since the man had hurt Carmelita. Dazed and enraptured, she meets his eyes.

"My apartment was burned to the ground. With me unfortunately inside. Once I had made my escape, my very first thought was to get here to make sure you were safe. Allow me, please, Violet, to reassure myself that you are still very much alive."

"Go ahead." She mutters, pressing her lips against the smattering of wavy hair at his ear. A small shiver darts down her spine. She feels honored and lucky that she can touch this man so soon after last time. Violet wonders if it is possible to become gluttonous for a single person and as Olaf's hands ghost over her hips she realizes she already knows her answer.

"I've wanted you to touch me since I saw you choking Carmelita." Violet says and, at the Count's startled look, thinks she could have phrased things better. Slightly embarrassed, she tries again. "Uh, I mean… You just looked so powerful. And you were so close to her. It was-" She pauses, unsure of the correct word to pull from her mind. "Startling. Like, you were hurting her. And that's not a very noble thing to do, but I also thought it was sexy."

Understanding flashes in the man's eyes. Hunger replaces the confusion on his face and his grin is wicked and wonderful. "Ah. You saw me hurting a young girl. Threatening her for you. And it *aroused* you, Violet? How interesting."

Absent of response, she nods. Olaf brushes a grimy hand past her collarbone to circle very lightly
around her throat. He settles his thumb at her pulsepoint, brushing back and forth. Voice quiet as if sharing a secret, the man asks, "Were you jealous?"

A violent blush overwhelms her so fiercely she blinks against it as if pained. The skin beneath the man's thumb is suddenly racing and he grins ever wider.

"I don't know." Violet answers, honest. "Maybe. But is that normal? Is choking a sex thing?"

As soon as the question leaves her lips and Violet hears herself speak, humiliation sinks her stomach. She can hear the innocence in her voice, the wretched inexperience, and that same frustration she had felt stripping on the beach finds her once more. Unaware of her internal frustration, Olaf nods. A new understanding softens his face yet his eyes are just as hungry.

"Oh yes." The man purrs, increasing the pressure on her throat very slightly. "But don't worry, it's a fairly common pleasure. Many enjoy it because of the powerlessness. Or rather the exchange of power. The first breath after a stretch of breathlessness is said to be very sweet. But I enjoy it because of the trust. You would be very literally putting your entire life in my hands."

Olaf removes his grip from her neck and plants a mess of slow kisses there instead. He mutters against her skin, breath hot, "But there's no need to consider any of that now. You still have much to learn from your obviously very willing teacher. The basics."

"Right." Violet agrees, wondering how they had gone from kissing very passionately to discussing sexual tendencies as if in a lecture. She realizes that she had given the man a very clear opening to ridicule her, to mock her cluelessness or make her feel immature and stupid and indebted yet he did not take it. Instead, she feels like she has learned something new, an interesting oddity about the world she had never expected. Count Olaf meets her where she is and expects nothing more. The thought is humbling and endearing. She meets his eyes, muttering, "Sorry. I didn't mean to turn this into a lesson. Go ahead. Continue, uh, seducing me."

Olaf laughs, startled. The sound is loud in the cozy little sanctuary. When the man finally gazes at her, his eyes are soft as broken bread.

"Violet Baudelaire, you are so very charming. Continue uhhhhhhhhhhhh seducing me?" The man pulls an exaggeratedly confused face and Violet giggles, swatting him, "I don't look like that!"

The man glances around as if to an audience, face still contorted. "Count Olaf wants to seduce me? To get me uhhhhhh naked?"

"I never said that!" Violet cries. She grabs for Olaf's clothes but he darts away and leaps onto the pink velvet chair, one foot on the cushion, the other propped on an arm. He looks like a captain at the helm of his ship, or an actor taking to stage.

"You mean he wants to uhhhhhh touch me inappropriately?"

"This is slander!" Violet shouts, unable to hide the amusement in her voice.

"Quiet, quiet in the audience! Allow me to begin my monologue-" Olaf turns with a dramatic flair, his back to her. He clutches his chest as if lovestruck, the other arm thrown dramatically wide. "Let the world know that I, Count Olaf, am delighted and frightened by the mere presence of Violet Baudelaire and any opportunity to touch her wounds me in a primal way I have never experienced before. It is a sweet pain, like removing a splinter! Like a tattoo! Ah, how does that poem go?"

The man scratches his head for a moment, thinking.
Violet, very slowly, reaches to untie her shoes.

"Ah! Body of my woman, white hills, white thighs, you look like a world lying in surrender… I was lone like a cave… Oh the goblets of the breasts! Oh the eyes of absence! Oh the roses of the pubis! Oh your voice, slow and sad!" Olaf pauses again, wracking his brain. Violet gathers her shed clothes and balls them into a heap atop her lap, waiting.

Finally the man gasps and shouts, "Oh, body of my woman, I will persist in your grace!" and turns with a flourish. Violet takes the opportunity to toss her shed uniform at his feet, like a flustered patron tossing roses to a stage. He goes still the moment he sees her completely naked sitting on her desk before him, expression serious and wanting.

He takes a careful step down from the chair. Violet reaches out. She grabs his fingers, tugging him forward like a pulley. When he stands completely before her, Violet parts her knees, hooking them around his legs, and reaches for his cheek. She grabs his reverent face with both hands, his facial hair prickling her palms, and brings him down to her own waiting mouth.

They kiss with violence. As if the bloodshed and destruction of the day could be collected and purged through the connection of their bodies. Olaf presses his thumbs against the sharp points of Violet's hips. She reaches past his face to grab tufts of that wavy hair and yanks, pulling him so close their teeth click.

Just to rile him further, she unhooks her knee from around him and begins to rub her kneecap maddeningly slow up his thigh. His hands slide up, dipping at the bend of her waist, before rising further to brush over her breasts. Instead of his soft touches at the beach, he runs his fingernails over her skin trailing faint white lines. When his mouth follows, he is more teeth than tongue.

Familiar goosebumps charge her skin. Already she is becoming familiar with this side of herself, with this sexual identity forming like a crystal in a damp cave deep with dark.

On an upswing, Violet lets her knee stray further, pressing slightly over the bulge in the man's trousers. He hisses softly against her lips. A subtle tremor causes his hands at her thighs to shake.

It is not long before Olaf grabs her beneath the knees and takes her into his arms. Startled, Violet pulls away to say, "Whoa!" and hook her arms around his neck. The man does not respond, merely stumbles away to kick her crate of blankets to the floor and lay her down atop them. He kneels before her, about to kiss her, to cover her body, but she stops him with a look and says, "I can't be the only one naked here. Take off your clothes."

"Hey-" Violet mutters, ignoring the slight hitch in her voice. She hooks a toe into a belt loop and tugs lightly. "What about these?"

The man glares at her, annoyed at the interruption, but does as she asks. He unbuttons his shirt too quickly, hands shaking, buttons slipping. Olaf slides the grimy shirt off his head and throws it to the floor. His skin is covered in ash yet Violet does not mind even as he lies atop her, kissing at her neck. She knows she will be covered in soot just the same, but does not mind as much as she thinks she should.

"Why not?" She asks, trying not to whine. Olaf snakes a hand between her legs, applying twirls of pressure to her hooded clit and even through the heavy surge of arousal and sensation she can clearly understand his nonverbal: *Shut up.*

"But-" Violet begins, but her breath is suddenly stolen in a soft moan as the man increases speed.
"You're trying to distract me, you fiend. I want to h-help you. Especially because I didn't the first
time."

"There will be more time." Olaf says between kisses, voice as serious as if making a promise.

"I don't care." Violet says, hooking her other foot into his pants. "I want to now. Can't you let me uhhhhhh seduce you?"

The scratch of his facial hair against her skin has Violet aware that he is smiling but the man does not allow himself to laugh.

"I just want to touch you, Olaf. Is that too much to ask?" Violet cries, voice brimming with drama and false sadness. When the man doesn't answer or give her pity laughter, she tries a different tactic. She tries her best to ignore the wicked work of the man's fingers. "I'm sure I won't be good at it, if that's what you're worried about. Not the first few times I do anything to you, I bet. But that's why you'll have to teach me. And then I can get better for you. But if you're worried you'll be disappointed, the only way for me to get better is to practice so-"

"Will you shut up?" Olaf hisses. Violet shuts up, but brings her knee between his legs again, noticing the obvious effect of her words.

Feeling sneaky and seductive, she runs her hands up and down his bare back, delighting in the goosebumps sprouting beneath her touch.

"Violet-" Olaf says, her name on the tail end of a desirous pant. He grabs beneath her knees and drags her sharply closer, leaning back until their bodies are flush. Her hips slot against his. Even through the fabric of his trousers, Violet can feel the heat and hardness of him against her. A feeling like emptiness opens in her body. She presses softly against his trapped erection, hips moving in slow, teasing waves.

"Why are you tempting me?" Olaf asks, sounding strained and distraught with arousal. "Violet, you must know- there is nothing I would rather do than fuck you. Make love to you. Long and slow and well." He grabs her hips and meets her with a thrust of his own and even that pressure has Violet moaning, that empty feeling growing more desperate like an itch she could not reach.

Without asking, without preparation, he slides two fingers straight into her and Violet loses her breath for a moment in pure satisfaction. She feels as if her brain has been unhinged from her body. He works them as deep as he can before pulling out and in, pushing his wrist with his hips. It is as if he is fucking her already.

"But. These things take time. Surely you would like for me to learn your body before you learn mine? To feel less responsibility for my pleasure so soon? I'll tell you, sneaky girl, that I find you very desirable. Once I have you tending to me, I will not hold back."

"I-" Violet gasps, that same teary catch in her voice. She knows she is close to orgasm because she feels like weeping with gratitude, with pleasure. "I didn't mean you had to sleep with me now. I- oh!- I just meant that I want to… to see you. To get acquainted."

Olaf grins. A wicked amusement plays at his lips. He slips a third finger into her and Violet has to bite back a shout. Her legs tremble fiercely at the man's hips.

"To get acquainted with what, dear thing?" Olaf croons, sounding innocent and sweet even as that desire rasps in his throat.

"Your cock." Violet says, even as embarrassment colors her face.
"Good. What an obedient little orphan you are." Olaf says, using his other hand to pass rapidly back and forth over her clit even as his fingers still dive into her.

"Do you want to see my cock, Violet Baudelaire?" The man asks, voice soft and suggestive.

Before him, Violet is rising, back arching. Her hands have come to cover her blushing cheeks. She gasps and he can see the dips of her ribcage. Her legs tremble at his sides. Growing pressure builds.

Unable to speak, Violet nods and keeps nodding.

"Do you want it in your hands? Your mouth?" He asks, and Violet, embarrassed, throws an arm over her eyes, but does not stop nodding. Tiny moans fall from her lips. He leans over her, close to her ear, and asks, increasing the speed of his fingers, "Your cunt?"

And that is all it takes.

The speed and depth of Violet's orgasm takes her by surprise. Her muscles lock and her breathing stops and there is a blissful moment of absolute pleasure where she cannot feel her body beyond tingling, as if her unhinged mind has gotten lost in the skies.

Her heartbeat thrums in her chest, almost painfully fierce. She sags bonelessly against the blankets. Her breathing is rapid, her body weak. Olaf slides his fingers out of her and Violet feels their loss acutely. He settles beside her on the nest of blankets, sighing.

When Violet can think again, she places her head on his chest, throwing an arm around him. Only once she feels the man relax does she trail her hand slowly down his chest, past his stomach, and brush lightly over the erection still swollen in his trousers.

Olaf gasps, starts to say, "Violet-

But she cuts him off, praying she does not make a fool of herself, and whispers, "You just saw how badly I want to touch you. Just let me."

Like Violet, he does not take much time. She palms him for a few minutes through the ashen material of his trousers. Even then he is hot and hard in her hand. Violet wonders if it is the teasing that brings him off. If it is the fact that she never quite touches him skin to skin, always hovering on the fine edge of true contact, always treading that line that gets to him the most.

When she reaches for the button at his zip, Olaf groans as if frustrated. He had been silent the last few minutes, only shuddering beneath her, never making a noise, always biting back some kind of reaction. The noise startles Violet so much she flinches. Her hand at his button freezes but she does not pull away. The other hand continues its steady motion.

The man hisses, "Don't, just- let me-" and that sudden twist of her hand is all it takes. Instead of blissful as she had been, orgasm makes the man look stunned with anger. His eyes are screwed shut, his mouth frozen in a frown. His shoulders bunch and his body locks. A small damp patch appears where her hand had been.

As soon as he is able, Olaf groans and scrubs at his face with harsh hands.

Confused guilt makes Violet wish she were no longer so naked.

"Did I do something wrong?" She asks, hating the whine in her voice.

"No." The man mutters. "You did perfectly fine. But perhaps it could have crossed your mind that I
did not want you to insist on my pleasure because I have just today escaped the hellish trap of a burning building. I would have preferred a shower before any kind of sexual act towards me. Towards you? Anytime. Anywhere. Burning building or not, I am always willing to assist you. But as it would have been your first time experiencing my body, I didn't think a grimey, ashen man would be much fun to romp with. Understand?"

Violet almost smacks herself out of embarrassment and idiocy. She bites her lip and tries to look him in the eye, but the man is still rubbing wearily at his eyes.

"I'm sorry." She says, voice quiet and genuine in the little attic. "You're right, of course you would have wanted a shower. You could have told me that, y'know, but… I was, uh, too excited I guess. I'm sorry."

Olaf sits up so quickly she flinches yet again. He places a hand at her thigh and, realizing she has gone cold, throws a blanket over her head. Violet grunts at the heavy blanket, but wraps it around her body, grateful.

"Do not apologize. I cannot tell you the pleasure I received from hearing you begging for me. I mean-" He waves to the damp spot at his crotch. Violet, embarrassed and proud, blushes and lets out a nervous giggle. "You made me cum in my pants. I can assure you that I have not done that in a very long time. Think early puberty. That long ago. If anything, just consider it a testament to how very enamored I am with you."

Violet reaches for his hand, giving it a quick squeeze. "I'm enamored with you too. Obviously."

"Great. Now that we got that passionate, gross, mushy crap out of the way-" He stretches his arms high above his head, bones snapping into place as if he had just woken from a long nap. "Let's find something to eat."

They dress and descend.

And this is where things go wrong.

If Olaf had the ability to reach into his past and litter it with premonitions and warnings and omens, there are plenty of instances he could pick. The night of his induction. The night of his parents' deaths. His very first burning building. Yet, out of all of them, he would want to change this afternoon discussion. He wishes he had found a note in the costume rack, something written in his own hand saying: Do not drink the wine, do not eat the puttanesca, do not open Violet's eyes to clarity in all its terror.

Yet he finds no note, no warning. No premonition hits him with unease. The only feelings Olaf has at the moment are motivated by primal urges- hunger and the postorgasmic need to care for his partner.

He listens to these. What follows is not without consequence.

Olaf leads her to the furthest depths of the backstage halls where a small kitchen and dining area border the costume room. He flips the lights and leads her to a table, muttering, "Ah, Fernald left the milk out. Idiots, all of them-" and sets a pot of water to boil atop a small stove.

He strips as he goes, slipping free the crumbling buttons of his ruined dress shirt, and shucking his favorite shoes that now bore melted soles. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Violet examining
the Punctilio atop the table, her expression drawn. He has already studied the front page photographs for himself. He has spent so long studying them, in fact, that if anyone had asked, "Count Olaf, could you sketch the night that the entire east district of the city burnt to the ground?" he could have done so. It was as if the photograph was printed behind his eyelids. Everytime he tried to sleep, all he could smell was smoke and all he could see was the flicker of flame.

Dread sinks his stomach for a moment as he sees her lips purse in distaste. He quakes at the thought of Violet's displeasure directed towards him and falls on the easiest role he knows how to play: sleazy and dramatic and just charming enough to woo.

"Ah, Violet. My dear thing. We'll have to play around with these costumes sometime. I know I would love to see you in this-" He tugs a holey linen dress from the closet and swings it through the air.

 Surprise cracks her drawn expression. "I don't know if that's my thing."

"No? I could picture it. You, on your knees, begging. Oh sir, could you spare some change? I'll do anything, anything! Even-"

"Oh, shut up. Your pot's about to boil over." Violet mumbles. Olaf darts over to pour pasta into the water and says, "Suit yourself, orphan." before heading into the back towards the mens’ costumes.

He feels more himself when he returns. He has taken the time to scrub the char from his skin and run cool water through his hair. The ruined clothes he has replaced with tight pinstripe trousers, a matching shirt, and a dark vest.

Violet has divvied the pasta, having covered it with a jar of sauce he had not noticed in the fridge. Despite the early afternoon hour, she had also rummaged an old candle from somewhere in the room. It burns at the center of the table between their two bowls. Violet has cracked and smoothed the Punctilio across the table, examining the photos exactly as he had.

"What is this?" Olaf asks, sitting.

"Puttanesca." Violet mumbles. Absorbed as she is in her reading, she misses the man's raised eyebrow and confused expression.

"What did you call me?" He asks.

That causes Violet to look at him, confused in her own way.

"Puttanesca." She repeats. "It's the sauce that was in the fridge. Do you not like it?"

"Never tried it." He says. The man scoops twirls a large portion onto his fork and jams it into his mouth, saying before he has truly tasted, "Loverly."

Although Violet's eyes show a hint of disgust she casts him a weak smile and turns back to the paper. Olaf eats his mouthful. It takes maybe a minute before Violet suddenly groans in frustration and tosses the paper to the floor.

"Do you have anything to drink?" She asks, voice annoyed as if he had printed the paper and delivered it himself.

Olaf waves to the fridge. "There are aqueous martinis, although I'm quite worn out by them. I'm sure somewhere back here is the grape juice served during communion. The blood of Christ bottled for your convenience."
Violet peers at him as if she has more to say. She looks him over, speculative. He tolerates this for a few moments before his patience wears thin and he finally asks, "Yes?"

"What about wine? I'm sure you have a stash."

"Ah. You're right, but…" He glances to the clock above the fridge. Knowing he is being hypocritical and not caring, he continues, "It's about 2:30 on a Sunday."

"And?" Violet asks. Surprise loosens the nervous tension in the man's shoulders. He had not expected to see Violet annoyed so soon. Where before he has grown agitated and explosive at the negative emotions of his partners, he feels himself slowing with her, calming where she does not. This change does not bother him as much as he thinks it should. Olaf twirls his fork between noodles, thinking suddenly that perhaps he could use a drink himself.

Instead of rising immediately to bend to the whim of his woman, Olaf reaches across the table and grabs at her hands from where she has tangled them in the tablecloth.

Voice soft, he asks, "Are you alright, little sneak?"

The moniker causes a grateful smile. She squeezes his hands once, hard, before pulling away and returning to the food before her.

"No." Violet says. "I'm not. Now that we've gotten our, uh, impulses out of the way, it's hitting me that your apartment was burnt down. That you were in it. That you could have… That you could have been hurt. And it worries me. So many people have been dying that Prufrock had to send us here. Now they're adding pews and desks all around the cathedral to compensate for even more orphans. It's- it can't be a random string of fires. Or bad luck. Isadora told me today that the public is starting to suspect arson. And I don't doubt it."

She says arson oddly, as if it is a piece of foreign dialect she has learned to define but doesn't quite know how to say. Violet's voice warbles around it. She is afraid to speak it, lest it be true.

Olaf rises and digs around to find her that wine. He can feel a cold sweat begin at the nape of his neck and the rapid lurch of his heart in his chest, but he cannot feel the fear his body is so obviously creating. A faint memory rises in his mind- the dizzy sheen of moonlight on grass, his head spinning, his throat a mess of trapped screaming, his ankles gripped by a pair of strangers hauling him away- and wonders if his every fear could be traced to high societies or housefires.

Olaf digs for the wine, a bit more frantic when every hiding place he had he finds empty. Eventually he stands atop his chair and presses against a square of loose ceiling tiles which give easily, and feels around until his fingers brush cool glass. He grabs the bottle by its neck, feeling his nerves untangle slightly, and pulls it from its hiding place.

The raspberry wine shimmers in the light. Only when he spots the small card looped around it displaying O in curly type, does he remember that it was a gift. A truce.

He does not have to read it to recall what it says: Do not betray me. I know your every weakness. - Esmé

Olaf rips the tag from the bottle and tosses it into the blackness above the other ceiling panels before replacing the one he had moved. He sinks into his chair finding that Violet has already prepared two glasses, their stems longer than his hand, the glass blown very wide. Ice cubes sit in their deep hollows.

Olaf pours Violet the wine his ex-girlfriend had given him and thinks that even though Esmé knows
she cannot be aware of his every weakness, that after his violence towards Carmelita, she will be sure of his most treasured. He hands Violet the full glass and she does not comment on his trembling hands.

"And why don't you doubt arson?" Olaf asks. As opposed to Violet, saying the word feels too familiar. Uncomfortable. Like saying his own name.

"I just-" She pauses and glances away. Immediately, Olaf knows she is hiding something. "I just have a feeling. It's too convenient."

The man stares at her blankly until she squirms and finally concedes, "Okay, that's not all of it. Olaf, I really like you. A lot. And I don't want to lie to you. But I don't want you to think I'm crazy either."

The man laughs softly, eyes tender and slightly manic. "My dear, I have known plenty of crazies in my time. I once knew a hunchback, a contortionist, and an ambidextrous man who could use both his left and right hands equally. I won't think you're crazy. I promise. And I like you very much too, of course. Very much. Now-" Although he knows he is growing stiff and theatrical with nerves, he waves to her anyway and says, faux-dramatically, "Spill your every secret."

A smile does not cross her lips. Instead, she frowns in obvious displeasure and takes a sip of wine. "If I'm going to trust you with a secret this big, I'm going to need you to be serious. Not an impresario. Can you handle that?"

The last line irks him, but Olaf subdues it, cursing his nerves. He nods and steels his expression. "Of course. My apologies."

At her silence, the man then adds a line he has never said to any of his previous partners, "I'm listening."

"Alright. Well-" Violet begins before pausing. She glances to his face, nervous and obviously troubled, before glancing away. He wonders if it is like her to hesitate, to quell her tongue. "I have two friends here that I met when all the orphans were back at Prufrock. When we could still fit there. Their parents died in a house fire like mine. And they lost their brother Quigley."

Something in the name sparks a hint of recognition in him, but he cannot place it.

"Quigley?"

Violet nods. "Quagmire. That's their last name. Anyway-" the girl continues her explanation, but Olaf feels as though he has swallowed a lump of ice. He can picture it then. The last time he had seen the Quagmires, pregnancy had bloated the belly of the new bride. He had slipped away from the baby shower at a well-kept botanical garden among familiar voices gushing, "I can't believe you're having triplets! Three whole babies!"

"-the night of the fire, Isadora and Duncan went back to their house. There weren't any firefighters present or police or anyone, so the whole thing just burnt to the ground. They dug around searching for anything that might have survived, even when the embers were still hot. And they found a book."

Before she even speaks, Olaf knows what she will say. He hadn't expected the *Incomplete History*. Perhaps a corpse. But the book, no matter how supposedly fireproof, was not something he thought the children to find so easily.

"A book?" He prompts, encouraging and gentle even as a bitter sickness fills his stomach as if infused into the wine. He wishes then more than ever before that VFD had never existed. He hears Violet describe the desolate despondency of her friends, their shared grief, and feels resolution
harden his resolve.

He feels no guilt, no glory. Only duty. Only mercy.

"A book." Violet repeats and that same hesitancy makes her look away.

"Violet. My dear thing." Olaf says. Through his jumble of feelings, he has an overwhelming urge to simply hold the young woman before him. "I assure you I am listening to every single word. And I am aware of your hesitations. But you look… drawn. Come here."

He pushes away from the table and holds his arms out in offering. Violet, looking grateful, shoves one last fork full of pasta into her mouth and hurries to his lap. There is a minute of clumsy fumbling in which she situates her skirt and tests her weight against him before she simply settles, her long legs crooked at the knee and dangling from the arm of his chair. He wraps an arm around her waist, the other playing with the deep drop of her hair which she has draped across the back, her head in her palm, elbow pressing against his shoulder. They are a tangle of limbs and although Violet's tailbone presses into his thigh, he gets his wish once she settles and sighs against him and feels no need to move her.

"The book. Was it a scrapbook or something?" Olaf asks, although he already knows he is wrong.

"No. Nothing like that. It's called The Incomplete History of Secret Organizations. And, before you ask, it wasn't some work of fiction. It... There were photographs in it. It's pretty badly burnt, but the Quagmire's recognize their parents when they see them. And fire is constantly mentioned as a tool or a weapon or a metaphor. Our homes were destroyed around the same time. I think, if the book hadn't been so burnt, then there might have been a photo of my parents in there, too."

Although he doesn't want to, Olaf remembers a portrait towards the back of the book, one that, along with countless fires, he can see when he closes his eyes through a wince: A large group of volunteers standing before the last safe place, arms around one another. He had been standing in the front, holding out a hand, Lemony grinning at his side. To the author's other side, Beatrice eyed him with obvious affection. Kit was beside her, at the end of the line, and behind them he remembers the monochrome faces of the future Anwhistles, the Quagmires, the Squalors. If he looked hard enough, he could even see the profile of the Duchess R, staring off camera, a plaintive look on her delicate face. Several other faces crowd the photo (the Juliennes, the Spats, the Remoras, the Orwells, the Morrrows, the Feints all blurring with age and old ink) but he no longer cares to recall them. All he can do is wait in nervous apprehension for Violet to sneer, "And I noticed another picture you're in as well. Care to explain?"

He is suddenly, desperately grateful that the Quagmire's book burnt as thoroughly as it did. His heartbeat is so wild in his chest he wonders if she can hear it.

"So, my parents were in a secret organization. But I know none of the people left in the photograph or what the organization did. And the book was found in the Quagmires' home, not mine. They must have been in it too, even though I'd never even heard of them. The fact that their family died in a house fire too... It just doesn't settle well with me. Makes me itchy. And feel--" Violet pauses, frustrated, searching for a word. "Conspiratorial."

"My little inventor creating conspiracies?" Olaf mumbles, running a hand through her hair to calm himself.

"Sort of. Does it count as a conspiracy if it's true?"

The man hums at that, debating. "Only if there are people in power dismissing it. Ever heard of the
new world order?"

"The new what?"

Olaf frowns, annoyed with himself for distracting her. "Nevermind. This isn't about all that."

Violet sighs and runs her hands across her face. She seems wearied and worn, as if every family that perished had been a personal loss.

He makes up his mind in that instant. Watching her eyes flutter closed on a scowl, her lips pursed in frustrated mourning. He thinks that the unknown may be more painful than the truth— that realizing her parents were secretive and their duties had gotten them killed, somehow, by someone still killing, might cause her to fret even less. He could imagine that knowing you had to look over your shoulder to avoid malicious intent was better than not knowing and doing it anyway.

Although the man knows it is not his duty nor his responsibility, he wants to protect Violet from VFD the way no one had ever protected him or any of his associates. He can not control the family she was born into or the secrets she has inherited, but he can try his damndest to keep her safe from them.

Olaf wonders then how to begin. He had not predicted this conversation happening for a very long time. He would delay it forever, if possible. But Violet Baudelaire sits before him, wrecked with grief and misery, and he knows he is only wounding her further the more information he gives her, yet he cannot stop himself. He knows the potential violence, the potential backlash that grows at his back with every orphaned child and the threat it poses to Violet through their proximity. He can only teach and explain and then let her be.

"Violet." Olaf says. He has that same feeling in his gut as the very first time they had kissed— surrender as an action, like sacrifice. "When I was young, two men broke into my home in the middle of the night, carried me by my ankles across the yard, and threw me into a long black car. I was instructed not to scream."

Reliving it even in conversation is painful. He has to force the words from his mouth, a fine razor of determination scraping across his tongue. "And it was normal. I expected it. It was the beginning of my induction."

"Induction?" She repeats, very quiet.

Olaf downs his first drink and when he glances over, Violet is doing the same from the bottle, her glass forgotten across the table. He watches the working of her slim throat and sees the barest shadow of ash there.

"Have you ever heard the song The Little Snicket Lad?" He asks.

Violet nods through a wince and ponders this. "I have. But not in a very long time. I hate the tune. Why do you ask?"

Olaf pours himself another glass and keeps his eyes away from hers. "Think on the lyrics."

She ponders for a moment, but, quick-witted as her mother, makes the connection through half-hearted mumbling. "They took him, yeah, they took him. They took him far away. They took him in the dead of night, beneath a moon of grey…"

At her look, Olaf nods. Violet continues, "They took him from the kitchen like you'd take a midnight snack. The-"
She hesitates.

"The VFD they took him and they never brought him back."

Her face is pale and drawn when they meet eyes. Violet reaches out to snatch his hand in hers, but drops it almost immediately to grab the bottle and stand. She asks, staring down at him, "Did VFD take you?"

He wants to hiss like a vile old man then, cursing himself and everyone he had ever known. He wants to say, "They took every speck of nobility in me." or, as if in pain, "I was only a child."

He settles on facts, as flimsy as they are. "They did. And they took your parents too. And whoever is setting these fires. All of them were volunteers."

Violet, who had again been working at the wine in the bottle, stops. Her wide eyes search his face as if looking for a hint of humor. "You knew my parents?"

He reaches out to take the bottle or hold her hand or something, but she jerks away, her eyes still wild on his. The rejection stings worse than a dart minus the poison.

"I knew them. But-" He begins, and Violet interrupts.

"And you didn't think to tell me for, what, nearly two months?" The color has drained from her pretty pink face, leaving her washed out and highlighting the purple beneath her eyes. She glares at his plate of puttanesca, unable to look him in the eyes. Just the knowledge that he has hurt her so badly she cannot even look at him sends the man into a panic of his own.

Violet backs a few steps away from him. Her absence leaves his lap cold and his chest even colder.

"My dearest darling.-" He begins, only realizing once it has left his mouth that the only person he has ever heard use that endearment is Beatrice Baudelaire. "I didn't intend to keep this a secret from you. I just didn't know how to begin. Your parents- I knew of them. But we were not close."

He knows that he is lying, but cannot find it in himself to care. Not when Violet Baudelaire stands before him looking as though she might start weeping any moment. He reaches for her hands and holds them as though they are very fragile. "I also didn't want to draw attention to my age. If you can believe that. Why would a pretty young thing like you want to know that I went to school with your parents?"

He gets a weak smile at that, which he had not expected. The sight makes the man's heart leap in his chest.

"I like how old you are." Violet says softly, as though she could barely speak through the emotional weight of their conversation. "I think it's sexy. But... Why wait this long? I understand that you might feel old, I guess. But why not tell me sooner? It feels like you've been lying to me."

Olaf rubs his thumbs along her knuckles, hoping to soothe, and only then realizes that she no longer wears gauze. The wounds have healed into large pink scars. He continues rubbing them as if to heal them further, thinking.

"When was I supposed to tell you? When I found you bleeding outside Nero's office? Or later with you bent over before me? What about our very first date? Or when I had you laid out on my car, waiting for me to touch you, should I have said, 'By the way, Violet, I went to school with your parents and it is possible I may know who is responsible for the deaths of your entire family. Just thought I should let you know. Shall I go back to ravaging you now?'''
"Why not that very first night when you met me on the stage?" Violet demands, refusing to react to his teasing.

"I didn't know who you were until Nero used your last name. You had never told it to me." Olaf says simply. He wonders if it is still too soon to tug her back into his lap. Violet shifts her weight, bites her lip. She seems as if she is struggling with what to ask or which mystery takes importance.

"You didn't recognize me?" She asks, very quietly. Her voice sounds almost wounded.

"No. But once I heard the name Baudelaire I realized. And then I saw them in you." Olaf says, voice just as soft. He tugs very gently at her hands and Violet resists until, all at once, she stumbles towards him and collapses into his lap.

She buries her head into his neck and her hands fist in his pinstripe shirt. Olaf winds his arms around her and presses their bodies further together, wishing yet again that he could tuck her into his chest like a second heart.

"Someone killed my family." Violet says, voice thick.

"Very likely." He says, tone quiet as a graveyard. "I'm so sorry."

As suddenly as she had collapsed, Violet rises yet again. Her face is red with fury and fervor. She is a trembling pire set to burn.

The wrecked and ragged grimace on her face has Olaf freezing in his seat. He wonders, panicked, if she has seen some hint of wickedness in him, some damning evidence to condemn him with.

Instead, she shocks him by saying, voice low and hushed as if plotting a crime, "You've got to know who did it then. You were in the very same organization. Who did it, Olaf? I need to know-"

A sudden tightness to her hands has the man recalling when he had burst into Eliade and found Violet standing in the hall, her chin tilted high, a crazed, manic look to her eyes as she welcomed a blow Carmelita never struck. In all the fervor- the threats, the sex, the secrecy- he had not yet asked about it. But Carmelita had been roughed up and bloody. Olaf feels as if he is seeing Violet Baudelaire for the first time as she truly could be- violent and self-sacrificial and fantasizing revenge. He wonders if this is hereditary.

"Violet-" He reaches out, takes one wrist in his hand and finds that she is flexed and poised as if about to reach or run. Olaf waits until she meets his eyes, finding hers burning and beautifully broken.

And he lies.

"I do not know who killed your family. There were hundreds of volunteers, so many I barely knew their names. Every year we recruited neophytes of a young age to join us and learn our codes. There was no way I could keep up with them."

He knows he is escalating the numbers, that he could list every volunteer by name and where exactly he last saw them. He downplays his significance in hopes that Violet believes him to be a small part of VFD, not a large part composing a narrowing whole.

"Well-" Violet sputters, deflated and choking on frustration. "You've got to know some of them. Someone who could have done it."

"I do." The truth feels easier than lies with her, as if he is avoiding his own traps. He is in such a
habit of lying that, when presented with truth, he almost doesn't recognize it. It leaves him feeling unexpectedly empty. "Should be photographs. Here- look."

He shakes the Punctilio until he catches sight of a familiar bowl-shaped hat and slaps the paper against the table. He shoves it towards Violet, who glances at the article as if it were dangerous, as if he had pointed a loaded pistol right to her middle.

"Do you recognize this man?"

"He did it?" She asks instead and, for a moment, Olaf boils with unjust frustration.

"Wrong question, Violet. Try again." He tries to keep the bite from his voice, but she hears it immediately and turns those wide, furious, scared eyes onto him. She speaks like a finality, the way one might read a fresh epitaph. Desolate. Decided.

"No." Violet says. Her hands are fisted in her skirt and one knee sock has slipped to loosely ring her left ankle. Distress radiates from her like heat, like desire. "I've never heard of Lemony Snicket."

This shocks him more than he would have admitted. Too many childhood memories are stained with Lemony Snicket's face, followed closely by Beatrice Baudelaire. Whatever happened between the two of them to make Bertrand father Beatrice's children and not Snicket had always been a mystery absent of a proper answer. Even Kit, in all the ways he could get her to spill her secrets, had never given him a conclusion. Although he wouldn't have expected Violet to be familial with Snicket, he wouldn't have thought she'd be unaware of the man entirely. This fact alone, this small way in which the late Baudelaires had surprised him, has him questioning how well he truly knew them.

Olaf scowls and flips the page. He finds the centerfold and two articles catch his eye. Years of searching for three particular letters have his eyes trained, his subconscious acting before he truly knows to stab a finger at an article entitled: LOCAL WAITRESS VISITS FAVORITE DELICATESSEN.

He sees a snapshot of Kit Snicket, chopsticks holding her bun, glancing away from the photographer. It is blurry and distant, but good enough. He shoves the paper towards Violet and points.

"Her? Or him?" He jabs a portrait of Larry impersonating a doctor for Heimlich Hospital.

A peculiar look crosses Violet's face. She leans over the newspaper, eyes scanning and frantic.

"I- yes. Yeah. I've seen them both. Um, the man was here for Duncan. Isadora's brother, he's sick with grief. With something. We're not really sure. And, oh god, Duncan's right. He told me and Isadora about the secret society and we didn't believe him at first. He had to deal with that man alone. They wouldn't let us see him. He- He was a doctor. Said he could give Duncan away to some volunteer family." Violet grimaces and runs her hands through her hair.

A desperate, ugly grief guts the Count. He can imagine the man twisting words, promising a happy life and a caring family. Familiar disgust builds in his mouth. He glances to Violet and sees the same emotion on her face.

"And this woman. She was my waitress when I got your cake. Kit Snicket. Oh god, she's a Snicket too? What, are they all in VFD? And what does VFD even mean? And why would they have killed my family?" Violet shoves the paper back at him and stands crookedly, hiding her face in her hands.

Olaf stays silent, unsure of what to address first. He sits like a powerless statue, immobile and wretchedly useless as a small cough hitches in her throat. Her shoulders tremble and she sniffs and
then, quick and heavy as a lightning strike, she is weeping where she stands.

Watching her weep has Olaf feeling truly powerless for the first time in his life. In other situations he has had some semblance of understanding or control or brainless action. Dealing with the depth of Violet's grief is foreign to the man. He hesitates. He watches.

"Sorry- Olaf, I… Sorry." She hiccups, turning her back to him. He can see her shoulders quaking beneath her shirt. Her breathing is erratic, heaving from her lungs in great gasps.

Only once she seems truly lost, her breathing questionable to her safety, does Olaf have an idea. He stands and scoops her easily into his arms, hurrying from the rooms and onto the stage. Without grace, he dumps her centerstage and hurries to flip the lights. Her wailing echoes throughout the empty theatre like a mournful spirit. Olaf grabs a mic, double checks that it is turned off, and runs theatrically onto the stage, arms thrown wide like a seasoned performer, as if he was not brimming with nerves.

"Attention! Attention!" The Count cries to no one. It mingles with Violet's crying, echoing round and deep. "We have a very special treat today! You know her, you love her. She's the one who has entranced the hearts of many a bystander and stolen the breath right from their lips. It's Violet Baudelaire- the living, breathing inventor extraordinaire!"

He glances over to see the girl still sitting on the stage. Her red face no longer hangs in her hands but looks him full on. Her complexion is red and ruddy, her eyelashes thick with tears, her throat still a mess of quiet crying. They meet eyes and he sees Violet try to calm herself, holding her breath at odd moments.

"Soooo, oxygen. How's that feel?" He asks, bending to place the microphone before her.

"Like… Like having an alien in your chest." Violet mumbles, forcing a shallow sigh. She casts a grateful look to him and it melts the worry in his chest somewhat.

"Well, we all know why you're here. Let's get to it then. Go on! Lung up!"

Violet sucks in a deep, shuddering breath, holds it for a few seconds, and exhales. Olaf claps, wild and so loud his palms sting, cheering, "And there she goes! God, the sheer talent! This is a legendary occasion, folks! Keep 'em coming, Violet, slow now, calm-"

So she does. Every breath, the Count cheers as loud as possible and claps until his hands grow red. They have been at it for a few minutes when Violet finally feels calm enough to say, "I can even hold my breath- and whistle- watch this-"

Olaf pauses to listen and the only tune Violet can think to whistle is the very same one Kit Snicket had loosed upon the air. A shaky rendition of Mozart's 14th Symphony quivers in the theatre.

Very faintly, Olaf hums along. Halfway through, Violet stops as if her throat has closed. When she looks up at him, her face is red and her eyes are just as broken and confused.

"Kit Snicket whistled that a few days ago. What does it mean?"

Olaf looks away, mouth pinched. When he first realized Violet was a Baudelaire, he vowed to keep her safe and ignorant. Now that he knows she was already onto VFD, he feels trapped by his commitment to her safety and comfort dueling with his desire to spill his guts, to tell her everything about the evil organization that seduced her parents and ruined him.

Finally he sighs and mutters, "It's a coded song. It meant she had a message. She must have
recognized you."

"Recognized me?" Violet mutters, voice breaking. She says quietly, as if insulted, "But you didn't. Why would she?"

"The Snickets were on good terms with your family, I think. She must have seen you before, somewhere." Olaf says, unsure of what else to say. He feels bizarre standing on the stage, seeing Violet quietly cry at his feet, his hands still stinging. He feels empty and vaguely disgusted- with himself, with VFD, with his secrets he should not share.

Violet flinches as if he had struck her.

"Seen me? That feels… treacherous. Like a violation. To think she could have known something about my family-" Violet stops and when she looks at him that same fury burns on her face quick as oil, violent as a funeral pyre. "I had a little sister. Her name was Sunny, and she was just a toddler. A bright little girl who was smart and funny and would gnaw things like a dog and your people, my parents' people, took her away from me. I had a brother, Klaus, and he was the most clever kid I'd ever seen. Could read anything and just understand. He knew so many words, and was always teaching me something. My little brother and sister are dead because of these people." Violet looks away, a reckless, wild flex to her jaw.

Fresh tears glide down her cheeks. Her shoulders shake with the force of repressing the grief he can see bending her spine.

"And my parents-" She sniffs, that same brutality in her voice, "They were the ones that joined VFD in the first place. They- they should have known this was a threat, should have done something to keep us all safe."

Olaf bites his tongue. He wants to tell her that Beatrice and Bertrand were absolutely aware of the danger of becoming volunteers. How fire was almost guaranteed. He aches with the need, but keeps silent, bites back the words that would only twist that knife of despair deeper beneath her ribcage.

"And you. You're part of it too. Or were. I don't even know." Violet turns that sharp glare onto him. Olaf feels rooted in place, a waiting victim welcoming the hurting hand. "I don't even know you, do I? How do I know you're not against me? How do I even trust you anymore? How- Why-" Violet wants to continue but fear and betrayal steal her voice. She curls in on herself, drawing up her knees, bowing her head as if in prayer, shoulders shuddering, breathing ragged.

"You're right." He says and his voice splits like glass.

It seems that is all it takes.

Despite the time and the breathing, Violet weeps as bitterly as she had moments before and, seeing this, a strange epiphany blooms in Olaf’s mind yet it is not the warm, joyous realization of an easy answer to a longstanding issue. It is dull and corporeal as a lost limb.

He wants to say that he likes Violet for their potential understanding, for the way they could connect and bond over their history of victimhood at the ashen hands of VFD’s many volunteers. Or he could profess his initial feelings for her had been purely aesthetic- the long cut of her dark hair, her wide doe eyes, the thin curves of her legs beneath such a tiny skirt. Olaf has always had a weakness for powerless women, especially the pretty ones. The further he thinks, he is unsurprised to realize that he could list thousands of reasons to be smitten with her and he feels all of them, absolutely. Yet...

He sees her crying and knows the truth. The reason he has become so infatuated so immediately with
her is simply because he shouldn't. He knows how twisted, how absolutely nefarious his actions are
given his history with the Baudelaires, the Snickets, with every single volunteer or villain that had
learned to fear his name.

He shouldn't want her so badly. And still he does.

Olaf reaches down placing his fingers softly at the crown of her head. The gesture feels as shameful
as an apology. Ash grits beneath his fingernails. Her dark hair is clean and silky against his palm.

"I am so sorry." He says, apologizing for everything and nothing, not even sure Violet hears him
over her weeping.

It is not often he feels as if a memory is being made. So many times he has been on the run, the
present blurring past like a photograph snapped too quick. There are several days and nights he can
no longer seem to recall in detail even though he knows they are crucial to his identity: the night of
his parents' deaths, picking poison darts from their necks, blood gushing to the opera floor. He
cannot remember his induction, does not know when he first kissed Kit Snicket or when exactly it all
got to hell.

Yet he hears crying in the little theatre echo round like the wailing of a phantom, feels the high stage
lights like sunburn at the back of his neck, feels his heart shriveling at the evident grief of a girl he
cannot save from the truth.

And he knows he will remember his shame at the very least.

Chapter End Notes

Body of a Woman by Pablo Neruda is the poem Olaf somewhat recalls and butchers.

Some of you may recognize the Count's pinstripe getup from the original front cover of
The Bad Beginning.

"I once knew a hunchback, a contortionist, and an ambidextrous man who could use
both his left and right hands equally." is a reference to Hugo, Colette, and Kevin who
made their expositions within The Carnivorous Carnival.

My Dearest Darling, is the beginning to Beatrice's letter to Lemony explaining exactly
why they could not be wed within The Beatrice Letters.

The Little Snicket Lad is a song published in The Unauthorized Autobiography, which
Violet would have instantly disliked simply because it follows the tune of Row Row
Row Your Boat, mentioned as her least favorite song.

The conversation between V and O atop the stage, mirrored in Chapter One, is, again,
quoting Dana Levin's Banana Palace.

Let me know what you think!
Chapter Eleven

Eleven-

What follows is a single month of absolute silence.

Violet avoids him as if he harbors a contagious disease or a curse or a nasty omen. In the days after their discussion of VFD, he climbs her ladder, knocks at her inventing room, and waits for a trapdoor that does not swing open.

He idles in the halls between rehearsals, his Troupe tittering in the basement theatre, and tries to catch a glimpse of dark hair and swinging satchel. Carmelita meets his eye each day, but when she sees him she looks immediately away, keeps her head down, and does not seem guilty. Olaf haunts even the dining hall, scanning the crowd of orphans who watch him back with equal mixtures of curiosity, flirtation, and callousness.

Every class, every day, despite where he waits he does not see her.

This ritual of seeking and coming up empty persists for so long, Olaf begins to feel panic prickle his spine as if he is being watched. Ludicrous thoughts of Violet on the run creep into his mind, of her slipping away from Eliade as easily as the shadows change and setting off into the city.

Of all the ways he has imagined Violet Baudelaire leaving him, this is the one he hates the most.

He imagines her holding out as long as she can, inventing odd things for food money, waiting and scrounging for the day she turns eighteen and an inheritance beyond his comprehension falls into her soft lap. In this particular nightmare, Violet’s clothes have been reduced to scraps like the beggar girl costume backstage and she kneels in the streets, whimpering to any men that pass her by, “Please, sir. I’ll do anything, anything-” and between the men that find her for her body, she meets Lemony Snicket who whisks her away and cleans her up and stamps an eye onto her ankle like a brand. In this nightmare, he loses her entirely. Romantically, physically, intellectually, she is bound and changed by others and she does not care for him anymore than a passing memory soon to be forgotten.

Three weeks in, Olaf haunting the halls between Remora’s classroom and the sanctuary, he is considering this possibility, anxiety twisting his stomach as he wonders when he should begin looking through the city, when he spots her.

Violet is rounding the corner, two friends at her side. She looks nervous, eyes scanning the hall, but she spots him far too late. They meet eyes for the briefest moment and Violet’s face goes bright red. He cannot tell if she is embarrassed, ashamed, or furious with him, yet she looks away with a
stubborn set to her jaw and mutters something to the girl beside her, who casts him a curious look.

Before he is even aware that he is moving, Olaf is wading through the mass of orphans to stand before the trio, blocking their progression.

“Orphans.” He says in greeting.

Violet’s friends, the Quagmire’s, he remembers, nod. Violet stares neutrally.

“Miss Baudelaire,” He begins, satisfied when he sees a small amount of hurt in her eyes. Before he even begins, he knows he will be theatrical and cold, can feel it in the roll of his jaw and the tilt of his shoulders, yet he cannot will it away. “I understand, after our last conversation, if you no longer wish to see me. The polite thing to do, in an instance like this, would be to let me know your feelings have changed. However, as you are unaccustomed to adult relationships of any kind, I will spare you the inconvenience of telling me yourself simply to let you know I have received your message loud and clear. I will not continue to-”

Violet interrupts him, sputtering in disbelief. Her face is uncomfortably red and she glances from him to her friends to the hall of passing orphans with growing distress.

“I didn’t want to-” She says, voice low and hurt, “I wasn’t going to, er, end things. I just needed some time to- think. About things. And-”

Olaf takes pity on her and shakes his head. He cannot stand and listen to Violet struggle over not wanting him. Regret sinks his stomach. He realizes her knowledge of VFD was always on the horizon. To keep herself safe from the threat of it, she would have to know of its existence. Yet he wishes he had kept his mouth shut, had merely kissed her and kept kissing her when he had the chance.

Still, a flash of hope soars in his chest. I wasn’t going to, er, end things. But that hope warps instantly into irritation. He is too grown for games, too old for a wayward partner.

“Yet you were hiding from me like a scared little girl.” He says, voice calm.

Violet winces, grimacing a bit, but does not deny it. Beside her, her friends shift awkwardly. They shuffle their feet and fiddle with their bookbags, looking anywhere else.

Olaf, feeling much too old, says, “I would not have done this now if you hadn’t avoided me. My feelings for you, Violet, have not changed although now I find myself perfectly disappointed. Find me if you feel the need.”

He does not wait to see her nod. Olaf turns so sharply his lanyard slaps against his chest, and walks calmly towards the backstage door. He opens it to the sound of his Troupe giggling, shouting, “To the getaway car!” and tumbles fast and snappy down the dark staircase, eager to get his mind off the desperation in Violet’s voice.

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Weeks pass.
In the meantime, he irons out a solid plot for his play and begins drafting costumes between practices. He hunts for scraps of linen and velvet and brass buttons in the backstage props rooms and hangs them in the wings, organized by character and scene like large pieces to a puzzle he is attempting to solve.

He has found a new apartment more secure and oblivious than the last. Summer burns itself out and the mornings sink damp and cool over the city, fresh with the first blusters of Autumn. Olaf keeps his head down, gets his work done, and only ventures from Eliade or his apartment when necessary to cause or survival.

After rehearsals, he gets into the habit of having dinner with his Troupe. They order take away some nights and settle into the props room to drink and judge one another on their improvisation skills. On one such evening, a white-faced woman was instructed to act as the captain of a wayward ship and had called, “Land ho!” into the long hall. The other woman had quipped, “I told you to stop calling me that.” Olaf had laughed so hard he’d gotten hiccups. Other nights they dress in their best clothes and settle into a restaurant with fine wine and fancy lighting. They break bread together. They bond over stories of acting triumphs and villainous plots. They leave one at a time before the bill comes and pile into the Count’s car, laughing as easily as children.

On one such evening, Olaf pulling his collar high against the wind, he waits outside a bustling restaurant, its bright neon lights proclaiming LOUSY LANE’S PARLOR AND CONFECTIONERY in pink at his back. Inside, his Troupe has ordered enough desserts and alcohol to feed a cafetorium of orphans yet he waits on the stoop, the air fresh and cold on his face.

The individual of indeterminate gender has always been notoriously late. Olaf waits outside, ready to wave them down and hurry together inside. Yet, across the bustling street, the flickering lights of a small boutique catch his eye. Uncertainty rots in his stomach for several moments until finally he hurries across the street and into the shop and returns, nearly ten minutes later, with a small parcel tucked into his trouser pocket. Olaf decides it is only fair. He had a hand in loosing Carmelita upon Violet and feels the need to apologize in some way. Not that he had ever felt the need to apologize for anything ever before this very moment. Justification, a lousy thing, is all he has.

Olaf returns to his spot only to find one of the white-faced women waiting for him, grabbing at his arm in excitement, boasting cotton candy martinis and an endless tap. He forgets the gift in his pocket and his accompanying embarrassment in favor of cherry wine and lemon bars. It is an evening full of sweets and song and thievery.

And it is not the only one.

Meanwhile, Violet emerges from whatever hiding places she used to walk past him as if he were not even present. He waits in the halls the same as ever, hoping like a fool that she will want to explain her actions, to beg for forgiveness.

Although they do not speak, they look their fill each time they pass. Olaf takes great care to appear groomed and polished and absolutely in control. He makes Fernald shine his shoes and the white faced women exaggerate the waves of his slicked hair. He shaves his face close but not bare. He wears similar outfits to the one from the night they first met- a dress shirt rolled at the sleeves, dark trousers, his lanyard glittering and gilded: impresario at his neck. The pin of the eye he forgoes. It is left on the countertop each morning considered then left behind, staring to nothing.

Where he seems functioning, Violet does not.

Her hair hangs in lank greasy strands at her face or up in a knot atop her head, no ribbon to distract from the tangle. Her clothes are rumpled and lined and she walks with an exhaustion he has never
seen. Dark circles ring her eyes as if she has been awake for far too long. He wonders each time if Nero is involved, but the young inventor has not bandaged her hands and walks with no noticeable limp. In the mornings she looks as weak and pale as the sinking moon.

By evening she has flipped into her most tempting.

Rehearsals run late nearly every weeknight and Violet knows this yet that does not stop her from sneaking backstage and interrupting. Despite the scene or actors atop the stage, Violet will cross the stage and his Troupe will fall silent mid-sentence, unwilling to let her hear their labors and simply let her pass. She flaunts to her ladder, a snap to her hips and a slight smirk at her mouth. His Troupe eyes him, unsure of what to do, and Violet does not even glance his way.

She walks straight-backed, head held high, her hair curled at the ends to whisp about her back as she trots right past him, close enough he can smell a hint of lavender at her heels. A pretty rouge dusts her cheeks. She has painted her lips the color of fresh roses. He wonders if she has just returned from meeting with another boy, someone not as old or venomous as himself, someone able to be tender and honest.

The idea infuriates him. Each weeknight, every time they pass, he nearly boils. Internally his thoughts are incendiary. (Who does she think she is?) On nights where he is feeling powerful, standing atop the stage, he aches to repeat their exposition, to say, grinning, “A little orphan is out after hours? How exciting.”

On days where he is feeling frustrated, he has to clench his fists to still his hands, to grimace through the fire in his chest, to bite his tongue to keep from saying, “Just cut the shit and look at me.”

And other nights where he is feeling vicious and venomous and evil standing still and mute while she interrupts his rehearsal and crosses his stage, he nearly spits, “Kneel voluntarily and I’ll go easy on that pretty little mouth.”

Olaf keeps silent. He lets her go. As Violet passes, his entire Troupe seems to hold their breath as though hurrying through a graveyard. She ascends her ladder and does not even flash him. As always, the sounds of machinery and invention distract his Troupe for the rest of the evening. They lose their lines, forget to swap costumes. Even after she is gone and done, Violet Baudelaire wrecks his head.

They continue this way until it becomes routine. Until the Troupe stops giving him questioning looks and instead glare in annoyance as Violet passes, looking tempting as the grave. Violet does not look at him and Olaf does not say one word to her.

Until, nearly two months later, they do.

“This thing-” Isadora snaps, slamming shut the front cover to The Incomplete History of Secret Organizations. Bits of charred paper flake from the spine, dropping to the floor like inky fish scales. “Is so ungodly frustrating. I want to pitch myself through these windows.”

Violet glances to where Isadora sits on the floor of her secret room, her back pressed against the seat.
of the velvet chair, glaring at Duncan’s book as if it had bitten her.

“We share the same sentiment.” Violet says from her spot near the trapdoor. Her homework is spread out before her, littering the floor. She has just finished the third page of an essay assigned by Mr. Remora on the many roles of God in classic literature.

Meanwhile, Isadora has been flipping through the book, a stack of old Punctilio’s at her side, and taking notes on her findings, which have grown less and less fruitful over time. The two girls have been swapping tasks for several hours already- Violet’s back bent over the book with a magnifying glass, her heart slowly sinking with accumulated months of disappointment, while Isadora set to work measuring random things in her piles of inventing scraps and scribbling them down for homework, hoping to appease Mrs. Bass. When one grew weary or frustrated, they switched. This routine has worked for the last two months, has been resolved and smoothed with repetition like any growing commitment.

With eyes freshly opened to clarity in all its terror, they set to hunting VFD.

And, like with so many other mysteries in their lives, they have come up empty.

“This whole situation makes me want to pitch myself through the windows. Maybe those notes would get shredded as I go. Then I’d have the backbone to take them down.” Violet eyes the tall tower windows, tinted with grime and dust, where Olaf’s notes still hang, faded yellow in the sunlight.

Isadora follows her gaze, frowning, the blaze of her frustration tempered to spark by pity. “Has Olaf tried to-?”

“Yes.” Violet snaps through a wince. “He has. He slips me notes beneath the trapdoor. Picks flowering weeds from the alley and leaves them on the stage once the Troupe is gone. Anytime we pass in the halls, he looks at me like he wants to kill me or- well-”

“Or get you naked?” Isadora supplies.

“Sometimes.” Violet admits, unembarrassed. “But that’s not what I was going to say. Sometimes Olaf sees me and grimaces like I’ve stomped on his foot. Like the sight of me causes him physical pain.”

Sympathetic to matters of the heart, Isadora mutters, “Ouch. That’s brutal.”

“It is.” Violet agrees, sighing, slumping, her head in her hands. “My heart hurts. And I hate it because I am, still, smitten. But this-” she nods to the book at the floor, black with ruin. “Is more serious than budding- No, blooming romance. And if there’s some chance of villainy then I should be smart and avoid him… Right?”

It is the first instance where avoiding Count Olaf seemed like less of a necessity and more like a rash attempt at survival.

“Smart.” Isadora repeats in a tone that suggests fresh doubt. “Maybe. Maybe not. He is the only one that’s been honest about VFD. Even our parents weren’t that honest. Maybe he just wanted to, I don’t know, prepare you for the risks that come with being together.”

Familiar tendrils of dread snake their way into her gut. Violet feels the pain of growing realization, the horror of looking into the past and recognizing all her decisions for wrongness, for folly.

Violet sits silent, worrying, while Isadora continues, “Our parents were in VFD, so we’re targets
already, sort of. But Olaf, from what it sounds like, was raised in it. Knows its ins and outs. He’s, well, a goldmine of knowledge. And looks.”

Violet snorts, pleasantly shocked from her downward spiral.

Isadora glances at her nails, a parody of prissiness. “Sorry, but I’m not blind.”

“You’re right, of course. But why didn’t you tell me any of this earlier? It’s been nearly two months. Who knows what the truth is? Who knows if Olaf even still—” Violet pauses, unwilling to continue when the man’s affectionate notes gather and grow like creeping vines at the window.

“I know what you were going to say and it was stupid. Don’t look at those—” Isadora points to an old liquor bottle atop the inventing table, its green glass neck choking on a drooping collection of dandelions. “And say that man wouldn’t bend over backwards just to get you to talk to him. He picked you dandelions and probably felt stupid doing it considering you haven’t even looked at him in months.”

“Hey.” Violet warns, edging on annoyed. “Why’re you acting like my enemy now?”

“I’m not.” Isadora insists. “I just feel bad for him. I think maybe we… freaked out too much.” Yet even as she says this, her tone quiets and Violet can tell she doesn’t mean it.

“I think we reacted perfectly well to hearing our parents were murdered by a secret organization they were in. That the man I was dating knew them and was, or is, in it too. Of course we would need time and— and space. To think. It’s reasonable and… smart.”

Isadora only hums at that. “Well. Think of it this way. You’ve shown him you can cut him off. That you weren’t so gullible and lovestruck you couldn’t turn away. Why not try to talk now? He was good to you. Gentlemanly. You should at least… talk.”

Violet glares to her friend lightly, suspicious. “Sounds like you hope we’ll do more than talk.”

“Of course I do!” Isadora huffs. “I told Duncan I wanted you to get married. So you have to talk again for that to happen. Get to it.”

Violet shakes her head, exasperated, her essay forgotten on the floor. “Yes but that was before we knew he was in VFD. Or is. I still don’t know.”

Isadora sighs, glancing beyond the windows to the slowly sinking sun. Thoughtful concentration smooths her features. She wears this look when penning poetry, hunting for the perfect word, stringing consonants and verse.

“It comes down to villainy. We need to know who he is, one way or another.”

“Right again, Quagmire.” Violet mutters. She rolls onto her stomach, pressing her face against her notebook in weariness. “And how do you think we should find out? We’ve flipped through Duncan’s book hundreds of times. We’ve dug through Punctilio archives. We’ve looked up Lemony Snicket and Kit Snicket and tried to find that doctor. Only to come up with next to nothing. Lemony was a journalist. That’s all I know.”

“And we have, er, his obituary.” Isadora reminds her.

Even the mention of it has the mood shifting from quiet contemplation to wariness, as if Snicket’s ghost had appeared at his name’s first utterance to haunt them just out of reach.
“Yes, that too.” Violet says, peeling away from her essay to stand and stretch. She moves so she does not feel small and useless. “What a mystery.”

Isadora sighs, glancing to the trapdoor. Violet knows what she is about to ask so she says, “No clue. He’s been gone for awhile though. I’ve almost finished his essay.”

“The library isn’t that far.” Isadora murmurs. “He shouldn’t be taking this much time.”

Violet shrugs, walking to the long table to stare out the windows, purposefully avoiding Olaf’s notes she could feel glowing like heat at her cheek. “Depends on which library he went to. Eliade’s full of them. Maybe he stopped by the Hall for food. Maybe he… found something interesting.”

Isadora does not respond. Instead, she turn and fiddles with Duncan’s book once more, as if hoping to summon him from his most valued possession. Violet flips the radio on, letting static and music fill the bright room as they work. She returns to Duncan’s essay. The sun begins its slow decline.

They work in near silence for two hours more. Isadora dozes in the velvet chair while Violet, Duncan’s essay finished and tucked away, roots through the old Punctilio’s. She finds nothing peculiar, nothing of interest, and the repeated chafe of failure has turned her mood sour. She thinks of VFD and feels a cocktail of bloodlust and mystery. She thinks of Olaf and feel simple regret, humbling confusion, and missed opportunity.

With Isadora silent and all of their studies placed so emptily before her, Violet feels, again, stuck in a spiral of downward emotion.

That is, until she hears Duncan screaming.

Far below, he slams the stairwell door shut and thunders across the stage. Violet and Isadora have wrenched the trapdoor open and unfurled the ladder before they even truly hear what he has to say.

“-stupid! I’ve stared at that book for nearly a whole year and felt familiarity looking at that weird page of scribbles and I didn’t pay attention! I would be the worst investigative journalist out there! Unable to recognize a stupid map when I see one. They’d take away my awards, my titles, my column! I’d be disgraced!”

Books tucked like feathers against the crooks of his arms, he hurries up the ladder and drops them heavily, sending the stack of Punctilio’s scattering.


“Ladies.” Duncan says, eyeing them both as he sorts through the books at the floor. His skin is pale and a sickly green hue gathers at his mouth. Cold sweat beads his hairline. “I’ll explain. Shut up.”

The two girls glance to one another, refusing to feel shame over their demands at information, yet they fall silent all the same. It takes little time for Duncan to flatten the books at the floor, each one revealing different angles on the same map- geographical landmarks stand out harsh as pinned points. They spot rivers and valleys and contoured anomalies unique to only the city.

“There’s The Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin.” Violet mutters, pointing to a blight of structure on their closest map.

“And here’s Eliade.” Isadora says, toeing a page near Duncan’s elbow.
“Yes, good.” Duncan murmurs, crawling across the floor to where The Incomplete History of Secret Organizations rests against its blackened pillowcase. “I’m glad you two can read maps. A bit more disappointed with your silence skills.”

“You shut it, Duncan. Just tell us what you’ve found.” Isadora says, patience thinning.

Her brother casts her a smug, glittering smile and says, “How can I tell you my investigative findings if I shut it? That will waste lots of time, but if you insist.”

“Oh my god.” Isadora growls, excited but trying to hide it in frustration. “I’m going to strangle you.”

“Tell me.” Violet insist, tiptoeing over the mass of books to sit at Duncan’s side as he gently cracks the burnt book. “I won’t strangle you or tell you to shut it.”

“Oh, Violet.” Duncan says, placing his head briefly at her shoulder. Even the small touch has Violet feeling his fever through her clothes. “If only you had been my sister. Then you’d be nice to me and not threaten me with physical violence.”

“I’m strangling both of you.” Isadora decides. Violet and Duncan share a sarcastic, fearful look.

Isadora settles at Duncan’s other side, as tense silence falls like mist in the room. Three orphans peer down at the same book they have fruitlessly studied for months with fresh chagrin, hoping against hope that it will finally reveal its secrets.

“So, you two have doubtlessly seen this mess.” Duncan says, flipping to one of the very first pages, revealing thick grey lines crossing and looping, looking as if someone had dropped a pile of yarn straight to the paper.

Violet hums in agreement as Isadora nods. It was not a page they had studied much, considering it held very little in words or structure at all.

“Well I’ve stared and stared at it, thinking it was familiar, but never quite realized what it was until now. But I was walking past the Sanctuary- it looks very nice now, with all the renovations- and it just came to me.” Duncan says.

“An epiphany.” Isadora says.

Violet supplies, “A revelation.”

Unwilling to ponder divinity, Duncan shakes his head and continues, “Wherever it’s from, I figured it out. It’s a map of the city. Look. Here’s where the lines avoid. They evade the Grim River. And the Swarthy Swamp. And Hazy Harbor. They turn away from bodies of water, which made me think they were either roads or tunnels.”

Duncan reaches for a book amongst the pile, but Violet, closer, grabs it first. It shows a road map of the city, each stoplight and sharp turn, every parking lot and driveway. She holds it next to the larger book, close enough for Isadora to see.

“They don’t line up. Those aren’t roads, but they cross over some. Or, I guess, beneath some.” Violet says. The three eye the maps for several seconds, watching the ways they come together and apart.

“So they’re tunnels. Underground tunnels. Of course. But, how are they entered or exited? It’s not like they can be recognizable to the average person.” Isadora says, brow furrowed, her head in her hand, leaning as close as she could.
“Right.” Duncan says, pointing to the burnt map, finger hovering just above the page. “Some of the tunnels begin or stop at certain points. Or just loop around. So, since I knew it was an underground map, I put it next to a tourist brochure of the city. It was stuck in one of these books. Isadora, can you grab it?”

Isadora lurches to her feet and rummages through the books until she pulls free a bright yellow brochure and tosses it to her brother. Duncan unfolds it as Isadora returns to his side. It is printed in bright primary colors, showing each body of water and roadway and monument. Printed across the top of the map is a quote printed in blocky script, red as fresh berries, “‘VERY FIRST DESTINATION!’ - TRAVELLING VACATIONIST.”

“Take a look at this.” Duncan says, laying the pages close together. “And tell me what stands out.”

The two young women study the pages for several moments in silence, peering at the winding lanes and travel destinations.

“The tunnels, they- they-” Isadora starts, pointing to the fountain in the middle of the city, while Violet jabs a high rise of apartment buildings off Dark Avenue and finishes her thought. “They line up with buildings. And monuments. And tourist attractions.”

“This one leads to the horseradish factory!” Isadora says, pointing.

“And this one to a dairy farm! And, here, a fountain in the center of the city. And, oh no. Look.” Violet jabs a point next to Eliade’s location.

“The Daily Punctilio ?” Duncan says, frowning, obviously having missed it. “Looks like it’s in the back lot between us.”

All at once, they have the same idea.

“No.” Isadora insists. “No way. We can’t just throw ourselves into some random underground-”

Violet and Duncan share a glance. They rise to their feet in unison.


“Oh now you admit I’m sick, huh?” Duncan says, but there is no heat in it. His mind is already snagging on adventure, of possible findings. His body holds the energy of a mystery unlocking. His illness is an afterthought, a physical hindrance to be considered then brushed aside.

Isadora is silent, absent of excuses. Violet reaches for her satchel.

“I won’t sleep tonight if we don’t go now .” Duncan says.

The three orphans gather their things in the sunset, dreading and anticipating sinking beneath the streets, eager as viruses to invade the lifeline of VFD.

“We’ve taken this turn already.” Isadora insists.
Their footsteps echo in the low-lit tunnels, stretching out like stones skipped over water. Duncan sighs, clutching his stomach. “We haven’t. Look. Montgomery. That’s a new name.”

He nods to an arrow fixed to the brick wall, pointing into a large, dark cavern. They pass it warily, peering into the hall as if staring into the long throat of a beast about to eat them all whole.

“He’s right. Montgomery is new.” Violet says, penning it into the notebook in her arms. “Ever known a Montgomery?”

The Quagmires shake their heads.

“Me neither.” Violet admits. “Let’s keep going.”

“We’ve been walking forever.” Isadora whines. “My feet hurt and this place is creepy. These yellow lights are doing things to my eyes, and—”

She is cut off by footsteps. Far behind them in the tunnels, someone is quickly approaching.

Dread roots the three to the spot, grabs them momentarily by the ankles.

“What do we do?” Isadora whispers, panicked. “If we run they’ll hear us. We don’t know which way these tunnels lead. There’s nowhere to hide.”

Violet and Duncan share a glance. Options gather in their minds, all useless and foolish.

Their choice is made for them when a voice cuts through their panicking, vowels long and warbling against the brick.

“Children—” the unfamiliar voice calls. “I heard you tumble in. Do not be afraid. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lemony Snicket. Did you get my letter? Could I take you for a rootbeer float?”

The man’s footsteps grow closer. Panic drops Violet’s stomach, remembering Olaf’s warnings. She snatches the hands of her friends and says, uncaring at her volume, and shouts, “Run!”

That is just the moment where Duncan heaves, terror on his face, to vomit atop the bricks. Lemony Snicket is so close they can hear the labored draw of his breathing, the quick rhythm of his shoes on the tunnel floor. When Violet looks back she can see the outline of him- dressed in a smartly tailored suit, his face obscured in shadow by a bowl-shaped hat.

“Children!” He calls again.

Duncan heaves. Isadora rushes to his other side, hooking her arms around his shoulders as Violet does the same.

“Come on, Duncan, you can—” Useless assurances fall from their lips as they run, dragging a half-stumbling Duncan as he continues to vomit, sickness slicking the front of his uniform.

Violet and Isadora run as quickly as possible, hauling a stumbling weight between them while Lemony Snicket tails them like a predator, his eyes boring like maggots into their backs. The orphans struggle and stumble, their throats full of pleas, waiting for an inevitable confrontation violent as any burning home.

They brace themselves, holding onto composure like water in cupped hands, and keep running.
Esmé has been waiting for him.

Olaf sees that in the way she leans very carefully against the brick wall of the tunnel and the practiced crossing of her long legs at the ankle, still so concerned that she look perfect at any angle despite lounging in a grimey tunnel, harsh yellow lights casting unflattering shadows. Carmelita sits on the dirt floor not far off, scribbling furiously in a tattered commonplace book.

He had come through the Southern entrance, ducking beneath the fountain at the center of the city and taking that long spiral staircase down to darkness. He is still damp from spray, his hair heavy with it. He walks towards them slowly, languidly, a man with all the time in the world. Time he would prefer not to waste on betrayal.

Although he wishes to appear calm and unfazed, he thinks of his burning apartment, of the aftermath and nothing left behind. He had searched through the rubble for scraps of his past, hoping to find his collection of disguises, his collection of incriminating evidence, and every matchbook he had ever used. Instead he found ashes and grit and nothing but char.

“Sorry to say, but I’m still breathing.” He says, and both their eyes snap to where he emerges from the connecting side tunnel. They are instantly cautious. Esmé straightens. Carmelita freezes at her heels. “But of course you’d know that, Esmé, given your little mole.”

He nods to Carmelita, who glances immediately away. Just to twist that knife of fear deeper, he mutters, “Tell me, girl, have those bruises healed yet?”

She rubs at her throat as though soothing an ache but does not respond. Esmé ignores his taunting and instead breathes his name in a pouty, lusty voice as if she had not attempted to burn him alive. “Olaf!” She cries, throwing her arms wide and hurrying towards him. Her boots grind gravel as she approaches. “It’s been too long, my pet, far too-”

He interrupts her, voice calm and low with derision. “Do not touch me.”

Esmé pauses, considering him with calculation. She lowers her arms and casts him a sad look, trying another tactic. “Oh, of course. I can only imagine what you think of me after your tragedy. Although I will not deny that I burnt your apartment to the ground, I will tell you it was for a perfectly good reason. A warning.”

She eyes him smugly, waiting for him to bite. Olaf sighs, wondering why every woman he has ever met has wanted him to bend to their will. He glares at her but questions, “A warning?”

Esmé grins. “A warning. I saw Lemony Snicket walk into that very building. He was heading straight to your penthouse. I had to do something, you understand.”

Olaf rolls his eyes, but a sudden confusion nearly gives him vertigo. He hates this feeling. Has never experienced it frequently but remembers it most clearly when he was first inducted, when he saw his first house fire and, most recently, nearly half a year ago when he heard Nero hiss Baudelaire. A feeling of sick epiphany, like reality had changed right before his eyes.
“Last I saw Lemony Snicket he was in a casket sinking six feet deep.” Olaf sniffs, folding his arms. Although he has learned to doubt the validity of anything that came from Esmé’s mouth, he still feels a prickle of discomfort at his back, as if being haunted by a spectre. He resists the urge to peer over his shoulder into the darkness.

Esmé smiles yet it is grim and agitated like a parent when their child repeats a stupid question. Instead of insulting him she asks softly, “How many years have you had that tattoo?”

Olaf feels the ink beneath his skin grow hot with awareness. He does not need to reflect or count numbers and replies nearly immediately, “Next month it will be-”

“Rhetorical, Olaf.” Esmé says, voice hard. Carmelita snickers and the man has a sudden urge to stomp over and kick her teeth in.

“And?” He hisses. “What’s your point?”

“In all the years you’ve had that tattoo how many associates have not been as dead as you thought?” Esmé asks, peering at him although they both know the number is high.

“A few.” He admits. He remembers the first time he had seen Widdershins’ obituary and kept eyeing Fernald for a reaction that never came only to see the man alive and well years later. “And you think Snicket’s alive?”

“I know Snicket’s alive. I saw him. I think he was coming to see you and I’m sure he wouldn’t be up for a chat.” Esmé says, the first hint of gravity in her voice. Olaf knows her well enough to take that tone seriously. Esmé Gigi Genevieve Squalor is all mouth and glitz until the world gets loud and she goes quiet and deadly in response. For all her obvious failings, she is a woman with flawless intuition. On Snicket at least, he trusts her.

He remembers the obituary reported by the Punctilio, how he had only found slight comfort in it, as if Lemony Snicket’s death had been mere fantasy instead of fact. Part of him feels he should have known all along, especially when that rag of a journal reported, “As no one seems to know when, where, how, and why he died, there will be no funeral services. A burial may be scheduled for later this year.”

Olaf’s suspicions had been trampled however upon witnessing the burial, the casket, the epitaph. (Lemony Snicket—Author and Fugitive) and his weeping siblings. At that point he had not seen Kit nor Jacques for several years yet their ruddy mourning faces were immediately discernible from a crowd of hundreds of concerned citizens gathered to guarantee a notorious criminal was indeed dead.

He remembers how this crowd had stood very quietly, seeming scarcely to move or even breathe as if the news of their deaths had also been printed in the newspaper. He recalls standing on that side street, huddled in an alleyway cloaked in shadow and feeling, absolutely, like a victor. Seeing Lemony Snicket’s coffin felt like seeing the final flailing cough of a fire just smothered. Yet part of him still wondered, still doubted, still had vivid daydreams of Snicket converting Violet like a slick-tongued ideologue. Which, of course, he had been.

And perhaps still was.

“No.” Olaf agrees, “He’d want me dead. Well, both of us. If he knew.”

Esmé nods sharply at that, shifting where she stands. Only then does the grimey yellow light illuminate her t-shirt and seeing Esmé Squalor in a garment so plebeian stuns him into hissing, “What are you wearing?”
Esmé scoffs and pinches the shirt away from her body as if disgusted.

“Don’t remind me.” She mutters. At her tugging he spots the printed logo across her chest- THE CAFÉ KAFKA in large block letters.

He understands immediately.

Between classes and missions and sneaking around, his childhood had been filled with unconsensually listening to Lemony Snicket speak and the amount of times Olaf had heard the name Kafka seemed nearly comparable to the times he had heard his own. Snicket’s devotion to the author was nearly a punchline so when the café opened that was the key spot to find him, sipping strong tea and sorting through research and photographs of people long forgotten. If the resurrected Snicket was going to haunt any old hang, it would be the Café Kafka.

“You’re staking him out.” Olaf says. “Clever. Any sightings?”

“No yet.” Esmé snips, defensive. “But I’m hopeful.”

“Well good luck ghost hunting.” He mutters, voice dipping to a threatening growl. “But you still burnt down my apartment building with me inside. Is that not cause for some suspicion? Revenge?”

With a flick, he reaches for his pocket knife and hauls it, gleaming, into the damp air. Esmé glances from the man’s knife to Carmelita who has gone still, the pen motionless in her small grip.

“No, Olaf.” Esmé says, voice annoyed and dismissive yet there is an unmistakable tremor to her voice. “We had a deal. I wouldn’t hurt you even after what you did to my darling daughter.”

“Adoptive daughter.” Olaf corrects, as if it matters.

“Who cares?” Esmé snaps. “You were the one who wanted her at Eliade in the first place. It’s only fair she should have some fun with the orphans while she counts them so well.”

Esmé turns so her back is to the wall and looks to the girl on the floor, unwilling to turn her back on him. “Right Carmelita? Who could have known our Countie here would get so wrapped around the finger of Beatrice and Bertrand’s spawn?”

Wisely, Carmelita stays silent, only glancing neutrally between them. To disguise a flinch, Olaf flips the glittering length of his blade back into its metal body and returns it to his pocket. Thin, high-strung panic jolts through his limbs as if one of the lights above had sparked and hit him live. The man is an actor (he hears himself, amused, to Violet, an impresario-) and he has had extensive training and mastered every veiled facial disguise still taught. He knows denial would be useless. Carmelita and Violet had been scrapping about something and he was sure part of it had to do with him. Carmelita had seen him stalking the halls, watching for Violet. Their relationship was obvious. His final option is obvious as his affection for pretty wayward orphans. What he could do, the only thing he could do, happened to be his most talented trick.

Count Olaf could lie.

In the grimey light, he smiles. He can feel the faint heat of the lights casting wicked shadows down his face. Esmé peers at him, suspicious.

“She is a talented lay. And easily charmed by an older man. Who could blame her?” Olaf smirks, running a hand through his hair still damp from the fountain. “But I am not a man manipulated by the heart. I’m surprised you don’t remember that, Esmé.”
At that, the woman freezes. He catches Carmelita glancing between them, confused and slightly repulsed.

He wonders if Esmé will be truthful with her later. If, on the car ride back to Eliade, she will explain how she had fallen head first into violent, wild love with him. How they had been the best of partners. Until, inevitably with most women, she had wanted something deeper. Commitment. A confession of love returned and multiplied cyclically between them. He hopes she tells Carmelita all of this only so she can also say how he had let her down. Had ripped her open and gutted her with absence.

This thought has him remembering a shred of lecture he had heard while wandering the halls of Eliade. It was taught in an easy cadence of a knowledgeable professor in a silent room, students alert and engaged and Olaf had thought he must have been a guest to be so good. The man’s voice had reverberated through the hall like the steady roll of a cathedral bell.

“Many common religions have central icons that become intangible after death or departure and it is this absence that gives them importance and mystery and inspires devotion. It is a six phase process but can be cut to three. Engage physically, neglect emotionally, and separate entirely.”

He had followed those steps with Esmé. And now that he was poking at her wounds he found them surprisingly tender.

“I haven’t forgotten your heartlessness, Olaf. Carmelita’s still wheezing, you know. From what you did.” Esmé turns a fierce glare onto him, one heavy with threats and a wicked woman’s best work.

“Right. Thank you for reminding me.” The man says, voice oily and faux charming as he stalks slowly over to where Carmelita sits on the grimey stones. Her gray eyes stare neutrally to his yet he can still see the absolute terror behind the glaze of disinterest.

A grin curls like smoke at his lips. He raises his left foot very slowly and steps atop the page she had been writing on, grinding the ink with the wet sole of his shiny shoes. Carmelita doesn’t have the backbone to look properly enraged. Instead a weary disappointment flickers across her eyes and the twisted pout of her lips as if she is unsurprised by the cruelty of her superiors.

“How many?” He asks, deliberately obtuse.

“Thirty seven.” Carmelita says. Olaf is surprised to hear no tremble in her voice. “Thirty seven orphans total. Thirteen different families.”

Beside him, Esmé hums in approval. “Sounds about right. Especially with the Marksons last week.”

“The Marksons? You went after the Marksons?” Olaf asks, shocked and impressed and appalled all at once. “We didn’t discuss that.”

Esmé shrugs, looking cool and collected even under the yellow lights in a café t-shirt. “We didn’t need to. S trained Snicket.”

Olaf hums, considering that. He has vague memories of S. Theodora Markson, most involving her enormous mass of tangled red hair. “What does the S stand for?”

Esmé grins, a wicked little smirk. It has been a long time since he’s seen it. “Success in this case. Went off without a hitch.”

“Good.” Olaf mutters. He feels a slight weight lift from his shoulders at the knowledge. “Now. Later this year there will be—"
A sudden gasp echoes from far down the tunnel, so far the sound comes at them round, bouncing off the wall from odd angles. It would have been easy to mistake as the shriek of a gas leak just burst or the squeal of tires on pavement from the roads above.

Olaf, however, would recognize that voice anywhere. He can imagine multitudes of scenarios-blindfolded, backwards, upside down- he would recognize Violet Baudelaire’s voice like an unconscious thought.

“What was that?” Esmé hisses, dramatic even in true danger like a reaction she could never shake.

“Probably nothing.” Olaf says, playing at calm, even as the three of them peer anxiously down the tunnel as far as they can.

“If there’s nothing down there then what was that noise?” Carmelita says, voice waspish and scared.

“I don’t know, you cretin, why don’t you-” Olaf starts but a ragged scream cuts him off. Rapid footsteps pound from the darkness towards them, and snatches of sentences over the noise.

“Where did he-? How-?”

“Duncan, come on, you can make it-”

Over the noise of their footsteps, Olaf realizes he hears his own voice in the chaos, saying, “They’re running from something. Get out, get-” and then Violet Baudelaire emerges from the darkness brilliant as a firework just sparked or a crow flying through a pitch-black night.

Her dark hair is messy, her face is red from cold. Black ash covers her hands like disease and smears atop her uniform. She looks as though she has crawled free from a pile of cinders. Panic has her eyes blown wide and feral, yet she sees him and stops immediately, recognition erasing the distress. Wordlessly, she reaches out and snatches his hands at the wrist. Violet looks into his eyes with exhausted relief, as if she has been saved.

The sight of her makes his knees humiliatingly weak. Even through several layers, he can feel the heat of her skin against the underside of his wrist.

“What are you doing here?” He asks, voice gruff. Hundreds of questions pile high in his mouth yet he cannot settle on more to speak. How did you discover these tunnels? Are you hurt? If you no longer want me why are you looking at me like a godsend?

Violet’s wild eyes are still roaming his face as if she cannot quite believe he is there. Beside them, Carmelita and Esmé have shaken themselves from stunned fear to watching the two of them with obvious intrigue. Only Olaf is aware of the obvious danger this has put Violet in. He can almost see the plots running untamed and gorey through Esmé’s mind.

“Violet.” He shakes the hands she holds. “Why are you here? Why are you running?”

His demanding tone shakes her enough that she turns to look to the tunnel and see the Quagmires hurrying into view. The girl supports the weight of her brother who is pale and drawn, his eyes heavy. Vomit spatters the front of his clothes. Ash blights them as messy as Violet.

“Lemony Snicket.” Violet says, voice wavering. “We saw him in the tunnels. He was following us, he- he’s here somewhere. You told me not to interact, that he’s dangerous, so we ran and he heard and-”

From the moment the name Snicket had left the girl’s mouth, Esmé and Carmelita were turning and
hurrying back into the easy protection of a side tunnel traveling East. Olaf cannot blame them. His resentment towards Esmé vanishes and instead he feels towards her a sense of partnership. Of accomplice. He hopes they make it back to Dark Avenue.

“Alright.” Olaf says, but Violet is still babbling.

“I know you said it’s a conspiracy and dangerous but we had to see if we could find something to prove it, something real and-”


He hears the quick trot of footsteps far ahead, trying to be quiet and hurry at the same time. Instead of forcing the trio forward into tunnels they do not know, Olaf leaves them behind, leaves Violet staring after him, and runs forward to face his truest enemy.

A sudden boom echoes straight down the tunnel like a boulder dropping. The noise is so loud the brick walls crumble. Dust shimmers in the air. Rubble seeps through new cracks in the stone above their heads. The yellow lights swing so wildly the man feels nauseous yet he keeps running until he finds the man standing still and tall in the middle of a side tunnel, one with an arrow pointing the way he had come, QUAGMIRE emblazoned golden in a large arrow.

Lemony Snicket looks the same as when they last met- covered in ash, dressed in a tailored suit, eyes bright and burning with hatred upon seeing him. It has been at least half a decade since they last met in person.

“Oh. Olaf.” Snicket says. His voice holds the same cadence as ever, lilting with knowledge, syllables clipped tight. “Time’s cruel persistence has brought us together yet again. I cannot say I’m pleased.”

“Likewise.” He sneers. “Aren’t you supposed to be dead?”

A grim smile quirks at the other man’s mouth. He dips his eyes very briefly to check a grimey watch at his wrist. “I am, as of half-past four this afternoon, still alive. And as a consequence of this I have duties that must be done. I was busy chasing children through these tunnels before you interrupted. Let me pass.”

A deranged smile crosses Olaf’s face. He grips the knife tighter, rolls his wrist in preparation to swing. He will put this dead man back in the grave before he allows him a chance near Violet Baudelaire.

“Bite me, Snicket. I’m about as likely to let you pass as I am to quit acting or read for fun.”

The other man shakes his head wearily. As if disappointed, he says, “You’ve not changed at all.”

Beneath the present danger, beneath the crowded buzz of thoughts in his mind, this statement strikes Olaf as odd. In very basic ways, he will always be himself. He will forever love to drape another identity atop his own and spew perfectly-delivered lines atop a warm theatre stage. He will always enjoy a cool glass of wine, or six. He will never read for fun.

But in other ways, he feels completely different from the man Lemony Snicket last saw. He is more driven, more aware of his limits. He works with a calm and steady hand. His heart is full and heavy. He works not only for himself, but for a world Violet can find quieted. Surely this should show. Yet, he feels no disappointment that Snicket cannot sense this. The less he knows about Olaf and Violet and their liaison the better.
“You’re as tactless as ever. Where have you been hiding all these years?” Olaf asks. He widens his stance, tries to take up as much space within the tunnel as possible. Lemony Snicket has crouched somewhat, like a sports performer aiming for a tackle.

“I don’t think tactless works in that sentence.” Lemony snips and Olaf resist the urge to toss his knife right at the man’s smarmy mouth. “And as for your last question… That’s simply none of your business.”

He knows there are several things he could say to further distract Snicket. Although they are enemies, absolutely, they were raised together in the close-knit halls of the same shady organization. They watched one another’s failures along with their successes. They know each other too well to resort to casual cruelties.

The Count feels several words gathering in his mouth he could spew—Bertrand, traitor, Kit, obituary, farcity. Yet they all vanish as soon as he feels rubble fall against the back of his neck and down his spine beneath his shirt. He does not look, does not want the other man to follow his gaze, but he is sure a fresh crack has split the tunnel above his head.

A dangerous idea takes form. Olaf grips his knife tighter.

“Nothing to say?” Lemony asks, voice low and derisive. “Then let me pass.”

“There are several things I could say to you,” Olaf mutters, that same devilish grin at his lips. “But those will have to wait.”

Snicket casts him a wary look, confused. Olaf takes the opportunity to summon all his strength and jam the long blade of his knife overhead, driving it deep into the crack. A sound of stone splitting echoes in the long map of tunnels. The ground begins to tremor.

The knife is stuck into the parting tunnel so deeply Olaf has to wrench his hand free. When he does, a large cluster of brick and rock tumbles down. A gushing hole has opened overhead. The tunnel has begun its steady collapse.

Enormous portions of stone split the space between them. The two men jump back reflexively.

And this is where Lemony Snicket fails.

By the time he could have followed the Count towards the orphans, the space between them is crowded with rubble so dense he cannot pass. Olaf turns had pounds down the shuddering tunnel, his heart in his throat. He hopes he remembers the way these walls wind.

“Orphans—” He calls, his voice echoing round and long. He hears Violet call back but cannot string together words from the chaos. Overhead, the yellow lights flicker and die. He is left running in darkness, the whole world falling.

“Olaf!” He can see the faintest hint of spark ahead. Violet and her friend stand struggling with the weight of the boy, his arms draped over their necks. “Over here!”

“Give him to me. Let me-” He is saying before he even reaches them. Without asking he ducks, scoops the Quagmire boy at the knees, and throws him onto his back.

“Run!” Olaf yells, snatching the lighter out of Violet’s hands. She tries to shout over the noise, rubble falling around them like ash but he cannot focus. “Follow me! Shut up! Get going! Stay safe!”

They run as quickly as possible, the lighter flickering like a slim measure of hope between them. The
walls had increased their rumble and the floor actively trembled beneath their feet, causing them to stumble and slow and falter. Gravel crunches beneath their shoes. Duncan is heavy at his back and a cold sweat beads the man’s forehead but he persists, swinging the flame at the walls, searching for another arrow.

“What are you-?” Violet shouts.

“Here!” Olaf cries, catching sight of a shimmer of gold. He stumbles towards a side tunnel and holds the lighter up high. The faint flame catches the letters meekly, nearly one at a time, yet the name is as familiar as the blazing sun.

BAUDELAIRE points them down the tunnel. Violet makes a pained noise next to him as if she has been wounded in some irreversible way. Olaf can only imagine how seeing that proof, the undeniable moniker, must ache. He reaches out, brushes his hand along the small of her back.

“Let’s go.” He says. There is no time for mourning. They dash down the tunnel which is so long his throat feels raw when that tight spiral staircase comes into view.

“There it is!” Isadora says. Olaf goes first, rubble spraying into his hair, the whole staircase trembling. Large cracks have split the tunnel where the metal rods hold the structure upright. It sways when they ascend like a surfaced submarine.

Even before they reach the trapdoor, Olaf sees the glimmer of typewriter keys and knows there will be trouble.

“Shit.” He curses, grabbing at the small paper folded against the platen roller and the paper finger. Without warning, he drops Duncan who hits the small landing platform with an audible clang. Beside him, Isadora shrieks and goes to catch him yet the young man rises on his own, shaking his head. Olaf pays them no mind, instead calls, “Violet, come here.” and her name feels addictive on his tongue after so long an absence.

“What is it?” She leaps over Duncan, already peering at the note.

“It’s a Vernacularly Fastened Door. A proper one. We have this list of clues and you’re the only one that will know them.”

In the low light, he can see the nerves on her face, the evident anxiety. Far down, they hear the crack and crash as part of the tunnel collapses completely. A thick spray of dust shoots towards them.

“Okay- First one?”

Olaf shines the light towards the paper and is met again with Bertrand’s handwriting. Violet prepares her fingers atop the keys.

“The world’s greatest inventor. Nickname of the eldest Baudelaire child.” He recites and Violet is instant. He sees those slim fingers working, the snap of a lock sprung free, and then her voice, “Next.”

“The next is a quote. The curtain falls just as the knot unties . What is this knot?”

Violet makes a small noise of recognition and her fingers fly across the keyboard. Another click of release from the typewriter. The trapdoor rattles in its frame.

“Hurry!” Isadora cries. Another crash follows and the middle section of the tunnel crumbles, large chunks of rocks falling and scattering against the dusty floor.
Over the noise, dust coating his throat, Olaf calls, “Another knot invented by Finnish female pirates in the 15th century!”

A moment of pause with dust so thick he can no longer see Violet or the typewriter or even the orphans at his feet. But then a large swatch of light beams into the darkness and Violet is hauling her friends upright and shoving them through the trapdoor. Isadora climbs up first, then helps drag Duncan through. Once he is up, she reaches for Violet’s hands and, immediately, unquestioningly, Olaf crouches to place his hands beneath her foot and shove her up and through. Only once they are safe, does he allow himself to reach into that gleaming pit of salvation and join them. He places his feet on the edge of the staircase and kicks off, and even as he makes it through, the staircase splits from the wall and clangs to the floor. He drags himself through char and wreckage and once he is through, Violet stomps atop the door, closing it off.

She reaches for his hand and the man rises, pushing against splintered wood and brick and glass. When he stands, he sees the two other orphans have hurried out of the wreckage to stand on the broken remains of the front stoop. Violet looks pale, covered in dust and debris. Her eyes have a haunted look to them. Olaf stands and shakes his head, feels his heart pounding high and sharp in his chest and realizes the glass crunching under his boots are remnants of window panes from the Baudelaire mansion. Above the trapdoor, singed bits of oriental rug show proof of its hiding place.

“This was the library.” Violet says. She has not dropped his hand.

It is only then that Olaf can comprehend what he is seeing. Long beams of wood once supporting the home now lie burnt and broken in ragged piles all around. The remains of a grand staircase travel up and curl as if once having led to a large upper floor, then drop off mid-step into only air. All around, enormous piles of a once noble home now gather as silent and tangible as gravestones.

He does not know what to say.

Instead of condolences or heartfelt apologies, he can only focus on the Quagmires, the young boy with vomit on his clothes, and the tunnels rapidly sinking beneath them. He is sure that parts of the city have collapsed. Sure that, somewhere, entire roadways have sunken into the earth.

“Violet.” He shakes the hand she holds and some of that haunted look leaves her eyes. “We need to get going. It’s not safe. I’m parked a few blocks away.”

Violet takes one last look at the ruins of her home, cast grey and smudged by the falling darkness, and nods.

“Right.” She says. “Let’s go.”

They join together silently on the sidewalk and hurry to the car, Olaf leading the way. He walks a considerable distance ahead of them, his collar pulled high, his hands shoved into his pockets. He keeps his distance, keeps alert. Tries to watch for any suspicious person who looks their way too long, while the girls fuss over the limping boy. Olaf finds his car just as he left it- polished dark as coal and perfectly intact.

Violet takes the passenger seat while her friends slump into the back. Olaf resists the urge to say, “Get vomit in my vehicle and I’ll throw you back in those tunnels, orphan.” He could already imagine the harsh look he’d get from the young woman slumped beside him. The Count keeps his mouth shut.

“To Eliade?” He asks.
“Please.” Isadora says. He nods, cranks the heater, and speeds away.

The radio is faint and shot with static as they drive. Olaf notices the orphans relaxing around him, drawing their knees into the seats, leaning their heads against the windows, sighing as deep as any adult faced with an uncomfortable reality.

Several times he glances towards Violet only to find her staring at his right hand which rests in his lap. He wonders what she is looking for- a tattoo, a ring, a smattering of ash? He does not find it in himself to break the heavy silence just to ask. Violet Baudelaire could look at him as much as she wanted. Better this, he thinks, than the calculated avoidance of months past.

When he turns down the alleyway beside Eliade, the two orphans in the back drag themselves into sitting positions and wearily eye the door. He feels the silence in the air that one might feel at funerals or weddings or baptisms- simply that there is too much to say. Silence is settled upon for the comfort of everyone involved.

That is, until a decision must be made.

Olaf parks and kills the engine. Isadora meets his eyes in the rearview mirror and says, “Thank you, Olaf.”

He nods, settled on silence.

The Quagmire orphans shift and slide across the seat until they are standing in the alley, the door ajar. Isadora frowns at Violet who has not moved. A familiar frown quirks her mouth.

“Violet,” Isadora murmurs, like a mother waking a dozing child. “Are you coming inside?”

“No.” She answers immediately. “Go on.”

Isadora waits for further explanation. Violet shifts in her seat, stretching her arms high above her head. Olaf fights and fails to keep his eyes from her midriff.

“Go on.” Violet repeats, voice stern. “I’ll see you later. Get Duncan inside.”

Duncan casts her a weakly grateful look, his hand on his stomach, his face pale as the sky. Isadora nods, turns to her brother, and helps him up the steps. Before the door closes behind them, the girls meet eyes once more.

Being around so many women in his youth has left Olaf with the idea that they can communicate fluently with a single look. He sees an understanding pass between them, invisible as a radio wave, yet there all the same. Beside him, Violet nods and Isadora shuts the door.

The man braces himself and disguises his nerves in the fast twist of his keys. His car hums alive and goes quiet. He shifts to look her in the face and sees Violet watching him uncertainly, her eyes hesitant and sad and very tired.

“I wasn’t aware we had anything to discuss.” Olaf says, breaking the silence.

“Of course we do.” Violet says, voice soft. She reaches over and touches the back of his hand lightly. Their skin seems to be a lesson in opposites- his pale, hers black from coal. When she withdraws, four little fingerprints smudge the space behind his knuckles.

He glances to their hands blankly then returns his eyes to hers.
“I’m sure you feel like I’ve ruined everything. And I don’t blame you.” Violet says, returning her dirty hands to her lap, her fingers tangled. She picks her fingernails, tries to rub away the ash. A nervous fidgeter without a ribbon. Seeing her fuss has Olaf remembering his gift but he dismisses the thought, pushes it to the back of his mind to focus. He doesn’t answer.

“Our first real date went so well. And I really, really like you. And you’re ungodly handsome. But when you told me about VFD… I wasn’t surprised. I mean, I was about you being involved. But not that it existed. I should have recognized that eye in the cathedral we went to. It’s all over Duncan’s book. I guess there are a few different ways to draw it, but… I still should’ve known.” Violet trails off, her eyes drifting through the windshield and to the stars just starting to shimmer.

She rolls her head against the seat to return her attention to his hands, as if she wants to touch him again but cannot bring herself to try for fear of rebuff.

“I didn’t want to avoid you. That wasn’t what I tried to do-”

Olaf snorts and barely resists rolling his eyes like a petulant child.

“No, really.” Violet insists. “I just didn’t know what to do. If our situations were reversed and some lady you’d been dating told you she was part of the organization that got your parents killed, what would you do?”

Olaf’s answer is easy. A grim smirk quirks his mouth.

“Believe it or not, little orphan,” He says, voice intentionally calm and low, “I have been in that situation. But, to be fair, I had already known about VFD. Had gone through training and could see through her disguise. We continued dating.”

Violet eyes him warily. “But you’re not dating now?”

He debates the idea of shrugging and smirking and not answering, hopeful of inciting ravenous jealousy within her. The more he thinks, though, the more he is sure that Violet, always polite, would respect the false relationship and leave him be.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” He teases, but Violet does not smile. Olaf sighs. “No, we aren’t. I haven’t seen her in years.”

Violet glances away. He can tell she is wondering how they went from an explanation of her absence to talk of his failed relationships. Instead of insistent questions on his past lovers as he had expected, Violet looks at him sadly, all big dark eyes and wild eyelashes, her face shadowed in coal and exhaustion. She asks, voice calm as the truth, “And are we not dating now, too?”

The question has riotous indignation and hurt broiling in his chest. “You decided that Violet. I had told you I was hopelessly entranced by you. What was unclear?”

Olaf clenches the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles go white. Part of him wants to tell her to get out, to not speak with him ever again so he can mend his heart in villainous conquests. Another part wants to tell her to shut her mouth and strip her bare right outside of Eliade and not care if she spots the tattoo at his ankle and have his wicked way with her, even as she frets and eyes the door and wishes to say, ‘Now is not the time.’ Yet another part wants to speed away, Violet cozy in the car, to his apartment to talk and reconnect and laugh as if he has been tamed. He does not know which route to take so Olaf merely sits and bristles and grits his teeth.

Violet frowns at him. Her voice is taut and simmering with low anger and humiliation when she says, “Oh there was nothing unclear about you breaking up with me in the middle of Eliade in front
of my friends and whoever else happened to walk by. *Unaccustomed to adult relationships of any kind*, you said. Really had to rub it in that my parents are dead, didn’t you? That was cruel, Olaf. Villainous.”

He resists the urge to sigh. Instead, he scowls and pinches the bridge of his nose, willing away an oncoming headache. So much has happened in the small limits of a single day he wonders how much more toil he could endure. More than anything, he feels he does not have the energy to argue. The man wishes he had made a decision. Had kicked her out, or shut her up with his hands and mouth and words that inflamed her in an altogether different manner.

“That’s not what I meant—” *Orphan* sits on his tongue but he bites it back, aware before he says it that this time the moniker would be too vicious. “You are seventeen. You are not yet an adult. That is what I meant—”

His gaze to her is calm when he says, “—simply that you must have been in over your head.”

That has Violet closing her mouth before she can spew something foul at him. Instead, her face softens. Her hands fiddle uneasily against her skirt. “Not with you. With you I feel perfectly safe and cherished and… I don’t know. Good. I’ve been in over my head with VFD. When you told me about them, I felt like I needed to avoid you too. To do some research on my own to see what I could find.”

*To see if you are as dangerous as them*, she does not say but they both feel it. Violet sighs, a memory of frustration in it. “But I couldn’t find shit. Nothing. All I had was Duncan’s book and I’ve dissected that thing for months.”

“That’s the thing about secret organizations,” Olaf murmurs, unsurprised that her hands had come up empty. “They’re secret.”

“I’ve realized.” Violet says. A silence blossoms into the car. Olaf wonders where they go from here. Several options present themselves to him at once, and none of them seem particularly smart. Yet, he knows what he must do. He has foisted the responsibility of Violet’s education of VFD onto himself and the least he could do was continue it, to allow her to keep herself safe if she could no longer trust him to do so.

“If you wish to be educated about VFD, I assure you I know nearly everything. Learning the codes, the disguises, and all the tricks will help you survive against it. Even if you weren’t aware of VFD, you would still be a target simply because of your last name. I could teach you. If you are willing.” He offers.

He can feel Violet’s gaze roaming the side of his face. Just like with his hands, he is not sure what she searches for. She shifts beside him. When he glances over, he is surprised to see a small blush against her cheeks. The sight leaves him momentarily breathless.

“And my other lessons?” She asks. The question goes straight to the man’s head, already replaying their lurid activities. He remembers their very first brush with indecency, Violet bent over before him, blood dripping down her legs, her voice so soft and high. He had repaired another man’s foulness against her. He wonders if, this time, he could repair his own.

“If you wish to become romantic with me again, that, of course, I am ever willing to do.” He leaves it at that.

Violet does not hesitate. “Of course I do.”
Aware she will not be rejected, Violet reaches out and grasps his hand in both of hers. When he meets her eyes, they are open and honest and apologetic. “I’m sorry, Olaf. I really didn’t mean to hurt you. Can you forgive me?”

Instead of answering, he leans over and nearly presses their lips together. He watches Violet’s eyes flutter closed, watches a vein in her neck spike, watches her lean into where he waits.

“You must make it up to me somehow. We’ve lost precious time, haven’t we?” He mutters. Before she can react, he kisses her fully, a hand coming to tip her chin, to graze her cheek. He kisses her deeply, desperately, as if he could communicate the utter frustration he has felt at not having touched her for many months.

When he pulls away, Violet seems dizzy with relief. Voice small and dreamy, she agrees, “We have.”

“Now, Violet,” Olaf says, voice stern. The sudden change has some of the dreaminess fading from her soft face and she watches him with curiosity and intrigue. “Lesson One of VFD: Do not linger. I’d say we’ve pushed the limit of allotted time. Especially with the tunnels collapsing. We can continue this discussion at a later date, when we are both free, in there.” He nods to the alleyway door, and deeper, to Eliade. “Or, you can accompany me to my new apartment—” He eyes her dirty hands, her smudged face. “And take a bath.”

Violet pretends to think on this, a smile she could not suppress curling the edges of her mouth. She hums to herself. When she glances to him again, her eyes are full of tired happiness. She says, “If there’s no bathtub when we get there, I’m leaving.”

Olaf laughs. He feels ultimate satisfaction and victory in the snappy way he revs the car and the roguish, wild grin at his lips. He has again won Violet’s affections and triumphed over Lemony Snicket’s plans. He will have her in his bath and in his bed. He wonders how, suddenly, his night had become so exciting.

“I told you on our very first date, Miss Baudelaire,” He purrs, pulling out of the alley and heading straight towards the city and its collection of dazzling lights, “That I am not a liar.”

“You did.” She agrees, and Olaf can feel her heavy gaze again on the side of his face. Violet looks at him with an expression more sensitive than nerve, as if from the moment her property first caught aflame, or the moments before they had even glanced upon one another, she had been waiting for him and (like a sinner waiting to pass into an afterlife of bliss-) had suffered enough to finally, finally, come home.

Chapter End Notes

“I am, as of half-past four this afternoon, still alive.” - Lemony Snicket, The Unauthorized Autobiography.

Hopefully most of you would have been able to unlock our Vernacularly Fastened
Door. For those who want to be sure, here are the answers. 1) Ed, after Thomas Edison 2) My Silence Knot, after the poem written by Beatrice Baudelaire 3) The Devil’s Tongue, a knot which Violet uses throughout ASOUE.

I know this chapter is insanely long (and I wanted to make it even longer, but had to curb myself) but I wanted to make up for missing last weekend. I was traveling and thought I could handle adding scenes, editing, and posting too. Nope! My apologies. I hope this plotty chapter feels like a little consolation.

Please let me know what you think!
Chapter Twelve

In the mirror, she sees all the scars.

There are the obvious ones, plain to any sharp eye. Her knuckles, most obviously, have grown thick as callouses and purpled with fresh scarring. Ten in total. Other scars are old and less obvious, simple consequences of living with less grace than the average woman and a strong desire to fiddle with metal and blade and power equipment. Inventing has taken its toll on Violet Baudelaire’s body.

She stands in the large bathroom of Olaf’s apartment, an enormous cast-iron bathtub to her side, each clawfoot gleaming and golden. Hot water pounds from the tap. Already, the wall-length mirror before her is fogging with steam. Violet stands before it, having just scrubbed her hands in the sink only to become distracted by her collection of scars. She undresses slowly after that, watching as with each garment dropped, the number grew higher.

She is left standing in only panties, eyeing a large scratch at her hip from her first time woodworking. Beyond the thick bathroom door, she can hear Olaf in his bedroom on the phone ordering takeout. She wonders at the man’s body, if his collection of scars outnumbers hers. Even with the admittedly limited knowledge she has of his past, she would bet money on the abundance of Olaf’s scars, proof of violence his body has endured and healed like hers.

Violet grabs a small glass of wine from a stool by the tub and drains the rest. Instead of the pink wine they had shared on their date, this pick was white and moved as if infused with oil.

“Sauvignon blanc,” Olaf had said, placing the glass and bottle at the stool as she sat on the edge of the tub and pulled off her socks. He had that predatory look to his eyes even at seeing the delicate curve of her heel. “It will pair well with the soy sauce.”

“Gesundheit,” she had said, reflecting his joke right back at him. The man had rolled his eyes and turned away to disguise a grin and left her alone to order food. She had been so distracted counting scars she had the tub nearly full by the time she had finished her first drink.

Violet reaches for the bottle, wondering if she will grow to enjoy wine as much as the man in the next room, when, out of the corner of her eye, she spots her backside in the mirror. Five long scars blight her skin. They are so ghastly and unexpected, she nearly drops her glass. It clatters harshly to the stool.

Staring into the mirror, aghast, she slowly drops her panties to the cool stone floor. The communal showers in Eliade are cramped and hardly private, each stall separated by a flimsy plastic curtain.
The water is miserably cool and no mirrors are present in the changing rooms. Discolored squares blight the space above the sinks, proving the past existence of mirrors. Isadora had told her once it was to avoid vanity. Violet had never found a way to check her wounds properly.

And this was the result.

Violet glances to the door and sees it absent of a lock. Outside, she can still hear Olaf struggling to order Chinese food. She rolls her shoulders, cracks her neck. If the man walks in on her stretching to look at her wounds, she’s sure he will not humiliate her. Violet thinks of all the times Olaf could have hurt her and places her hands on the floor. She plants her feet firmly on the tiles, her backside still to the mirror, and bends forward at the waist until her head is completely upside down and her dark hair brushes the floor. She hooks her arms around her knees, takes a deep breath, and looks into the mirror.

Along with the pale stretches of her legs and the surprisingly pink flash of genitals, the scars stand out harsh and far longer than she had thought. They are knotted at the edges like bad wounds. Violet sucks in a harsh breath, watching the curve of her spine rise and fall, and wonders how lifelong marks could have escaped her notice for this many months. A bone in her spine cracks into place. Violet runs her hands along the backs of her legs, peering at her upside down face as it reddens with hoarded blood.

She widens her stance until her hips pop and a familiar relief follows. She wonders if she should stretch more. If Olaf would be willing to lend his bathroom to her disrobed twistings in a steamy little room.

*Only if I can watch.* Violet could hear his probable response without doubt.

She sighs again, her thoughts consumed by the man beyond the door. In the mirror, her eyes wander to dip between her legs. Instead of vague disgust or embarrassment, Violet feels only a scientific sort of curiosity. She thinks of the very first comment Olaf had made about her anatomy—*soft and pink as rose petals parting*. Then, later—*Do you want it in your hands? Your mouth? Your cunt?*

*Such a naughty word,* Violet thinks. Yet every other name she could imagine seems awkward or too anatomical.

Only once her head begins to spin does Violet slowly rise into place. She watches the way her body rolls and bunches and moves, the way her hair sways once it comes away from the floor. She stands at her full height, raises her arms high above her head.

In watching her body move, a poem resurrects itself in her mind. She is sure Klaus had read it to her before, or perhaps her mother. It is not the voice she recalls but the words, vivid and only now heavy with understanding.

Violet clears her throat, takes a sip of wine, and stands straight-backed before the mirror as if her reflection were a guest at a poetry recital as she, the Violet not within the mirror, were a poet just taken to stage.

She feels silly and happy and recites the poem as best as her memory provides.

“If I in my north room dance naked, grotesquely before my mirror waving my shirt round my head and singing softly to myself: ‘I am lonely, lonely, I am best so!’ If I admire my arms, my face, my shoulders, flanks, buttocks against the yellow drawn shades- Who shall say I am not the happy genius of my household?”
She mimes clapping and takes a bow and feels utterly ridiculous but it is a happy sort of ridiculous, one she feels she has not felt often enough. Violet blames her silliness on the wine but downs the next glass anyway and finally turns off the frothing tap. The tub is swollen with bubbles and steam and water so hot her fingers throb when she checks it.

Olaf finds her once she had been fully submerged in the tub, her hair a high knot on her head, and nearly all of the wine has been drank. He steps into the bathroom looking out of place with his sleeves and his vest and his shoes. Violet peeks at him from beneath a smattering of bubbles so thick all he can see is above her neck.

“Enjoying your time alone, dear thing?” Amusement quirks his lips. A pleasant blaze flickers low in Violet’s belly at the sight.

“I am lonely, lonely, I am best so!” She quotes, grinning.

The man quirks an eyebrow at her and shrugs in amused confusion. “Alright. I’ll leave you alone then?”

“No, no. It’s a poem, silly man. Stay with me.” Violet murmurs, raising a hand above the water to blow a smattering of bubbles towards him.

“Ah, quoting poetry are you? I’ve experienced enough of that already in my life. The last thing I need is more poetry.” He says the last word as if it is a contagious disease.

“Oh, that’s not true. You were the one quoting Neruda in my inventing attic last time we were together.”

Olaf moves the near empty bottle of wine and hands Violet her glass so he can sit on the stool. He stretches his long legs out beneath the tub and takes the last swig of wine straight from the bottle. He swallows and hums and shudders at the sudden blaze of alcohol in his throat.

“Oh the goblets of the breasts! Oh the roses of the pubis!” He quotes, eyeing the curtain of bubbles. “Speaking of. Where have they disappeared to?”

Violet giggles, the blush atop her cheeks from the wine deepening. “I’ve still got them. They haven’t gone anywhere.”

“Are you sure?” Olaf asks, his voice rough and deep and rich. He skims a hand flat atop the bubbles. “I would hate for you to lose them.”

She shakes her head and sinks deeper into the water. Olaf dips his hand beneath the surface only to quickly pull away as if burned.

“Good lord, woman!” He cries. “How are you not boiling alive?”

“I am.” Violet says. She sips her wine and grins at him. “But I like it.”

Olaf frowns, eyeing the water as if it has betrayed him. “How could I live a minute longer with you naked before me but a sheen of suds? If I don’t touch you right this moment I think I’ll just die.”

“Well I can’t have that.” Violet murmurs. She slowly shifts in the water, steam curling in the air, until she is on her knees before him. The water halts his view just below her hips. His eyes roam her body from the taut cords of her neck to the flushed skin of her breasts and lower to her navel, which sprouts goosebumps. Violet shudders. Soap drips down her frame in much the same way his tongue desires to follow. He watches her nipples grow taut and his hands seem to move on their own. One
reaches for her cheek, the other traveling around to settle on the small of her back and draw her close. His touch is cool and rough on her hot skin.

Violet feels desperate in that moment, more desperate than she has ever been even when he had been touching her. She slams their lips together, tactless and uncouth and so very willing. The man groans into her mouth. Another shiver wracks her spine.

Regardless of the fact that she would be drenching him, she throws her arms around his shoulders and leans into his body. His arms come to her waist and slip down her spine to squeeze at her bottom, heedless of the scars.

Every brush of the man’s hands on her skin makes Violet’s head swim. She feels already grateful to him in more ways than she could put into words- for saving them from the collapsing tunnels, for running towards Snicket, for warning her about VFD. She thinks the one reason she could never thank him, the vulnerability she could never show, would be simple thanks for picking her. Of all the women in the world, of all the orphans of Eliade, she had caught his eye and held it long enough that they were together in a tiny apartment in the city drinking wine, kissing, covered in suds. Violet feels eternally cherished and special and treasured in a way she never thought possible simply because Count Olaf had looked at her with devilish affection in his eyes and said, “I’m very good at keeping secrets.”

Olaf groans again, his hands squeezing almost painfully at her hips. He pulls away from kissing her to trail kisses down her jaw, her neck, in the space between her breasts.

“Violet,” He growls, a sweet, breathless lilt to his voice. Hearing her name in that voice has a strangled whimper escaping from her own throat. Somewhat embarrassed and eager to hide the noise, she quickly asks, “What?” She finds her voice as ragged as his own.

She feels his wicked smirk against her skin. Her hands have come to rest on his shoulders, probably gripping the expensive fabric too roughly, but she could not bring herself to care about the man’s clothes when all she wanted was less of them- less clothes, less buttons, more skin and muscle and soap.

“I wish this tub would fit two.” Violet mutters. Olaf hums, nodding. She can feel the stubble of his facial hair catch the skin at her chest.

“Something I must consider when shopping for my next apartment. But that wasn’t what I was going to say.” He pulls away from kissing her to look her straight in the face. He is reverent and open and a patch of bubbles clings to his jaw but all Violet can think about is how utterly sexual he looks- eyes passionate, lips swollen, hair mussed. Olaf looks like damnation, like temptation personified. She has a hard time paying attention to the words he speaks.

“I have a proposition. I have noticed that your uniform is quite… sullied.” The man glances to her heap of clothes at the floor. They have already smudged ash against the stone. Several loose threads have grown to rips, especially at the ends of her too-short skirt. The white button-up is covered in stains she doubts could ever be removed.

Too much has happened in the brief instance of a single day for Violet to begin worrying about her uniform. As if the clothes were a symbol of issues she had yet to deal with, a wave of nausea makes her sigh. She glances at Olaf and thinks of all the things they must discuss. And finds herself hoping to delay those conversations long enough to have a pleasant evening. She looks to him, waiting. “And?”

“And, because I can recall with absolute, besotted clarity the evening of our first date, you wore
your uniform to that, too. Am I correct in my assumption that your wardrobe is-” The man pauses, searching for a word. “Limited?”

A wretched flush climbs up her neck so quickly she can feel it like a zap of electricity. Violet crosses her arms, looks away and down into the calm throng of bubbles. Beneath the water she clenches her toes, fighting to keep her evident shame from becoming too obvious.

Her voice is calm and understanding and measured. “I realize I am not… suited to be, er, involved with you. I am young and homeless and all my clothes were burned in a house fire. I don’t have the means yet to purchase the quality of dress you might prefer, but later, when I come of age, I’ll-”

His voice cuts through her anxious rambling, deep and calm. She feels his hands on her, traveling up her arms quick and back down to squeeze her hands. Even the brief touch relaxes some rising panic in her.

“Violet, Violet-” Olaf says, his voice startlingly gentle. When she meets his eyes they are worried and confused. “The last thing I meant to do was offend you. I realize-”

“I’m not offended.” She snips, disliking the image that rises in her mind of someone in a fit over clothing. Although the next two words feel painful as pulling teeth, she realizes the necessity of honesty in any close relationship and clarifies, “I’m ashamed.”

A sad laugh falls from the man’s lips. He runs his hands up her arms again, soothing.

“My sweet girl,” Olaf says, “There is no reason to feel shame. I was going to suggest a game of sorts. But I think the day has grown too long. Even I’m acting idiotic. Saying things that make you think this way. I catch a glimpse of your tantalising little body and my mind goes blank. I’m sorry.”

“No, I-” Violet sighs, frustrated with herself. She is alone with the man claiming her heart and she ruins it nearly instantly with insecurity. “I shouldn’t have thought that’s what you meant. That’s my insecurity. I’m sorry.”

She grabs his hands and squeezes them. His hands are large and far more scarred than hers. Violet wonders if it is odd that she feels no discomfort sitting naked and wet and vulnerable before a man like this, that she does not fear if he is scrutinizing her body for flaws.

Olaf raises their hands from the water and kisses her knuckles softly. He murmurs against her skin, “Apology accepted.”

Violet shakes her head, which feels light from wine. “You mentioned a game?”

A wolfish smile blooms atop the man’s face. Seeing it has her stomach dropping as if she has just taken a very large fall. Awareness of her body, her desire, flushes against her skin. With just a look, Violet feels as if she is remembering a part of herself momentarily forgotten- arousal, and its due course.

“I did.” Olaf purrs. That voice and its intentions sprout goosebumps up her arms so sudden she shivers. His eyes flick over her body. “As I said, I have a proposition for you. But now you’ll have to work very hard to win this little game.”

The man tugs up a shirtsleeve, eyeing a watch at his wrist. “Yes, there’s not much time. Would you like to play?”

“Well, I don’t know what I’m playing. What’s the goal?”
“The goal, little orphan, is your pleasure. I want you to get off before the food arrives. If you are successful, I will allow you your due time with me and my body. Unhindered. If you fail, you will have to wait for another night.” Olaf says. He leans back, crosses his legs, and looks at her with the eyes of a seasoned patron soon to enjoy a coveted show.

“Well-” Violet begins, flustered and confused, “It shouldn’t take long if you help me. Come here.” She reaches for his hands only to have him pull them away, a mischievous smirk at his lips.

“Oh no, Miss Baudelaire.” He purrs. “You misunderstand. You are going to be the one performing. I will sit and watch and suffer.”

“You-” Violet sputters. A wild blush burns atop her face, embarrassment coiling in the depth of her belly. “You want me to masturbate for you? What does that have to do with clothes?”

Olaf waves his hands, unconcerned. “Forget I mentioned clothes. You don’t need them right now, do you? The clock is ticking, dear thing.”

Violet groans. Duel wants battle in her mind. On one hand, she values privacy and self-intimacy and has not even thought about masturbating with someone watching. Having the man’s strong body atop her or beside her, his eyes distracted, was one thing. Having his full, undivided attention was wholly another.

Though, even she is honest enough with herself to admit she wants that man out of his clothes. From the first instance they had met, a strong attraction had her imagining lifting her skirt and offering herself at his feet. All these many months later, and she has yet to see him fully naked. She desires Olaf so much her mouth waters at the thought.

Plus, she thinks, mischievous and smug, she wants to watch Olaf sit, enduring arousal for her and because of her. She wants to see how much he had missed her, and make him admit it too.

“But-” She says, a last-ditch effort, a halfhearted excuse. “That’s private.”

“It is.” Olaf agrees, nodding. “So show me your privates, Violet Baudelaire.”

She groans again, realizing already that she will bend to his wishes. She rises out of the water to sit atop the far rim of the tub. Olaf’s dark eyes follow suds down the deep curve of her waist, the slopes of her calves.

Sudden shyness makes her aware of the near-silence.

“Music?” She asks, biting her lip to keep it from trembling.

“You are wasting time.” Olaf replies. “But if you truly wish, I can grab a record.”

Violet nods, suddenly unwilling to look him in the eye. “Please.”

He returns moments later with a thin record player and places it on the counter near the sink. Violet watches the way his hands move- slowly lifting the thin plastic lid and guiding the needle so smoothly. Soon, faint piano fills the room. A feminine voice trills, breathy, dramatic, “Come all you fair and tender girls…”

Olaf returns to his stool. Violet sighs, glances beseechingly to his face, and laughs nervously. She swishes her legs in the water, steam whirling into the space between them.
“What would you like to see?” She asks. Uncertainty has her slouching even as her heartbeat spikes. The music has helped ease some of her discomfort. Olaf narrows his eyes at her, thinking.

“What do you imagine when you masturbate?” He asks. Even the question has Violet blushing all the way to her ears.

“Er, I don’t know. Nothing really. I just-”

“You’re lying, little orphan.” He says and there is no anger in it, only the calm masculinity of his voice and his hot gaze on her, reverent, excited. “Be honest with me. What do you imagine? Where are you? Take a deep breath. Close your eyes. Begin.”

And she does. Violet takes a breath so deep her stomach quakes and releases it slow and steady. Her eyelids shut. She hears only the music, “Beware, beware, if you’re good and fair…” She starts at her jaw, trailing light touches down her neck, while the other hand toys with her mouth, her lips, pressing against them.

“There are… a few places I start. I’ll tell you the one I like the most. My family was Jewish, so all I know of Catholicism is secondhand and probably very wrong. But this is fantasy and accuracy just doesn’t matter. So- I’m… alone, at first. I don’t know how familiar you are with Eliade, but there are several places of worship throughout the place even though it’s built like a cathedral. And at the very center near the Sanctuary is a Roman Catholic confessional booth. It’s meant to be just an antique at this point. No one uses it. But I imagine, uh… Let’s just start there.”

Violet moves her hands down, ghosting them over her breasts until she shivers so violently the water splashes at her feet.

“I don’t live in Eliade. I don’t know where exactly I live. But it doesn’t matter. I need to go to confession to… discuss my foulness. To share it. The room is quiet and the booth even quieter. I open my door and hurry into the dark little nook. Beside me, I can’t even see through the screen to make out the silhouette of the priest. He- he has to ask who I am…”

She moves her hands from her breasts to her thighs, trailing light, tickling touches up and down. Olaf watches mesmerized, entranced. He is so fraught with arousal he feels he could burst from his skin. Yet the man keeps very still, unwilling to make any sound that might spook the young woman playing so well before him.

“And when he does, I can barely answer. I recognize his voice. And I’ve been waiting for months to get him alone, to tell him every sinful thought, all starring him. His voice. His hands. His tongue-” A small hitch in her chest has her stumbling in the narrative. Violet bites her lips, eyelashes fluttering. Although Olaf knows it is stupid, he feels a twinge of jealousy towards the man beside her in the booth. He clenches his hands.

“It’s, um… I’m sorry, Olaf, if this is weird, but it’s you. I imagine you’re the priest and- and you work throughout Eliade. In the halls, you’re always watching me. With this look in your eyes I can never understand. Like you want me. And it’s so deliciously wicked that I can’t resist. Just a look and- and you’ve got me.”

A strangled groan rattles in his throat, but Violet doesn’t seem to hear. Her small hands dip between her thighs to very, very slowly rub her outer lips. Her legs fall open like an exhale. He is so aroused he is trembling in his seat.

“When I tell you my name I can hear the smile in your voice when you respond. That you’d be delighted to hear my confession. That you would sit and listen until every single one had left my
mouth. I thank you. You laugh and say in that voice of yours, Olaf, you know the one, that growl, that it would be your pleasure. And it takes me a few moments before I can begin. I’m so attracted to you, so worried to mess things up, that I have to summon all of my bravery just to begin. And you’re so very patient with me.”

Those fingers travel higher to tease the flesh around her clit, small, delicate circles. He watches them, wishing they could be replaced with his tongue.

“And I say that I’m usually a very good girl. I’m not prone to wickedness. You laugh and say that you suspect I am perfectly noble. You say that you watch me sometimes, and find me kind and good and smart. And I say thank you, thank you, that is so very flattering. But I wouldn’t be here without wickedness. You get quiet and allow me to continue. And I say, kind of shy, because I think that’s what you like, that I’m prone to other sins. Ones of the mind. Of the body. I say that sometimes I cannot sleep because I am overcome with desire. That I do not know how to rid myself of it without touching myself.”

A particularly rough twirl of fingers has a startled, breathy moan escaping her. Violet’s face is scrunched as if in pain, yet that hand works faster, harder. Her other hand rises to tickle across her chest, one nipple at a time.

“And you don’t respond for awhile. I start to think that maybe I went too far. But you are very understanding, of course, very willing to help me. And you say my name like you know exactly what I’m trying to do. You say that it is very normal to feel that way, especially at my age. You say that you have a more liberal view than the other priests. That you think I should be able to find a nice young man to share my body with. That you think it is healthy and good. But you make me promise that I won’t tell anyone else you said that. You tell me you’re very good at keeping secrets. I say that I am too.”

Olaf bites his lip against the sudden memory of their first meeting, of hearing his own voice, suggestive, “I’m very good at keeping secrets.” He has become the star in Violet’s favorite fantasy. The knowledge is so erotic he feels drunk.

“I thank you for the advice. And say that I will protect your secret. But, there’s an issue that I’m reluctant to share. You can hear it in my voice. In the way I shift in my booth. You ask me what’s wrong. And I say what if it’s not boys my age I’m attracted to? What if I want someone older? Wiser? Someone more willing to instruct me in the ways of the flesh? I hear you take a deep breath. It comes out shuddery and I can feel my heart in my throat. You say that’s a normal way to feel as well. Very normal. Very smart. You say that as long as I make a smart choice of partner and I’m safe, that you will keep my secret. I shift in my booth. Kick against the door. Try not to touch myself even though I’m aching. I say that I already have someone in mind. And you-you-”

Violet whimpers. Her breathing is labored and heavy and shallow. A peachy flush dusts her from the chest up. Olaf’s erection is hot and heavy against his hip yet he sits, still as a gargoyle, and listens. He is suffering exactly as planned. Though he had not expected Violet to work him into quite this madness.

“You say that the man in question must be very lucky to have a beauty like me after him. I say that I’m not sure he would be lucky at all. I am scrawny and no great beauty. You scold me in that voice of yours. Say any man would be honored to have me begging at their feet. And- and I say- Even you, Father? You take a minute to answer. But you say, eventually- Especially me. I ask about now. If I can join you in that dark little b-booth-”

That hand still rolls against her clit. Violet shudders, muscles tense and twitching. Any second, he thinks, and she will unravel before him. She is so close. So ready.
Despite the restrictions and the fact that he had wanted to be an observant, silent audience, Olaf breaks his own rule and cannot resist joining the fantasy. He growls, “And what do I say, Violet? How do I let you touch me?”

“Oh-” She moans at the sound of his voice as if she had forgotten he was there. “Oh, Olaf, you let me sneak into your booth. You put me in your lap, k-kiss me breathless, and I can feel your cock through your heavy robes. Can feel it against my cunt. You say you’ve wanted this for a long time, have wanted to make me—”

A loud buzz cuts through the music. The harsh pounding of knuckles on wood thuds through the walls. Violet whimpers, distracted.

“Fuck-” Olaf hisses, frustrated beyond rationality, and rises. His erection presses very noticeably against his trousers. “Fuck. That’s the- Keep going, Violet. Keep—”

He hurries for the door.

When he returns, arms laden with bags of food, he finds the bathtub empty.

“What-?” He skids to a stop in the steamy room. He hadn’t even bothered to put down the food he was so eager to return in time to see Violet climax. Instead the Count is met with emptiness and a trail of water.

Backtracking into his bedroom provides him with an answer. An obvious lump has buried itself into the mass of blankets atop his bed.

“Violet,” He says, a breathless edge still obvious in his voice. “Did you do it?”

She grunts from under the blankets and curls into a ball. Olaf sets the plastic bags on the floor and sits on the bed, debating his next move. He touches the lump of Violet under the blankets, hoping his touch soothes her.

“Are you alright?”

“No.” Her voice is clearer then, as if she made a small opening just to speak to him. “I am supremely embarrassed. Supremely. I want to smother myself in these blankets.”

“Violet Baudelaire.” He says, voice steely. His hand at her back stills. “That was the most erotic experience of my life to date. I have experienced pleasure before. That’s no secret. But what you just shared with me was the most sexual, seductive, beautiful, mesmerizing, seductive thing I’ve ever seen. For me to be the star in even your fantasies is such a gift. Do not be embarrassed. Now eat lots of Chinese food with me.”

Violet groans again, this sound more amused and ragged than the last. Her voice is muffled beneath the comforter, “Hopefully I’ll choke on a potsticker and then you won’t have to hear my degeneracy ever again.”

Olaf says, “Too late, orphan, I ate all the potstickers already.”

Violet shoots up from her hiding place, her dark hair a frizzy, half-dried mess. A deep blush stains her cheeks and she looks at him with shock.

“Hey!” She cries, reaching for the opened box in his hands. Although his cheeks are already stuffed, he crams the last potsticker into his mouth and an alarmed smile curls on her face. “You can’t just—Olaf! You- you cad! Share with me!”
He shakes his head and tosses the empty box at her.

“You lost! You don’t get me or the potstickers!” He forces through a mouthful of food. Violet laughs and beats her hands against the fluffy bed.

“I can’t believe you!” She giggles freely, reaching for the numerous bags of food.

They spill soy sauce in the bed, drink another entire bottle of sauvignon blanc, and watch old movies to make fun of together. Violet dresses in his clean clothes- a nightshirt far too long and a pair of gym shorts from a long-forgotten disguise. They laugh and kiss and eat far too much.

They break their fortune cookies to end the feast. Olaf crushes his inside the tiny bag with a pop while Violet tears hers apart very neatly.

“You first.” She mutters.

Olaf clears his throat dramatically and recites, “If you are allergic to a thing, it is best not to put that thing in your mouth, particularly if the thing is cats.”

Violet laughs and says, “Very true. Mine says: Destiny is something you cannot escape, such as death, or a cheesecake that has curdled, both of which always turn up sooner or later… What?”

Later, once the food has been put away, the lights turned off, and they have shifted into bed, Violet winds her legs between the Count’s in the darkness. His eyelashes flutter against his cheek.

She asks, very quiet, as if unable to face his answer, “Why did the tunnels collapse? Why were you there?”

Olaf sighs and does not open his eyes. He responds, just as quiet, “I think they collapsed because of the houses burning. Weakening the tunnels that might run below them. I was there to discuss things with an associate. Later, I will explain all I can. For now, my dear-” He reaches out, limbs warm and heavy from dragging sleep. He pulls her close, kisses blindly at the nearest stretch of her skin. “Sleep.”

Violet sighs, settles.

They sleep as easily as children, tangled together in the center of the bed as if avoiding the potential monsters lurking at the floor and outside, deep in the loud, loud world.

Chapter End Notes

The poem Violet quotes is Danse Russe by William Carlos Williams.

The lines “Come all you fair and tender girls...” & then “Beware, beware if you’re good and fair...” are from a 1600's folk song called Let No Man Steal Your Thyme, which warns young girls to choose their lovers wisely. My personal favorite rendition is by lemonflower on YouTube.

Both fortune cookie quotes are from Snicket’s Horseradish.
As of yesterday, ASOUE season two is available on Netflix. (Many thanks to a dear fan for letting me bum off their account!) Also as of yesterday, I have watched it once fully and plan to watch it again soon to take copious notes. I have so many feelings about each episode.

Also, as per usual, with the new season comes plenty of new readers. If you are new, welcome! Enjoy your time falling into the V & O rabbit hole.

Let me know what you think!
Chapter Thirteen

Violet wakes alone.

She comes up from the thick smog of sleep blurry-eyed with dreams. Scenes of a library in the mountains and gnats the size of snowballs swim in her mind before they are forgotten with a blink and she sits up to examine the sunlit room.

It is bare but clean, proof that Olaf had moved in only months ago. The bed is large and bedecked with heavy linens that had kept her warm even though the man had cracked the windows and let the autumn night’s chill seep in. The result of cold winds and a cloudy day hadn’t woken her despite the lack of curtains or blinds or window furnishings of any kind. She had slept well.

As she stretched and wiggled her toes, Violet wondered if she would sleep this well all the time outside of Eliade. If she wouldn’t be so worried about Carmelita or Nero or the vague threat of VFD if she did not sleep alone.

The messy pile of blankets beside her is cold to the touch. Instead of engendering fear or anxiety the way she can imagine some women might react after their first sleepover, this knowledge only registers as a reality. Olaf is not gone, has not left, he is simply not beside her.

Violet rises into the cold morning, visits the bathroom (the sight of the tub and the record player rousing a recollective blush), then makes her way to the front room. In her haste to make way to the bathtub, she hadn’t looked around much the previous evening as Olaf had shrugged out of shoes and hastily flipped the lights. Now, in the cloudy sunrise, she can see the whole apartment cast in cozy grays.

The carpet is soft on her bare feet. She opens the man’s bedroom door into the sitting room which is bedecked with a plush leather couch, its ends tattered and worn but still whole. A large trunk serves as a coffee table before it. Smatterings of books and loose papers stack together on the floor. She cannot catch the words at the spines, so Violet makes her way further into the apartment. She passes a sturdy dining table, its center decorated with candle stubs that looked suspiciously like the ones from Eliade. Mismatched chairs gather around it. She continues into the kitchen, following the sound and smell of a gurgling percolator.

She finds him sitting in the doorway between the kitchen and a small porch with the doors wide open. Olaf does not notice her at first, merely stares out to the bustling city far below, a stressed, pinched look to his face. He is dressed as he had slept, in warm pants and nothing else. The man is bare-chested, his long legs crossed at the ankle, sitting in a low wicker chair he must have dragged in
from the porch, and holding a steaming mug of coffee. She can see the muscles in his forearm flex as he brings the mug to his lips and sips. The troubled expression does not fade. Violet finds herself suddenly dry-mouthed and shy.

“Good morning.” She mutters too quietly and steps further into the kitchen. Olaf’s head turns and the troubled expression, instead of shifting into pleasure upon her arrival, only deepens.

“There she is. My dearest darling.” He says, his voice only a tad theatric. He waves his mug to the percolator and says, “Coffee. Feel free to have a cup, or several.”

Violet nods and suppresses a shiver, wishing for nothing but a hot drink in her hands. From a scattered collection of different mugs, she picks one decorated with a chipped yellow smiley face and the words SMILE! NO ONE CARES HOW YOU FEEL printed in thick black text, finding the phrase oddly comforting. When her drink has been perfected, she makes her way over to the man and, just as she had all those many months ago in her sanctuary, presses his legs together and climbs into his lap so they are face-to-face.

The physical touch seems to rouse him from his thoughts somewhat. An easy grin glides across his face. His free hand, still hot, slides up her bent knee as if trying to rub warmth into her skin.

Violet kisses him gentle and easy and casual, a greeting as necessary as a good morning. His eyes are softer after that. Olaf clinks their mugs together and mutters, “Cheers. How did you sleep, dear thing?”

“Very well. Your bed is much more comfortable than mine.” She says with a teasing smile. Olaf nods and says, “Good. I can imagine Eliade beds are as horrid and uncomfortable as the institution itself.”

“You’d be right.” Violet takes a sip of coffee and adjusts herself so she can sit atop his knees effortlessly. “And how did you sleep?”

Here the man pauses. He sips his coffee and directs his gaze outside to the bustle of the city. Eventually he admits, “Not well. I’m not… accustomed to sharing a bed with someone.”

Before she can react, Olaf catches a lock of hair at her temple and twirls it round his finger, his gaze admiring and heavy. “But that does not mean I didn’t enjoy you there. You’re quite extraordinary. I think my mind would have been cluttered anyway.”

“Cluttered with what?” She asks, trying to sound innocent, as if she had not just asked the man his worries and fears and the thoughts that kept him up at night. It was not the conversation she had expected to be having upon just waking but things rarely went the way Violet Baudelaire thought they might. And Count Olaf, sitting beneath her and sharing his space and time and privacy, was never something she had expected.

“You, of course.” He grumbles, but the look on his face is shuttered with stress. “You had already known about VFD before I told you-” He starts and surprise jolts her awake as if someone from the very organization had knocked on the door. “-but could not have put a name to them without my input. I’m sure you would have discovered it eventually, or someone else, someone other than me, would have found you and opened your eyes. And you would have been in the very same danger, but less aware and less ready. But I still wonder if I shouldn’t have told you. If you would be happier if you simply knew me as the man you dated and not a member of a ruined secret organization that took away your family. Tell me, Violet, please, which you would prefer.”

The mention of VFD, especially so early in the day, has Violet’s heart thrumming. She wanted a
calm morning, cozy and intimate and soft, yet she is sitting in the cold autumn air discussing an evil organization instead. She understands what the man means then, what he is offering.

“Although it’s tempting to pretend we are normal and could date like normal people, we can’t ignore the issue. Someday we will be in danger again. Like yesterday. Lemony Snicket is out there-” She nods to the city. “-and he is after me or you or the Quagmires or whoever he can get his hands on first. Imagine if I had met him as simply as you and mistook him for some kind man who wanted a conversation and instead did, I don’t know, something bad. What if- what if someone stole me away by my ankles from Eliade and threw me into a long black car? I wouldn’t know what to do. I-I’d be…” Violet shakes her head, unsure of how to continue. “Gone. They’d take me like- like-”

“Like a midnight snack.” Olaf says.

Violet nods, recalling the song he had first used to explain the induction process.

“Like a midnight snack.” She agrees. “And Snicket can’t be the only one. I’m sure there are more people out there to help him. Do you think he wants to round up the orphans who don’t know about VFD and induct them? Something like that? Do you have any idea if he would do that? Or why?”

Olaf shrugs, twitchy and high-strung. “Worrying about Lemony Snicket, I’ve learned, is not conducive to a normal mind. That man is a pest. A mystery. He’s the side of VFD that wants to control the lives of children, to take them and fashion them into willing weapons. I have no clue how that man’s mind works.”

Olaf’s eyes, suddenly sad, find hers. That finger that had been looped at her temple falls away only to return as the man cards his hand through the long snarls of her hair as if he will never have a chance to ever again.

“Violet. There is so much you do not know. And I will attempt to remedy that, I promise you. I will teach you everything about VFD that I can. But I’m afraid I can’t simply explain. Some things you must learn by action, by doing. By following. There will be things I cannot tell you no matter how deeply you may wish it. For both our safety.” The man’s eyes take on a desperate touch, his voice a tad frantic. It is obvious that these were the true reasons the man could not sleep- not some threat of Lemony Snicket but information and how much he could share.

Fear and confusion have Violet nodding her head in encouragement, hoping the man keeps talking so she might understand. He sets his mug precariously in his lap and gently takes her face in his hands which have gone clammy. She has never seen panic warp the handsome face of the man before her and feels, distantly, privileged to see him in such a state. Facing Nero, facing Snicket, in the gut of a crumbling tunnel, he had not seemed even slightly frightened. Now, Violet in his lap, the danger passed but still lurking, he held her as if she were precious and temporary.

As if he had already lost her.

“My dearest darling.” Olaf says, voice rasping at the edges. “I will need your trust. Your nobility. There may be times I ask you to do things you do not understand or find uncomfortable. But I promise I will not ruin you. I won’t hurt you. I will need your… devotion. Your-” The man shakes his head, frustrated, vulnerable. “Your-”

“Olaf,” Violet says, voice gentle and confused. She places her hands over his and presses them tighter against her face. “I’m right here. I’m not ruined. I’m listening and willing and I trust you. Okay?”

The man says nothing, only grimaces at her, his lips tight, his whole expression mourning. Violet
removes her hands from his and places them on his own prickly cheeks instead. She thinks, in other circumstances, having a different conversation, they would look silly. She shakes his head just enough to get his attention and repeats, “Okay?”

Olaf nods but the miserable expression does not fade. She hesitates, unsure of what to do to soothe him.

“You know I trust you. Why would I be here if I didn’t? I’ve told you how I- how-” She realizes then that she has never quite said how enamored she is with him. Olaf has repeated in a myriad of phrases exactly how he feels about her. From his very first confession (“I am intensely, uncomfortably attracted to you.”) to his note scribbled into the Punctilio before their date (“You are a beautiful, wondrous young woman and I am deeply entranced by you.”) to the very first time he had touched her (“You, standing on that stage, looking like an angel, like a vision of sin personified to tempt me.”) Olaf has been nothing but affectionate and complimentative.

Although she knows her attraction to him has been obvious- she remembers the previous night’s bath and thinks she has perhaps been too obvious- she cannot recall a moment she has been truly forthcoming with compliments the way Olaf has. The more she thinks, the only instance she can come up with was on their first date, the two of them wrapped around one another on the hood of the car, and Violet saying simply, “I’ll have you.”

Violet knows her neglectfulness is not truly the issue, yet she says, “Do you know just how I feel about you?”

Olaf huffs and avoids her eyes. “Do not feel the need-”

“Shut up.” Violet interrupts. “Listen to me. You, Olaf, you’ve changed me. Remember when we met and I was shy and fearful and spineless? I was haunted and anxious and couldn’t even go outside or read the papers or look at fire. I would do that breathing interview several times just to make it through the day. Carmelita was at my back. Nero was splitting me open. I was… not good. But then I met you-” She squeezes his face. Olaf’s hands fall away from her to hold his mug. When they meet eyes his are appraising and attentive.

Violet laughs breathlessly, “I met you and then I hit Carmelita with a Bible. And then I punched her in the face. And you terrified Nero into leaving me alone. He doesn’t even look at me now. You’ve protected me and defended me and…”

She almost says loved me. It sits on the tip of her tongue, a self-made wound and its own healing balm. Her heart hammers high and rapid in her chest as if she had actually spoken. Knowing it is a bad idea, Violet swallows the words and instead chokes out, “…cared for me. You made me find my bravery. And it’s not just what you’ve done for me. It’s- it’s what you’ve always done to me.”

She shifts atop his lap, embarrassed, but knowing for the sake of the man before her that she must continue. A tight smile crosses her face and a small, curious one glides across Olaf’s. She says, voice teasing, “I have a confession to make.”

The Count takes a sip of his coffee and casts her a heated look. “There’s a place to do that, y’know. We could go. Together. In that dark little booth. I’m sure-”

Violet slaps her hands over his mouth, a response as automatic as a flinch.

“That’s not what I was going to say!” She says, face heated. For a moment she is afraid he will scold her for her harshness, but once she removes her hands she is surprised to find a grin behind them.
He waves his mug to her. “Then enlighten me, Miss Baudelaire.”

“I was going to say. Er, this is nearly as humiliating as the confessional booth, but... The very first night we met, up on that stage. I saw you and I thought I was going to die I was so attracted to you. I saw you and my very first thought was to lift my skirt like an offering. That’s what my hands wanted to do. I- I just wanted to offer myself at your feet. And I had never felt that before. Ever.”

She avoids his gaze. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see the man’s grin take on a wolfish flair.

She holds up two fingers very nearly touching. “I was this close to doing it.”

Olaf hums. “You should have. What a sight you’d have been. I can’t even imagine.”

Surprise makes her whip her head around to meet his gaze full-on. “Should have? Would you have-? Have-? Taken me up?”

Olaf hums again, thinking. His one free hand glides up the taut curve of her right thigh until it reaches the limits of his gym shorts, then back down.

“I’m not sure.” He says, voice low. “As I have said before, I am intensely, uncomfortably attracted to you. Even if I did not know you as I do, I think I would still feel this way based purely on aesthetics. You are a stunning young woman, Violet. If you had offered yourself to me without a word, who would I be to refuse you?”

He shrugs in a conceited, languid fashion.

“Oh you’ve refused me plenty.” She snips, eyeing the hem of his long sleep pants.

“Refused you? You’ve hardly asked.” He mutters.

Violet slaps his chest lightly, an affronted look on her face. “I have! The very first time I said I wish I could have helped you! And every time since! Don’t make it sound as if I’ve been uninterested or- or lazy, you cad. You’ve heard me say-”

“Oh you’ve refused me plenty.” She snips, eyeing the hem of his long sleep pants.

“Refused you? You’ve hardly asked.” He mutters.

Violet slaps his chest lightly, an affronted look on her face. “I have! The very first time I said I wish I could have helped you! And every time since! Don’t make it sound as if I’ve been uninterested or- or lazy, you cad. You’ve heard me say-”

“You want me to?” Violet asks, heart spiking.

“Today is a new day.” Olaf says, settling deeper into the seat as if he planned to stay there for awhile. “And I am all yours.”

Violet drains the rest of her coffee in one quick shot.

“Then tell me what to do.” She shimmies away until she is standing right before his bent knees. Olaf smiles.

“That’s what I like to hear. Well. Before you do anything to me, you must realize the necessity of nakedness. In situations like these, when we have time, it is best if we are both undressed to some degree. Take off that top, Violet.”

It slides across the floor with a soft hiss. Rapid goosebumps sprout up her arms and down her spine. Several stories down, someone blares the horn of their car and much yelling ensues. She pays them no mind, instead adjusting her gym shorts and casting him a questioning look.

“Not yet. I will remove those later, perhaps, if you have pleased me.”
Violet opens her mouth to quip something sassy, but Olaf cuts her off.

“Now undress me, orphan.”

She does as she is told. She undresses him tactlessly, grabbing his pants by both ankles and yanking until they are completely off. Olaf shifts and stretches to help, but other than that says nothing.

Violet catches a pale stretch of skin at the man’s hip and realizes he has not worn underwear. Duel battles of want and fear make her look away, a blush on her face.

“I feel like I shouldn’t look at you. As if you’re changing. As if you need privacy.” She says, glancing around the kitchen without truly seeing.

Olaf leans forward and grabs one of her hands. She meets his eyes, which are hungry and patient.

“No need for that. You were the one that wanted to get acquainted, yes? Allow me to introduce you.”

Olaf drags her slowly closer as he leans back against the chair. Violet allows her eyes to travel over him and the sight makes her stomach drop.

The dim sunrise has cast the man in cool colors like a statue, shadows clinging to the cords of muscle at his throat, his sides, the thin slopes of his hips. She sees his legs, his pale feet flat against the cold tiles. Only once she admires the rest of him does she feel she can look to his cock.

Although Violet has never before seen a naked man, she is unsurprised by the look of his cock. It is long, jutting against his hip. Pale but for the head which was tinged pink as if blushing. It seemed heavy and full and intimidating in a good way. Violet feels her mouth water.

Olaf leads her hand to his cock very slowly, watching her face, giving her every chance to pull away, to speak up. She wraps her fingers around it hesitantly. She finds the skin soft as rose petals and unexpectedly hot. The man hisses out a shuddering breath.

Violet misinterprets it immediately. “Are my hands too cold?”

“No, no. Just- move. Stroke up and down all the way. And you might want to kneel.”

She kneels before him, stroking very softly. Again Violet is aware of the sudden silence and feels the need to babble.

“It’s so soft. And warm. I really didn’t expect it to be this soft. Are you- does that feel good?” She mutters, warm breath ghosting over his thighs.

“Wonderful.” Olaf mutters through a harsh breath. When Violet glances up she notices the muscles in his wiry body strung taut, the harsh flex of his jaw pronounced. A ruddy red flush has grown atop his chest and his cheeks are pink. “You’re a natural. If you had- had done this to me up on that stage I-” A ragged groan rips from his chest as Violet increases her pace. She rolls her palm across the head of his cock, surprised to find it slick already.

A mischievous grin curls across her face. She realizes that she has this beautiful, powerful man completely at her will, completely guided and at mercy to every turn of her hand. Violet repeats, prompting, “If I had knelt at your feet?”

Something seems to pass in the air between them, some fine emotion heavier and more important than either of them have ever said. Olaf looks to her, his mouth open on a moan, his face flushed, his
eyes ablaze and burning with arousal and says, vulnerable and honest, “I would have never let you go.”

A ragged breath leaves her own lips. Strangling sentimentality rises in her throat as she watches Olaf quake at her touch. She realizes that she is getting exactly what she wanted. She is learning this man’s body as he has learnt hers.

There is beauty in that, she thinks.

“Is there anything else I can do?” Violet asks, pressing her thumb forcefully against the underside of the head and down in a way that made the man shudder. Her other hand stays strong and steady, working a rhythm.

Olaf gasps and trembles and Violet bites her lip to keep from grinning.

“No-” He pants, “No. I am- close. But someday, if you would like, you can take it into your mouth.”

Violet slows her strokes and redirects her gaze to look him in the face. She makes up her mind in an instant, in a heartbeat. “Guess what?”

“What?” The man hisses, chest heaving.

“That day is today.” She quips, and summoning her bravery, licks the underside of his cock in one smooth drag.

“Fucking Christ-” Olaf groans. His hands tangle in the soft snare of her hair as Violet closes her eyes and continues licking in large drags, one hand holding him still at the base, the other still stroking, working faster with the help of her tongue. Once he is properly slick, she swirls her tongue around the head, watching his reverent expression, and finally takes it into her mouth.

“You- you little vixen- Violet, you- you’ve been holding out on me. God-” He pants, fingers so tight in her hair it is almost painful. Violet continues a steady rhythm, only taking in a small amount while she lets her hand do the rest. She teases the head of his cock, small flicks of her tongue, small bobs of her head, each movement causing the man to twitch and ache and beg.

“Violet, I am- ah- so- so close. You can remove your mouth or you can- could-”

The force of his orgasm surprises them both. Violet chokes on the first burst of cum, hot and sticky in her mouth, and pulls away in shock. By the time she has gained her bearings enough to swallow and wipe at her lips with the man’s pajama pants, he has finished and sits bonelessly in the chair, eyes closed, chest heaving.

“So, um… How was it?” Violet asks.

Olaf’s head rolls and he cracks his eyes open to gaze at her with an expression she cannot place.

“You’ve never done that before?” He asks.

Violet shakes her head negatively. “Does it show? I told you I could get better with practice.”

“No-” Olaf mutters. “It doesn’t show. That was so good I can’t feel my legs.”

A startled laugh breaches her throat. “Is that normal?”

Olaf sits up and reaches for his trousers, using them to wipe up any remaining fluid. He casts her a grin. “Only if it’s a really good orgasm.”
“Oh.” Violet says, pride swelling in her chest. “Good.”

“Yes, good.” Olaf parrots. A wicked smirk crosses his face. “You did so well, little orphan. Let me reward you.”

He slides from the chair and kneels before her only to scoop her into his arms and stand, marching towards the bedroom. Violet giggles and clutches his shoulders and cries, “I thought you couldn’t feel your legs?”

“I still know how to walk, silly girl.” He mutters, kissing her cheek. Olaf kicks open the door to his bedroom and tosses her onto the bed. Violet laughs and settles and watches him with a new affection to her face, one born only from physical intimacy and timely romance. She is beginning to understand the ways of the body and its consequences- already she could feel her heart filling, her body turning into something to be shared and treasured.

Her mind spins chaotically, too many emotions she cannot name making her feel too tender and vulnerable in a way she is not used to. Instead of going deeper she focuses on her breathing and the man before her, the way he moves, the way the light brings out the waves in his hair and the shine in his dark eyes.

Olaf glides his hands up her calves, her thighs, parting them. He purrs, voice already melting the rational part of Violet’s mind, “Now, dear thing, let me return the favor…”

They spend the rest of the morning in bed.

Finding a place for brunch, Violet soon learns, is tough when avoiding Lemony Snicket or other members of VFD.

She clutches Olaf’s hand tight in hers as they walk together down a crowded city street. The weather had not improved since the morning dawned, the wind whipping up fallen leaves to scrape against the sidewalks.

“What about Black Cat Coffee?” She asks the man, nodding to the brightly-lit shop across the street. The inside is crowded with patrons and books and a very large machine she could not fathom.

Olaf snorts, squinting into the wind. “Definitely not.”

“Alright. On 4th there’s the Cafe Kafka?”

“Hell no.” Olaf spits, shaking his head. “Not only is that where Snicket is likely to be, it is also the workplace of a woman I no longer wish to see.”

“Lopsided’s?”

“Used for teary teenage conversations. I have no wish to visit.”

“Okay… Well I’m not sure. There can only be so many dozens of coffeeshops in a single city.” Violet slows slightly to walk behind the man, annoyed by the wind in her face.

“Using me as a human shield, eh? Noble.” Olaf mutters. Violet laughs but does not respond, instead keeping her eyes to the ground and following, her mind turning.

She thinks of the young women within Eliade.
In hallways and classrooms and the cafetorium there were always happy clans of girls discussing the next weekend’s adventure.

Overtime, Violet has heard all kinds of ludicrous things, including that Eden Morrow, Finch Feint, and Elle Orwell like to sneak into the city at night to spray paint nice things under bridges. She has heard that on the weekends Elsie Julienne creates and sells lingerie in town, sewing at night, fearful of Eliade’s repercussions. She has heard Dannie Mallahan and Tyler Knight discuss their lists of places to visit within the city—museums and cafes and theatres Violet had yearned for and feared at the very same time.

Now, holding this man’s hand in a bustling city, she is free and unafraid to wander. A name emerges from the depths of her memory.


“Never heard of it. Where is it?”

She leads him through the city and its winding, cobbled streets. They pass the Rhetoric Building and Dark Avenue and the Limelight Opera House. They pass cracked avenues and the rubbled remains of once-grand homes. Entire roads have been blocked, the ground beneath them having sunk several feet in winding paths throughout the city.

Violet spots a particularly deep stretch of sunken land and cobblestone and tugs on Olaf’s hand. He follows her gaze and before she can ask says, “Yes. It was a tunnel.”

“But where to? Out there-” she nods beyond the treeline and into the horizon. “It’s just land. No one lives that way.”

“Not for several miles.” Olaf agrees. “But it leads to Valorous Farms Dairy. Ever heard of it?”

She squints, thinking. Several moments pass in silence, the only sounds the scuffing of their shoes on the sidewalk and the thrum of passing vehicles. Eventually, she says, “No. I don’t think so.”

Olaf does not seem surprised. “Alright, you’ve had your first lesson. Do not linger. Your second will be to pay attention to letters and their orders, which you will, unfortunately, have to learn to spot all kinds of patterns and codes. But, for now, just the basics. What do you notice about Valorous Farms Dairy?”

The way he says the last few words has awareness rising in Violet before she can truly consider. “The initials. Is everything they control advertised through initialism?”

A smug smirk slips across the man’s face. He squeezes her hand, proudful. “My clever little inventor. There is meaning to the name, but it does not necessarily imply control. Merely that the person or people in operation at the institution are aware of our organization. If they would help or hinder is another story. One that has gotten all the more difficult to guess. But don’t worry about it just yet. Leave that to me. In due time you’ll know everything.”

With unexpected gentleness, the man bends to drop a kiss to the crown of her head. Violet smiles, a warm pride of a different sort swelling in her chest.

“Good. In the meantime, I’ll let you buy me brunch.”

Olaf grins, genuine and warm. “Oh lucky me.”

For the bustle and chaos of Black Cat Coffee, Heirlooms has it beaten. The building is brick painted
black as char and several storeys high. Old windows sit bright and crooked in odd places at its front, the panes warped, the metal guilting white as a fish’s belly. Through every window they can see smatterings of strangers, faceless with distance, dancing or reading or sipping large mugs and peering dramatically into the city.

At the center of the building, someone has scribed HEIRLOOMS COFFEE & CONFECTIONERY in golden paint. It looks fashionably off, as if the artist had painted with their non-dominant hand. Violet is excited in an instant.

“This place is huge! Let’s get going.” She drags him through the doors, the Count muttering words like “dramatic” and “expensive” and “the things I do for pretty little orphans.”

“Oh shush.” Violet mutters. They cross the threshold, stepping into a tight little nook, nearly the entire front room crowded by a table upon which hundreds of desserts sit waiting for consumption. Cupcakes the size of Olaf’s fist line the first display case, each one boasting a different oddity like glitter or sprinkles or flakes of gold. There are macaroons and taffies and packs of candied flower petals. All at once, Violet finds herself both impressed and overwhelmed.

The entire front room seems devoted to confections of every size and shape. Behind the counter, a young woman has her back to them, fiddling with a hissing coffeemaker the size of a small vehicle.

“I’ll be with you in a moment!” She calls over the noise.

Olaf grunts in response, eyeing the place scrutinously. His gaze scans the coffee menu written in crooked chalk on the wall while Violet eyes the far doorway, its frame covered in red velvet drapery. Someone a very long time ago had painted a black arrow pointing to the doorway and large text below it reading: MORE FUN THIS WAY. Faint music floats from beyond the velvet curtain as if somewhere far deeper in the building a needle has just been led to record.

Olaf catches the tune and casts her an amused smirk. Before she can ask she feels his fingers, still threaded through hers, tap atop her knuckles following the cadence of the song.

“Good dancing tune.” He offers with a shrug. Violet shimmies her shoulders half-heartedly, only to amuse him, and laughs when the man rolls his eyes.

Beyond the doorway there is a loud crash and much laughter. A voice shouts, “No fair! No fair! I took the last one!”

The voice of the young woman behind the counter reverberates through speakers in the ceiling when she taps into a small microphone and calls, “We have a Made for Love by Alissa Nutting. Made for Love.”

She sets a large mug of peculiar-looking coffee onto the counter. The liquid is neon pink and in the very center floats a tiny candy dolphin. A young man nearly Violet’s age wanders from the back room looking harassed, grabs the mug with a muttered thanks, and quickly returns.

The girl behind the counter recognizes her before Violet can tear her eyes away from the coffee menu.

“Oh. Hi, Violet.” She says with a warm smile.

Violet’s eyes snap from the trendy chalk calligraphy to the sweet face of her classmate. Olaf’s fingers squeeze her hand which has suddenly gone clammy. A familiar feeling of dread flickers in her mind as she takes in the girl’s round face, light hair, and smattering of freckles. Violet knows this girl trails the halls of Eliade, knows they share several classes, knows they sleep in the very same hall, yet she
cannot seem to recall her name.

Despite this panic, the moment passes, clarity dawns, and she responds, cool and kind and unfazed, as if her classmate has not spotted her on a date with Eliade’s stage director and impresario, “Hello, Elsie.”

Elsie smiles and perks at Olaf’s neutral expression. When she glances to their linked hands, no scandalous shock charges her expression. Instead, she gestures to the rows and rows of sweets and says, “Pick your poison. Any dessert you can dream. And our coffees are just as amazing. Each one is named after a literary idol and their work. The Kyle Minor is a latte with a shot of the grape booze served during most communions to get you Praying Drunk. We’ve also got one called All the Dirty Parts based on the book by Daniel Handler. Which is basically a normal black coffee with leftover grounds in it and a condom on the serving plate. You’ve heard of him, right? Daniel Handler? It’s not a very popular drink.”

“Then we’ll take two of your most popular coffees.” Olaf says, a wicked smirk to his mouth. “And enough desserts to induce a sugar coma.”

“Coming right up!” Elsie grins and slaps a bell at the counter which dings loud and round in the cramped front room. Another swell of laughter echoes from beyond the curtain.

Several minutes later, they have finished a croissant and a cupcake between them and have just sipped the last drops of coffee from their mugs. Violet stands from the small table by the front window, a wild look in her eyes. A strange flush has worked its way up her neck, and a muted tingling flares in her fingertips. She eyes the first mug of coffee they had shared which still had a small ring of edible glitter around the rim.

“I heard there was a photobooth here. Will you do it with me?” She asks.

Olaf, still sitting, casts her a heavy look, his eyes trailing very noticeably down her body.

“Yes. I feel that would be a natural progression in this tactile and romantic relationship we seem to have entangled ourselves in. Although I must admit I did not expect you to ask so bluntly. Of course we can do it.”

“I meant the photobooth, you cad!” Violet shouts. A horrid blush stains her cheeks and when she glances to the front counter, she catches sight of Elsie fiddling with an empty mug, very obviously pretending she hadn’t heard.

“Ah, the photobooth.” Villainous amusement lightens the man’s tone. “That too. Lead me there, little orphan.”

Olaf stands and stretches, the same odd look to his face. He glances from Violet’s flushed skin to the two glittering mugs. Elsie meets his questioning gaze and says, “Don’t worry. It’s all legal. You can thank Shane Jones’ Crystal Eaters for that. Enjoy your romp through Heirlooms. The photobooth is on the third floor.”

“Thank you, Elsie!” Violet calls, grabbing Olaf by the cuffs of his nice dress shirt and dragging him past the heavy velvet drapery.

“Did that classmate of yours just dose us?”

“With something.” Violet mutters, weaving through chairs piled with other teenagers who seemed distracted by a board game, the light in the room dim and lit by seedy red bulbs. Cigarette smoke wafts from several ash trays stacked precariously atop speakers and towers of books. They dodge
them easily, the teenagers paying them no mind, and clatter up a large metal staircase, climbing high and fast into brilliant light.

Violet reaches the landing and pauses, clutching Olaf’s arm and gazing at the stairwell in wonder. Enormous panes of stained glass form a tunnel above them, bright pinks and greens and blues all dappled in meager sunlight. The tunnel stretches as far as Violet can see, going at a steep incline with the staircase.

“I feel like we just stepped into a kaleidoscope.” Olaf mutters.

“Me too. Let's get to that photo booth.” She says, trudging dutifully up the steps. On their way, they pass several open doors each room crowded with people and books and song. One room even boasts a small stage upon which a young woman garbed in a floral dress and chunky boots meant to look secondhand stands dramatically, a microphone clutched in her hands, and says, “The worn out bone-collar of being dips its fingers to the dirt and pins you- the turning worm, the tragedy! Your eyes a house of attics! Your throat a wishing well!”

Olaf snorts as they pass and rolled his eyes. “Modern poetry is a mess. That didn't mean anything it was just a jumble of words!”

Violet glances critically in the direction of the door, half-expecting another person dressed as a stereotypical teenager to jump into the hall and cry, “Cigarettes and underage drinking make me very cool! Did you know I’m verrrryyyy interesting?”

“I think you’re right.” She says, distracted by another door where two women sit together at the same spinning pottery wheel, their dark smocks spattered with paint and clay, their hands linked in the middle to wet earth and their eyes linked to one another.

Olaf’s hand rests low on the bend of her back as they keep walking. Violet sees one of the women flick her dark hair and say, “Mycology, my sweet-” and by the time it meets her ears their view into the studio has passed and they are stumbling up yet another set of stairs.

“Nearly there, my sweet.” Olaf says, obviously having heard the very same thing.

“Nearly there.” She parrots, and climbs the last set.

It takes nearly half an hour for the couple to find the little booth. Upon entrance to the third floor, they are immediately bombarded by adults in odd masks, all talking in tight-knit circles and whispering to one another. The moment Violet sees this, she glances to Olaf in a panic but the man merely shakes his head and takes her hand, leading her head-first through the throng of strangers.

“This is not our organization.” He says calmly, loud enough that any curious ear could hear.

After that, they get caught in a maze made entirely of mirrors and end up in a taxidermy lab. Violet takes a moment to look at a peculiar owl and then they are hurrying, following the directions of a crooked map on the wall, to a dusty corner. Far away, Violet can hear carrousel music, can catch flashes of garrish lights down the hall, but she pays them no mind because they are stopped before a dated photo booth.

The structure itself is rusty and old, cobbled with dents and chipping blue paint. On the side it says in intricate calligraphy: Lutwidge’s Snapshot! Instant photos faster than you can say ‘Marmoset!’

Beside her, Olaf parts the musty curtain and bows. “After you.”

“Finally.” Violet says, passing her fingers through his hair as she clambers inside. The man beside
her swiftly sits and draws the curtain so they are shrouded in darkness. Violet feels around and eventually smacks a button causing the little booth to whir to life.

Small lights shine from the screen before them, casting the booth in soft, gauzy gold. Olaf wraps an arm around her shoulders, jostling her playfully, “We’re here! We made it! This had better be the best goddamn photo set I’ve ever taken!”

“It will be.” Violet promises, fiddling with the buttons to find a plain border. “This one’s good. Any suggestions for poses?”

“Oh I have plenty.” Olaf purrs, and smacks the button to begin.

“You didn’t warn me! What-?” She shouts in annoyance, but Olaf drags her close and poses for both of them.

The photos the booth spits out, one by one, go like this:

In the first, Violet is barely there, still standing, only visible from her ribcage down, Olaf pressing his face to her navel with a look of reverence which is immediately betrayed by the ravenous grip of her backside. He is not boastful. Simply adoring. There is a blur near the left border as Violet’s hand flies up to balance herself. The white cloth of her uniform is still smudged with char.

The second picture again does not show Violet’s face. Instead, she has untangled herself from Olaf’s grip and turned to face him, her back to the camera, and lifted her skirt like an offering. The slim portion of Olaf that is visible shows his eye wide in surprise and his mouth open slightly on a shocked, startled, heated gasp, and his hands frozen, reaching, in the air.

By the third photo, they are both in frame, Olaf having hauled Violet into his lap and kissed her even though her face was screwed in laughter, her hands gripping his clothes, her skirt mussed and riding on her hip enough to show a slip of her thin cotton panties.

By the fourth and final photo, they are kissing in earnest, Violet splayed across the man’s lap, her fingers in his hair, her eyes blissfully closed. Olaf’s hand is on her thigh while the other holds her up beneath her shoulders.

It is a classic, rapturous kiss.

“Wow that’s steamy.” Olaf says once they exit the booth and the photos have been spat out all over the ground.

“Very steamy.” Violet agrees, “Look at this last one. We look…”

She tries to think of the correct word but her mind is still spinning from kissing and the flash of the booth’s bulb and whatever glitter Elsie dumped into their coffee. Her fingers feel heavy and electric, her heart sharp and skidding like a car crash. She is sweaty and clammy and when she looks to Olaf she finds the pupils of his dark eyes blown wide and alluring as the grave.

“We look like lovers.” She wants to say this so suddenly her whole body aches. Violet looks at the photographs and remembers just that morning how she had wanted to say, “You’ve protected me and defended me and…and loved me.” and thinks that she can only ignore this desire for so long.

And, she thinks, a painful stinging in her chest at the thought, if the man responds badly she could always blame the glitter coffee for her loose tongue.

“We look like lovers.” Violet says, quiet and simple.
The weighty silence she had expected does not come. Instead Olaf smiles and goes crinkly around the eyes and places his hand at the top of her head.

“Look?” He says, teasing and charmed and honest all at once. “As if we’re not already? Silly girl.”

Violet feels a peculiar melting dead center in her chest, as if her heart had just swelled and popped and its tar was bleeding warm down her entire body. A lump rises in her throat as she clutches the photographs in her clammy hands. Prickling emotion swells behind her eyes and Violet thinks to herself, embarrassed and uncaring all at once, *you will not cry, Violet Baudelaire, damn it, you won’t*

She clears her throat very obviously and looks away to disguise the ruddy heat to her face.

“Right.” She says and her voice cracks too high.

Olaf takes pity on her.

He grabs her hand and begins to pull her away, giving her time to scrub at her eyes and swallow the lump in her throat all while he babbles, “You are a wonder, Violet, truly, and I will cherish these photos forever. You’re so smart thinking of this place. It is so odd and intricate. Let’s go to the fifth floor, I think they have a place where you can test mobile hot air balloon homes. How does that sound?”

By the time he looks to her, Violet has composed herself for the most part. Her voice is still squeaky and worn when she squeezes his hand and mutters, “Perfect.”

They spend nearly the entire day at Heirlooms.

They wander from the typewriter collection to the multi-level indoor garden to the petting zoo all in a matter of hours. By the time they return to the front room, several patrons have gathered for coffee and sweets and Elsie waits patiently at the counter as cheerful as ever.

Olaf hurries away from Violet to approach her classmate and place a small silk bag on the counter. Elsie’s face brightens with a delighted gasp. She cries, “Thank you, Count! It’s my favorite set!”

She takes his money with a satisfied grin and casts her eyes to Violet, who has hurried to join them from where she had been admiring the stacks of books throughout the room.

“She’ll look beautiful.” Elsie says and the two look to Violet with matching grins that make her immediately suspicious.

“What did you-?” She starts, but Elsie merely giggles and Olaf says, voice dark and amused, “I merely bought some of Miss Julienne’s product. While you were busy fiddling with the typewriters I was off examining her delicate, whimsical selection of handmade lingerie.”

“You didn’t.” Violet says, embarrassment draining the color from her face. “Oh god. Elsie, I am so sorry.”

“For what?” Elsie chirps, oblivious to the mounds of potential gossip Violet was laying at her feet. “Don’t be so bothered, Violet.”

“Thank you.” Olaf says theatrically, gathering the small silk bag and placing it in his trouser pocket to rest alongside the photographs. He slings an arm low on Violet’s waist and says, “Ready to get home?”
Violet groans in false annoyance and casts her classmate a grateful look.

As they pass through the front door and tumble into the street Elsie calls, “Have a good night, you two!”

Violet groans, embarrassed still, and Olaf laughs, grabbing at her hand and leading her down the street.

They stumble home, VFD lessons forgotten, a mess of laughter and sloppy kisses. Darkness has dropped like a theatre curtain, not a star in sight. Ballrooms and restaurants and glitzy little shops glint as they pass, each one brimming with food and drinks and happy people. The whole night is wide open with potential and glamor and so much light.

Even as they pass the streets sunken in the collapse, Violet does not regret their day spent having fun in Heirlooms instead of sitting together drilling secret codes into her head.

Violet feels wild and wired on sweets and caffeine and sentiment.

“I am lonely, lonely, I am best so!” She cries for the fourth time only to annoy the man at her side.

“Shut it, orphan.” Olaf growls but there is no heat in it. When she glances his way she finds the tip of his nose has gone red with cold. “Can’t you go one whole day without quoting poetry?”

“I could try. But where’s the fun in that?” She snips, swinging their linked hands again as she shouts to the city with its bustle of cars and people, “I am lonely! Lonely! I! Am! Best! So!”

“You aren’t.” Olaf finally hisses, a glimmer of possessiveness in his eyes and the hard slope of his jaw. “You aren’t lonely. And you certainly aren’t best so.”

“You’re right.” Violet concedes, unconcerned. Instead, she shouts, “I am lonely, lonely, I am best so! But that’s a lie! It’s a lie! It’s a lie!”

“It certainly is.” Olaf grumbles and Violet is so happy she cannot disagree, the city fogged and glistening around them like a secret and bright new world.

Chapter End Notes

Smile! No One Cares How You Feel is a song by The Gothic Archies from their album The Tragic Treasury, which was wholly inspired by ASOUE.

Although the first names of V’s classmates are imagined, their last names are intentional and mentioned throughout each series.

Black Cat Coffee, Cafe Kafka, and Lopsided’s are all coffee shops mentioned in Handler’s work. Heirlooms, the mess it is, is my own.
Each book mentioned, I would recommend reading for yourself. *Made for Love* by Alissa Nutting (I also enjoyed her debut novel, *Tampa*) *Praying Drunk* by Kyle Minor, *All the Dirty Parts* by Daniel Handler, and *Crystal Eaters* by Shane Jones.

As requested, I have finished putting a playlist together for this work. It can be found through my tumblr (@s-softersoftest).

One last chapter before the first Part is through. Many thanks, already, to all of you. I didn’t expect this to get much attention and I have been pleasantly surprised. Thank you!

Please let me know what ya think!
"And Penn was quoted as saying, ‘My prison shall be my grave before I budge a jot; for I owe my conscience to no mortal man.' His sense of identity and righteousness was ultimately within the divine. And as we have learned from the namesake of this institution, whatever is not divine is inherently profane, right students?"

Violet, along with the rest of Sunday's attending orphans, mumble in agreement. They are gathered for the morning's lesson, Nero having already finished his violin solo in time for their presenter- a tall, whispy man with greying hair and a very large nose- to speak.

Violet has tried to pay attention, but every few minutes Isadora's notebook is jammed into her ribcage. They have been passing notes tacitly for over an hour before her friend finally asks a question that does not involve her disappearance with Olaf and the nature of their relationship.

In Isadora's small, neat handwriting she asks: *I can tell you anything, right?*

After Heirlooms, Olaf had broken out his record player yet again and they had danced in the kitchen for far too long. Violet stayed awake well into the morning and was now, after the man had dropped her off in time for sermon, feeling the effects of sleeplessness. Despite this, reading the question jolts Violet into a state of alertness as if someone had just popped a large balloon. Alarmèd, she glances to Isadora's face only to find her resolutely looking towards the man on the stage and pointedly away from her.

*Of course,* she scribbles much too quickly, her handwriting suddenly sloppy. She shoves the notebook into Isadora's lap and waits.

*Good,* she writes. *Can we talk in your place after this? Duncan too?*

*Of course,* Violet writes again, wondering what could be so important Isadora questions the limits of their friendship. She thinks of all the potential enemies the Quagmires could have and comes up empty. After Olaf's threats, Nero and Carmelita made sure to drop any foulness against anyone in Violet's immediate proximity which had left the Quagmires mostly unscathed.

Though Nero hadn't left the looming threat of Duncan's expulsion alone. During the evenings, Isadora often brought up letters she had found slipped under her door from Duncan's teachers, a weekly assessment of his attendance which had steadily declined. Despite Isadora's pleading, Duncan spends his days resolutely in bed, the shades drawn, the burnt book next to him on the bed turning the sheets black as frostbite.

Violet almost pulls the notebook back to write- *We could always hide Duncan in my place if he gets expelled-* but doubts Isadora would appreciate the plan.

She sits, fidgeting, nervous, in the pew for two more hours, listening to the drone of the speaker ("-to
you who stands outside yourself, crying at the empty sea of faith-") and tries not to think of how her life would change without them. Isadora sits beside her still as a gargoyle.

After an eternity the speaker says, "And that concludes our sermon. Enjoy the rest of your Sunday, children. Make good choices."

With a dramatic turn, he stalks off the stage and through the very same door Violet had chased Carmelita through months ago. The orphans rise with groans, clutching their weary backs. Others jostle their neighbors awake. Violet merely stands, her body slow and heavy. She feels as if she has been asleep, as if her mind is fogged and dull.

"I'll grab Duncan and meet you." Isadora says, giving Violet's hand a quick squeeze. Before she can respond, Isadora has turned and hurried out of the sanctuary, lost in the fleeing crowd of orphans.

Violet follows reluctantly, wondering if it would be best to avoid the crowd and take the backstage tunnels. Instead, she wanders to the cafetorium and gathers a small feast of fruits and muffins and a whole thermos of coffee to take back to her sanctuary.

She has just balanced the final muffin between her chest and the strap of her satchel when a familiar giggle reaches her senses. Violet's stomach sinks in frustration, her back already bracing for one of Carmelita's cruel remarks, but none follow.

"You've got a lot there." Elsie says, her smile kind and amused. She brushes past Violet who is suddenly wide-eyed with relief and crouches to the floor before the breakfast buffet.

Violet starts to ask, "What are you-?" but pauses once Elsie reaches under the thin plastic tablecloth and retrieves a cardboard tray. She rises easily and holds it out like an offering.

"They keep these under here incase anyone wants to take their food elsewhere. Which it looks like you do."

"Oh. Thank you. I had no clue." Violet says, piling her breakfast onto the tray, feeling embarrassed and stupid and grateful all at once.

"You don't eat down here much. No reason for you to know." Elsie says, her tone light.

"You're right. I... have another place to go." Violet says. She brushes crumbs away from the front of her uniform then takes the heavy tray in both hands.

"Another place, huh? Violet Baudelaire's found a secret room to escape the rest of us?" Elsie teases.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Violet quips, just as teasing.

Her classmate tosses her curly blonde hair and rolls her eyes dramatically as if Violet had just ruined an evil plan. "Maybe someday I'll get so lucky."

"Maybe so." Violet agrees, amused.

There is a small silence as Elsie glances around the cafetorium as if testing their privacy. Violet tries to follow her gaze, finding orphans sitting in long rows passing homework around and shoving food into their mouths. After a few moments, Elsie steps closer to Violet, her eyes intent and secretive.

"I don't know if you've heard," She mutters, voice quiet. "But me and a few other girls like to go spray paint nice things under bridges throughout the city. It's really fun. We usually get lots of fast food and gossip and go swimming if there's a creek nearby. Would you... maybe wanna come next
Although Violet is not surprised by the information, it is the invitation that floors her. There is no sneer on Elsie's face, no restrained snideness behind her eyes. Instead, her classmate stands before her simply wanting to share her company.

For a reason she could not name, this makes her equally excited and desperately sad.

"Let me know next time you're going. I'll see if I can. But, yeah, I'd-" Violet nearly winces against a memory suddenly blinding behind her eyelids: Olaf, up in her attic, his hands on her thighs, his voice low and mesmerizing in her ear, "Before becoming an orphan, would you have isolated yourself in a church attic for days on end or would you have explored the town? Made more friends?"

Violet swallows the shame, the fear, and instead looks Elsie in the eye and says, "I'd love to go. I need to get out of this place more."

The critical approval Violet expected does not come. Instead, a softness blooms on Elsie's face, something that speaks of duel triumph and desolation.

"Orphans gotta stick together." She says as if it were a rule printed in the Eliade handbook, a statement solid as fact.

"You're right." Violet nods. She looks down to her tray loaded with breakfast foods and wonders if Isadora has managed to drag Duncan from his bed or not. Deeper, she wonders if the three of them were just three orphans trying to stick together, to survive in the aftermath of VFD's cruelty.

She is just about to make a farewell remark when Elsie's face twists in confusion. She eyes a spot far beyond Violet's head, nodding towards it, and says, "I think you're being summoned by some members of Olaf's Troupe."

Startled, Violet turns to see Elsie is not wrong.

The white-faced women stand in the hall between the sanctuary doors and the cafetorium, their cream dresses domed at their hips, their hair stacked high on the tops of their heads. Each woman has a crazed, near desperate smile on her face. They wave to Violet as if coaxing a hound, shouting, "Come here, little orphan, here-"

She turns to her classmate, annoyed and curious, "Like I said, I'll get back to you on the bridge thing. Looks like they're pretty desperate."

"Right." Elsie says, her expression unwavering in its warmth. "We'll probably do it again before it gets too cold. But, yeah. Hurry to the Troupe. I'll see you around."

With that, Elsie turns and heads back to a table crammed with classmates and homework and breakfast while Violet hurries to the white-faced women who are nearly leaping in an effort to catch her eye.

"Oh yes! This way! Come answer our every question!"

"Yes? Do you need something?"

One woman grabs the tray from Violet's hands while the other pulls a long roll of soft measuring tape from her pocket.

"We were sent here by that devilish man of yours. We need measurements!"
"That devilish man of mine?" Violet mutters, a shock of endearment swelling in her throat like sickness. The woman with the tape measurer crouches and tucks the loose end beneath Violet's heel, standing and letting the roll unfurl as she rises.

Violet glances around the dining hall finding several curious eyes on them. She adds, "Must we do this here?"

"Oh, don't be so bothered." The woman with the tray says, while the other holds Violet's arms out as long as they can reach and measures one fingertip to the next.

"We won't be much longer…" The tape measurer slides down to wrap around her waist, cinching it. The women nod to themselves as serious as scientists studying a peculiar specimen. After a few moments, the measurer falls away and the tray is thrust back into her grip.

"We'll see you tonight, little orphan!" The women chime as they cast her one last shared grin and hurry away as quickly as they had arrived. Busy noise from the city leaks inside as they haul open the enormous front doors, the stained glass casting shimmers of color to the floor, and duck into the chaos. The doors close softly behind them and Violet, feeling rumpled, heads to the basement theatre.

Isadora and Duncan have already unfurled the ladder and climbed inside. She finds the ladder waiting and the trapdoor open once she takes to the stage. Keeping the tray carefully balanced, Violet ascends. The higher she climbs, the better she can hear Isadora who speaks rapid and nervous, "I think this was probably a spare props attic that everyone just slowly forgot about. I mean that would make sense. There's some weird stuff up here. Have you seen that embroidered bullfighter's cape over there? I bet you could wear it if you wanted."

Duncan is seated on the floor, already tangled in the pile of blankets. To his side rests a familiar blackened pillowcase. Isadora sits in the velvet chair fiddling with a can of rusty nails as if she needed something trivial to occupy her hands.

"You guys got here quickly." Violet says, sliding the tray with all its treats over to Duncan who grabs a muffin with ravenous interest.

"Yeah." Isadora agrees, casting her brother a look he doesn't catch. "Someone was agreeable this morning. We just got here."

"Good." Violet says as she bends to retract the ladder. "Feeling better, Duncan?"

He nods enthusiastically, his mouth full of food.

Despite the tense situation, knowing that has a small knot of relief unraveling through her body. She feels ambiguously grateful that, at least on this very morning, Duncan's body does not rot with sickness.

Violet nods again. When she glances to Isadora, her eyes are on the windows. They traverse the growing collection of mementos shared with Olaf. Violet watches her eyes travel along the length of the Count's first note (Moved the lights before we left, orphan. You can thank me later. -O) to the Daily Punctilio's interview taped crookedly beside it ("I am hopelessly entranced by a true beauty.") to the two typewriter keys tied to thread and hung from a nail in the wooden division of the panes, clicking softly (V and O).

These trinkets are not new to her best friend who spends nearly every evening with her in this very attic doing homework or studying Duncan's book or gossipping. But what is new, what Isadora's
eyes linger upon unhappily, are the grainy monochrome photo booth prints.

Violet follows her gaze seeing herself and Olaf accosting one another in miniature and feels strangely ashamed. The Quagmires study relentlessly for clues about VFD while Violet spends her time kissing a man who could tell them all he knew. The shame fades, however, when Violet remembers the previous morning, of sitting in Olaf's lap and clutching at his face, his eyes tormented and his voice hushed, "There will be things I cannot tell you no matter how deeply you may wish it. For both our safety."

Knowing she has upcoming lessons with Olaf shrinks the shame. She is doing the best she can.

"Look your fill." Violet snips, annoyed. She kicks the trapdoor closed with a bang as Isadora flinches and glances away. From his spot on the floor, Duncan watches them neutrally. He tosses the empty muffin wrapper to the tray and opens the thermos, sending a puff of steam into the air.

"Violet. Duncan and I..." Isadora begins, examining the blackened pillowcase on the floor. Much like in the Sanctuary, her eyes remain elsewhere. "Duncan has something to show you."

"Oh, you coward." Duncan says, not looking at his sister, his tone teasing but serious enough to make Violet wonder. He waves a free hand towards her where she sits by the trapdoor. "She's your best friend, Isadora. Come on."

"Yeah, come on. What's the news?" Violet asks, reaching over and grabbing a muffin of her own.

"You found it. I thought it should come from you." Isadora defends, shooting her brother an annoyed look. She sinks from the velvet chair to the floor, joining her friends. Duncan rolls his eyes and slides the thermos of coffee to his sister who catches it gratefully.


Duncan shakes his head, a bitter twist to his mouth. He reaches for his blackened pillowcase. "No. Something else. I found it when I rearranged my bedroom earlier this week. Take a look."

He withdraws a hefty envelope and hands it over. Violet takes it gently, feeling the weight of the typewriter paper and the smudge of a broken wax seal at its back. The face of the envelope contains no return address, merely states QUAGMIRES in faded ink.

Violet flips it finding the wax seal to be an odd creature in the shape of a question mark with prominent sharp teeth. The letter inside is made of the same heavy paper. It hisses free from the envelope as Violet tips it into her hand.

"I didn't get it at first because when Isadora smacked me in the head with those papers, they scattered all over my bed. I thought I had found them all, but I missed this. Found it on the floor. But then when he mentioned it..." Duncan's voice is calm but there's a restraint that makes Violet nervous as she unfolds the letter.

"Dearest Quagmire children," Violet reads, "If you are reading this letter it means that you have made contact with a man who is not a doctor at all, no matter what his name tag may have implied. Due to my shared childhood with your parents and an unfortunate string of fires, I have become aware of your current situation and residence at the Eliade Cathedral of the Mysterium Tremendum Et Fascinans. I feel that I can provide assistance to you in your endeavors. Or, if not, that I may be able to provide critical information at the very least. If you wish to communicate with me, simply wander the city. If a taxi driver attempts to show you a photograph of a baby you will know you are in good company. So many stories have ended in fire, children. Let's hope this one ends differently."
With all due respect, Lemony Snick- No! No. How did he find you here? And- and he knew where you were last Spring! That's-" Violet sputters. "This is bad."

That last statement evokes hesitant silence. Violet glances rapidly between her friends in confusion, as if she had missed the punchline to some grand joke.

"What?" She asks. Already, there is a tense sinking to her stomach. "What? Don't tell me you found him."

"No!" Isadora insists. Offense sharpens her tone like a freshly whet blade. "No. We've just been discussing it and… maybe it would be good to talk to someone who actually knows about VFD. Who could give us a new perspective."

Violet laughs softly in disbelief. Isadora meets her eyes but there is a stubbornness in them that she has only seen when dealing with Duncan, who fiddles with his blankets.

"Hell no. Not Lemony Snicket. Have you forgotten that he could be the one who burnt down our homes in the first place? Who killed our families?" Absolute repulsion wells in Violet's chest so harshly she does not consider tact or tone when dealing with a subject so serious. Where in other contexts with her friends she could be honest and uncensored, in the current situation she forgets to tamper her emotions accordingly and they show not only in her crass language but physically in the furious narrowing of her eyes, in her posture stilled as if threatened and standing her ground, in her mouth quirked with an exasperated sneer. "That's the worst idea I've heard in a long time. Seriously. I hate it and we're not doing that. Please explain to me why you think we should."

Duncan snatches the letter so quickly she doesn't notice him moving until her hands are empty.

"Told you." Duncan hisses, glaring at Isadora who watches him with displeasure. "Told you we shouldn't have showed her." He turns that glare to her, dark eyes wild with betrayal. "Why do you think we waited an entire week before telling you, Violet?"

He waits for her answer but the best she can give him is a confused, desperate shrug and say, "Because you knew I would think it's a horrible idea? Because it is and you know it?"

"No." Duncan looks away at that, rolling his eyes. Violet can tell by the avoidant twist of his body that he knows he is treading dangerous waters. She wonders what could be so worth the threat of danger Lemony Snicket represented. "It's because you're so far up Olaf's ass that you take his word as law and can't think for yourself. Lemony Snicket could help us. Oh, but Olaf said he might be a villain. So we'd better trust him, huh?"

Violet stands so quickly her kneecaps pop. Jagged hurt punctures her heart like a bullet. She glares through sudden tears, her face hot with humiliation and ire.

"Am I the only one who remembers Lemony Snicket chasing us through a collapsing tunnel? The only reason we got out of there was because of Olaf. The only reason we know anything about VFD at all is because of Olaf. Without him we wouldn't even have a name for them. And without him confirming their existence, Duncan, Isadora and I would still think you're delusional. He's the one who made us trust you."

Duncan is so outraged his hands shake against the blanket. Isadora opens her mouth to speak but Violet cuts her off with a pointed finger and says, "No. Let me talk. Do you know what VFD does to its new recruits? They kidnap children in the middle of the night. Steal them away from their families who they won't see until they're grown and have become completely different people, probably damaged from years of training. It's cultish. A secret society that steals children for profit
and power. Why defend a man who honors that?"

"Because he could help us find Quigley!" Duncan shouts.

Her fury vanishes in an instant. In its place is horrid understanding, which leaves her feeling shaky and drained. Distantly, she is still stung by Duncan's idea of her being vapid and thoughtlessly smitten. But, deeper, she now realizes it is all a way of fighting for his family, of desperate fighting to save his brother.

It is love that makes Duncan cruel.

Speechless, Violet rubs her eyes, pressing the unreleased tears into her fingers.

Silence settles uncomfortably in the room. Violet feels as though the three of them have conquered and endured so much together that they now have a shared awareness of their fears and secrets. She feels that disagreeing with the Quagmires' need to find their brother is nearly a betrayal.

"Look," She says eventually, when a minute has passed and neither friend will look at her. "I understand that you want to find Quigley. But relying on Lemony Snicket is not the way to do this. In order to be able to find him, you have to stay safe yourselves. He... You could get hurt."

For one bizarre instant, Violet remembers Olaf's voice all those months ago in this very attic. She hears him, a true invasive thought, yet his voice sounds other and warped, as if a mock rendition of Snicket, "You are young and broken. I could eat you whole."

"But-" Duncan starts, a teary catch to his voice. His words break with a snap as his throat closes. He grimaces to the floor, forces through. "But I've been trying. For months. On my own, to find him. I've studied the tunnels and the city and this miserable book. I have labored, and- and-"

Watching her friend break beneath the weight of his own mourning has wretched cognizance sinking Violet's chest like grief: It is love that turns Duncan cruel. It is also love that makes him suffer.

"Suffered." She supplies quietly.

"Suffered." Duncan spits. "And I have been utterly useless."

"Duncan-" Isadora begins, eager to rebuke him, but he interrupts.

"I know what you're going to say, Isadora. I found the tunnels and our parents' photographs and this book. Hell, if I hadn't found this thing-" He smacks a hand atop the pillowcase. "We'd be clueless. Completely in the dark. Who knows if Olaf would have told you anything about VFD if you hadn't already known about them. Probably would have been much simpler to keep you ignorant and... safe."

Violet can feel the shock on her face, the way her eyebrows shoot up so quickly she flinches. Duncan continues speaking, does not even spare her a glance, and Violet is grateful for this because she has a hunch that he is absolutely right.

"I've accomplished some things. But not enough. If I had done enough we'd have Quigley by now."

"But you don't even know if Quigley's alive." Violet rebukes.

Duncan shakes his head as if trying to banish a violent idea.

"I don't care." He says. "If he's out there, I'll find him. If he's not, then I'll find out eventually. But
there's enough doubt for me to continue. The fact that his body was never recovered. The tunnels. The organization obsessed with kidnapping children. Our brother could be alive. And I can't find him on my own, no matter how much you two have helped. If associating with Lemony Snicket gets me one step closer then it's worth it."

Violet still disagrees, wholly and supremely. She is so repelled by the idea of even speaking to Snicket that her adrenaline spikes considering it.

"I'm not helping you." She insists, feeling shocked that she is speaking this way to her two best friends. "If you're going to speak to him, I am not helping. This is dangerous. More dangerous than you seem to realize. What if you two meet him somewhere and he captures Isadora? Then you'll be-"" Violet snaps her mouth shut against the extension of her next thought. She was going to say something about how he would be all alone, his two siblings apart from him, as good as dead, and then realizes that, if by any chance Klaus or Sunny were still alive, that she would be doing the exact same thing.

"Just leave me out of it." She finishes, voice small with suppression.

"Fine." Duncan snaps. "If you're not helping, we don't need your input anyway."

He stands, shucking the tangle of blankets and grabbing his black pillowcase with an angry flourish. He glares to Isadora, who has remained silent as any casual bystander.

"Come on." Duncan murmurs, brushing past Violet to open the trapdoor. Isadora stands, glancing between them, looking lost. With Duncan's back turned, Violet meets eyes with her friend and nods towards the door, saying without speaking: Go comfort your brother. You and I are still friends despite this erroneous decision.

Isadora nods, and crosses the meager distance to the trapdoor. Duncan has already begun unfurling the ladder, which hits the stage with a soft thud. He begins his descent looking anywhere but Violet, yet the moment Isadora turns to place her foot on the first rung, he stops.

Violet meets his eyes neutrally. Internally, she is already preparing for whatever foulness he might spew.

"You know… If this were reversed and you thought your brother or sister might be alive, we would help you. Absolutely. Despite the danger. But you, Violet, you're acting heartless. How relentlessly cruel. How- How villainous. You're so-"

Before Violet can speak, Isadora places the heel of her shoe lightly on her brother's head and snaps, "Get going."

Without another word, the Quagmires descend, and Violet lets the trapdoor fall heavy behind them.

Violet spends the rest of her afternoon with the radio on. The buzz of music and static keeps her from thinking on Duncan's words, the ones she can still hear like a background vocalist to every tune. She eats the remainders of their breakfast and keeps her hands occupied with practicing her lockpicking and inventing.

She has not had much time for inventing in the past months, but this space between the Quagmires'
absence and Olaf's invitation to dinner serve as a respite from the outside world, one where Violet can simply wear circles into the floor of her most private space, keep her mind sharp, and be blissfully alone.

She has just finished sketching a blueprint for a secret room hidden behind the latticed wall of a wine cellar when a soft knock sounds at her trapdoor. Fully expecting Isadora to apologize for Duncan's behavior, or for Duncan to show up for another chance at explanation, Violet, feeling annoyed at the interruption, takes her time in answering. Several more knocks sound before she sighs, admits defeat, and swings open the door.

She does not find Isadora or Duncan or even Olaf.

Instead, the Troupe member of indeterminate gender stands on the ladder looking calm and unfazed, as if they were expected to do abnormal tasks on a normal basis.

"Hi, orphan." They say, remaining where they are even as Violet swings the door fully open and steps away to give them entry. "No need for that. I'm here to bring you something."

Like a magician waiting to reveal some grand trick, the henchperson reaches into their shirt pocket and, with a flourish, withdraws a heavy letter. The envelope is nearly the same heavy typewriter paper as Snicket's and the sight, so soon after her shock, has split survival and rationality warring in Violet's mind like compulsion. She wonders if the henchperson is in contact with Snicket, if their plan is to bring Violet a letter on false pretences, then lead her (baited, a thoughtless participant in her own abduction-) to a long black car.

She debates tossing her radio through the high window and dropping into the street below. She envisions slamming the trapdoor and the heavy thud atop the stage.

The Troupe member watches her with steady eyes, holding the letter ever closer.

Violet shakes her head, confused and worried at the ready violence in her mind, and reaches for her delivery.

"My task is done. See you tonight." With that, they descend the ladder slowly, whistling a cheery tune.

Still stunned, Violet eventually calls, "Thank you!"

The henchperson waves from the stage, presses against the feet of her ladder, which begin to roll upwards, and heads through the large exit doors. Violet watches them go, then shuts the door and sinks to the floor.

Her music has devolved into monotonous advertisements. A peppy voice calls through the static, "Despite any myths you may have heard, the Swinster Pharmacy sells aspirin and toothpaste just like everywhere else!"

Violet, however, is too engrossed in the sudden letter to keep her ears open to the buzz of sales. It is not addressed in any way and there is no hard knot of wax on the back. Heart pounding, she tucks her thumb beneath the back flap and rips.

What first falls into her outstretched hand is not a letter at all, but the soft coil of a new hair ribbon. It sits in her palm like a resting serpent before she unfurls it. The ribbon itself is made from silk, its color black as coal.

Grateful but ever suspicious, she sets the ribbon to the floor and grabs the small note inside. Even
through the heavy paper, she can see the familiar curls of sloppy cursive and wretched relief bends her weary back.

"Evil man." She murmurs to herself, unfolding Olaf's note with an eager snap.

"Little sneak," Violet mumbles, voice low and rushed. "It is my humblest hope that you enjoy this hair ribbon and find it to your standard. If you would, wear it to dinner tonight. It will pair well with the surprise you are to find in- oh no- the confessional booth. Do not worry about it being found by any wandering orphans, it is being guarded until you arrive by two very excited, very pale ladies. Meet me in the alley at seven sharp. Lover...?"

Violet peers ever closer at the note and Olaf's closing, and the word that had been struck through. He had originally written Lover-boy and signed his O as normal. But, later, had scribbled out boy and penned man instead, following, Violet is sure, the same idea Isadora had voiced when she first learned about the two of them: "I thought you would have told me something about that. About a boy. Well- he's not really a boy, is he?"

"Lover-man." Violet mumbles, suppressing the swell of emotion in her throat by rising and hurrying to tape their latest memento to the window.

Once it is secured, she turns and regards the trapdoor in feigned annoyance, as if it is the source of her duel excitement and exasperation.

"What are you waiting for?" cries the radio. "Hurry down to the Swinster Pharmacy before it disappears into the fog, and you're left wondering if it ever truly existed!"

Violet twists the dial. The noise dies, leaving her in silence. She glances to the ribbon, then to the door, and tosses her hair, a trademark motion set to steel her nerves.

She makes quick, nervous work of finding the confessional booth.

The two white-faced women stand like guards before it yet, seeing her, step aside, mirrored grins on their painted faces.

"Oh, you made it!" cries a sister.

"Oh, you're going to look lovely!" cries the other.

Violet eyes them with hesitance, wondering if they had bothered to question why the Count had ordered her surprise placed so specifically.

"Right," Violet agrees. "So, do I just open it?"

"Go ahead!" They chime.

Violet glances around the sanctuary, finding no other orphans watching from the pews or standing still at the altar. The handle to the left door is polished and smooth. She tugs, the small door slides on its track, and light floods the darkened alcove.

Inside, a large package waits like a celestial offering. Violet dips her hands into the darkness the way children dip their toes into foggy lakewater- cautious, and fearful to lose themselves inside.

The box is heavy in her grip. She cradles it against her chest, precious and endeared already. She steps away from the confessional booth and wonders when someone had last bought her something simply because they wanted to. She remembers her father and the sentimental look on his face when
he had found her in the library of their home, turning a grandfather clock into a toaster, a weary persistence on her face. He placed a small package on the face of the clock, his handwritten address on the top, a large, looping: *To Ed.*

Violet had it open and had her hair tied back with the grey ribbon by the time he reached the door. It had been simple and sweet. A small gesture between father and daughter. Now, however, that ribbon was gone, desecrated by Carmelita’s teeth, and in its place was Olaf’s ribbon which waited brand-new and gleaming upstairs.

"Now hurry to your attic!" cries a white-faced woman, "If there are any issues-

"We'll be around to assist! If not-

Here, the two women clap their hands together like delighted children and shout, "We'll meet you in the alley!"

Violet nods and turns away, eager to open her present and put some distance between herself and the two women.

"Thank you!" she calls, the sound loud in the sanctuary. The women wave as she goes.

By the time Violet is fully dressed, it is nearly seven.

More excited than her age suggested, Violet had ripped open the package the moment the trapdoor swung shut. What fell heavy into her lap were several things at once: heavy fabric black as smoke, a glossy pair of kitten heels, a collection of cosmetics that immediately scattered across the entire space, and a silken sack the size of her palm. It is the sack she goes to first, tugging on the glittering beaded drawstrings. What she withdraws looks to be a knot of fine lace- dark and green as fresh pine. At her shaking the knot unravels and she is left with a soft pile of handmade lingerie. Recollection hits her like a fist to the eye.

"I'm going to murder Elsie. And Olaf." She mutters to herself, standing, and shucking her skirt with furious determination. After several minutes of tangled straps and twisted lace, she finally stands in the sanctuary in her very first set of lingerie, complete with a small sheer bralette, a strappy pair of panties, and nude stockings. Although she has never had a mirror in the cozy sanctuary, she immediately notices its absence and necessity.

She slips the heels onto her feet, standing slightly taller, her calves flexed and poised, and feels much more adult and capable than the moment before.

She slips the dress easily over her head, feeling its heavy drop around her waist, and shimmies into the remainder. It is tight and gauzy, boasting a high collar and deep bell sleeves, all black as tar.

The makeup she applies inexpertly in a tiny compact mirror accompanying a fresh coin of blush the color of fever. She kills the remainder of her time smoothing nonexistent lines in her dress, dragging a brush through her hair, and singing to music she does not know, inventing phrases to mumble when instrumentals swing from the radio.

"I have known little civility, sir. Few have been kind, fewer truthful-"

She sings half-heartedly, while inside her whole heart sings.

Violet waves the loose belled sleeves of her dress, wears dents in the floor from her polished shoes, and stares out the windows watching golden sunset glaze the city, feeling treasured and charming and simply excited.
Nearing their meeting time, Violet descends slowly, careful of her heels on the ladder, and arrives on the stoop to find Olaf's car already there, patient, gleaming. He stands with the same sunglasses on his face from their first date. His posture is practiced yet coolly relaxed, showing in the lazy jut of his hips against the passenger door, his arms crossed, a devilish smirk at his mouth. He wears a white dress shirt with a silken bowtie black as the ribbon that flutters in her hair. His trousers are so dark they nearly blend with the vehicle humming at his back.

"Look at you." They both say at once, equally reverent and humbled and thrilled.

"Jinx." Violet grins, hurrying down the steps and flinging herself into his arms, hasty as any enlivened child. She kisses his grinning mouth until he laughs, shakes his head in false exasperation, and drawls towards the car, "The insatiability of orphans, hmm?"

The Troupe snickers from the back seat, each one of them crammed shoulder to shoulder.

Violet peeks around Olaf, their bodies still flushed, her hands in his hair, and says, "Oh. Hello."

The Troupe waves to her, their lips pursed in comedic suppression, as if trying with all their might to keep from teasing them. Olaf clears his throat and gently pries her off of him to get a better look at her dress, which she presents with a grand sweeping gesture.

"Tah-daaaahhhhh!" says the tall bald man, his deep voice rumbling like thunder in the alley.

"Oh, marvelous!" cry the white-faced women, clapping. "You show-stopper!"

"God, you two picked this?" Olaf says, glancing from Violet's dress to the two women who smile smugly back. "You'd figure I'd pay you for that sort of thing."

"Today you've only paid us in coupons and bubblegum!" cries one sister while the other pops a perfect bubble, sharp as an exclamation point.

"Oh hush. I'm buying your dinner."

There is an amused grumble from the Troupe as the two women roll their eyes, their posture unoffended and relaxed as the others. Violet glances between them, her hand still in Olaf's feeling suddenly grateful to the Troupe, to their absolute loyalty to the man at her side. This thought leads to a twinge of jealousy and deeper unease, suddenly aware that her two friends had left her sanctuary hurt and intent on making terrible decisions.

Violet takes a deep breath, grounding herself, and squeezes Olaf's hand. She is unwilling to dwell on actions she could not change. Instead, she feels the sun like a warm touch at her shoulder, the excitement of a night out, and the security of Olaf's tight grip, a vice by any definition.

Her thoughts are thankfully addled when Fernald leaps from the far back door and shuffles towards the front of the car, calling, "Shotgun!"

Olaf glares, a tight smile at his lips. He opens the door like a violent suggestion.

"Negated." He says, unfazed, and ushers her inside.

Fernald groans, shuffling back to his seat amidst a chorus of giggles from his associates, saying, "Told you! Told you he'd send me back here like some dog."

"What did you expect?" asks the individual of indeterminate gender. "When two people are romantically involved, they're obviously going to favor one another over the masses around them.
This, at least, *should* happen otherwise a rift borne of thoughtlessness could grow between them, and with the divorce rate what it is, shouldn't we respect any moment of true romance, no matter how small, and let it happen? Will you be the death of their relationship by being so continuously obnoxious? Are you to die alone in your bed, Fernald?"

"Christ." say the two white-faced women before the Troupe bursts into startled laughter, even Fernald himself who claps his hooks together like a respectful competitor knowing he has been outdone.

From where she eyes them through the rearview mirror, the dogged group of actors are dually intimidating and entertaining. Violet watches and keeps silent until Olaf slides into the driver's seat beside her and demands, "Well? Are you to die in your bed?"

"I don't know!" Fernald cries, miming bitter weeping. The pale woman at his side pats his shoulder soothingly as Olaf cranks the radio and pulls through the alley into a blaze of sunset and city noise.

The Troupe soon becomes lost in their own conversations, drowned out by wind and music. Violet reaches out, plucks the man's hand from the steering wheel, and links their fingers. He casts her a smug look out of the corner of his eye and asks, voice languid, "And how is my favorite little vixen?"

"Wonderful. Truly. Thank you." She reaches to fiddle with the ribbon in her hair. "For this. I know it probably doesn't matter all that much, but I'm really touched by it. It... means a lot to me that you bought me a ribbon. That's thoughtful. So thank you."

"You're very welcome. For the rest of your ensemble, too, of course." He teases.

"Oh! Yes, those things too. Of course." Embarrassed and unwilling to seem ungrateful, Violet pats the dress at her lap and says, "I love it. Even though you put it in the confessional booth, you cad. We're discussing that at a later date. But for now I suppose I should thank you for the other parts of my gift. Made by Elsie."

"Ahhh, yes. I'd forgotten." He mutters, smirking in a way that suggests the opposite.

"You did not." Violet accuses.

Olaf shrugs, not even possessing the decency to look ashamed. He admits, voice low, "You're right. How could I forget?"

Absent of a proper comeback, Violet merely grins stupidly at him, sure she looks every bit of the infatuated teenager she is.

The Count glances to the rearview mirror as if checking for enemies before admitting, "I saw you just this morning and all day I've had this peculiar craving to see you yet again. I'm sorry to say I feel quite lovesick. Do you think there's any hope for me?"

Violet glances to the cars they pass and bites her lip, hoping the man does not see her unsuppressed grin.

"No," she replies coolly. "Lovesickness is very fatal. You'll be dead by sunrise."

"Damn." The man curses, slapping his driving hand quickly against the steering wheel. "Well, in the meantime, I say we enjoy a luxurious dinner and then spend the night indulging in various carnal exploits. What do you say?"
Violet giggles, unable to hold back. "Sounds like a plan."

"You know," says a white-faced woman, nearly shouting over the radio. "All this sexual tension is giving me a touch of jealous mania."

"Me too." Fernald grumbles.

"Aye!" cries the other white-faced woman while the bald man and the person of indeterminate gender remain respectfully silent.

Olaf slows at the traffic clogging a red light, and turns to face the Troupe like a disgruntled parent.

"Take the bus next time. Or crawl. I don't care." He growls.

"Ah! Evil man!" The white-faced women cry.

Olaf, grinning smugly, adjusts his bowtie. "Did you expect anything less?"

Unwilling to hear their retorts, he turns the dial higher on the radio and music overwhelms the noise. Violet grins, squeezes his hand, and, lets the glimmering city pass her by.

At first, dinner is stunning.

Violet arrives on her lover's arm feeling like a particularly expensive wristwatch, gleaming with obvious care. The restaurant is fogged as if aflame, so many patrons smoking cigars that the air tingles her throat at each breath. The lighting is dim and moody. White neon light pours from great signs on the wall -OTTO'S CHOPHOUSE & WINERY- catching on every speck of crystal. Wine glasses, silverware, even individual shards of intricate chandeliers glimmer in the dimness and glow.

Violet has been so distracted by Olaf she has hardly noticed the outfits of his Troupe until they are seated together in a plush half-circle booth. Each member seemed dressed in their most charming clothes. Pale shimmers of light from the white-faced womens' sequined dresses glitter like a spills on the table. The men wear suits that do not quite fit them, yet look clean and new all the same. Fernald fiddles with the long sleeves of his jacket while the bald man tugs at the too-tight collar of his undershirt. The individual of indeterminate gender has dressed in straight pleated trousers and a loose shirt stamped with bright florals.

Violet eyes them with obvious appreciation as they sit and settle.

"Like our dresses?" A white-faced woman asks, placing a hand beneath her chin as if preparing for a pensive photograph.

The other woman says, "We found them just today! In the very place we bought yours!"

"Beautiful!" Violet says, miming a camera in her hands. "Stunning!"

"Ooh, she's a charmer," says the first woman. "Keep her around, Olaf."

The man's hand is warm at her back. He casts her a charming smile of his own, eyebrow quirked, and quips, "If I'm so lucky."

Pleased and feigning embarrassment, Violet elbows him in the chest. "Oh, quiet."
Light-hearted chatter consumes the table. The Troupe grows rowdy and excited as the restaurant brims with noise and bustle. Their waiter, a meek-looking young man near Violet's age, brings them menus and, without looking at any kind of lists, Olaf demands champagne. Their waiter hurries to comply, but spots Violet at the man's side and backtracks.

"Oh god." She mutters, wanting to duck beneath the table.

"Sorry. Could I see your ID?" The waiter asks.

Beside her, Olaf smiles. Sensing a confrontation, the Troupe continues their lively chatter yet their eyes are on Olaf, waiting for a cue.

"Um-" Violet begins, but the man shifts beside her, reaching into his pocket. A subtle thud hits the table. His wrist rests coolly against the lip of the table, and in his hand shines a large switchblade.

In that moment, he teaches her something: Sometimes the best threats require inaction. Holding his tongue, deft of complaints or commands of compliance, he merely says, "Not necessary."

The waiter glances between Olaf's calm expression to the switchblade. After a few moments he nods and, without a word, hurries away.

"You didn't have to do that." Violet mumbles, dually uncomfortable and impressed.

"No," Olaf agrees, apathetic. He swivels his wrist so the blade catches the light and shines. "But I wanted to. I just got this thing. Lost my last one in the tunnel collapse threatening Snicket. How can I bond with my new knife if we don't spill some blood together? Plus I want you to enjoy dinner, of course. A dinner can't be fully enjoyed without wine."

"Of course." Violet echoes, watching the blade snap into place. Olaf pockets it with a practiced air. One hand returns the weapon to his pocket. The other brushes her kneecap beneath the table.

Skewed feelings of concern and affection war in her mind as she watches the Troupe joke and laugh with one another. A small part of her worries about Olaf's eager inclination towards violence and his desire to inflict it upon others. This thought, however, has a memory spiking in her mind of running full speed through the halls behind Eliade's altar, of feeling glee at Carmelita's injuries caused by her own hands. Violet remembers the moment blood had dripped down Carmelita's chin and her own satisfaction so sweet and desperate that followed.

She watches Olaf, watches the way his throat moves around the buzz of laughter, and wonders if they are not as different in that way as she had thought. Still lost in thoughts of Carmelita bleeding, she realizes that tiny amount of concern is still there. But the thoughts that consume her mind the most are of Olaf.

A nameless want makes Violet feel charged and trapped in her own skin. She runs a hand down his back, down his thigh, eager to touch him if only through his clothes. Violet thinks of the emotions she felt the previous day, sitting on the man's lap in his kitchen faded soft and gray by morning, feeling treasured and safe simply because he had chosen her.

She knows Olaf is willing to be soft and tender. But what makes sudden, desperate neediness burn through her body is the realization that he is willing to be brutal for her too.

"Touchy tonight," Olaf mutters, voice quiet over the chatter of his Troupe. He casts her a heated look, drawing slow circles atop her kneecap. "Am I that hard to resist?"

"Absolutely." Violet responds.
"Oh?" The man drawls. His hand slips further up her leg, dipping to inner thigh. "Want me to take you home after dinner?"

Flustered, Violet slaps his hand away, glancing nervously to the Troupe who pay her no mind. She clears her throat and tosses her hair, hoping to gain a sliver of composure.

She shrugs. "If you're lucky."

Olaf laughs, the sound loud and genuine. At this, the Troupe pauses, startled, as if the sight of the Count laughing from pure amusement was an oddity they had never seen.

Their waiter returns, avoidant and quiet. He places three bottles of champagne at the center of the table and hands each person a flute already full.

The drink is sweet and golden and constellated with fizz.

Once each member of the Troupe holds a thin glass of alcohol, and their waiter has scuttled away, Olaf stands, reaching to the center of the table to wrap his hand around the thick neck of the next full bottle.

"My dear colleagues," He says, voice dripping with authority and affection, "Tonight we come together as a team, as a Troupe, to wine and dine and cherish one another. Congratulations, my fellow actors, for we have finalized our script." A jolt of surprise hits Violet, so severe she almost asks herself aloud - How didn't I know that?

"And now comes the fun part. The acting. And, in favor of fun yet to come, we must celebrate. Congrats! Kudos! Cheers!" Olaf thrusts the open bottle of champagne to the center of the table and each member of the Troupe, Violet included, clinks their glasses against it the way some people touch religious idols for good luck.

The rowdy table cries out in a wordless cheer, tipping champagne into the caverns of their throats, their teeth gleaming in the low light, feral with delight and splendor.

Olaf's hand returns to her leg beneath the table. He announces, "Order whatever you'd like, Troupe. Dine like gods."

Platters of food arrive in quick succession, Violet's plate piled high with delicacies, yet she only has eyes for Olaf and wine. The Troupe accepts her with ease, seeming to forget the awkwardness of the last two months, of Violet interrupting their rehearsals just to cross the stage and catch the eye of the man beside her. They do not mention any bad blood at all, simply laugh and reminisce and tease one another with the relaxed and unfiltered cadence that accompanies prolonged friendship.

Violet glances to Olaf, who is busy reflecting on a theatrical achievement ("-anagram, thus Al Funcoot was born!") and simply looks. Although the numerous glasses of champagne have her emotions spiking, she looks at the man's profile and feels only simple, yet deep, affection. She looks at him and feels tears prick at the backs of her eyes, her heart suddenly heavy and sweetly breaking.

She sees Olaf having fun with his comrades, his hand supportive at her back, and feels, all at once, humbled by love. Realizing this, Violet Baudelaire feels the room tilt slightly, the world going off its axis. It is an odd feeling. A little like panic.

She wonders how the shell of her body could possibly contain sentiment of such magnitude. How she (wretched, orphaned, unlovely-) could do something so extraordinary as fall in love.

"You've been staring at me for several minutes now," Olaf says, and Violet flinches as if someone
had stuck her with a needle. She realizes the man had finished his story long ago, and the Troupe continued another conversation, yet his fingers were still smoothing small circles at her back, as if he could not bear to stop touching her. "What's on your mind, Violet?"

For once, no poem rises in her mind. No line of diction to repeat and profess purses her lips. Instead, she feels a bottomless wound in her chest. It is so sweet and sickening she could nearly weep.

Instead, her heart keeps beating. She does not know what to say.

"Uh," She stammers, "Just feeling sentimental."

When Olaf smiles it is private and soft. He leans over, pressing a forceful kiss to her temple, once, twice.

Where she had expected him to say something charming and devilish, Olaf simply asks, "Would you do me the honor of accompanying me to my vehicle?"

"Of course." She says, trying not to sound as unbearably humbled as she felt.

The Troupe parts to let them shuffle past. Smooth as any growing ritual, their hands find one another's and link. Violet, legs numb from alcohol, sways in her new heels. They travel through the restaurant, past crowds of people simply having a good night, and pass right through the front doors where neon bleeds into the puddles on the street.

Cold wind whips her hair wild at her back. She feels refreshed and calmer, less impeded by noise and other people. Violet presses herself into Olaf's side and follows him to the car.

Olaf opens the passenger door and Violet goes to duck inside, but the man holds out an arm, blocking her. He ducks inside, turning the key, then climbs inside.

"I hope you don't expect me to drive." Violet says dryly. "I'm underage and tipsy."

"That you are." Olaf agrees. He settles into the seat, cool light from the dashboard settling in the hollows of his cheeks and spiking on the faint fans of his eyelashes. "No, I don't. I'll drive us back. But first, give me a moment. Come here."

"Don't have to ask me twice." Violet quips. Careful of her angles, all elbows and knees and long hair, she climbs into the passenger seat to settle in his lap. It is precisely that moment where Olaf presses a button near the window and the seat drops back. They slide horizontally, their bodies pressed together.

Beneath her, Olaf shifts and sighs and settles. His arms rise to wrap around her. When Violet glances up, his eyes are closed and his face is perfectly relaxed.

"Sleepy?" She asks. Violet places her head against his chest, listening to the solid drum of his heart and each slow drag of breath.

"Not particularly." Olaf responds. He speaks softly, aware of her ear pressed to the crown of his ribcage. "Just wanted a moment alone before things get hectic."

"Hectic?"

Olaf hums. Violet resists the urge to press him, figuring he means his schedule, or the evening, or the night with all its stars.
"Okay." She mutters. For several minutes there is only the hum of the car. Violet feels the lull of the man's body warm and strong beneath her, feels the comforting blurriness of alcohol in her blood, and feels simply content.

"Do-" Olaf begins, then hesitates. This fact alone has Violet's previous comfort draining in immediate anticipation. "Do you remember what I said about devotion?"

"Yes." She responds, quiet and careful.

"What are your thoughts?"

"Devotion." Violet repeats. Her thoughts branch in a series of anxious directions all at once, each one unfurling into a useless direction.

"Well," She begins, nervous, hesitant. "There aren't any other charming older men I'm seeing. I am… distressingly devoted. I think of you and me, together, and want to weep. From-sentiment. It's all rather distressing."

"I agree." Olaf says. "I see you and want to cry. No, wait. I see you and heaven bleeds. No. That's not it either. What I'm saying is… I want you, Violet, to trust me."

"I do. Of course. We have had this conversation before." She says, vague confusion in the words. She feels as if she is treading a verbal mirror, moving as herself, one foot in front of the other, yet seeing her reflection do just the same, gilded in shadow and moving in doubles. Violet senses they are not only discussing matters of the heart, but something deeper and tougher and decidedly more sinister.

"There will be some things you cannot explain." She speaks with the practiced weight of memorization, a schoolgirl spitting definitions. "You need my trust. My nobility."

"Yes." Olaf hisses, voice raw with relief. His heartbeat pounds like a fist against her cheek. "You understand."

"I don't." She says. "Not really."

But Olaf does not seem to hear her over his breathing suddenly gone shallow and rapid. Sweat gathers at his palms, resting at the curve of her hip.

Deeper confusion blooms in Violet's mind. She wonders how much the man has had to drink, yet cannot recall another glass in his hand after their toast. Hoping to jar him, she asks, "Are you my boyfriend now?"

At this, Olaf laughs but the sound is ragged as his breath, and slightly broken.

"Am I not already?" He asks. "Am I not the man you've placed yourself in the arms of? When do you suppose I became your boyfriend? Your lover? Name the moment, exactly. On the dot. What sealed the deal, Violet?"

Concerned, she sits up only to peer at him, eyes narrowed, unsure if he is being sarcastic.

"I don't know. Are you okay?"

"What time is it?" He asks, instead of answering.

Violet glances to the clock at the dashboard which glows green in the darkness.
"Nearly nine-thirty." She mutters, quick. "But what does that-"

"Shit. Already?" The man bangs a fist against a button at the door, which springs him upright.

"Olaf. You're worrying me. What's-" Violet tries, but she is cut off by his sudden kiss. His lips press against her teeth, his hands clammy at her cheeks. After momentary hesitation, she leans into it, her words vanishing, her worry fading.

Olaf kisses her and Violet feels her heart melting in her chest- an open wound pooling in her own cupped hands. He kisses her with a desperation she has never felt, not borne of lust or romance, but nerves and anxiety and, deeper, adrenaline. Olaf kisses her as if they are about to leap from an abandoned bell tower, as if, at any moment, their entire relationship could fall apart and he would not suffer it without one last kiss.

He pulls away as suddenly as he had kissed her. Jaw locked, brow scrunched, he presses their foreheads together and says, "I do not know how else to explain how much you gut me. I am distressingly devoted. To you, Violet Baudelaire. You."

"Me." She repeats, simply because she does not know what else to say.

"Keep that in mind. Now get off of me. I need to drive."

Awareness blurry around the edges with alcohol and confusion and fresh, fragile love, she rises and clambers to her feet outside. Olaf swats her once on the backside before hurrying to the driver's seat. Violet settles into the passenger seat, belt clicking. Hearing it, Olaf nods to her lap and says, "You'll want to keep that thing on."

"Alright. Where are we going?"

"Wrong question." Olaf says, pulling out wide and circling around the restaurant, weaving through bumpy brick roads and several other cars parked crooked and illegal. He turns down a grimey alley, pressed even tighter than the one bordering Eliade.

"Alright." Violet repeats, finding her mouth has gone dry. "I'll try again. Where is your Troupe?"

Olaf hums. With the press of a button, his headlights die. They are blanketed in blackness, not even the moonlight on them.

"What time is it?" Olaf asks her, even though they both look to the clock on the dash.

"Nine-thirty on the dot. Why does that-?" Violet never lets matter pass her lips. Instead it is replaced by a gasp as a side door in the restaurant is flung open, bright white light beaming into the alley, and several figures skid down crumbling concrete steps and into the night.

"Go, go!" They shout, voices mingling into once chaotic chant. "Hurry! He's coming!"

Violet is so stunned by the action she cannot speak until their waiter appears, standing in the doorway, backlit, furious.

"Cowards! Cads! Thespians! Thieves!" he cries, pointing an accusing finger. The Troupe slides rough and dogpiled into the back of the car, wild with laughter.

Olaf, grinning, races through the alley and out into the buzz of traffic and bustle. He turns down several unpopulated roads while the Troupe howls and squirms in the back.
"We did it! We did it!" Fernald cries, raising his hooks into the air.

"What did you do?" Violet asks, voice quiet with sudden dread.

"How much do you think that dinner was?" A white-faced woman demands.

Olaf shrugs, twitchy, his grin wild. "For seven adults? Several hundred dollars. At least. We've burnt a hole in his pocket."

Startled, Violet glances to Olaf only to find him already watching her out of the corner of his eye. He studies her best as he can while maintaining control of the car, meanwhile the Troupe laughs and crows at her back, victorious, still infused with alcohol and splendorous dinner.

"You-" Violet mutters, "No, we, stole all that?"

Olaf only frowns, glancing between her and the road, watching her reaction as if testing a critical experiment.

"How-? Why-?" She starts, feeling panicked, but remembers what Olaf had told her mere minutes ago, hears his words skipping like stones across her mind, ("I want you, Violet, to trust me.") and her own response, ready to offer her nobility like a cherished sacrifice.

She waits. Yet no sirens wail at their backs. Violet braces for a strike from a cane, for a reprimand that does not come.

Instead, all she sees is Olaf, the wild pulse of his heart in his throat, his eyes wide, glistening with the thrill of a plan come to fruition and moonlight through rapid trees.

Violet knows she has a decision to make. That her reaction completely divides the course of her life so spectacularly she feels frozen as she did seeing the switchblade a threat in Olaf's hands, her twin responses pressed as evenly together as desperate hands praying.

One moment, Violet is wine drunk, her heart in her hands, already impossibly in love.

The next, despite her realization, she is still all of those things.

Later, much later (hours turning to days turning to months-), Violet Baudelaire will eye a growing plume of black smoke at her back and remember this night as the first step to her very willing ruination, a slaughterhouse for nobility and good intentions.

Moments pass. The Troupe cheers. The car speeds on, unhindered by traffic, the whole backroad wide open and welcoming. Body buzzing with shock, Violet reaches for Olaf's hand. As soon as her fingers brush his knuckles, he grabs her hand and presses it reverently to his mouth, brutal and humbled and grateful.

Her anxiety unravels.

She lets out a huff of weary laughter, squeezing the man's hand as he cheers with his Troupe, glorious, delighted, profane with victory.

When faced with the choice between nobility and love, she chooses Olaf.

Everything that follows (the sex, the blood, the first fire, and the next-) is not without consequence.
Chapter End Notes

29 Myths on the Swinster Pharmacy is by Lemony Snicket and is illustrated by Lisa Brown. The line, "Despite any myths you may have heard, the Swinster Pharmacy sells aspirin and toothpaste just like everywhere else!" is inspired by myth number twenty-one.

Violet's mumbled song may be recognizable to those of you who have listened to The Gothic Archies' When You Play the Violin.

"How can I bond with my new knife if we don't spill some blood together?" is a quote by me, embarrassed at just having sliced open my finger with my new knife at a Christmas party.

As stated before, this ends part one! I sincerely hope you enjoyed it. I haven't fully completed part two, so I'm not sure how my uploading schedule might change. As always, I will keep you guys updated through tumblr.

Let me know what ya think! On to part two!
“We wanted to burn a hole in his pocket. The owner.”

Those are Olaf’s first words to her over tense coffee the next morning, Violet’s eyes dry, her mouth full of cotton, her whole body aching.

“Am I hungover?” She asks instead, afraid her response would prove damning or spineless or laughably naive.

“Absolutely.” Olaf says. “And I intend to bring you the greasiest of breakfast foods within the hour. But I wanted you to know- last night wasn’t petty theievery. It was calculated and measured and-

“And I was an unwilling accomplice. Complicit.” Violet sits gingerly at the dining table, her head in her hands. “You wanted my nobility? You’ve got it.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Violet.” Olaf mutters, trying at unfazed, yet she can see the nervous stiffness to his shoulders as he pauses near the front door. “Think on it. I’ll get us breakfast.”

“Will you pay for it this time?” She almost asks, but bites her tongue, unwilling to be cruel despite the circumstances. The last thing she wanted was to remind herself of Carmelita, and that remark would have hedged on precariously bratty.

“Alright. Thank you.” She says instead, moving to settle onto the couch. Olaf closes the door and she can hear his footsteps dropping down those sets of stairs nearly all the way to the street, tumbling like tossed coins to a yawning well.

Violet dozes on the couch until Olaf returns. Half-dreams swamp her mind, of Eliade sinking into the rain-wet earth, of Olaf hanging at her back like a shadow, never speaking. She can hear the traffic far below in the city, the chatter of birds and boots on slick sidewalk.

When the man walks back inside, a cacophony of rustling plastic bags, squeaking shoes, and jangling keys, he disperses her tangled dreams. She wakes with a deep sigh, her whole body still sore and heavy.

“You’ve returned.” She croaks.

“Of course.” He drawls, yet there is still a practiced distance to his voice, as if they were lovers long ago instead of just yesterday. “How could I desert you on your very first hangover?”
“How noble.” Violet mutters.

The man only hums at that. He sets the bags before her, so full of breakfast foods they nearly spill. She makes quick work of arranging her plate, piled high with hashbrowns and toast and fried eggs, their centers yolky and fine and ready to split.

Eliade is a flimsy detail in a long line of conversations they must soon endure. Violet knows her absence will not go unnoticed—by Nero, by Carmelita, by Isadora and Duncan, and, perhaps, Elsie—but she cannot quite feel bothered to care when her body hurts as it does, and a messy plate of greasy breakfast warms her lap, and there is so very much to say.

Olaf, having returned into his long plaid sleep pants and a dark tee with blurred print (SUSPECT YOUR ELDERS) settles onto the couch beside her. Despite her initial reaction in the car, her hand finding his like a promise, the man has been careful to give her space and leave plenty of pauses between speaking, allowing an in to flay him or dump him, she’s sure.

Violet brushes her fingers through his hair, sighing. Where she thinks she should feel betrayed or horrified or hurt she feels only exhaustion and emptiness.

She places her empty plate on the coffee table, then scoots until they are nearly touching. When she reaches for his cheek and guides him to her lap, he lets her position him until his head rests heavy like a stone on her thighs, the rest of him sprawled along the length of the couch. Olaf settles with a sigh. Violet watches his eyes close and wonders what she would not give, what he could demand from her, to leave him. Her responses rise vague and empty, an endless cavern of nothing.

She scratches lightly at the shadowing of facial hair at his cheeks. Even that small touch with the sharps of her nails has the man’s expression softening evermore. He breathes deeply. On an exhale, his whole body seems to melt into the couch.

“Are you hungover too?” Violet asks, voice quiet. She trails a reverent finger up the bridge of his nose, tracing cartilage and bone.

“No.” He responds, just as hushed. “I didn’t drink quite as much as a little orphan girl I know.”

Her finger travels higher, brushing over the papery swells of his eyelids, soft and smooth as new birthday candles.

“Poor little orphan girl.” Violet muses. “If only she’d had a strong, handsome man to take her home and put her in his bed… Demonstratively.”

At that, Olaf snorts. His eyelids flutter beneath her touch.

“You were in no state to romp, Baudelaire. Besides, I was surprised to find you still beside me come morning. I figured you’d run back to Eliade intent on dumping your lover-man boyfriend who just so happens to be a villainous actor and an active villain.”

“I thought about it.” Violet lies. She knows, however dangerous, her devotion to this man is absolute.

Olaf opens an eye, watching her neutrally, his every emotion hidden away.

“Oh?” he asks. A hollowness rounds out his tone.

She grants immediate mercy.
“No. Not really. And honestly that concerns me. These emotions are similar to how I felt when I hurt Carmelita. I hurt her with my own two hands and felt… satisfaction. Or justice. Or something, seeing her bleed. It’s like there’s this violence in me that I didn’t know existed. I wanted to hurt her so I did and I don’t feel bad about it. This guiltlessness worries me.” Violet rubs at the man’s temples, as if trying to rid him of the stress building in her own joints, throbbing like a fresh wound at the back of her neck.

Olaf does not respond. He waits and listens until she continues, the words pouring from her with the same intensity and depth as any traditional confessional.

“It’s similar to how I feel about last night. We, well, you, did something wrong. Ignoble. Traitorous. But you did it to get even petty revenge against the people who hurt you. Who have hurt us.”

When, again, the man does not respond, Violet concludes, “Stealing is bad. I was taught that as a moral absolute. But I understand why you did it and I feel, sort of- I don’t know. Defended. Vindicated. I… I want to hurt VFD like I hurt Carmelita. I want them to regret ever forming. Ever taking my family from me.”

“Violet,” Olaf says, voice more serious than she has ever heard it.

She braces for a scolding. In her mind she hears him snort, “A tiny thing like you? Good luck.” Or, hesitant, her body suddenly a host of red flags unfurling like Spring blooms, “These violent tendencies are truly alarming. Perhaps you should visit a psychiatrist immediately.”

Yet neither come.

Instead, the man’s eyes open and he gazes at her with only calm understanding, like looking into his destiny and finding it ultimately satisfactory.

“Just when I thought you had gutted me wholly. How can one body hold sentiment as intense and vivid and wholly large as mine? You want to destroy VFD.” His voice holds such raw emotion Violet has to look away.

Olaf’s hand, calloused, large, brushes reverently at her jaw, his thumb passing over the swell of her bottom lip.

“Fate saw us together, Violet Baudelaire.” He says, convicted, convinced. “Who are we to waste it?”

Her training begins the very next day.

Olaf wakes her with a steaming mug of coffee sweetened to perfection as dull sunlight bleeds through the windows.

“Wakey wakey, little sneak.” He calls. “Time to open your eyes to clarity in all its terror.”

She jolts upright at the sound of his voice, waking nearly instantly. Her hair is a frizzy halo, her tongue stiff. No memory of dreams swamp her mind. She had merely been blank, gone, her whole
awareness sunken by sleep. Violet rubs her eyes, asks through a yawn, “Clarity in all its terror?”

Olaf hums. He takes a loud slurp from his own mug, held tight in the palm of his hand.

“That’s rude.” Violet mutters, tossing the covers aside. She tiptoes to him on weak legs, her cold hands dipping beneath the hem of his shirt to rest flat on his stomach.

“Get your chilly little hands off me, orphan. Take this instead.” He thrusts the mug her way. Violet accepts it, taking a sip.

“Can I take a shower before delving into the mysteries of a secret society?”

The man narrows his eyes, pauses, pretends to think it over. “Only if I can join you.”

She covers her grin with her coffee mug and turns away. “That’s what I expected. Let’s go, you cad.”

Olaf follows at her back, his hands running from the flow of her hair to brush the curve of her back. “You know, the best part of seeing you in my clothes is knowing I’m going to get you out of them.”

Violet laughs, the sound amplified in the bathroom. She flips the lightswitch, runs the water. “You could get me out of my own clothes too, y’know.”

“Smart-mouthed little orphan.” Olaf growls, amused. “I’ll drown you.”

They spend far longer in the shower than either expected and emerge some time later pruned and clean and laughing. Violet dresses quickly and hurries from the bedroom, intent on warming her coffee and giving the man space.

She drags a wicker chair into the kitchen and sits, running fingers through her damp hair. Her thoughts, relaxed from the shower and simple proximity to Olaf, darken. Her coffee goes cold. Nerves work their way into her stomach, a clutch of needles.

She realizes the selfish, hedonistic part of her wants to avoid the topic of VFD forever if possible, to forget the world outside with all its fire and treachery and noise.

She imagines sharing Olaf’s apartment until her eighteenth birthday and, once inheriting a mountainous fortune, running away someplace remote, unassuming, quiet. Somewhere they could simply be an actor and an inventor, bedmates, lovers.

Violet watches cars rumble past far below and holds onto this fantasy a few moments more. From the bedroom, she hears Olaf sigh, shuffle. A soft rustle of fabric like bird wings folding.

Even hearing the man from afar, existing, moving through his morning routine, has Violet’s heart constricting.

Abandoning the city with all its secrets, she knows, would be cowardly. Knowledge of VFD she views as a stolen birthright, a bullet to the head avoided only by other people’s mistakes.

Knowledge Olaf is willing to share.

“There will be things I cannot tell you no matter how deeply you may wish it. For both our safety.” His words rise in her mind, tinged with dread and promises of trouble. Even with her limited understanding of VFD, she knows the man is risking his neck in educating her, of breaking code and vow and honor.
Maybe, she thinks, he broke it a long time ago.

“Ready little sneak?” The man slinks into the kitchen, his hair damp and wild, a loose white shirt hanging from his shoulders. He wears hemmed cloth trousers, rolled at the ankle. His feet are bare despite the morning chill.

She nods, feeling his warm hand settle against the top of her head, smoothing her hair.

“Ready to get inducted?” He says, half-heartedly teasing.

Violet snorts. “Not funny.”

“You’re right. Over my dead body would you ever get inducted. And speaking of inducted...” Olaf walks before her, a calculated look to his eyes. He raises his left foot slowly and places it on an arm of the wicker chair.

She spots it immediately, her eyes blowing wide.

“What-?” Violet sputters, pointing. “What is that? Since when do you have a tattoo?”

“Since I was eleven.” He answers, voice calm. Serious contemplation erases the earlier mirth from his eyes. “I was given it nonconsensually in the back of a long, black car the night I was taken away. It’s the brand of a volunteer. Though, as far as I know, it’s an outdated tradition.”

Violet brushes her fingers gingerly over the tattoo, as if afraid it still stung. “I can see it now. It’s like the other eyes we’ve seen. The curve of the eyebrow as the V, the line beneath it the F ... The eye as the D. That’s...” Violet shakes her head, images she has never experienced swamping her mind. She feels the chaos of a proper kidnapping, the adrenaline and terror of being taken, a pinch of needles at the bone of a bare ankle. “Traumatic. Vile. Why haven’t I ever seen it?”

Olaf rolls his shoulders, steps away. He stares at her in silence for several moments, debating, she’s sure, information and how much he could share.

“I’m sure part of it is simple thoughtlessness.” He says, voice distant as a practiced lecturer. “You didn’t think I’d have a tattoo, so you hadn’t considered hunting for one. But, the better answer, is because I didn’t want you to. Think on it.”

So she does. Violet rises to place the chair back where she had found it, to rinse her mug in the sink, mind turning. She thinks of her ribbon resting on Olaf’s bathroom sink, but forgoes it.

“You undressed after me on our first date, once I had already hit the water. And then knelt in the sand instead of joining me on the car. When your apartment was burnt down you wouldn’t let me undress you, not fully. You have been... very clothed, so far. Until recently.” He catches her displeased frown.

Violet hums, annoyed yet understanding. “I’m sure you didn’t want me to see it until now because you weren’t sure how much I knew about VFD. Me seeing that tattoo would prompt questions you couldn’t answer. I’d get suspicious. It’s all over Duncan’s book, y’know. Not really that eye, but ones like it. I’d have made the connection eventually.”

“Exactly.” Olaf nods. He offers no apology, no promises of future honesty.

Violet breathes deeply, already overwhelmed. She glances to the man’s bare feet, then to the sad sternness of his face. His hand is warm in hers when she briefly laces their fingers.
Teasing, nervous, she asks, “What else don’t you want me to know?”

Olaf squeezes her hand once, then drops it. He points to a door she had never truly considered and opens an arm, gesturing her inside.

“Everything I’m about to tell you.”

Violet holds up longer than he expects.

Even in the face of his unexpected study, she does not falter. He leads her inside the bright room, its walls lined with maps and photographs and newspaper clippings. A large desk by the window overflows with clutter. A shadowy terrarium hums between stacks of books. Piles of props and disguises line the walls. They sit at another small desk in the center of the room, Olaf brushing away scraps of burnt paper, the lens to an old spyglass, and a small tower of mycological books to make room.

Violet, for all her sure surprise, waits and listens.

Olaf knows her mind is sharp as his favorite knife and gleams even brighter, knows beneath the anxiety, the avoidance, she is desperate for details and answers. After hours of conversation, explaining the induction process, the history, the machinations of VFD, Violet listens and does not grow weary.

Questions he expected. Yet, after everything is said and every question has been answered, what he does not expect is her pity.

“So they kidnapped you. Took your whole childhood. Your whole life.”

Somehow, he had underestimated her heart. He tells Violet Baudelaire the manipulations of VFD, of its children victims turned warped adults, and instead of mourning the childhoods of her parents, she considers him. The boy, the innocent, in him could weep.

As an adult, he still feels much like he did at eleven, branded, marked, the whole world dangerous and strange, unlike he knew it before. One wrong move- a slip of the tongue, a misspelled poem—could land a poison dart in his neck. He knows these things as surely as he did in childhood.

He does not know how to tell her how bitterness has calloused him, made him tough to emotional rot, to the things that would haunt him. To the normality he could have had. Instead, he was completely absorbed by VFD.

And then, all at once, he was done.

“They did. They took my childhood from me. And they would have taken yours too, if not for the schism.”

Even saying the word still has wretched relief bursting through his bones.

“The schism?”

“Many years ago there was a general disagreement between volunteers. Plenty of us wanted out,
wanted to stop stealing children from their beds, wanted change. To disband. Things grew… violent. It became hard to tell who was on which side. I’ve learned now that you can’t walk away from VFD. It follows you. I can’t not be a volunteer. I’ve been trained, molded. I cannot shake who I was raised to be. But you. You’re safe. And free. Because- I–

He pauses, unwilling to continue. He can feel the fear on his face, reminiscent of Violet’s first morning visit, clambering into his lap, his every emotion on display.

“Violet sometimes horrid things must be done to meet a good, well-deserved end. Skipping the bill at an enemy’s restaurant. Hurting your tormentor.”

Their eyes meet- hot, intimate. He knows she is remembering Carmelita weeping and bloody at her feet.

“I understand.” Her voice cracks.

“Good. We’ve been talking for awhile. Your first official lesson should be done with, I think. There will be more, of course, if you’re willing. Give me a recap of what you’ve learned.”

Violet sighs, long and deep, burdened by information, by inherited sins.

“VFD stands, at its core, for volunteer fire department. It can be used in other ways, any words at all, as long as the initials are correct. Valorous Farms Dairy, like you taught me. And these can be used in letters, publications, speeches, street signs, village names. Anything really. It used to mean that other volunteers were nearby who shared the same ideas and would be willing to offer you whatever they could. VFD was about promoting international literacy and humanitarianism and quieting a loud, chaotic world. Right? Am I on target so far? VFD… targeted people. People with power or wealth to join. But things grew corrupt. Recruits became younger and younger, dazzled by the importance of belonging to an organization so secretive and exclusive.”

Olaf nods, uncaring that he is interrupting. The hours of dwelling on his most traumatic memories have grated is patience, his emotional control. “And that’s the worst part. When you’re so young they make you want it. VFD was nearly considered a bloodline inheritance. Families began offering their children to be taken and trained. They were stolen away, stuck with tattoos, and inducted with no choice whether they knew about VFD or not. Eventually volunteers would roam the city, searching for children with traits they desired. Once the neophytes turned eleven they would be kidnapped. Families ignorant of the organization would wake to find their children gone. Children who would grow into volunteers, bound by duty and nobility, taken and never brought back. The schism ended that. It’s why you weren’t inducted. Things grew too chaotic to take and train neophytes. Hopefully the practice never returns.”

Violet casts him the same pitying look. Normally he hates pity, feels powerless beneath it, but this time he knows she means no harm and lets that pity start to soothe him. “I’m sorry. I wish you hadn’t gone through that. Hadn’t been hurt and… and changed.”

Olaf sighs, frustrated at the old wounds he finds still aching. He shifts, takes her hands gone cold as first frost. In the face of someone apologizing for his childhood, even having had no part in it, Olaf does not know what to say.

“I wish you didn’t have to know about it.” He settles on, as true as anything else.

“Imagine if we had met like we did, but just as normal people. Unorphaned. Unmarked. We could date in secret and my parents could be overly concerned about your age and intentions but they’d come around eventually, once they saw how happy you made me, and then, once I graduate, we
“Violet-” Olaf says, stopping her. “I don’t like thinking about who I’d be. Without VFD. It’s a useless fantasy. But speaking of your parents, I do want to show you some things. All my possessions burnt to the ground. An associate sent me copies of childhood photographs, seeing as she owed me a favor or two.”

He cracks a book on the floor at his feet, then rises to toss a small stack of worn photographs across the table with more force than necessary, as if he could not bear to touch them a moment longer.

The print is stocky and thick, nearly cardboard in texture. Violet eyes the back of the photos first, finding no stamp, no label, no handwritten date. Olaf can see the nervous apprehension on her face as she flips the first, only to come face to face with her father cast monochrome.

She lays the photo flat on the table, close enough that he can see.

Bertrand stands tall and proud before an old carnival tent, his hip cocked, a smug smirk on his face. At his feet, a grown lion rests in the dirt, its paws folded, its eyes on his open, steady hand. He could not be but five years older than his daughter.

Violet stares, speechless.

Olaf feels pressure to explain, to cover the silence with his own voice. “There are so many mementos of our time together in your little sanctuary. I thought you might appreciate some of your parents, too.”

“I would. Yes, of course. Thank you.” Violet says, but does not tear her eyes away from the stack. She tucks the photo of her father to the back of the stack.

The next shows her mother standing in a dim hall, her face obscured in shadow, the glitter of her dress catching faint light. She holds one arm extended to her side, showing off a large set of dragonfly wings stitched to her sleeves. A typewritten caption, blurred by time, reads: BEATRICE, HEADQUARTERS.

“There’s a headquarters?” She asks. He watches a delicate finger brush the glitz on her mother’s dress.

“Was. But it burnt down a few years back.” He leans across the table, peering closer. “Ah. The dragonfly dress. Who knew those wings actually worked?”

That gets Violet’s attention. Her dark eyes meet his, suspicious, amused. “You’re joking.”

“I absolutely am not.” He insists.

Violet still watches him for any telltale sign of deception, and, finding none, flips to the next photograph. It features both her parents centered in the frame, their arms around one another, their faces so close to the camera the background blurs. No clarifying script marks the film, no details to offer more insight to her parents’ lives. They simply exist, grinning, immortalized together.

Though the other photos had charmed her, Violet stares at her parents simply happy, their cheeks pressed close as book pages, and Olaf can tell by the softening of her face that she remembers them this way. Not dashing, noble volunteers, but two people who had loved one another and loved her in turn.

“This is so sweet.” Violet says, voice soft. “They… look like themselves here.”
Olaf reaches over, places a hand at the soft crown of her head. Seeing Beatrice and Bertrand even in worn photographs summons a host of awful memories, yet watching their only surviving daughter study them with obvious affection tampers the sting.

She flips to the last photo.

Olaf is the first to react. Mortified, his fight-or-flight instinct kicks in and he resists the urge to rip the portrait from her hands. Instead he stands, growls, rubs his eyes, and curses Esmé Squalor.

“Damn woman!” He hisses. “I should have known she’d try to humiliate me.”

Violet squeals in unabashed delight, pressing the photo protectively against her chest. “Don’t be so embarrassed! You’re so cute! Look at you!”

“I’d prefer not to.” He grumbles.

Violet peels it away from her chest, sure he will not steal it, to study once more. It shows a young Olaf near Violet’s age, donned in a dated Prufrock uniform, side-eying the camera with a scowl. He is smaller, thinner, a bit more wild-looking. Yet Violet eyes him with affection all the same.

“I love these.” She says, gathering her clutch of treasures close. True gratitude meekens her. “They’ll look perfect in my secret room. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome.” Still ruffled, Olaf runs his fingers through his hair, a nervous tick he could never quell. “You’ll have a chance to hang them soon. We’ve got to get going. I have rehearsal and you should at least show your face in Eliade after disappearing for two days.”

Violet stands, stretches, glances around the wild room. She does not look particularly troubled over leaving it.

“Alright.” She says. “Ready to go?”

Olaf watches her stand feeling overwhelmed and grateful and sweetly broken in the aftermath of such a traumatic conversation. He shakes himself, already preparing for the messy, surely-disastrous lessons soon to come.

He waves to the door, out into the world beyond his intricate studies of VFD. Violet watches, waiting for instruction.

He says, tone strong, “Lead the way, little sneak.”

Instead of returning to her bedroom or seeking out Isadora, Violet climbs to her secret room and lights the altar candles. Although she had been there two nights previous, the space felt old and untouched, as if a memory of when she first discovered it.

Her satchel slumps to the floor as she steps out of her shoes, weary. Her mind feels soft and fuzzy, worn from questions and information overload. With each step she peels off a layer of clothing, tossing her uniform to the floor in search of pajamas. Only once she has changed clothes, brushed her hair, and calmed enough to strike a match does she withdraw the photographs.
The candlelight casts the pair in golden, filling white hollows where ink avoided- the bridge of her father’s nose, the familiar swell of her mother’s cheek. She places the print on the inventing table at an angle, the back against the great glass windows. It looks at home atop her salvaged inventing parts- a polaroid worn at the edges, faded by time, surrounded by rusting tools and scuffed soup cans flipped like pedestals to support dribbling candles, their crowns of flame, her parents centered and beaming and already in love.

The scowling portrait of Olaf she holds with the other photos, pressed like a child to her chest. Soothed by the low light and hush, Violet sits on the floor, her chin resting on the makeshift table, her legs between the wine crates (close enough to catch a whiff of them- honey and peach, a flint like tobacco-).

Violet gazes at the photograph, an unspoken fear blunted by its presence. She remembers her dream, stuck close together with her family in the little tower, how she had felt the warmth of her mother’s hand but had been unable to summon her voice from memory. In the fallout of that dream, slow thoughts of erasure have crossed her mind. Violet found herself wondering if she would forget the faces of her family, the way they moved and spoke and smiled.

Over time she has come to realize that abandonment does not happen the instance one is left the sole survivor of a family of five, but much later, once memory has lost its grip on the fine details of the dead. Abandonment begins once one realizes the identities of their families have faded pale and vague like words to a treasured book left too long in the sun.

It is an inevitable process, she thinks. And, thanks to Olaf, one that could be delayed.

Although her time in Eliade has taught her plenty about hierophanies and rituals and every version of God, she has never found herself convinced one way or another. The promise that others felt when raised in religion had never bloomed in her growing up with Judaism. Violet has hardly felt even vaguely spiritual.

This thought leads to another, a memory of two mornings previous- Duncan’s epiphany, walking past the Sanctuary and right into divine instruction. Violet, however wondrous, does not feel convinced. Yet she kneels at her own ramshackle altar with its flame and smoke and Olaf’s wilted dandelions, gazing to her parent’s photograph, hoping that somewhere her family is happy and safe and warm together.

Violet sets the portrait of teenage Olaf atop the table, finding him handsome even then, and revisits her daydream of normalcy and familial bonding.

She dozes.

Through the haze of half-dreams, she hears the Troupe file onto the stage below, hears them laughing, swapping lines. Olaf grumbles, gloats. Feeling comforted by familiar voices far away, belonging to people who wish her no harm, she sinks to sleep.

And wakes, sudden as thunder, to the stairwell door slamming.

From the Troupe, silence like the seconds before a car crash.

Violet rises with a blurry mind, already lurching towards the trapdoor before she truly wakes. She expects police. Or Nero, at the very least, come to demand explanation at his impresario’s likeness in the fresh Punctilio, a warrant for his neck.

She does not expect Carmelita Spats.
Violet opens the trapdoor just a crack, instantly awake, her heart rabid and caged.

“Get out.” Olaf orders at once. The Troupe, knowing when to pick their battles, shuffles backstage, disappearing into the labyrinth of halls.

Olaf stands alone centerstage, watching Carmelita approach as if eyeing a loaded pistol. He has changed clothes since their arrival at Eliade. Instead of his usual dark slacks and buttoned shirt he wears trousers cut from reams of white velvet, embroidered with golden thread. Beneath a vest he wears linen cut tight at the wrists and flowing at the elbow. He stands calm yet defensive, cheekbones hollowed by high stage lights, looking like he had just stepped from a centuries-old oil painting.

Carmelita steps to stage looking pleased. Her hair hangs long down the curve of her back, glimmering like polished copper. She casts him a look that is not fully a smile.

“Well, young lady, have you been good to your mother?” Carmelita asks, voice simpering and sly.

Olaf sighs. There is a tough flex to his jaw, like biting down sarcasm. He replies, bored, “The question is, has she been good to me?”

“You survived the tunnel collapse.” Carmelita says, withdrawing a letter from her blazer.

“Unfortunately. What do you want?” He drolls, snatching the letter.

Carmelita flinches, an instinct she could not quell. Violet remembers with sudden acuteness the minutes after she had split Carmelita’s lip- Olaf pressing her against the wall, his hand at her throat. Olaf, it seems, has the same flash of memory.

“Still scared of me, little girl?” He smirks, amused. Not prone to conversation, he rips the envelope carelessly, turning away. Carmelita does not answer, merely stands her ground, watching.

“What are you waiting for?” The man sneers. “I should be hearing you stumble down the stairs. Get going.”

“Read it.” She insists.

Olaf rolls his eyes, tugging the small paper free and flipping it open, muttering, “Women and their ceaseless demands. When will I be free from-”

He stops. Violet can see the quick flash of his shiny eyes darting across the thick paper. The letter is immediately crumbled in his fist, crackling like flame.

“No. No! Why now? He’s-! It’s-! Ugh!” He shouts, bearing teeth. Carmelita takes a nervous step back, calculative. The rubber of her shoes squeal against the stage.

“Next week.” She says, a parting reminder, before slipping away. Quiet as a mime, Carmelita steps offstage and hurries back to Eliade’s main floor.

Olaf sighs. Only once the door has slammed shut behind Carmelita does the man’s gaze shift, very deliberate, to meet hers. Violet feels stunned, frozen, by the dead seriousness on his face. She wonders if she has witnessed a transaction she was not meant to see.

“My dearest darling.” He says, a bitter, rueful twist to his mouth. Olaf throws his arms wide, a wicked welcome onto unholy ground. “Gather your things! Watch your back! Check the locks on every door and window!”
He tosses the crumpled letter to the stage, disgusted, “It’s induction season.”

Chapter End Notes

I didn't elude to much in this conversation-laden chapter.

Welcome to Part Two! I hope you enjoy it.

Many thanks for all the excited messages I've received. You lovely people keep me going.

As always, let me know what you think!
“Tell me, young lady, have you been good to your mother?”

He asks her this at odd moments throughout their days together- Violet on her tiptoes brushing her teeth at his apartment, shouting over the radio in his car, or slipping it written on notes beneath her trapdoor, the Troupe on a break.

Olaf takes any and every moment to teach her, trying to sink knowledge to her mind like a heavy stone to a vast green lake or a starfish to endless sea. And Violet, ever studious, is not unwilling.

Her response, from the very first lesson, has always been the same.

“The question is, has she been good to me?”

“Perfect.” Olaf would say, placing his hand atop her head, her bent knee, or at her jaw, intent on a kiss. “You will be so very hard to fool.”

He does not test her on their midnight drive.

Instead, to Violet, to the empty road, to the pitch-black night with all its stars, he says, “You can still back out you know. I can turn the car around and you can keep your youthful ignorance. Your innocence of treachery. There is only so much you must see firsthand.”

Violet sighs, squeezes his hand where it rests at her knee.

“I know what you’re trying to do. You want to protect me from the things you’ve seen. And that is kind. Noble. Sweet. But you can stop asking. I know we can turn around, I just don’t want to. This is something I should see.”

Olaf scowls. “I know you want experience. But there’s a difference between knowing something will occur when you are very far away, and watching that thing occur right before your eyes when you are powerless to stop it. This night… it will change you. And not for the better.”

“Yes.” Violet agrees, staring ahead to the winding road smothered in night. “I will probably have nightmares for months. Keep driving.”
“Listen to me. No matter what, Violet, my dear thing, my little sneak, my dearest darling… Do not
scream. Do not attempt heroics. Tonight, there is nothing we can do. We cannot- Snicket cannot see
us.”

“I understand. I won’t scream. I need to see what VFD does.... What they’re capable of.” She says.

“I don’t like it but I think so too. We’re nearly there.” Olaf murmurs, trailing his hand from her knee
to her lap to lace their fingers. Violet grips it like a boon, like a lifeline. She presses a kiss to each
knuckle.

“I’m scared.” Violet admits, spitting it like a tooth punched free- fast and gorey and not without some
pride.

“The only good piece of advice I’ve heard from Lemony Snicket’s melodramatic mouth was this: Do
the scary thing first and get scared later. As much as I hate to admit, it works. So-” Olaf says,
squeezing her hand.

“So let’s do the scary thing.” Violet says with a nod.

They drive.

The night swallows their high-beams whole, lays flat the open land. Horizon and sky meet in vague
blackness. The only light comes from inside the sparse homes they pass, candles or televisions or
sputtering fireplaces- properties marked by crooked fence posts jutting like teeth from the jaws of the
earth, fabric phantoms fluttering in the yards, clipped to clotheslines.

She looks at those houses, wondering at the bodies sleeping inside, and tries to guess which
household will next fall victim to Lemony Snicket- which parents will wake to find empty beds, to
their whole lives gone.

Olaf parks the car at the edge of a cornfield, careful to hide from the gaze of the moon. He parks
where shadows gather, pulled off the bumpy road into bumpier terrain.

“We can’t park too close.” Olaf says as he kills the engine and rises quick into the night. The cool air
does nothing for Violet’s nerves as she follows his lead.

His gaze travels down the length of her- assessing the all-black ensemble he had insisted, had tossed
to her before donning his own. “My associates should be- this way.”

They hike in the darkness, every sound a threat, a thrill. Olaf leads them from the edge of the
cornfield to a forest thick with trees and brush. The sweet smell of rotting foliage plumes with every
step they take. Ripe, heavy things fall to smack the earth.

Violet watches Olaf shift through the growth, silent. Suppression harnesses his reflexes into fine,
controlled motion like a predator. He steps and twists and ducks all with effortless action. The
muscles of his shoulders roll through the fabric of his dark shirt. She follows him, trying her best to
mimic the motion, wondering if it was VFD who taught him to sneak, to disappear.

“This neophyte is said to not only possess a certain gleam in the eye indicative a sharp, erudite
acumen but also strong foraging and agricultural skills.” Olaf says, voice low in the darkness. “With
a town as dreary as this, what else would there be to do but learn your land? We- they- are in need of
mycological assistance. Biological warfare is a token practice of VFD. Tell me, Violet, were there
ever days your parents fed you apples bitter with the taste of horseradish?”

“Yes.” Violet says, carefully avoiding a harsh snag of thorns. “Some days they would both look
worried and sit us down at the kitchen table. We’d all eat lumpy, bitter apples. They told us it was just to stay healthy. Doesn’t every parent say that to their child? An apple a day keeps the doctor away? Klaus and I were suspicious. They were so worried, but-they would never tell us the truth.”

“Well, allow me. Here’s a bitter truth you can’t avoid. Those apples have the taste of horseradish because it destroys the spores of a toxic mushroom used by VFD. A deadly fungus. Your parents must have had days they expected calamity. Do not let it worry you. Either way, there’s our hideout.” He points through the trees to a wiry structure, so tall and thin it seemed to scrape the stars.

“A radio tower?” Violet asks, eyeing the long chords anchoring it to the ground, the high ascension of metal ladder, the disc-shaped room near the top with its black walls of windows.

“Yes.” Olaf says, emerging from the thicket of trees to the gravel plot surrounding the tower. Violet follows him cautiously, feeling spooked by the stillness and darkness, by navigating a new situation she does not fully understand, and the seconds creeping down to an inevitable exchange she must bear witness to.

Pale red light shines against them, blinking from the tower. Olaf approaches the bottom rung of the ladder. Violet catches sight of a small sign jutting crooked from the gravel. It reads in faded script: ENDTIMES TELECOMMUNICATIONS NETWORK.

“Endtimes?” Violet questions. Olaf turns, following her gaze to the sign. He squints, shrugs, takes a step closer.

“It says- something else-” Violet points to the fine print on the sign as they step closer, feet crunching gravel, their hearts in their throats.

Olaf reads, “Endtimes Telecommunications Network. Radiation channeled right to the skull, to the permeable, decaying body. The muscle of your brain atrophies under our fine tuning.”

“Uh-” Violet mutters, reaching for his hand in the darkness. Above them, that red light blinks its constant beam. “Are you sure we’re supposed to be here? That- that sounds horrifying. Maybe we should go.”

Beside her, Olaf shakes his head. “I was told to meet here, but this is not our organization. It’s something bigger. Tread lightly.”

They scale the ladder carefully. Violet, rising higher with every step, looks out over the land, sees it unfurling endlessly in every direction. The drop of earth deepens behind her, gales of wind batter her grip, and that red light swamps her form like a pulse. She feels very small.

Olaf helps her stand as they reach the platform. She is met by her own reflection blinking back at her from the dark glass door. Her hair yanked by harsh winds, her eyes wide and wild, proof this night has already mauled itself to her memory.

Unwilling to face her reflection a moment more, Violet yanks the handle, unsurprised to find it locked.

“Shit.” Olaf hisses, barely audible over the wind.

“Give me a minute.” Violet mutters, reaching into her back pocket for her pack of lockpicks. Minutes pass in the cold before the pins finally recede and they enter into the calm, dark stillness of the control tower.

“Clever little orphan. Maybe I should keep you around. Won’t that- don’t!” Olaf hisses, slapping
her hand. Startled, Violet yelps, whipping her hand away from the lightswitch.

He offers explanation instead of apology. “We can’t be seen.”

“You’re right.” Violet mutters, embarrassed at her thoughtlessness. “Sorry. It felt reflexive to turn the lights on.” She sighs, attempting to slow the harsh hammering in her chest. “When should your associates be here?”

“Soon.” Olaf says, glancing out the door to the long drop below. “I’m surprised they aren’t already. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be on the lookout.”

He brushes a hand over her shoulders as he passes, ducking into the wind and crouching to the shadows. He shuts the door, disappears.

Violet walks slowly around the tower, eyeing its mess of papers and electrical equipment. Long desks covered in buttons and microphones line the walls. Tangled cables huddle like shadows at the floor. Such a massive amount of controls in such a small space reminds her distantly of Eliade’s dimmer room.

She takes her time wandering the dim, circular tower. She takes note of the files in neat stacks at the windowsill, the wires running like river channels at the floor. Atop the desks, she catches glimpses of paperwork- bland, anonymous type or careful penmanship.

Outside, beyond the wind, voices.

“-your only warning.” Olaf says, voice stern.

Violet turns, grateful for a distraction, only to see Carmelita step into the stillness. Sharing such a small, quiet space with her feels immediately wrong. The nervous coil of her gut winds a notch tighter.

“Orphan.” Carmelita says, tight with suppression.

Violet, shocked and confused, stares neutrally, does not respond. She simply looks to Olaf who enters next, watching her with steady seriousness, as if she were a long-taught pupil facing her first organic task. She remembers his words like reflex, like instinct- “There will be some things I cannot explain no matter how dearly you may wish it.”

Violet recalls her shared history with Carmelita, feeling bloodlust like another skin. She smiles in the darkness, hoping the moonlight catches her bad angles.

“Hi, Carmelita.”

Carmelita frowns, watching her uneasily, and steps aside for a tall woman to enter. It is only then that Violet notices each of them has dressed in all black. Where Carmelita wears tight, probably enormously expensive leather pants and a long jacket, the woman behind her wears a cape made entirely of black bear fur. Violet knows this because the bear’s head trails along the floor, open in a perpetual snarl. The cape is so thick she can barely see beneath it. Glossy boots toe through the mass of fur, the heel so long and thin she’s surprised it does not snap.

“Oh, Miss Violet-” the woman breathes, ignoring Olaf who shuts the door firmly behind her. She lurches to grab Violet’s hand in a painful squeeze. “Lovely to see you survived the tunnel collapse. “Lovely to see you survived the tunnel collapse. We didn’t get a proper introduction then, seeing as you weren’t supposed to be there, but there’s no time like the present, don’t you think? My name is Esmé Gigi Genevieve Squalor, the city’s sixth most important financial advisor. Even though I am unbelievably wealthy, you may call me Esmé.”
She grips Violet’s hand, long nails digging into her skin.

“Oh. Uh, how do you do? I’m Violet Baudelaire. I’m an inventor and a student at Eliade with C-”

“Ah, Baudelaire!” Esmé swoons, releasing Violet’s hand. She turns on sharp heels to cast Olaf a smug look. “That name brings back so many pleasant memories, don’t you agree, Olaf?”

He cuts in, tries to growl, “Esmé, don’t start.”

Esmé Squalor, Violet learns, is in the nasty habit of ignoring rebuke.

“Oh, speaking of Olaf-” The woman looks back to Violet who has not moved from her spot by the front desk, too frozen by the surge of rapid energy Esmé flaunted.

Carmelita mutters, annoyed, “You brought him up. No one else mentioned him. He’s right there.”

Esmé does not even spare the girl a glance. Instead she saunters closer to Violet, whispering loud enough for each person to hear even over the howling wind outside, “I hear you’ve got this man wrapped around your finger. What a lucky girl you are to have such a handsome man at your beck and call, hmm?”

Under the scrutiny, Violet finds herself blushing, unnerved. She is immediately intimidated by Esmé’s feral smile, by her unrelenting proximity to Carmelita.

“Oh, ah, yes. I mean, yes, I am lucky. But he’s not, er, at my beck and call. But, yes, he’s very handsome. Wrapped around my finger, though, I don’t know. Um.”

“Ladies-” Olaf drawls, crossing the room with a confident gait. He shoulders up to her, wrapping an arm around her waist, pressing their bodies so close she can smell the campfire scent of him. “I know how pleasant it would be to sing my praises like I’m some god before a congregation. But we’re here for an induction.”

Esmé tutts, waving him away. “You’re no fun, Olaf. Nobody needs a reminder.”

“An induction.” Carmelita repeats. Suppressed beneath cold aggression, she bears a wounded tone, proof she has not been prepared for the following emotional trauma. An expression Violet has never seen crosses Carmelita’s pale face. Desperate, horrified, she looks to a grinning Esmé.

“Surprise!” The woman crows, throwing her arms wide.

Disgusted, Carmelita huffs, rolls her eyes, and slinks away to stare out a long side window. There is a preparative hunch to her shoulders, as if she is already trying to guard her heart, bracing for a strike that would surely scar.

“Ah, teenagers. Always in a fit when you forget to disclose emotionally disturbing information.” Esmé drolls.

Violet and Olaf share a steadying glance. He drums his fingers softly at her side.

“Emotionally disturbing. Everything about this whole experience is disturbing! This place is creepy.” Carmelita snaps, turning. She points to the ceiling where a large canvas map hangs. “Look at this thing.”

Their eyes trace it in the darkness, rolling over painted hills and homes and fine edges of water.

“It shows how far these radio waves reach. Which is, like, everywhere. Endtimes
Telecommunications Network. Is this—” For a bizarre reason Violet could not guess, Carmelita’s eyes find hers. “Us?”

“No.” Esme says, sudden fear in her voice. “Not at all. They’re something I uncovered accidentally during my days as a neophyte. Don’t let it concern you. Also, don’t touch anything. We watch the induction and we leave. Understood?”

“Speaking of—” Olaf says, voice falsely calm, neutral. He releases her and Violet steps away gratefully. “Which house is it?”

Esme walks closer to the wall of tinted windows. The bear’s head trails at her feet, crossing a beam of moonlight. Violet watches the glass eyes catch the light and glow.

The four of them, pressed close together in the little tower, stare out over the town with its dirt roads, dusty fields, and sparse homes with great gaps of land between. Violet stares to the unfastened dark, delirious with stars.

Esme hums. One long, manicured finger jabs the glass, pointing towards an unassuming home, its crooked gravel driveway, its windows black with night. “That one. You’re lucky, Olaf, that I had the foresight to lower myself to the Kafka. Even disguised, I knew he couldn’t stay away. That’s the home. Snicket should show up within the hour.”

“Perfect.” Olaf says.

Violet, feeling sick with dread, steps away from the windows. She crosses the room to continue her examination of the control panels, eyes roaming its lights and buttons yet not truly seeing. Her mind is on the child far below. She wonders if they are sleeping, if they can sense the coming doom. Her gaze snags on an untidy stack of paper, handwritten plans on them penned in the clean and tightly-controlled hand of someone who knows their work will be examined by others:

HIDE IN PLAIN SIGHT, IN POSITIONS OF POWER AND HONOR. YOU ARE ABOVE RETRIBUTION, REBUKE. DO NOT WORK FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD. DO NOT SEE THE BLOOD IN YOUR OWN SOFT HANDS.

Violet hopes her knowledge of Endtimes fades from memory easily, does not haunt her. She knows, however, that it is a useless wish. The look of her reflection at the door had been proof enough, her whole awareness changed, warped, other. She knows she will remember this night, the sheer anxious waiting. And then, she thinks, the aftermath. The absence.

“There’s his car.” Olaf says, voice calm but stiff with nerves.

For a single moment, they all freeze. Shared dread peaks to a heartbeat’s span.

Esme pauses examining her manicure. Carmelita keeps her eyes resolutely on the canvas map. Violet does not turn away from the papers, her gaze stuck on HONOR.

The moment passes. They crowd, not touching, at the window.

Lemony Snicket arrives with all the grace of a phantom and the welcome of disease. His car, long and oily black, resembles Olaf’s parked blocks away. Moonlight glides like water off the vehicle as it drives slowly down the lane. Two homes before the destination, the lights are cut and the car crawls forward on slow momentum. It drifts to a slow stop at the foot of the driveway.

Beside her, Carmelita holds her breath.

Two figures emerge into the night. Lemony Snicket steps coolly from the driver’s seat, adjusting his
bowl-shaped hat with easy confidence. The other accomplice is tall, slim, their hair cut short. No telltale signs of womanhood mark their figure. Violet watches him slink around to join Snicket in the grass. They share a tense nod then set off to cross the yard, slow as shadows changing.

Olaf shifts at her side, peering from the scene far below to spare Esmé a glance. He asks, “Who’s the other one?”

Esmé hums, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I’ve seen him only a handful of times. Meets Snicket at the Kafka. Their conversation led us here. Looks young. Must go to Eliade.”

In an odd moment of confused camaraderie, Violet and Carmelita share a startled glance.

As surely as she has ever known a thing, Violet realizes it’s true. She finds sudden familiarity in the gait of the stranger loping across the yard, in the bend of his shoulders and the anxious tilt of his chin.

“Quagmire.” Carmelita says, unsurprised. “Obviously.”

“Duncan.” Violet mutters, trying to keep the hurt from her voice. She watches one of her best friends trail behind Lemony Snicket like a phantom, her whole heart breaking. She remembers the agonized catch in Duncan’s voice, unmoored, tragic, “But he could help us find Quigley!”

Violet feels sick wondering what she has missed in her time spent with Olaf.

“Wonderful.” The man says through a sigh, aware already of what this new knowledge costs her.

“You know-” Esmé cuts in cheerfully, ignoring the obvious woe. “Entering straight through the front door was quite the fad many years ago. Now they climb in through the windows like common burglars. Thieves. Villains. See? There they go.”

The two figures have crossed the lawn and crouched against a side window, bracing against the turning wind. Snicket fiddles with it, pauses, steps away. There is a moment of contemplation where the men stand completely still, cloaked in darkness. Violet feels a sick lurch of hope in her chest, thinking perhaps they cannot find a way inside. Time passes. The wind shifts. Lemony Snicket finds a way.

He leans so close to the home she cannot see the agile work of his hands in the blanketed dark. Moonlight snags on the window pane as it is gently, carefully, slid skyward. Duncan nods to the man’s back, a well-wish into dangerous territory, as Snicket ducks into the home.

Violet watches the man disappear feeling as if she has been similarly infected, as if he were rummaging around in her heart’s deepest corners searching for something precious to steal away.

It takes nearly five minutes of sick, desperate waiting.

Violet knows if she were only with Olaf and could not feel Carmelita like heat at her side or Esmé’s stern gaze flicking over her, that her reaction would be wholly different. She can feel the dread, the disgust closing her throat like sickness. She feels her breath catch and falter in her throat, feels her heart wild with repressed horror.

Instead, in the name of knowledge, she keeps her mouth shut.

One instance, she is painfully aware of the passage of time. She watches Duncan’s silhouette stand still as the moon. A small analog clock ticks amidst the mess of Endtimes. Violet feels within herself a gradual implosion, a countdown, as if she will lose her fine grip on composure, on sanity, if she is left stricken and waiting a minute more.
Then, all at once, Lemony Snicket returns with a small child in his arms.

He hands the squirming, terrified child to Duncan who clutches them close as a parent even through the thrashing.

“Oh no.” Violet whispers, gutted, a reaction as instinctual as flinching. Her hands fly to her face to cover, to protect, but she cannot look away. Dual duty and savagery hold her.

Snicket lurches back onto the lawn, already reaching. Each man grips a bucking leg. Duncan’s arms open and the child drops, breathless, towards the ground.

Beside her, Olaf’s breath catches. She does not have to look to know he is wincing.

The child does not hit the ground. Instead they swing like a pendulum between the two men as they race across the yard. Something dark, black with night, flies free from the child’s mouth.

A terrified scream cuts through the wind.

Violet watches the men cross the grass, watches the child struggle as he is dragged out of name, out of living home. She wonders if he prays. If desperation putrefies to cosmic begging.

The child is heaved into the back of Snicket’s car and Duncan follows suit, clambering inside, his body hunched and bulking, blocking any space a child might flee. Lemony Snicket dives to the driver’s seat, slams the door, and pulls away with precise, measured speed. They watch the car slip away like a poison dart cutting quick through smoke, a stolen child in the back seat.

Silence.

Olaf is the first to break it. “That, ladies, was the first proper induction since the schism.”

“That was also traumatic.” Carmelita responds, stepping away from the window with a heavy gait, as if looking at the home a moment longer might wound her.

“You’re right.” Olaf snips. “Imagine living it.”

Violet, absent of proper consolation, reaches for his hand only to find it shaking. Fine tremors trace his body yet the man stands tall, focussed, calm.

He meets Esmé’s waiting eyes. Violet watches the woman nod, say, “Yes, very traumatic and unfortunate. You two go on. Spend your night grossly romantic and try to suppress the sudden horror. We’ll finish here.”

A mysterious weight, some vague agreement, passes fine in the air between the man and Esmé. Confused, yet desperately ready to leave, Violet nods. She swallows the frantic questions in her mouth, knows that if she gives them volume they will come out screaming. (“That’s all? We stand and watch like cowards while they flee with someone’s child- ”)

Composure, that thin skin, stretches and holds.

She passes Carmelita as they go, feeling all the same fragmented rage towards her yet accompanying it is a fresh intimacy- they stood side by side and watched misery unfold. Inside Violet there are fractures, fault lines. She’s sure Carmelita bears the same new marks.

Olaf leads her out the heavy door and into the night with its stars and wind and flat, open land. Her mind is so full of static, buzzing violence obscuring rational thought, that it is as if Violet blinks and
she is sitting in the passenger seat of Olaf’s car seeing his headlights blink awake.

The world looks different as they pass it by, each shadow a threat, a villain, a faceless volunteer come to steal them away. Violet remembers her earlier words, “I will probably have nightmares for months.” and does not feel inaccuracy in them.

Later, once cornfield and flat land has broken and bunched into city, Violet reaches for Olaf’s hand gone white-knuckled at the wheel.

“You’re trembling.” She says, peering concernedly at his face which remains glasslike and stoic.

“Yes,” He agrees, voice factual and distant. “And I will probably continue to do so for quite some time. I haven’t seen an induction since my own.”

He leaves no room for questions, for consolidation, and Violet is wearily grateful. She thinks she can listen to Olaf explain the night of his induction at a later date. She is sure that if he unleashed that trauma before her after having just witnessed the same horrors, she would not know what to do besides weep, besides begging the world clean of manipulation and agendas and so much noise.

They drive in silence, louder than she’s ever heard it.

Midnight breaks to early morning.

Time, ignorant of misery, marches on.

It is only natural, she thinks, that in the aftermath of despair, standing wounded and changed, they reach for one another.

Feeling hollow and emotionally exhausted, they stumble into Olaf’s apartment- their boots heavy with mud, their guts heavy with adrenaline’s aftershocks, their tongues swollen with words they cannot yet bear to speak.

Violet sits at the edge of Olaf’s unmade bed, half-heartedly struggling to kick off her boots. Wordlessly, the man kneels before her and picks free the laces. Her first boot thuds to the floor. She hears chunks of dried earth scatter against the wood.

“Thank you.” She mutters, voice quiet like a phantom in the darkness.

“Of course.” Olaf responds.

Once the second boot falls, he peels the socks from her feet and tosses them away.

“Lie back.” He murmurs, pressing thoughtless kisses to her kneecaps. Violet is so drained she drops immediately back against the fluffy duvet, letting herself sink blissfully. In the hush, she hears her heart hammering.

With the ease of any comfortable lover, Olaf rises, snaps loose the button at her waistband, drags down the zip. He grips the fabric at her ankles, mutters, “Lift those hips, orphan-” and tugs until her pants join the collection on the floor.
“Now,” The man instructs, slight heat in his voice, his hands gliding up her navel, dragging. “This.”

He lifts the hem, lets Violet tuck her arms inside, to bury her face in the intimate dark of her own shirt before he tugs that off too.

A pleased grunt of shock leaves him. Violet cracks an eye just fluttered closed.

“You’ve been wearing the set I bought you.” Wonder creeps through the weight of his voice.

“Oh.” Violet mutters, glancing down at her body marbled by moonlight, the lacy bra with its matching panties slung low on the points of her hips. “You’re right, I have. They fit me much better than the standard Eliade stuff. This is the first time you’ve ever seen them in action, huh?”

For a reason her foggy mind could not summon, she realizes her stomach is quivering. Nervous anticipation rolls in her gut. She watches Olaf’s dark eyes roam her body lying splayed, undressed, an eager, boneless invitation. His fingertips trace the soft hem of her panties, dip to the juncture of thigh. He brushes flat-palmed over her stomach, slips a finger teasingly beneath the middle joining of her bra. Violet holds her breath, heart rattling.

“You look more gorgeous than I ever could have imagined. And trust me I’ve imagined.” He lets his hands come to rest on her hips and closes his eyes, mouth a tight pinch of repression. He sighs deeply. Violet watches his chest swell and sink.

When the man opens his eyes, tender clemency has replaced a shred of hunger. He lets his touch linger, then turns away.

From the floor he gathers the outfit come to be her residential pajamas. He tosses them to the bed, says without looking at her, “There’s your sleep clothes, little sneak. I’m sure you’re exhausted and emotionally bankrupt. Hopefully tomorrow we-”

“Olaf,” Violet interrupts, conviction she has never felt solid as a second heart in her chest. She gathers the pajamas, throws them to the floor. “Don’t make me put those on.”

He turns, examining her in the low light. She says nothing, merely opens her arms. Experience makes him step out of his shoes, a vicious longing suddenly bleeding from those dark eyes like an inkspill. And Olaf, the action tender and submitting and careful, joins her on the bed.

Violet Baudelaire learns the soothing proximity of full skin to skin contact, the way Olaf’s touch turns her mind blissfully blank of true thought yet alive with spark. He peels the lace from her body as slow and devoted as her muddy boots. When he rises to shrug out of his clothes, she follows, kissing any stretch of freed skin.

They bury themselves beneath the covers, kissing, legs twining like creeping vines. Violet can feel her stomach trembling, knows she is overcome with dual desire and trepidation, yet the clarity of her thoughts disappear the longer Olaf presses kiss after kiss to her lips, lets his hands brush uncensored over her body.

She feels the present pierced by a growing swell of shared need. Pressing her face to his shoulder, his whole body blighting hers in the darkness, Violet feels protected and cherished and heartswollen. She remembers briefly the look on her face reflected on the door of Endtimes, how the violence of the night had already mauled itself into memory, and thinks that the least they could do is end their miserable night together.

She loops her arms around his neck, drawing him close, their chests flush and rapid. Olaf kisses her neck, brushing his stubbled jaw over the peaks of her collarbones. She can feel the rigidity of him
pressing against her thigh with every movement, every slight brush of their legs beneath the covers. She shifts, slipping lower. The head of his cock brushes just below her hip. He hums, pleased, kisses her cheek. Violet wriggles just the slightest, until the stiff head of him rolls over the heated flesh of her clit. She sighs happily, breathless, into his neck, while Olaf’s breath catches. Violet weaves her hands through the sweaty hairs at the nape of his neck, slowly curling.

“What do you want?” He asks, voice soft near her ear, and hearing it does something helpless and welcome to her body. Violet knows he is testing her limits, asking for guidance and direction and, also, permission. She feels humbled by this small kindness. Olaf looks briefly into her eyes, pets her head, letting her think. He kisses her lips patiently, waiting, while Violet’s mind remains blissfully blank, no fear or worry inviting hesitation. She rolls her hips, the head of him dragged slowly towards the slick core of her.

“Go on.” She says simply.

“What do you want?” He asks, pulling away to look her in the face.

“Must you question me?” Violet demands, teasing, breathless. Then, just to taunt him, “Don’t you want to?”

“Oh, what a useless question.” Olaf’s smirk is so wide Violet cannot help but laugh.

He rises onto his knees, tosses the covers back like unfastening a heavy cape. It is Violet’s turn, then, to see the man marbled in moonlight, his eyes heavy. The sight makes her momentarily breathless.

He shifts closer, lifting her hips with one hand and tilting his cock with the other. He drags it along her, teasing, then rests the blunt head at her entrance. Surprise makes her flinch as the man leans slightly closer and spits into his hand, rubbing the fluid between them.

“Uh. That was gross.” Violet mutters, bewildered.

“It’s all gross.” Olaf says, his eyes finding hers. He moves forward slightly the head of him easing deeper just the slightest. “Would you like me to stop?”

The idea is so ridiculous, Violet laughs softly. “No.”

Olaf smiles, shrugs. “Wasn’t that gross, then.”

Violet rolls her eyes, wiggles her hips, “I think you’re getting distracted.”

No further retorts fall from him lips. Instead, the man, seeing the anxious quiver of her belly, leans forward until their bodies press as close as before. Violet follows suit, her legs parting like an exhale, her knees resting raised at his hips.

She rises, kissing his lips once before again wrapping her arms at his neck and pressing her hot face to his shoulder. That shifting desire burns her skin, fogs her mind. When he presses, very slowly, into her, Violet closes her eyes and presses softly back.

Instead of sharp pain as she had expected, she feels only pressure, only movement and satisfaction, an itch finally scratched. Her first thought, irrationally, is ‘Oh, I’ll have to inform Isadora’ before Olaf draws away and returns, setting a slow pace, and her mind goes blissfully blank.

Minutes pass in shared, gentle pleasure. Olaf kisses her neck, her shoulder, any stretch of her available while Violet presses her face resolutely into his shoulder, keeps her eyes closed, and feels.
Slowly, Violet feels herself growing familiar. She thinks she has grasped the experience, has learned the details of a long-kept secret only to have it be exactly as she expected. But then Olaf pulls away enough to rise, pace steady, and licks his thumb.

She almost asks, “What’re you-?” but before she can give her curiosity voice, he moves to familiar territory and rolls his thumb over her clit.

Violet’s eyes slam closed. Her hands rise to cover her face, overwhelmed, but Olaf does not seem to mind. His hips move rapidly, fast, jerky motions. Moans fall breathy from his lips. Beneath them, the bed frame begins to rattle.

They continue this way, sweaty, trembling, their hearts in their throats. Violet loses track of time, of thought, of dignity.

Minutes pass. The bed rattles a pace she does not count.

“God, look at you-” Olaf hisses, reverent even through breathlessness. Violet meets his eyes. They stare at one another in unabashed, shameless desire. Olaf’s breath grows ragged. His whole body begins to spasm.

“God-” He heaves. Sweat beads his flushed chest, dewed by the moon. “God damn it-”

He pulls out of her smoothly, leaning back on his knees, a single hand pumping at his cock. Violet rises onto her elbows, breathing just as rapid, mouth dry with desire, and watches Olaf come undone.

His whole body locks. He catches most fluid in a closed fist, yet it still drips, unlovely, to the bed. Olaf sighs heavily, pauses, and stumbles into the bathroom. He returns, minutes later, clean and smiling and exhausted.

Violet, body heavy and relaxed, groans, and rolls to her side of the bed. Olaf presses a quick kiss to her forehead, says, “Your body will feel better with experience. You’ll relax, grow more comfortable. And then this whole exchange will be as mutually beneficial as our other endeavors.”

Violet, sleepy, waves him away.

Olaf flops down beside her. “Also, you should go pee.”

That makes Violet turn, confused, wondering if the orgasm had addled his mind.

“What?” She asks.

He nods and turns to his side, pressing the curve of his back against hers. “I don’t know. Some folklore or something. Like a female rule. Just do it.”

Violet stumbles, bleary-eyed, to the bathroom.

When she returns a short time later, she finds Olaf already asleep. Knowing she no longer feels the panic she arrived with helps her crawl, exhausted, aching, into bed.

Mercy arrives in the form of blankness. She does not dream.
"Do the scary thing first" is a quote from Snicket's *When Did You See Her Last?*.

Olaf's line, "Here's a bitter truth you can't avoid." was inspired by Snicket's book *Horseradish: Bitter Truths You Can't Avoid*.

I'm a sucker for a good conspiracy. Endtimes was inspired by several.

Please let me know what you think!
Chapter Seventeen

They arrive in the middle of sermon.

Once finding their usual alley entrance strongly locked, Violet and Olaf pass through the shimmering stained glass of Eliade’s front doors. Sunlight blazes through the glass as Olaf swings the heavy door open. Fragmented snags of sea blue cross over her skin, glazing it like blush, like fever. For an instant she is blinded by shimmering red. When she glances down she sees Fascinans reflected and held like water in her hands. She has a wild urge to cup it in her palm like a firefly to capture and examine yet the word slides from her grip like sand.

Olaf ushers her inside. They enter Eliade’s front hall finding the whole place silent and eerily still. Then, from the Sanctuary, a choir cries, “God does not know, God is what is known. For affirmation ask the living bone.”

Hush breaks to lofty song.

Careful of their shoes on the tile, they pass by softly. Violet wonders if Isadora and Duncan are inside, if they are hearing a chorus call for prayer and thinking of the previous evening, of hearing a child’s scream split the world in two.

Olaf seems to be thinking the same. He glances around the large hall, peeking towards the empty staircases, wary of eavesdroppers.

“Will you talk with your friends tonight?” He asks, tone casual, yet his eyes are soft with understanding.

“Well. I need something to do with all this emotion.” Violet responds through a sigh. Beyond the closed doors, the choir in the Sanctuary trills to a high note. Violet imagines their voices fluttering like prayer against the high domed ceiling.

“It’s been an emotional few days.” The man agrees, reaching over to brush a comforting hand over the top of her head. Peculiar concern makes him frown.

Violet recalls seeing this look only once before: their first date, the man standing half in the water, covered in salt and spray.

“My apologies, Violet, if I seem scatterbrained. There is a delicious little orphan standing half-naked before me that I can’t seem to take my eyes off of.” He had said, then, to her response of similar sentiment, “Are you?”

That same tense nervousness settles into a grimace, like a wince. Olaf says, theatric, stilted, “Give this fool’s heart rest, Baudelaire. Tell me there was good with the bad.”
“Of course.” She insists immediately. “Any day with you is good.”

At that the man laughs, genuinely startled.

“Is that so?” A pinch of maudlin doubt blights his words. “Good even when I drag you to a midnight kidnapping? Or—” Here, his voice dips softer, smoother, “deflower you in my bed?”

Violet shoves him away so quickly she does not register movement until they stumble apart. Olaf grins wickedly, a victor examining his embarrassed combatant.

“You cad!” She hisses. Her gaze strikes wild up the stairs, searching for anyone who might have heard. “Keep your voice down!”

“My Violet’s lost her flower, hmm?” He teases.

“Don’t you have a rehearsal to get to?” She says a tad harsh, too embarrassed at his words to summon a clever rebuke.

“Ahh, who cares about that when I could tease you instead?” The man saunters back to her side, a relaxed ease to his face, hands clasped cavalierly at his back. His eyes roam, as if further proving his point, “Besides, nobody’s around. They’re all—”

Olaf’s breath catches. Violet freezes, unwilling to follow his gaze, sure that if she does she will see Nero or Duncan or Snicket. Naturally, as if a proven flaw in her psyche, she assumes the worst.

That is, until a devilish smile glides over the man’s face. It is so wide and delighted, Violet fears it almost as much as an unwelcome spy.

“Look what I’ve found.” He mutters, crossing the hall.

Violet spots it immediately, her eyes grown familiar to every bevelled curve and dent. It looks the same as she had last seen it- all strong doors and solid wood polished to a shine. The only peculiarity is the location. Violet wonders, startled, what cause was so important to move an antiquated confessional booth from the Sanctuary to the front hall, what had caused the congregation to take notice of a structure only used to gather dust.

Olaf slinks beside it with his most charming grin, as if a warwon salesman sizing her up, already so sure he will tempt her to ruin. She follows him slowly, unwilling to look the booth full on, as if it would burn should her gaze linger. Violet comes to stand on the other side of the booth, close enough to smell the dusty smog old things put off like heat. Her hands form fists at the hem of her skirt.

Olaf raps a knuckle atop the closest door. The sound lingers in the hollowed space like an unanswered question. “Interested in a little sacrilege, my dear?”

“Interested?” She almost questions, insulted by how little weight the word held. Instead, Violet settles on easy embarrassment, on denial and composure.

“Not—” She sputters. “Not-here. Now. What’s wrong with you?”

“Not now you say.” A patient gleam settles in his eyes, an expression of everlasting restraint. Olaf looks as though he is perfectly willing to wait and suffer until, unreservedly, he will get what he wants. “Noted.”

“Great.” Violet snaps, still embarrassed and attempting to cope.
Proximity to Olaf always has her body going distressingly weak and pliant in all the best ways, yet the look he casts her, leaning on the confessional booth as if he owned it, has a familiar heat sparking in her gut, one that, now, holds the weight of experience.

“Get to your Troupe, impresario.” She says.

Olaf rolls his eyes, faux annoyed at being dismissed.

Violet turns away from the booth, from the man watching her with vicious stoicism, and heads towards the first staircase. The choir lulls to quiet instrumentals.

“You’re not joining me to the basement?” Olaf asks.

She stops, turns. “No. I’m going to go check on my actual bedroom. No use going in there.”

They both glance to the closed doors of the Sanctuary, behind which another song begins, older and slower and wiser, like a weary battle hymn.

“Ah.” Olaf says, nodding. Calculated curiosity makes him narrow his eyes. Violet waits, watches. He asks, voice light, “A kiss farewell?”

“Here?” She mutters, already backtracking to meet him before the doors.

“Why not?” He shrugs, glancing pointedly to the gleaming confessional booth. “A little kiss is better than blasphemy.”

“I suppose.” She mutters, not thinking clearly, as she walks over, grips the collar of his dress shirt, and tugs closer. Still, even within Eliade, before a sermon that could be dismissed any moment, the simple act of kissing Olaf is enough to leave her breathless with endearment.

She pulls away quick, half-suppressing a grin, and bounds up the stairs, leaving Olaf behind to watch, feeling his eyes on her the whole way up.

Finding her bedroom as bleak and tidy as she had left it, Violet grabs her satchel from its hiding place beneath the bed, and takes her time wandering through Eliade. She paces empty classrooms, dormitories, libraries, every alcove and dusty corner she has not already committed to memory. She wanders until her feet grow weary, her mind allthetwhile spinning with thoughts about VFD- of Endtimes and kidnappings and the irony of the word volunteer. She thinks of Lemony Snicket obscured in shadow, Duncan on his heels like a dog. She thinks of Olaf (ignoring, for a moment, how her heart kicks at the backs of her ribs-) and coming home only to share their bodies in a way wholly different than before.

Simple reflection diffuses her with girlish smugness. Violet wishes, for the first time, that she had kept her mouth shut about Lemony Snicket only to preserve her friendship with Isadora. She can imagine it- a private conversation in her secret room, cozy and bright, ready to spill her guts to her eager best friend.

Keen mourning stamps her smugness.
Violet, frowning, distracted, takes a mindless turn.

She only notices the library because of the peculiar stained glass pattern cast to the floor. It catches her eye and holds, depicting a lonesome sailor backlit by sunset. No other window in Eliade shines with such deep color. It is enough to pull Violet from her thoughts, to recognize the library as her very first sanctuary throughout the cathedral.

Out of reflex, she pats the front pocket of her satchel, finding the stolen book right where she left it. Then, she had been all alone, seeking rest and refuge.

Violet enters the library seeking solace of a different kind.

She wanders the aisles, enjoying the quiet. She finds the space where her thievery left a gap in the rows and, again, settles down beside it. Violet hoped she would be distracted by then, that her thoughts would cease cycling through tragedies. Instead, she finds herself as transfixed as before.

That is, until she hears the sigh. Followed by the flip of a page, the creak of an old wooden chair.

Violet freezes. Scowling images of Nero summon themselves in her mind as she wonders who might catch her skipping sermon. Slowly, carefully, she tugs a few books loose from their shelves and peeks through the gaps, spotting Duncan and Isadora sitting together, their heads bent over a book, speaking softly.

Violet is so overwhelmed by the sudden presence of her friends, she feels struck with wordlessness, with hesitance.

She wonders if this feeling is hereditary. If other volunteers stood warped by their own choices, facing the same situation they found themselves in. Violet looks at the familiar concentrated furrow of Duncan’s brow and the weary bend to Isadora’s back and realizes they have fallen into old bloodline traps of volunteer versus villain. She wonders which side she’s on, and figures the Quagmires, with all their good intentions, would say their actions were similarly noble and good.

When she steps from the aisle and into the light, Isadora is the first to see her. They exchange sad, uneasy smiles. Duncan, having looked up at his sister's nudge, watches her warily, as if she might try to strike him.

“Hi.” Violet eventually forces, sounding far more wounded than she intended. She glances Duncan over, looking for signs of particular exertion, of stress, sure that last night had changed him the way it did her. Instead she sees only normal lingering signs of his grief-sickness. Where Violet does find sleepless bags like bruises beneath his eyes, an unkempt uniform, and unwashed hair, she sees no shame, no glassy-eyed horror. “What are you guys up to?”

“Skipping sermon.” Isadora mutters, trying at casual humor. “Couldn’t take it anymore.”

“Right.” Violet says, hating the evident distance in her voice. She does not like looking into the eyes of her best friend and speaking like a stranger. “I don’t blame you. I can only hear so much of the sermons our guests like to preach to us. Telling the orphans ‘Blessed are those who mourn’ may seem like the right thing to say but it really isn’t and I’m tired of hearing it too so I don’t blame you. Have I—”

Isadora interrupts her nervous babbling. “Where have you been?”

“-missed much?” Violet finishes. Knowing there is no point in lying, she answers, “With Olaf. At his apartment.”
“Also. You’ve missed plenty. This just got dropped off this morning.” Duncan says, tugging a fresh *Punctilio* from his bag at the floor. He tosses it flat onto the table.

Violet, ever grateful, takes that as an invitation.

Before she even has the paper fully in her grip, she sees the monochrome photograph blown wide and winces. Recognition makes her stomach drop. The front-page headline reads: VICIOUS FIRE DESTROYS MUCH OF HOME FOLLOWING KIDNAPPING. Above it, the little country home blazes against a starry sky.

“Oh no-” Violet mutters, clutching the paper close, her gaze snagging on heavy phrases. *Long line of fires - suspected arson - numerous fatalities -*

“So Eliade’s basically on lockdown.” Isadora explains. “They don’t want anyone else kidnapped. The last thing any cathedral needs is a scandal. The only reason Nero wouldn’t expel us if we were found here is because he’s been leaving you alone. It’s-” Isadora pauses, failing to find an accurate word. She looks far more fatigued than any young woman of seventeen has any right to be.

In the silence, Violet wonders how many nights they stay awake together, flipping the well-worn pages of Duncan’s charred book, hoping it will finally grant them consolidation and answers, will make their suffering worth something.

“It’s- well.” Isadora glances sadly to the photograph. “It’s another one.”

Violet sighs, her eyes on Duncan, knowing she must be careful, like Olaf, with information and how much she could share. The emotion that had choked her high up in the tower, watching her friend at Snicket’s back, had been one of heartbreak and wretched love. She feels these resurrected in her yet not to the same shocked intensity. The emotions feel like bright flames burnt down to coal- hotter and dangerously quiet. What remains is wretched sorrow and the kind of love that hurts.

Even before she speaks, Violet feels each word like a splinter in her palm.

“I’m sure you’re not surprised by the news, Duncan.” Measured, neutral. She watches the Quagmires take in her words with patience, waiting for explanation. When it does not come, they glance to one another, hoping to find understanding.

“What?” Duncan asks eventually. Isadora gives her a keen, assessing look.

“I…” Violet begins, working through the anxious closing of her throat. “I saw you last night. With Snicket. *Here.*” She jabs a finger to the newspaper, to the burning home sagged with destruction.

“I- what?” Duncan says, bewildered. “We haven’t even talked to Snicket yet. And what do you mean you saw me with him? Are you spying on him now?”

Violet glances around the library, finding it empty. She pitches her voice hushed and low, “Last night was the first induction since the schism. I watched it happen. Watched this child get stolen from his bed in the name of nobility and tradition. Someone helped Snicket. I know it was you.”

“Violet, you were the one who told us to stay away from him. Now you and Olaf are trailing him like bad detectives.” Duncan says. Confused shock ratchets his voice louder than she would like.

Isadora interjects, “You think Snicket started the fire?”

“He was in the house for a long time. Probably started it inside.” Violet says, ignoring the sudden burst of dread in her gut as she remembers the look Esmé and Olaf had shared, the woman saying
“Either way, I wasn’t there.” Duncan says. His hands are tight around his stack of books, the Incomplete History nestled perfectly between the two siblings.

“We’ve been here.” Isadora affirms. “We’ve been studying and suffering and praying. Not chasing grown men around the city.”

“Alright.” Violet says, not knowing what else to say, unable to sift through the dregs of her feelings to find truth and wisdom, a spot of gold in the vast muck or river able to bind them all together just as tightly as before.

Duncan, ruffled, confused, shuffles his notebooks into order. Scraps of paper stick out at odd angles. Hard edges of photographs jut from a small folder as he slaps it down atop his book, gathering his things as if to escape. It is not unusual to see Duncan’s belongings littered with loose papers, his handwriting small and cramped with unfurling ideas.

Even Isadora hoards notes, tucked into her schoolbooks or satchel or sometimes even the odd, shallow pockets of her blazer. Violet recalls one evening spent in her inventing space where Isadora, in a fit of sarcastic melodrama, had thrown herself to the floor like a distressed heroine. The result had been nearly twenty little scrolls of paper rolling free from her clothes like startled bugs fleeing a field.

“You’re leaking.” Violet had said sternly, aghast, teasing. “How much poetry can one girl-?”

“I’ve been inspired!” Isadora had cried, throwing her arms wide. She did not attempt to shove the words back into her pocket, merely left them to settle where they were as she gazed up to the high slanted roof of the tower crowded with glowing string lights. “Leave my little scraps alone, Violet, they’ll be poems someday if I don’t lose them in this hoard. Really, we should-”

They had spent the night unrolling each paper and lining them up side by side, fashioning makeshift poetry out of fragments.

Violet knows the Quagmires have a propensity to protect and collect a favored word. Yet, what catches her eye in the mess is not a line from a poem or a portrait cut ragged from the Punctilio, but a hard, waxy envelope. It peeks out from his battered commonplace notebook revealing a typewritten return address stamped simply: LS, CATHEDRAL OF THE ALLEGED VIRGIN.

The outright anger she thinks she should feel does not come. In its place is simple sorrow. She cannot fault Duncan for keeping his communication with Snicket a secret simply because she knows that, if he is lying about contacting the man, then he must be lying about following him to pluck a child from their bed. She knows this. But it doesn't stop her betrayal and resentment and frustration from developing brighter like a film to deep acid.

“How was it?” Isadora asks. Violet realizes she has been watching Duncan shuffle his papers for several seconds of tense silence. She wonders at the look on her face, if she has gone pale as first snow. “Seeing that?”

“Devastating.” She answers dryly. “I’ll have nightmares through graduation.”

“You mean you watched a child get kidnapped and you didn’t do anything?” Hypocritical disgust weighs on Duncan’s tone, makes him wrinkle his nose as if just catching a whiff of something long dead.

It hits a nerve in Violet, some deep tenderness sensitive with shame. I was told not to scream, she
thinks, knowing it is feeble. Face suddenly red with humiliation, she snips, “And you're considering advice from a man who steals children.”

“What do I care-” Duncan hisses, standing. Even that rapid exertion makes his legs shake, makes his knees buckle momentarily. “-what Lemony Snicket does for his organization if he can help me find our brother?”

“Because he might have stolen your brother to begin with!” Violet shouts, rising to look him in the eyes. Until she had spoken the words, she had never even given them thought. Now they seem fine and solid as only truth can be.

Duncan drops into his seat, an exhausted crash, his eyes closed on a wince. When he speaks, it is tight with repression. “Just go away, Violet. I can’t deal with you right now.”

“You’re scared.” She says, not bothering to sit back down. The Quagmire siblings sit morose and strong in conviction before her, yet they feel very far away. “I understand. With all these fires and tunnel collapses and secret societies- we’re all scared. But you need to consider-”


Isadora, her last hope, looks away.

Violet knows that if she speaks it will come out shaking and she will not be able to smother the onslaught of tears. She pushes the Punctilio back across the table, scoops up her satchel, and goes.

Hot tears blur her vision as Violet races mindlessly away from the library.

She knows she had somewhat expected this- for loyalty and nobility to divide her from the Quagmires but she did not expect a near relinquishment of friendship.

Bitter grief knots her fists. She is so hurt she wants to scream. Yet, overall, she feels utterly stupid- for granting advice, for saying the wrong thing, for offering caution where, if she had wanted to keep their relationships, she would have offered the siblings encouragement.

Violet, turning down an endless progression of empty halls, debates where to go. Immediately she thinks of Olaf, tucked away in the underground theatre, but dislikes the image that rises to her mind of herself, frustrated and teary, interrupting his rehearsal over an argument with her friends.

Anxious, upset, she rounds a corner too quickly and nearly smacks into a group of girls pressed closely together, their expressions wary.

“Oh! Violet!” Elsie says, stumbling back against three other girls she recognizes instantly. Their names rise unbidden in her mind and she thinks them over with the same nervous insistence as tonguing a sore in the mouth- Finch, Dana, Elle. Violet has seen them giggling in the halls, dining with Elsie during meals, sitting close together through every sermon and violin recital. She recalls them instantly, absolutely. Yet, what steals her voice is sudden shock. It is not the fact that they aren’t suffering through the sermon downstairs but instead at the clothes they wear- estival and floral and revealing. Each girl wears shorts that cover more stomach than thigh and they throw off a faint smell.
of perfume- rose water and lavender and something bright she can’t catch.

“Hi, Elsie.” Violet mutters, rubbing quickly at her eyes.

“I’ve been looking all over for you for the past two days. We’re leaving to the river now while everyone’s in sermon. Do you wanna come with us?” Elsie asks, glancing to the group of girls.

Violet looks them over, taking in their outfits and the wild, excited look to their eyes. They make her aware of her tattered uniform, of her face flushed and puffy with tears. Briefly, she wonders at the last time she brushed her hair.

“Now?” Violet asks, buying time as her mind races. “You’re leaving now?”

“Yep. You coming or going?” Elsie asks. Behind her, the other girls grow skittish, peeking around corners and fiddling with their bookbags.

She thinks of Olaf rehearsing into the evening only to find her missing with no clue where to look. She thinks of Duncan, of Snicket’s letter from the Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin and thinks that, with that kind of information to exchange, he can’t be too upset with her for disappearing unnoticed.

“I have more clothes in my bag.” Finch pipes up, her huge eyes finding Violet’s beneath the stark cut of her bangs. “For swimming. If you’re worried about getting your uniform dirty.”

“Guys.” Hisses Dana. “Come on. We’ll miss the trolley.”

“I’ll go.” Violet decides, as surprised at the words as all the others. They stare for a second in shock before satisfied smirks swamp the girls and they head, quick and quiet, down the hall.

“Perfect!” Elsie says through a squeal, latching onto Violet’s arm as they sneak through Eliade and out into the bright, golden day.

“I heard she talks in her sleep. Says all kinds of crazy things.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. She says all kinds of crazy things awake, too.”

On the pebbled shore, the two girls begin to giggle. Violet snorts as she walks gently towards the water’s edge, avoiding large stones. Beside her, Elsie calls to Finch and Elle eating their fast food from crinking bags beneath the shadow of a large Maple, “You gossipmongers, you!”

The two girls, still giggling, toss french fries their way.

From downstream, Dana calls from beneath the dark and cool of a large bridge, “You know you want to hear all about it!”

Violet laughs as Elsie rolls her eyes.

“Have you ever swam in a river before?” Elsie asks her, reaching, unasked, for her hand as their toes brush the cool water’s edge.

“An ocean.” Violet answers, realizing only then why this stretch of land and water felt familiar. It is not in location or expansiveness, but in the way she feels the same calm amazement as wandering the
beach with Olaf—stunned and humbled that such a beautiful, tranquil spot could exist just for them to enjoy. “But never a river.”

Sunlight shines warm through overhead trees, casting bright shadows like lace atop the water. It is so clean and clear, Violet can see every stone, every fleeting fish pass by.

“They’re not much different. Except here you won’t get knocked over by waves.” Elsie says, flipping her blonde hair out of her face and smiling excitedly. She points to a spot of darker water downstream, where a large Willow dips its branches to the rolling surface. “Down there we want to tie up a rope so we can swing into the water. It’s deeper there. Won’t that be fun?”

“Oh of course.” Violet responds, unsure but amicable.

Water rolls at their kneecaps. Pebbles, round with tumbling, press and give against her feet. Under the bridge, Dana rattles her first can of spray paint. Elle and Finch have taken out a small radio and soft, happy music takes to the wind.

They wade deeper, hands clenched together for support as the rocks grew bigger and bright with shaggy moss. Water brushes the hem of her borrowed gym shorts. Violet glances down at the outfit quickly donned in the brush, her uniform hung like fruit from a tree. The t-shirt offered by Elsie is old and worn from frequent use, dotted with holes. The black fabric fits her snugly. Displayed across the front is a band ringed by fire, bordered by jagged script: THE PSYCHIC VAMPIRES.

Elsie, a few steps ahead, wades to her navel.

Violet glances back to the girls on the shore, happily distracted and chattering, to Dana, a pensive look on her face, holding two cans of spray paint indecisively. Her eyes wander to Elsie who shivers with sudden goosebumps, a grin on her face as she gazed into the water.

“Thank you for inviting me.” Violet says, aware that this might be the only private moment they will have, and that any gratitude expressed later, after, with friends closeby, may seem flippant. She thinks of Duncan and Isadora, the looks on their faces as she had fled from the library, and feels struck with gratitude, humbled by kindness. “You didn’t have to.”

Elsie waves her off with her free hand. “I know I didn’t have to. But I wanted to.”

The girl’s eyes roam skyward and she releases her hand. Violet can tell she has more to say.

With practiced grace, Elsie lets her feet drift up until she floats on her back, her light hair spread out atop the water like sunshine. She closes her eyes, breathes shallowly.

“I know it’s none of my business,” Elsie begins, “and you can date whoever you want. But I saw you with Olaf and got concerned. You two seemed perfectly happy but… like I said. Orphans especially have to stick together if they can. I figured you could use some girlfriends. I don’t know. Sorry if that sounds dumb.”

Violet knows she could easily choose to be annoyed by Elsie’s reasons for inviting her, can already imagine the kinds of things she might say if she were someone else—“You’re right, it is none of your business.” or “I don’t need pity friendship, thanks.” She can tell, however, that Elsie’s intentions are noble and honest. Instead, Violet feels touched that a single interaction at Heirlooms could prompt this girl to look her way, to think her worthy of repeated time and attention and concern.

“That’s not stupid. It’s sweet. Thank you.” Violet says, wading deeper.

Elsie snorts, waves her off again. “I’m just glad you’re here.”
Violet takes a deep breath and ducks beneath the surface, curling her knees to her chest, and enjoying the cool water on her face. When she emerges, she finds Elsie sitting calmly next to her, submerged from shoulders down.

“You’re really swimming now!” She chirps, standing, and only then does Violet see that she holds her shirt like an apron and in the cup it forms, several flat rocks rest stacked together. “But can you skip a stone?”

Violet laughs, reaching for a rock. “I once invented a machine that would sling my skipped stones back onto the beach. I’ve got lots and lots of practice.”

Elsie has already turned her back and began trudging to shore. She calls, “Contest, Baudelaire! I bet I can skip twice as far as you! Oh, but if you’re scared, I understand. Who wouldn’t be when faced with my skill?”

They continue like this for nearly an hour, skipping stones down the deep expanse of river while Dana rattles can after can, and Finch and Elle strip to underwear, running like delighted children to the deep, cool water.

Eventually, once Elsie cannot beat the length of Violet’s skipped stone, they form teams, Finch and Violet to Elle and Elsie. The water grows choppy with ripples, their skin prunes from submersion, the sky grows darker, and Violet laughs more that night, she thinks, than the last several months combined.

Amidst their rowdy giggles and lofty music, Dana wanders over rubbing the paint from her hands. Even the checkered bandana tied atop her dark hair is dusted with fine white spray. She says, like taking a vow, “I’ve finished my project.”

“Oh Dana!” Elsie cries, turning so quickly she launches her stone into a sloping spot of earth bordering the water. “That’s so exciting! Congratulations!”

“How do you feel?” asks Elle, the question heavy with a weight Violet does not understand. She palms the flat stone in her hand, shifts her weight atop the pebbles.

Dana shrugs, her eyes on the water. “Good. I’m glad it’s done with. Hopefully the lacquer dries alright.” Then, to Violet, “I’ve been working on a mural for the last year. Since we first started coming here. You can see it soon, after…?”

Her voice trails off, and she looks at the other girls uncertainly.

“Oh.” Elsie says, realization in the word. She turns to Violet, nods to the water. “We do this thing called Float of Truth. It’s kind of dumb, but basically we all link arms and float and spill our secrets. And if one of us loses our balance and slips underwater then we all do. Like a metaphor or a simile or something. Don’t feel pressured, though, to—” she waves vaguely to the other girls, then to herself. “To tell us your deepest secrets or anything. You can just float. If you’d like.”

“That sounds fun.” Violet says, already walking towards the water. The nervousness she had expected at the thought of spilling her guts does not come. Instead she feels only the eager anticipation of a challenge. These girls have welcomed her to their most private space. The least she could do, she thinks, is honor their traditions.

“Float of Truth! Float of Truth!” Finch shouts, arms in the air, stomping to the water and flopping below the surface.

It takes much teamwork and patience, but after several minutes of coordinated directions, the girls
have linked arms and started to float, very slowly, downstream. Violet is sandwiched between Dana and Elsie, their arms looped at the elbow. When she glances down at her body, she sees only her kneecaps and toes peeking from the surface and the rest of her beneath the water, gone vague and shapeless like melting wax.

“Dana! Go!” Elle shouts from the end of the line. “You’re first!”

“I don’t have any secrets to spill.” The girl grumbles. “I see you guys everyday. I’m just glad my mural is done. I’m proud of it. That’s my secret, I guess.”

“And what a wonderful mural it is!” Finch says.

“Thank you. Uh, Violet?” Dana says, elbowing her, an unspoken question.

Violet hums. They pass beneath a large tree, sunset poking like pinpricks through the leaves. She says, deciding, “I’ll go last.”

“Alright. Elsie?” Dana prompts.

“Oh, do I have a secret for you ladies!” Elsie says, smug as only someone with a juicy secret can be. “I’ve wanted to tell you guys for weeks and I’ve nearly died keeping it to myself, but… guess who came into Heirlooms to buy my lingerie?”

“Mr. Remora?” Elle mutters and they all snicker.

“Me?” Violet guesses, and Elsie snorts beside her.

“No, silly, that was awhile ago. You’re both wrong.” She pauses dramatically. Then, “Mrs. Bass!”

“Gross.” Dana mutters. Violet does not have to look to know she’s wrinkling her nose.

“No thanks.” Elle says in a similarly disgusted tone, while Finch howls with laughter.

“What did she do? Tattle on you to Nero?” Violet asks, worried already for her new friend’s sake.

“Nope.” Elsie chirps happily. “Once she realized they were made by me, she ran right out of Heirlooms.”

“You’ve held onto that secret for quite awhile. It’s a good one. Finch?” Dana asks.

“I’ve been stealing more altar candles for my room but that’s hardly a big secret. It’s just all I’ve got. Elle?”

“Got nothing.” Elle says on a slightly bitter sigh, as if disappointed in herself. “The fact that we come here sometimes is my biggest secret.”

Elsie hums. There is a moment of silence where the five girls simply float, drifting downstream. Then, Elsie, hesitant, “Violet?”

“Well…” She mutters, considering. Her only thoughts are of Olaf. She debates mentioning her inventing attic but knows she would have to invite them to see and, with everything up there, doesn’t want the company. She thinks of confessing to punching Carmelita right inside Eliade, but then knows she would have to explain context, and doesn’t want to get into it. Instead, she tells these girls what she could not tell her best friend, “I lost my virginity last night.”

“Well that’s a damn good secret.” Dana says immediately, impressed, amidst Finch’s excited,
“Oooh!”

Elle raises her head above the water to say, “How exciting!” but the act throws off their floating and they begin, rapid as leaves caught in an undertow, to sink.

“Elle!” Elsie shouts through a delighted shriek.

“We’re going do-” Finch starts, cut off as her head dips below the surface.

Violet laughs and laughs, water in her mouth, as she sinks, dragging Dana with her.

They rise spitting and giggling and wiping water from their eyes. The other girls hound her with questions—how was it? who was it with? Duncan Quagmire I bet, huh? - while Elsie remains silent.

They trudge to shore. Violet answers slowly, smugly, “It was good. Sweet. Didn’t hurt as much as I thought. Not telling. And no, it wasn’t Duncan.”

“Ahh, come on, Violet. The point of Float of Truth is to spill your guts and you have to spill all of your guts!” Finch whines.

Elsie splashes the girl, says, “Leave her alone. You’re lucky you got a single secret out of her. Don’t push.”

“Yeah, Finch.” Dana says lightly, as if she had not been pestering Violet as well. Finch rolls her eyes and does not badger her again.

They walk to the bridge chattering happily. Dana wanders ahead, already preparing to show off her mural.

Violet does not see it until properly ashore, too busy wringing out Elsie’s t-shirt. She takes to land. Only once hearing Elsie’s choked, “It’s beautiful, Dana.” does she focus her attention.

At first she only notices a shock of white against the flat grey of cement holding the bridge in place. The closer she gets the more details rise to catch her eye. She sees brown brick front steps, large black windows, a dark roof with three chimneys. Bright shocks of purple and pink border the large colonial home, proof of a sprawling garden. Sprays of yellow shine at the window edges like the bright flames of candles.

Only once Violet gets closer does she see a scrap of newspaper taped beside the mural. She recognizes the font of the Punctilio, can see a few words left behind that Dana did not tear away: burnt down under mysterious -

“It’s, uh,” Dana says, coming to stand beside her and examine the finished work. “It’s of my family’s house before it burnt down. So I can come here and remember. Even once I leave Eliade.”

“That’s-” Violet begins, unable to summon words to explain her feelings, speechless at the sight of such talent and emotion. Her heart pulses inside her chest as if laid open under blade. “That’s so sad. And amazing. It looks perfect. Truly.”

Dana laughs softly. “Yeah. Thank you. I’ve been working on it for a long time.”

“It shows.” Elsie says, dragging over Dana’s massive bag of spray paint. “And now I’m inspired. Let’s get to it. Violet?”

She tosses a can of paint her way. Violet shakes it, sprays a rock experimentally, and watches as it
bursts with bright red color. Elsie crosses the water to the other side of the bridge, while Elle and Finch arrive, having backtracked to grab the radio.

Violet, her mind suddenly sparking on an idea, runs to her satchel, only to return with a book of poetry in her grip. She switches colors, debates her spot, and begins. With each word, she glances back at the text, muttering as she goes, trying her hand at memorization, “I was lone like a tunnel… The birds fled from me…”

Her handwriting, unfamiliar with spray paint, goes crooked, but her cursive reads legible and fine. After Olaf’s repetitive mention of Neruda, Violet had checked out a book of his poetry from one of Eliade’s many libraries and thoroughly enjoyed it. Even in times where she should be paying attention – in class, in sermon, even when Olaf was prattling on about something unimportant – Violet felt herself trying to recite the lines from memory, utterly charmed by them. She expected to find a favorite poem other than the one Olaf had tried and failed to remember. Instead, Body of a Woman became her favorite too.

It is this she wants to paint, yet one line catches her eye and tempts her to action. She moves gracelessly, her finger going numb at the nozzle, and watches thin lines of paint bleed from her words.

Elsie wanders over as the sun shifts, watching patiently.

Violet finishes the first line and steps away to look.

In loopy black script, Elsie reads, “To survive myself I forged you like a weapon…”

“It’s a poem.” Violet explains. “Well, part of one. Neruda.”

She returns to her work, completing almost two more lines. All the while, Elsie watches at her back, calm and attentive.

“-like an arrow in my bow, a stone in my sling. But the hour of vengeance falls and I-” Violet reads, interrupted by a loud metallic bang.

Each girl looks up in concerned confusion.

Dana stands on the other side of the river, peering at Elsie’s colorful flower. Finch and Elle sit on the sand by the radio which is promptly switched off.

Another bang sounds, harsher than the last. It echoes beneath the underpass like gunshot.

Violet, following the noise, heads for the overgrown foliage where rocky embankment sloped upwards to deserted road. Her eyes recognize it before her mind truly does, and she flinches away from the hatched door on instinct alone.

“We need to hide.” Violet calls, voice unnaturally calm. She feels the blood drain from her face in one quick drop.

Another bang sounds from the other side of the rusty door. The VFD insignia watches her indifferently, rattling in its frame. One more harsh crash, like someone throwing themselves against the metal. A single screw falls loose and scatters amongst the rocks.

Violet turns, ushering the girls to deep forest, babbling, “Leave your things, we need to hide. Now, now-”
Knowing when to pick their battles, the girls stay silent and hurry to the brush. They assemble themselves in the shadowed thicket, dropping to the ground like hot bullets. Sharp grasses slice into their knees and jagged shells of walnuts press against their feet yet the girls stay silent, huddled close together.

With a great groan of rusty hinges, the door flies open. A familiar figure stumbles onto the pebbled shore, squinting against the water reflecting bright sunset. The moment Violet sees him she wants to rise from the brambles and stomp towards him, to shriek, “You liar, you filthy liar, Duncan, how could you?”

The words spark in her throat, a wick quickly burning. Her legs shake with fury and repressed action. She almost rises, but Elsie’s quick hand on her shoulder keeps her down. They watch the figure glance around the beach, taking in their littered cans of paint, their bookbags, their fast food wrappers.

He glances towards them, spotting Violet’s uniform pale as a ghost in the trees.

Familiarity putrifies to sickening confusion.

Violet sees Duncan’s familiar snub nose, the tight, high cheekbones, the dark shine of his hair. It is his eyes that seem wholly alien, foreign like a stranger’s.

The figure turns to leave, darting quickly through the water and up to the road. They hear his footsteps slap hard against the pavement as he runs away and, in the anxious silence afterwards, staring at the hatched door flung open, Violet realizes with sick surety that she has just come face to face with Quigley Quagmire.

Chapter End Notes

“God does not know, God is what is known. For affirmation ask the living bone-” is a quote from Mark Jarman's *Unholy Sonnets*, #12.

“Blessed are those who mourn-” comes from Matthew 5:4.

Unfortunately, there is not a band named The Psychic Vampires. Don’t get to looking them up.

The poem Violet paints is, again, *Body of a Woman* by Pablo Neruda.

Many thanks to my dear internet friend Rachel for the continued writing advice and encouragement. You keep me sane.

As always, please let me know what you think!
Fearing whoever might follow Quigley, the girls gather their things and flee.

Violet does not even change from Elsie’s clothes which cling to her skin, weighed down by water and sand and prickling burs. As the others hurriedly collect their things, Violet plucks her uniform from a swaying branch and shoves it into her satchel. They drip to the floor of the trolley the whole ride back, five orphan girls sopping and miserable and confused.

The jovial mood they shared before plummets to uneasy silence.

Elsie casts her sad, patient looks. Dana keeps her eyes to the floor where her bag of paint rattles with every bump. Finch and Elle stare out the windows to the blurry passing city.

By the time they return to Eliade, the sun has set and the front doors glow with color, lit from inside. They approach it slowly, as if nearing a sleeping monster. Having been in residence so long, it is easy for Violet to forget the beauty evident in Eliade. But staring at it from the outside, seeing the whole cathedral lit up and glowing, makes her feel suddenly very grateful and, unexpectedly, at home.

From the street they can hear the happy chaos of the dining hall, loud with laughter and chatter. Elsie skips up the steps first, hand outstretched for the knob.

It is that exact moment when Olaf bursts through the front door, not watching himself, his gaze turned to Fernald following at his back.

“- tower.” Olaf says, voice rapid and anxious. “Even the beach if we have to. She’s-”

Elsie yelps in surprise, backs away.

Fernald is the first to spot Violet standing damp and miserable on the sidewalk.

“Right there, boss.” He says, gesturing with a hook.

Olaf freezes, not sparing Elsie a single glance.

Their eyes meet. Violet realizes only then that she has been trembling, chill and nerves rattling her whole body. She knows how she must look- strung out and wired, her hair a frizzy mess, her only thought: Quigley’s alive, alive-

Yet even seeing Olaf standing before her, his eyes on her, soothes her.
“Violet.” He breathes, tapping quickly down the stairs and taking her face in his clammy hands. She thinks, for a moment, that he might kiss her- on the city street, before Eliade, her new friends watching.

“Where have you been? I was-” He stops, winces. “Concerned. When I couldn’t find you. Especially after last night.”

She knows he means after the kidnapping but sees Elsie’s eyes go wide as she misinterprets immediately. When Violet glances nervously around she sees the other girls are doing the same.

“Concerned?” Fernald scoffs. “You were more than concerned. You were running around the whole cathedral promising death to whoever-”

“Thank you, Fernald.” Olaf snaps, releasing Violet’s face. It seems only when he pulls away does he realize his hands are damp. He asks, like an afterthought, “Why are you wet?”

“Uh-” Violet stammers, glancing to her friends. She does not know how to be subtle about what she is feeling, or how to phrase what happened without her absolute shock and horror.

“We’ll see you later, Violet. Right ladies?” Elsie chirps, voice too pleasant as she shuffles the others indoors. They mutter in agreement, passing her by.

Violet pinches part of the heavy shirt and peels it away from her skin. “I’ll get your clothes back to you… sometime.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Elsie says and she can tell it’s genuine. The girl gives her a small wave before heading inside and closing the door behind them.

“Uh...” Violet mutters, glancing to where Fernald lurks on the front steps, his face concerned, wanting only to help.

“Can we go to your apartment?” She asks, only then realizing what a source of safety and privacy the man’s space had become.

Understanding smoothes the worried lines of his face into serious determination and action. Violet feels she is seeing only a hint of what he must have been like hunting Eliade for her, ready to tear the place apart. For all his emotional shortcomings, he acts immediately.

“Bye Fernald.” Olaf says, his hand warm on her shoulder, leading her to the alley.

“But boss,” Fernald sputters. “Rehearsal just start-”

“Good bye.” The Count snaps, hurrying her along.

When they reach his car parked crooked in the back lot, Violet sits on her satchel, unwilling to ruin the seats.

Once the door shuts, before he even turns the key, he demands, “What happened?”

The whole story spills out of her in a series of long, anxious running sentences. As they drive, Violet mentions even the things she knows are trivial and distracting- Dana’s mural, Float of Truth, her gratitude and excitement towards her new friends. She speaks the whole way to his apartment, hardly catching a breath.

Olaf waits and listens, his eyes distant even on the road. He drives on muscle memory, his mind
fogged with her words.

“- and so we must have just thought it was Duncan with Snicket yesterday.” Violet says as they enter his apartment, finding it dark and still. “And it was Quigley this whole time. God, Duncan was telling me the truth. All this time he’s been telling me the truth and I just wouldn’t listen-”

Recollection dawns as Olaf flips the lights.

“Wait.” Violet murmurs, talking to herself as much as to the man beside her. “That’s not true. Wait.”

She rushes towards the shadowy kitchen and into the hall, calling, “Are there any other cathedrals around here? Any other Cathedrals of Alleged Virgins?”

She enters the study, flips the lights, finds it as cluttered as before. A second passes as Olaf follows behind her, flipping lights she missed, responding, “No. No. Why?”

In the moment before he enters, Violet notices the room looks different. The same defining features stand out- the table and chairs, the large windows, the wall layered with newspaper clippings and photographs and play bills. Yet something seems off. An absence. A change.

Distracted, Violet looks to the wall, finding a photo of the Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin as it once was- tall and proud and not yet pockmarked with holes and peeling paint. She jabs it with a finger, turns to face him as he stands, confused, in the doorway.

“Lemony Snicket’s hiding out here.” She says, expelling the information like the resolute click to a cocked pistol. “I saw Duncan with a letter from him. The return address was to here.”

Olaf blinks slowly, every line of his body stiff. Violet knows he is chewing on word and reaction. After so long nearly silent, she knows he will have something to say. After several seconds he asks tightly, controlled, “So you mean to tell me there was another survivor of the Quagmire fire?”

“Yes. Quigley. And he’s working with Snicket who’s staying at the Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin.” Violet says. Her finger still presses accusationally against the photo yet she cannot bring herself to stop, frozen by the importance of their conversation.

“A survivor.” He growls again, barrelling right past her to the desk beneath the windows. He yanks open drawers, grabbing handfuls of pens to test on an old takeout menu. The first, out of ink, is tossed blindly across the room. Pen after pen, proven useless, is cast away only increasing the man’s frustration.

Not knowing what else to do, Violet keeps talking.

“Right. And I’ve spent all this time convincing Duncan and Isadora not to talk with Snicket because he’s dangerous. Which he still is, but… I don’t think they know. About Quigley. But if they don’t, should I tell them? They’ll go running right into Snicket’s hands.”

“No.” Olaf says, final and decided like a judicial decree. “You won’t tell them. Let me think on this. What to do. Who to- Damn it, why don’t any of these work?”

Another pen skitters to the floor, eventually rolling to stop against the toe of her boot, the faded label reading: HEMLOCK TEAROOM AND STATIONARY SHOP.

Moments pass where Violet watches, unsure of what to do. Without his opinion, his machinations, she does not know how to continue wisely. She crosses the room to watch from the doorway, leaning against it wearily. All the earlier sun catches up with her. Sudden exhaustion makes her feet
After several more pens have rolled across the floor, Olaf finally stills, as if his mounting anger has risen to a paralyzing degree. Violet’s gaze traces the troubled hunch of his shoulders.

“Go take your bath. I know you want one.” Olaf says coldly, not bothering to look at her, his mind already plotting.

There is something about the harsh entitlement of his voice that makes Violet pause, aware of how it has (abruptly, unexpectedly-) affected her body, the diamond of her sexuality examined under different light, sparkling in a new facet.

Violet stands in the doorway on shifting feet, torn. She frowns, bewildered, unsure how to voice such a new sentiment. She thinks, “This old-world sexism might be interesting.” yet gives it no voice, stands meekly in the doorway half-hoping he’ll snap at her again.

She imagines Olaf full of snark and bravado, more so than usual, patting her head, saying as if speaking to someone much lesser, “A girl like you shouldn’t spend your time inventing or lockpicking or reading. You’re much too pretty for all that, don’t ya think? Now be a doll and get me another drink.” The thought dually infuriates and inflames her, sparking new heat in her gut.

Violet, confused and admittedly desperate for a bath, finally obeys.

As always, there is a cool bottle of wine in the fridge and she takes it as she goes.

As the tub fills, she puts on a record in Olaf’s bedroom, something calming and slow. Steam fogs the mirror and, shamelessly, she draws their initials inside a sloppy heart. Violet shucks the heavy clothes, causing a spray of pebbles and sediment to scatter to the floor. They smack as they land in the sink.

This time, standing naked before Olaf’s wall of mirrors, she feels no need to examine her body. Instead, seeking comfort, Violet avoids her own eye, kills the tap, and sinks into the frothy water trying very hard to think of nothing at all.

Meanwhile, as if acting on the feelings she suppresses, she hears Olaf bumping around several rooms away- slamming drawers, throwing pens, stomping circles in the floor.

Eventually, the sounds stop.

Violet, mind fuzzy with wine, scrubs the film of river water from her skin. A growing pile of silt forms near the drain as she washes her hair. Once every inch has been scoured and Violet has finished the bottle, she realizes she has succeeded in relaxing, having forced herself not to think of VFD or Snicket or Quigley at all.

She dozes, humming to the music.

Sometime later, Olaf enters the steamy room, spots their initials drawn on the mirror, and kneels wordlessly before her like a sinner in need of absolution.

Eyes heavy and distracted, the man swirls a finger in the hot water, making the bubbles sway. Violet remembers his teasing the first time he had seen her in the bath, “How could I live a minute longer with you naked before me but a sheen of suds? If I don’t touch you right this moment I think I’ll just die.” Now, none of that near manic desperation overwhelms him. Instead, he looks resolute yet worried, as if afraid of what that determination might cost him.
Violet reaches out, brushes her hand over his. She waits, listens.

“You know what we need to do, right?” Olaf asks, voice weary and guttural like a stone dragging the ground.

“What we need to do?” She repeats, wondering what direct action they could take other than informing the Quagmires of their brother’s survival.

Instead of offering explanation, he asks, “During the kidnapping... Did you notice that you didn’t feel the need to pace yourself? Or breathe a certain way?”

Confused yet distracted by the change in conversation, Violet says, “No. I didn’t notice. But you’re right. I, uh, handled it I guess.”

“You did.” The man agrees, sounding surprisingly proud. “You’ve seem to grow less frantic by stress or fear or-” Here, he pauses, hesitant in the way one might approach a living trauma- not a fear for self preservation, but for the steady progress that might be lost by saying its name. “Fire.”

“Fire.” Violet repeats, searching his face for any source of humor or reservation. “Does that mean you want to-”

“Don’t worry about it now.” Olaf says sharply. When they meet eyes, his are open and honest and scared as they were driving away from the restaurant after skipping the bill- scared only of Violet’s reaction and what she might say.

Now more than any moment before, Violet feels like reaching for his hand that night, the whole world wide open and glittering before them, might have been a promise she was not prepared to make.

You need my trust. My nobility, she had said, already offering.

And this was the consequence.

“Help me understand.” Violet says, feeling her composure fray like a nerve going raw. “You want us to- to-”

She cannot even speak it.

“I want to go to the Cathedral. And see what we can find.” Olaf says, voice calm and smooth as a doctor attempting to soothe a distraught patient.

“And then?” Violet demands. She wishes she were not so naked, not so flushed and hot and wine-drunk. She can think, easily, of several other things they could be doing in this exact situation rather than discussing arson.

“And then you trust me.” Olaf says, charming even when she is disgusted by him. He dips his hand to the water, soaking his sleeve to the elbow, and tugs her hand to the surface to kiss tenderly, as if already asking forgiveness. When he pulls away his lips are gleaming. “You follow my lead.”

Feeling brittle and vulnerable and unable to voice her fear (She can already hear herself, squeaky with horror, “You want us to burn down the cathedral?” ) Violet merely stares, seeing the man who owns her heart kneeling before her, humbly requesting her assistance with a crime.

“Do you trust me?” He asks softly. Coming from him, the words sound as tender and vulnerable as if he had asked, “Do you love me?”
The answer, Violet knows, would be the same.

She remembers scattered images of times where she has had to trust this man (running in the crumbling dark of a collapsing tunnel, climbing into the high Endtimes tower, or even the very first time, Olaf shuddering and suffering as he patched Nero’s bloody discipline-) and knows it is not her trust he should be questioning.

As suddenly as if she had stepped into the room, Violet hears Carmelita, “Olaf’s handsome, sure. But he isn’t a good man. There’s not a shred of nobility in him. If you’re not careful, he’ll ruin you.”

Violet had punched her for that. Now, she wonders if those words had held the weight of prophecy, if she should have examined them when she had the chance, before her heart had split her chest and begged itself stolen.

She wonders, briefly, what would change if she denied him. If she let him go, alone, to destroy Lemony Snicket’s hiding place while she sat anxiously at Eliade hoping for his safety yet dreading his success. She knows their relationship would change, that Olaf would not feel truly comfortable with her. He could not be honest, could not be himself, always waiting to cross another invisible boundary, one that she, eventually, would find enough fault in to leave.

Even imagining her life without Olaf has her stomach dropping with anxiety and desperate, messy loss.

Violet knows there is nothing he could ask that she would not consider.

“I do.” She forces, honest, even as her throat closes around the words.

“Good.” Olaf sighs, nearly wilting with relief.

They reach for one another at the same moment, synchronized in their desire to hold and capture.

“Next weekend.” Olaf mutters as Violet’s hands catch in the stubble of his cheeks. “We’ll go when-”

“Don’t tell me any more.” She says, nearly pleading.

He nods, reaches reverently into the bath as if dipping his hands to a font of holy water, gripping the small of her waist.

They kiss like a promise, like a vow, like two desperate people sealing a (cruel, decimating-) deal.

The following week passes in a blur of familiar rituals.

Violet eats her meals with Elsie and the other girls while Duncan and Isadora, if they show up to the dining hall, continue as singularly as ever- heads bent over books, pens scribbling furiously, their fingers black with ash like frostbite.

Duncan avoids even looking at her, having fully harnessed the strength of his betrayal. Isadora casts her soft, hurt looks when her brother is distracted. Violet knows it is only a matter of time until they
find a chance to speak.

Olaf rehearses all day through classes and into the evenings, eventually knocking at Violet’s trapdoor once the rest of his Troupe clears out. She follows him to the stage, chattering about her day, as they exit Eliade and to his apartment to share their nights together. These evenings become much-needed respite from responsibilities, full of food and wine and touch.

Some nights they strip to skin and bones- touching and laughing and, as far as Violet’s concerned, lovemaking in its purest definition. They finish with their minds languid, their limbs shaking, the bed a ragged mess.

She is inexcusably happy.

That is, until true nightfall.

They do not discuss the coming weekend, yet Violet still wakes from nightmares sweating and breathless and too terrified to scream. Dreams she has already had loop ceaselessly in her mind from night to night- her family standing together in her inventing room until Olaf slams the trapdoor and steps inside. Or, gulping gasoline to spit on the fire consuming Eliade while faculty and orphans watch from the street.

Olaf, not having to ask, would wake and hold her until her heartbeat slowed. For all her obvious terror, he does not back down, does not change the plan.

Familiar days give to romantic evenings give to sleepless nights.

Friday arrives with shocking swiftness, as most dreaded guests do.

Violet waits in her inventing room, sitting curled in the velvet chair, her eyes unseeing on the floor. Golden sunset glows through the high windows, shadows where her photographs hang cutting black gaps in the shine dusting the floor.

She concentrates very hard on not thinking about what she will do.

She thinks of her assignments and an essay she has yet to write due Monday. She thinks of Elsie’s sketchbook cluttered with lingerie designs and scraps of fabric, overflowing with daydreams. She even thinks of her family, feeling comfort in the way remembering her siblings and her parents digs instead at old wounds instead of facing the trauma her behavior will surely create.

Down below, Olaf and his Troupe have gathered their collections of props on the stage to review. She hears them every so often, someone calling, “This one wasn’t painted right!” or, “Who broke this?” Meanwhile Olaf sighs and grumbles and works towards perfection.

Violet is so engrossed by her thoughts, and so accustomed to the infrequent noise of the actors, that she does not notice when they fall silent. She does not notice the familiar gliding noise of her ladder or the heavy clatter of it hitting the stage.

In fact, she only notices she has a visitor once their knuckles rap against the trapdoor.

For a wild second, she freezes, thinking it’s Olaf ready to take her away. But then she hears Fernald grumbling atop the stage about being interrupted and Violet launches herself across the room to fling open the trapdoor.

Isadora squints against the sudden sunlight.
“Oh!” Violet says, standing to open the trapdoor further.

The girl heaves herself inside, muttering, “Thank you.”

On the stage, Violet meets eyes with Olaf who watches with concern. She drops the door with a loud bang, blocking them out, wanting absolute privacy.

When she turns, Isadora has clambered to her feet and is watching her with trepidation.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that, Isadora.” Violet huffs. “We’re still friends. I’m right here. Say whatever you want.”

“I know, I know.” Isadora says, sounding unsure. “I just don’t have a lot of time before Duncan realizes I’m gone. I’m going out tonight. With Duncan. And I thought maybe you could come. To talk things through.”

The invitation strikes something hurting in Violet, poking a wound just as tender as when it was formed. And, although she hates this reaction (as instinctual, she realizes now, as a flinch) there is a sickening clutch of suspicion there, too.

“We’ve tried that.” Violet says, heart beating hard as if she had been threatened. “What makes you think things will be different in public?”

Isadora shifts, uncomfortable. Her dark eyes glance from the floor to the radio to the windows, anywhere else.

Violet wonders, suddenly, if she is being invited to meet Quigley. If Isadora’s hesitation is out of her soft-hearted nature, at not wanting to gloat. She can already imagine it: the four of them, sitting close together in a coffeeshop (her mind summons Heirlooms, perfect and worn by memory) to chat, to spill every secret, while Duncan and Isadora weep over their brother.

For all the emotional connection it would restore with her friends, she cannot imagine it being an evening she would enjoy, not when she sees Quigley as little else than Lemony Snicket’s ill-fated footman.

This thought leads to another, far more sinister than the last. She senses treachery like a gas leak in the air.

Isadora says, “We just miss you, Violet. It’s stupid, this- this schism between us over a secret organization. I don’t want to-”

But Violet can barely hear her over her mind’s wretched turning.

She knows, if things were genuine, that the moment Isadora arrived, she would have thrown herself into Violet’s arms, weak with happiness and relief to say, “My brother’s alive, Violet, Quigley’s-”

Instead, she acts cautious and jumpy and looks as if she wants to cry.

“Isadora,” Violet says, voice calm and sad. She feels almost like a mother extending mercy on her misbehaving child. “Are you trying to take me to meet Snicket?”

Isadora flinches, her dark eyes going wide. Immediately, she spits, “No. Why would I-? No. No.” She smoothes her dark hair, eyes fluttering around the room like dark birds seeking escape.

Watching her struggle has Violet’s heart breaking. Instead of feeling fury at the fact that her best
friend has tried to trick her, she feels only grief, mourning their friendship and what it has been reduced to. “Is it because you want me to hear him out? Because he’s already convinced you?”

“No, Violet. No. I wouldn’t.” But Isadora is betrayed by her body, by the sudden tears spilling from her eyes. “I just- just want you to understand.”

At that, her grief changes, tinted with disgust. It is as much confirmation as she needs.

“Go without me.” Violet says, voice painfully distant. “I can’t go with you. I’m... busy.”

It it only then that it hits her- she will be with Olaf burning the cathedral while the Quagmires sit talking with Snicket. There is a metaphor there, she thinks, but her mind is too feverish with adrenaline and pain to ponder it.

When Isadora does not move, Violet reminds her, “You said you didn’t want to keep Duncan waiting.”

Without looking to her friend, she walks over, feeling only then that her legs are trembling, to wrench open the trapdoor.

“If you ever want to see me,” Violet mutters, staring to the stage far below, unable to look at Isadora, “Instead of trying to trick me, or, I don’t know, if you want to discuss anything other than VFD, just let me know. But if that’s not the case, then-” All that grief sinks her belly. Before she speaks the words, they are acidic on her tongue, “Then I don’t think we should be friends anymore.”

“Violet.” Isadora pleads. “You don’t have to do that. Look, you’re the one ending our friendship. You’re dividing us even more. Don’t you see how Olaf’s manipulated you? All he’s done is feed you lies. And slander. About VFD. And-”

“Knowledgeable about VFD now, are you?” Violet hisses, uncaring if the Troupe could hear them, not when Isadora stands in her most private place insulting everything about her. “Who filled you in, Isadora? Who gave you your information? Don’t talk to me about manipulation when you just tried to deceive me into an evening with Lemony Snicket!”

Only in the heavy silence afterwards does she realize she has been shouting.

Isadora stands before her looking utterly defeated. No more guilty tears roll from her eyes. Instead they are weary and bloodshot and very sad.

“Alright.” Isadora says after several long seconds. “Okay.”

Without looking at one another, Isadora crosses the room and begins her descent to the stage. Violet cannot see Olaf or any member of his Troupe, but she’s sure they are there, standing stunned and silent.

As soon as the crown of Isadora’s head clears the trapdoor, Violet lets it fall, unwilling to see her go.

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Unlike the last time they arrived at the beach, high tide has been away.
Where glittering pools of creatures once swam, there are instead only shallow cups of water sunk to the bottom of great craters where the most desperate of ocean life clings to survival. The place smells of rot, of beached things picked by scavengers, dragged to the dunes and left behind.

Violet and Olaf arrive less enchanted than before. He still parks crooked on the beach, still kisses her just as feverishly, but there is an undercurrent of determination to every move they make.

They are doing this out of necessity, Violet reminds herself. Even as Olaf cracks his trunk and hauls can after can of gasoline to the sand, she grits her teeth and forces her hands to move.

As they walk towards the cathedral, their gates uneven from sand, Olaf talks constantly, a low, smooth chant of reminders, “You are so brave, Violet. This is the right thing to do. Snicket has manipulated your very best friends and kidnapped an innocent child, and he works as a small part of VFD’s larger whole. Any way we can hinder him is progress to us. I know what this is costing you. What you’re suffering through to help me. And-” She tunes him out, focussing on her steps and the sound of the waves.

They reach the greenery hiding the cathedral from plain view and the smell of decay hits them at the same time, as overwhelming as the cans of gasoline clutched in their hands.

“Gross.” Olaf mutters, distracted, nearly retching. “Let’s hurry this up.”

Violet, feeling a cocktail of nasty emotions, only hums, and follows.

They find the front door unlocked and ajar, the mess of typewriter keys still caught in the cracks of the front steps. Inside, the cathedral looks much the same. There is still the clutch of crooked pews, the intricate glass windows, the altar with all its decorations.

What is not familiar is the typewriter sitting in the center of the room, or the suitcase beside it cluttered with papers. A mess of blankets rests on a pew not far off.

Violet looks around the place, wondering how it had been so wondrous before. Now, seeing proof of Snicket’s presence, she feels nearly threatened.

It is almost a relief when Olaf sets the first can of gasoline to the ground.

She watches as he rips the lid off the first can and kicks it over, the liquid gushing to the floor. It moves the dust with it, gets divided by the feet of so many pews, sends Snicket’s papers floating briefly away.

The smell hits Violet like a fist to a black eye.

She snaps out of her brief emotional ignorance, stricken by anxiety, the smells of death and gasoline making her head spin.

With no warning, she heaves, doubling over, and vomits to the floor. It spatters against the hardwood, against her sandy shoes. Olaf is next to her in an instant, his hand soothing and warm on her back, muttering things she can barely hear.

In that moment, Violet is overwhelmed by the urge to turn and hold him, to recapture some familiar affection, to soothe her ragged heart. When she finally stands straight, Olaf says, “Don’t worry. I know just how you feel. My first time was hard too.”
“You’ve done this before?” Violet croaks, wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

“It is a penchant of VFD to fight fire with fire.” He answers neutrally, hauling another can of gas to the front of the cathedral, where the imprint of the missing cross had left a shadow on the wall. “It was part of my training to learn how to start one. Your parents too.”

“I don’t really want to think of my parents right now, thank you.” Violet says on a wince, walking over on weak legs to join him at the altar. He heaves the heavy can into his arms, says, “Fair enough. Get the cap for me, will you?”

Violet unscrews it swiftly and tosses it to the floor, her hands rising to help him tip it over the altar table—still covered with moth-eaten linen and candle stubs and the curling wisps of dried flower petals. The gas pours to the table, soaking into every dusty nook, dripping steadily to the floor. It glides down the small altar steps like lacquer, shining in the colorful light of the stained glass windows.

Once it has been drained, they step away and empty the remaining cans. Olaf kicks his over near the front doors. Violet covers the thin middle ground, drenching pews and papers, soaking Snicket’s nest of bedsheets.

They stand in silence examining their work once every can is drained. Olaf sees the floor covered, glittering, already starting to stain, and holds out a hand.

“Come here,” He says. “We’ll start it over here.”

Violet gazes around the cathedral where they had their first date, feeling stricken with sentiment and terror and utterly ashamed of herself.

“Do you know,” she says, her voice shaking and bitter, “what I wouldn’t do for you? I’d do anything. Anything.”

When she looks at him, she finds Olaf’s eyes unexpectedly soft.

“I know.” He says, and Violet can tell he means it. His own voice shakes, and his eyes are humbled and reverent and, if someone had asked her in that moment, she would have sworn that he loved her.

“Look at me.” Violet cries, throwing out her arms, gesturing to the broken cathedral, to the drenched altar, to the work of a man she does not know swamped with gasoline. There is a point she is trying to make, an emotion she cannot fully speak. She remembers the morning after they had stolen their dinner, what she had hissed to Olaf as he left. “You wanted my nobility. You’ve got it.”

He shakes his head, a bitter victory, knowing she is right.

“Come here.” Olaf says again.

This time she does, reaching for his open hand.

He does not lead her to the door. Instead he wraps an arm around her waist, reaches for her face with fingertips wet with gas, and kisses her. It is a heartbreaking kiss, one as full of chaos as it is devotion.

When Violet finally pulls away, there are tears on her cheeks. Olaf, looking as wrecked as she felt, brushes them away.

“Violet,” He says, voice heavy with emotion. He lets her go, walks away to stand in the doorway. From his pocket he withdraws a heavy metal lighter and a small wooden club, damp string tied at its
She joins him near the doorway, their shoes scraping against the crumbling gravel of the front steps. He flips the tab of the lighter until it sparks, flame bursting into a controlled pillar. The glow of the small fire catches the hollows of his cheekbones, glazes his eyes bright and golden. Gently, as if handing her a newborn, he passes her the piece of wood. Violet grips it as steadily as possible, her whole body shaking. Tears still slide in a steady stream down her face yet she does not wipe them away, can only focus on the man before her and his steady instruction, hoping, once everything is said and done, that she has proven herself worth keeping.

“It’s time to take up the torch.” Olaf says, passing the lighter under the roped tangle which immediately crackles with flame.

Violet, for all her fear, does not even flinch.

The man situates himself behind her, their hands linked. He is so close she can feel his breath on her neck, his stubble brush her cheek. Synchronized as a pair of newlyweds slicing a cake, they dip the lit torch to the doorway.

Combustion is instant. Violet sees the mess of flame spread immediately across the whole first floor of the cathedral, drowning the pews, swarming the altar. Smoke black as tar bleeds through the cracks in the windows, funnels quick as a gushing river out the front doors.

They stumble away, Violet dropping the torch so it clatters to the steps, Olaf following, his arms coming up around her, holding her. Over the roar of the flames, she hears him speaking softly, (“You did it, you did it, I am so proud of you-”) his voice in her ear even as the stained glass windows shatter from heat, even as she presses her face to his chest and finally, finally, weeps.

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Chapter End Notes

The Hemlock Tearoom and Stationary shop is mentioned within Snicket’s *All The Wrong Questions*, and is notorious for selling pens that do not work.

This chapter is dedicated to my dear friend Rachel. Happy birthday, my dear!

Like anything, this fic must come to an end. Consider this a warning. We have two chapters left.

As always, always, always. Please let me know what you think.
Chapter Nineteen

In retrospect, she is surprised by how little things change.

Following the cathedral’s destruction, they had hurried back to Olaf’s apartment and crashed into bed only to sleep until noon, heedless of homework or rehearsals or life’s smaller responsibilities in favor of heavy, dreamless sleep. Even as she sinks into the bed, Violet is aware and sure that, somewhere, someone suffers in the aftermath of their arson, yet she ignores it in guiltless, greedy rest.

With their actions trapped in the unchangeable past, Violet’s nightmares disperse. She sleeps, unlovely and crooked and shameless, in Olaf’s bed as the sun rises and dips to midday.

She takes her waking slow, unwilling to confront the aftermath of their actions.

Violet expects things between herself and Olaf to be awkward and hesitant- always afraid to step upon one another’s toes or cross some nonverbal line. Instead, the moment he wakes, Olaf squints at her, tugs halfheartedly at his bedhead, and croaks, “Want to go get some food?”

Instantly, they are whole and happy and closer than ever before.

The rest of the week continues in much the same fashion. If anything, Violet thinks, Olaf does his utmost to prove his devotion to her as she has (bent over backwards, disfigured her moral identity-) to prove herself to him.

Monday evening he shows up in her inventing room, an old white beer can full of wildflowers in one hand (Queen Anne’s lace the size of her fist, wild clover still crawling with bugs, tangles of ivy and plump purslane-) and a thick sheet of paper rolled like a scroll in the other.

“Thank you.” Violet says, plucking the can from his hands. She arches onto her tiptoes, prompting a kiss. Olaf smiles so widely their kiss falls flat yet Violet steps away grinning all the same. Stray papers are brushed aside for the can nearly overflowing with flowers. She sets it by the murmuring radio, close enough that the can clatters against it.

Violet shakes her shoulders to the music, throws her hair in a high, dramatic arch. “Did you need something or are you just here to look pretty?”

“You’re in a good mood.” Olaf remarks, smirking, eyes soft with amusement. He crashes into the velvet chair with casual ease.

“You’re right.” Violet says, crossing the room with a twirl to sit atop his bent knee. “Lucky you, huh?”

“Perhaps.” Olaf shrugs, handing her the scroll. Violet casts him a playful, suspicious look and uncurls the paper.
What reveals itself to her is a small poster. Printed in stark, bright colors, it shows Olaf standing centerstage dressed in a gleaming golden robe. A COUNT OLAF PRODUCTION, reads the top script, followed by STARRING: COUNT OLAF laid over the backstage blankness to his side.

“The Dire Deity. You never told me that’s what it’s called. With special thanks to-” Violet stops, shock plain on her face. “Violet Baudelaire, Inventor Extraordinaire?”

“I’ve got a proposition for you, little sneak.” Olaf says, plucking the poster from her grasp. “How would you like to invent a contraption to aid my performance?”

“Of course.” She says immediately, already excited. “What kind of invention would you need? Do you think I have enough materials? When do you-?”

“We can go over the details later. I’ll have to show you the catwalk first to see if it’s possible.” Olaf says.

“Okay.” Violet agrees, nodding. Already, her hands itch with the need to invent, her mind spinning with bizarre, half-brained ideas. “Okay. Yeah. I’d love to. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Olaf says, running a hand up her back, endlessly amused by her enthusiasm. “And in return, I’ll buy you dinner and allow full access to my bathtub at any given moment.”

“It’s a deal!” Violet cries, throwing her arms around his neck in a brief squeeze. She leaps from his lap with a twirl and throws open the trapdoor before he can fully stand. “Now show me this catwalk, you handsome fiend.”

They spend the evening tracing the long walkways above the theatre, jovial chatter filling the empty space. Violet returns to her bedroom later that night, just before curfew, happy and anxious to test her skills. These ideas keep worse ones at bay, allowing her an easy, consuming distraction until sleep swallows her whole.

Olaf finds her early the next morning.

She walks between Elsie and Dana, chattering about their penchant for bizarre dreams, when Olaf swoops through the front hall cluttered with orphans intent on making it to their first class.

He stops before them with a wicked, impatient gleam to his eyes that she has only ever seen in various states of undress. The sight of it, even between her friends in the crowded chaos of Eliade, has her stomach swooping and a familiar heat flushing her face. His lanyard gleams in the sunrise glinting through the windows. He doesn’t wear it in the theatre, tossing it in annoyance to whatever open space he first sees, so the sight of it provokes a smack of memory in Violet of seeing him for the first time, standing on the stage as if materialized out of a lewd fever dream.

“Miss Baudelaire,” He says in greeting, cavalier and couth as ever.

“Hi,” she returns, wary with surprise.
“Your presence is oh-so humbly requested in the basement theatre this evening. Centerstage. Midnight, as usual.”

“Oh!” Violet says, a wide grin breaking across her face. “For our invention. I’ll try to measure things out, but I’m not sure if I have enough—”

Olaf shrugs away her concern, that same peculiar heat to his eyes.

“Don’t fret. I’ll see you tonight. Ladies.” He nods to Dana and Elsie, who erupt into shocked giggles the moment he is out of sight.

“He sure is… something.” Dana says, while Elsie bumps Violet with her shoulder, mutters, “You’re not actually going to be inventing, are you?”

“How scandalous is that mind of yours?” She asks through a teasing glare. “He’s asked me to create some kind of invention for his play this Friday. I’m sure you’ll see proof on the posters soon enough.”

Elsie hums, mutters something about keeping a poster for memory’s sake. Dana continues a rendition of her most favorite dream, and they head to class without another thought.

By the time their first class ends, the halls have been cluttered with posters. They hang awkwardly with no reasoning behind them—stacked to bulletin boards two at a time or taped outside classroom doors with crooked zeal.

“I guess you were right.” Elsie says, peering at a poster. “Inventor extraordinaire, huh?”

“That’s me.” Violet says, plucking the poster from the wall and tucking it into the cover of the notebook in her arms, intent on taping it to the windows of her secret room.

“How boring.” Elsie teases with a wink, already walking towards their next class.

Her day continues in much the same fashion. She attends classes, eats her meals with her friends, and completes her homework in Dana’s room during the evening.

Nightfall drops.

Violet waits in her bedroom, flipping through Elsie’s latest sketchbook, and watches the hours slip away. Just before midnight, she sneaks through the halls and into the basement theatre, already anticipating her invention.

Darkness hides the rows of empty chairs. Once Violet’s eyes adjust she finds the only source of light is above the stage, casting it bright and golden. She takes a few steps towards it, examining the scripts covering the stairs, the rolls of tape and tinsel cluttered near the wings.

“Olaf?” she calls into the empty theatre, still with night. No sounds of travelling, rowdy orphans fill the main floor to swamp the place with vague noise. The room is hushed and calm and entirely deserted.

A change in perspective, a higher angle, is all it takes for the full stage to come into view. She notices the confessional booth instantly. It gleams in the light, polished and smooth.

“You didn’t.” Violet says to the empty room. She takes the stage slowly, approaching the booth with a strange mixture of dread and awe. “You just took this?”
A quick loop around it reveals no answers, simply the object of her most treasured fantasy waiting ready and glinting before her.

She thinks, perhaps, that it is empty, that Olaf expects her to climb inside and sit, prim and waiting, a schoolgirl patient in her suppression.

The door rattles on its track as she hesitantly slides it open, finding nothing inside but vague darkness and the dual scents of dust and furniture polish. Violet takes a deep breath, remembering how she had felt withdrawing Olaf’s present from this very booth- sick with nerves, afraid to lose herself within. She exhales, long and only somewhat shuddering, and ducks inside, closing the door behind her without a second glance.

Violet, nervous, thrilled, adjusts her skirt, presses her feet firmly against the worn floor, and settles, her hands forming fists in her lap, her posture too straight. Moments of shallow, anxious breathing pass.

Then, from the deep dark of the accompanying compartment, a voice asks, “How long since your last confession?”

Violet, nervous and shocked and suddenly self-conscious, tries not to giggle. Instead, she does what she has done before in times of great nerves. She takes a deep breath, briefly closes her eyes against the overwhelming dark of the confessional booth. Olaf, she knows, is attempting this for her, attempting to fulfill a fantasy shared in private, intimate secrecy.

In her is the sudden, nervous desire to brush the whole thing aside, to stumble out the door red-faced, avoidant, to pull Olaf from the other side and demand he return the booth to the front hall. Fear makes her want to flee.

When Violet opens her eyes, she finds them adjusted to the darkness. She can see her feet on the floor, can see a crack of light where the door rolled on its track, can see, to her right, a small screen thinning the space between her and Olaf. It is so dark and private she cannot even see his face, can only see his outline black and formless as a dream.

“Never.” Violet answers, embarrassed at her voice already gone weak. “Not once.”

“Well,” Olaf says, voice low and deeply genuine, an actor having fully and seamlessly embodied his role. “Allow me to conduct your first, Miss Baudelaire. Usually, a priest doesn’t acknowledge your identity, especially during an anonymous confessional. But I recognize your voice. So sweet. I do hope you’ll, ah, forgive me, Miss Baudelaire.”

Violet summons the reality of her fantasy in her mind, so clear and tempting she can see it- Olaf dressed in odd clerical robes, wandering the halls of Eliade, his eyes always on her with a look of intense fascination and want.

Part of her is surprised he remembered the circumstances of her fantasy so wholly. Another part remembers the look on his face when he had requested his game, so rapt and focused, then afterwards, “That was the most erotic experience of my life to date… For me to be the star in even your fantasies is such a gift. Do not be embarrassed.”

She focuses on this instruction, severs shame and hesitance from her body like something gone rotten.

“Of course.” She forces, feeling as though her throat is closing, as if she might cry at any second. It is a curious feeling, one she can only remember from their evening after visiting Endtimes, after
crawling into bed. It takes a few seconds for Violet to name it—anticipation. Suspense. Her hands tremble in her lap. “I won’t expect any other priest to use my name then. From now on.”

“Smart girl. I would be delighted to hear your confession.” Olaf says, so committed she can hear the smile in his voice like a threat. “I’ll sit and listen no matter how long it takes. Once every word leaves your mouth.”

“Thank you.” Violet says, glancing to the screen with its intricate, curling mesh of decorative wire.

“It would be my pleasure.” He returns, so close and quiet he must have spoken directly before the screen.

Violet hesitates. She knows Olaf has set the stage. Has had the confessional booth moved and cleaned, has initiated himself in role and place, has invited her to step inside her shared fantasy. He has even coaxed her, has gotten her talking. But she knows it is up to her to take the first step—those continuing this situation is up to her, her responsibility and duty and desire.

Pretend, that near-forgotten pastime, settles upon them like dew.

Violet sighs, exhales, knocks her heels briefly against her seat. When she finally speaks, her voice trembles. “You must know, before we begin. Usually I am a very good girl. Not prone to wickedness.”

“Of course you are.” Olaf returns, voice low and quiet and heavy with a thrill she has never heard. He says gravely, like confessing to sins of his own, “I suspect you are perfectly noble. I see you sometimes around the cathedral and have come to find you good and smart and soft-hearted.”

“You watch me?” She blurts. Sudden blush dusts her face so hot her eyes water.

There is a rustle of heavy fabric against wood as Olaf shrugs in the compartment beside her. “Yes. And I believe your claim against common wickedness. But that begs the question, Miss Baudelaire. What has you so viciously ashamed of yourself?”

The question jolts her from fantasy and deeper denial. Instead of lewd desires, she sees only fire, remembers only the burn of gasoline in her lungs, the ache of her arms as she lifted the heavy can onto Lemony Snicket’s papers, watching it drip through the keys of his typewriter. She feels the torch prickle her palms, sees the flash and burn of ignition. They watched the Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin burn to the ground, smudge the sky black.

Shame of a different kind nearly ruins her experience.

Violet shakes her head, winces against the memory. Although her shame is no longer resigned to the back of her mind, she ignores the anxious churning of her stomach and forces, “Thank you. Your assessment of me is very kind. But you’re right. I wouldn’t be here without wickedness. Or—or shame.”

Violet remembers her fantasy, clear and harnessed by repetition, and in it she does not touch herself the whole encounter, even as her hands shake and her breathing spikes. In this instance, however, she feels as if it would help her, could warp and temper her resurrected shame into something malleable and under her control.

She picks free the first button of her collar.

“I’m prone to other sins. Ones of the mind. The body.” Three more buttons slip from their holds. Violet’s hand glides across her chest, slow, seeking. “Sometimes I cannot sleep because I’m
overcome with such peculiar… want. Ache. And I do not know how to rid myself of it without--”
Her fingers brush, feathery and gentle, over a nipple, sensitive with expectancy. “Without touching.”

No ready reply rises from Olaf. Violet wonders if this is intentional considering it works on her so well- the silence invites critical reflection tinted with panic, makes her question the immediate instead of the distant past. Humiliation, that bittersweet sting, only deepens her arousal. At her chest, her movements grow longer, harder. She scratches at her skin, wondering briefly if her nails leave lines.

“Miss Baudelaire. Several ideas ran through my mind when I realized you were the one seeking penance. I thought, perhaps, you had cheated on exams. Had lied to a teacher about an assignment. Had passed on a particularly cruel shred of gossip. But never did I consider you to be so… indecent.”

The scandal in Olaf’s tone is weakened by shallow breathlessness. Beside her, he rustles and shifts in his seat. Violet’s hands press insistently across her body- running down the flat gap between her breasts, her trembling stomach, the muscles of her thighs gone taut with suppression.

She has successfully forgotten her earlier shame. Now, there is nothing left to keep her grounded, to keep her from becoming overwhelmed by the smell and dark of the confessional booth, from the alluring magnetism of her own imagination.

“Unlike most other priests, I think your desires are normal. Appropriate for someone your age. Finding a nice young man to share your body with might be helpful and good for you. Sure to lead to better sleep at least.” Olaf says, a hint of bitter humor in his voice. “Though I have to ask that you promise not to share my opinion. My peers would not approve. But I am, after all, very good at keeping secrets. What’s your word worth, Violet?”

“Plenty.” She says immediately, knowing it is true. “Thank you for the advice. I’ll protect your secret of course.” She mutters, a twinge of reluctance to her tone. Olaf, however, must have seared that night to his memory, because he senses the next procession of the game with immediate enthusiasm and care.

“You seem… hesitant, Miss Baudelaire. Tell me. Purge that shame. What else has you so wrecked with indignity?” Olaf purrs, cloying, as if he had stepped into the role of the devil himself, tempting a young woman to her soul’s demise.


There is a truly still moment, like a pause before a breath.

“Normal.” Olaf bites out, harsh, rough. “Smart. As long as you make a decent choice in partner, there’s no need to, hmm, punish you. Though the man in question must be very lucky to have a beauty like you at his heels.”

“Ah. No, nothing like that.” Violet responds immediately, humble courtesy ingrained so deeply into her character she cannot accept outright praise. “I’m scrawny and no great beauty. My-”

“Violet Baudelaire.” Olaf hisses, scolding her. “You are absolutely a sight to behold. Any man would be lucky to have you.”

“Even you, Father?”

He takes a few moments to answer. In them, Violet feels her heart sink to her feet, her breath falter and fade.
“Especially me.” He says, low and gruff and serious as if confessing to sins of his own.

Unhinged, the word rises from nowhere, unprompted, appears rough and instant in her mind as if summoned from the sea, dragged to the forefront of her awareness by wave after chaotic, boiling wave.

The word evokes visions of Olaf (hands black with char constricting around the slim thread of Carmelita’s throat, or, asking harsh and hurt, “There was another survivor of the Quagmire fire?”) yet never has she felt the same twisted freedom inhabit her own body. Never before has she felt so disloyal to her mind, gone dark and instinctive and wild as the night sky.

Rationality holds no value to her.

Instead, Violet reacts on old flame, on intuition and gut and heart.

“Olaf. Can-?” Desperate need has her body moving before her mind considers the tact in it. She yanks the door open, clattering on its track, and stumbles on trembling legs to the stage. “Can I-?”

Light spills in when she opens his door. The first thing she notices is heavy black fabric gathered at the floor before the small bench. Her gaze tracks it, confused, frazzled, grazing the caps of his knees and higher still to the way he sits leaning back, his arms to either side of him rising, open and ready to take her in. What catches her eye is not the sight of him sitting in the booth as if he belonged there, is not his hands reaching for her like a prize, is not the rapturous, striking look to his face, but the pearly square at his throat. He wears a cassock dark as deep water.

“Where did you get that?” Violet demands, frozen at the sight of him.

“Might have stolen it from the cathedral.” Olaf says, rising, reaching. There is a moment in the quiet where Violet sees him with his eyes hot and desperate on her and feels just as drawn and instantly seduced as when they first met on the very same stage. “Doesn’t matter. Come here.”

Releasing her hold on the booth hurts her in a way she doesn’t expect, fractures something sensitive and delicate in her chest, yet she still backs away, retreating to centerstage.

Olaf mutters, “What are you-?” yet once they meet eyes he stops, falters.

“I have something… else to tell you, Father.” Violet says, watching the way the word father sparks something feral in him. A pulsing vein at his neck spikes and his hands twitch, contracting at the empty air, still reaching for her.

“Tell me.” He demands.

“You said before that you watch me. Here. Through the halls. But that didn’t surprise me. I’ve seen you watch me. How you look at me like-” Violet’s breath catches. “Like you want me.”

“I do.” He affirms, impatient. “Miss Baudelaire. I want you so badly I’m-”

He doesn’t finish his sentence but he doesn’t have to. Violet hears the tremor in his voice, sees his strong hands reduced to shaking.

“Right. But first, I have something for you. As penance. Remembrance.” She walks towards him slowly, carefully aware of the subtle swing in her hips, the steady stretch of her arm as she holds out a fist of vague offering. She places the bundle in his outstretched hands (palms up, begging without diction, “I’d do anything, anything-” ) and sees the thin cotton give and unfurl.
“Your panties, Violet?” He asks, distracted.

She hears the exact moment his eyes find her, finally trace the spot where she now stands, the stage lights warm on her back, her skirt in her hands lifted like an offering.

“I’ve wanted to do this since the moment we met.” She says, then, slowly, kneels. Waits. She watches the booth with its shroud of darkness, no longer able to spot the man inside.

Then, with a growl, she hears the moment Olaf breaks.

He lurches from the booth on trembling, weak legs, and storms towards her, emerging into the light enough for her to see the long cassock—the way the sleeves brush his knuckles and ring his feet, how a long string of buttons hangs like a knotted, bending spine over the swell of his chest. He stomps towards her so forcefully she feels the motion in her kneecaps pressed to the stage.

With a strength that surprises her, Olaf lifts her into his arms, spins, and tosses her roughly inside. Violet’s head bashes against the far wall, her vision going blurry as Olaf rushes inside, slamming the door shut at his back.

By the time Violet regains her balance and her eyes adjust, Olaf has knelt between her legs, yanking them apart at her knees gone red with pressure. He runs his hands, quivering, up the part of her thighs. Her skirt rucks up. In the dim, she cannot see his face, can only make out the gleam of his eyes, glimmering like raw salt freshly-mined, gauzed in earth and shadow.

“What is this you wanted, Violet?” He asks, thumbing the peaks of her hips. “You wanted to give yourself to me?”

“Yes.” She says, shifting closer, offering evermore. “To you, Father. Just you. Only—Oh!”

He kisses her navel as if it were holy ground, a precious space doomed to defilement. Breath humid against her skin (enough to send goosebumps crawling up her legs-) he asks, “Do you know what you’re asking of me? Damnation.” He kisses her again, lower, his bottom lip at the soft stubble of hair at her pelvis. “Devotion.”

“Yes.” Violet breathes, voice soft with want. She runs her fingers through the wild curls of his hair, coaxing, tempting.

Hushed, Olaf says, “Look at me. See what I would do for you?”

 She hears herself like an echo, lungs heavy with gasoline, “Do you know what I wouldn’t do for you? I’d do anything. Anything.”

Violet mirrors his speech herself, saying his exact words as he pulled her towards her own moral disfigurement, “Come here.”

He follows direction, keen as ever.

As consequence for the breathing fantasy, the humiliation, and her own wandering hands, it takes Violet only a handful of minutes to come undone. This surprises Olaf, who had taken to kneeling as easily as the very first time, his hands at her waist, the scruff of his face prickling her thighs. Her knees rest on the slopes of his shoulders, trembling far sooner than normal.

She knows he will have a comment to make once his mouth is less occupied, yet Violet cannot bring herself to care, not when she sits sloped and crooked in the confessional booth, the man who owns her heart at her feet draped in holy vestments.
Violet’s hands grip his hair, her legs tremble so fiercely she cannot control them, and, with a clutch of strangled whimpers, she gasps, shrieks, pushes him away. Olaf pulls away already smirking while Violet slumps, trembling, in her seat.

“No time at all.” The man purrs, smug. “We’re getting better together, aren’t we?”

“Hush.” Violet says, grabbing fistfuls of the cassock’s rough fabric and hauling him onto his feet, crouched above her. She presses her face to the crook of his neck, hands picking rough and desperate at the long line of buttons at his chest. “Get out of this, Father. Teach me. Show me.”

Olaf laughs softly, hands rising to assist her. “Still playing, are we?”

“Will you just fuck me already?” Violet hisses. Her hands, useless, still unsteady, fall away. He picks free the last button, shrugs out of the garment and tosses it to the floor. Beneath it he wears no shirt but still dons his usual trousers. Seeing them, Violet groans in frustration.

“Patience, Miss Baudelaire.” He says, teasing, sliding the button from its catch. In the dim, she sees the faint glint of metal shifting as he drags his zipper down. She does not see the moment his belt strikes the floor, can only hear it clap against the wood. She feels, however, the instant he leans down and presses fully inside her, quick and ravenous and greedy.

The instant pressure is enough to steal her breath, to send her gasping. He thrusts into her so rapidly the feet of the confessional booth skid against the stage. Without warning or past experience, Violet feels another orgasm build and peak. She reaches between them, gasping, ragged, to rub herself, to tempt that final push into hoarse, shameless bliss.

“Go ahead, orphan.” Olaf spits. “Show me how I make you feel.”

With a whine, she crashes into her second orgasm.

Olaf follows not long after, pulling her wrinkled panties from the floor to catch the result. He yanks his pants up while she recovers and stumbles from the confessional booth, kicking the cassock to the stage on his way out. With a grunt, he flattens out beneath the lights, his face to the ceiling, his chest heaving.

Violet stumbles from the booth in much the same sweaty, disheveled fashion.

“I can’t believe you.” She croaks as she collapses beside him. “I can’t believe you did this.”

He laughs wearily, reaches out blindly to pet her head. “It wasn’t difficult, my dear. But you’re welcome either way.”

“Thank you.” She murmurs, wriggling close enough to kiss his cheek. “And you’re keeping that cassock.”

He sputters as if the idea of abandoning it is unimaginable. “Of course I’m keeping it, silly orphan.”

They peel themselves from the stage after several minutes of contact in which they joke, kiss, catch their breaths. By the time Violet has adjusted her uniform to appropriate standard, she realizes she is missing one crucial piece of clothing.

“Um.” She starts, watching Olaf fold the cassock over his arm. “You’ve still got my panties.”

“Your panties?” He scoffs, taking them from his pocket to examine in the light. “If I’m not mistaken, these were a gift. An offering. A memento of-”
“Fine. Keep them.” Violet bites, an embarrassed blush bright on her face.

“Thank you.” Olaf murmurs, pocketing his prize once more. “I like knowing you’re walking back to your bedroom without them. Seems more sordid that way, don’t you think?”

When she doesn’t respond, Olaf rolls his eyes at her and holds out an arm, his face exhausted and deeply satisfied. “Now come kiss me goodnight.”

Upon finally returning to her room, Violet sheds her clothes, dons her pajamas, and crashes into bed. Her body feels blissfully heavy, and she falls into sleep as easily as breathing, the world dissolving around her into absence, into air.
Chapter Twenty

For the next three days, Violet falls into an easy and beloved routine.

She wakes in her inventing room, hurries to breakfast with Elsie and the others, and attends her classes with her usual disinterest and criticism. Time passes slowly, lectures bleeding into one another, her only respite in the long notes she passes between friends plotting their course for the evening.

It is the evenings, after all, that make the long hours worth enduring.

Dana and Elsie accompany her on long walks throughout the city as the sun sinks and burns itself out. They comb back alleys and dumpsters and construction sites, Violet’s bag growing heavy with scrounged inventing supplies. Dana snaps odd pictures of her friends and the city on a beat-up looking camera while Elsie chatters about her newest fabric experiments, endless assignments, and their coming graduation.

They wear themselves out until the sun sets, and return to Eliade just before curfew.

With that, they head to the basement theatre and into the chaos of pre-production planning. Violet abandons her privacy in favor of much-needed help, allowing Dana and Elsie into her inventing room with strict rules for secrecy.

Elsie had taken one look around the cluttered space and instantly recognized the photobooth pictures, glancing back to Violet with a smug, dirty grin. “Followed my directions to the photobooth, I see.”

Flustered, Violet had waved her off, brushing past to her rickety desk, “We’re not here for you to gawk, Elsie, I just need to grab my hand drill and we can-”

Dana had turned from where she had been examining the string lights cluttering the high tower to join Elsie, teasing, “Oh, so steamy, Violet. Who knew Olaf could kiss like that, huh?”

“Me.” She had challenged through a grin, grabbing her tools from the mess of the table and handing them to the amused, fascinated girls. “Now help me get this done.”

They spend their few remaining hours of freedom in various positions around the theatre, helping Violet link long coils of bicycle chain together and measuring the growth. Dana holds her ladder as Violet drills a rusty metal sign in place between two lights bigger than her head. Elsie holds a greasy oil can with politely subdued disgust.
With each passing day there is a growing sparkle and electricity to the air, the sort of anticipatory instinct similar to the moments before a fierce thunderstorm. Nero reminds them of the upcoming, mandatory play at every available moment. He mentions it during morning announcements, on the intercom between classes, and even forces their teachers to offer extra credit despite the compulsory attendance.

Three days pass in a trial of endurance, hard work, and skill.

She finishes her invention on Thursday evening, the night before the play.

Violet sits on the latticed edge of the catwalk, her feet dangling between the handrail beams. Far below her sit the plush velvet audience chairs, empty, waiting. She put the finishing touch on her invention minutes ago, her hands now black with drying smears of oil, a handful of dirty rags stuffed into her satchel.

Having finished, exhausted and confident about her job well done, she had dropped to the floor of the catwalk, dangled her feet over the edge, and simply watched the Troupe traverse the theatre with a weary, hardwon sort of affection.

Fernald and the bald man are pacing the stage, examining the marking tape stuck to the floor and muttering. The white-faced women stand before the steep stairwell leading up into Eliade, large clipboards in their hands, tasked with examining doorways and windows and viable exits to check off a numbered list. The individual of indeterminate gender stands upstage, dimmed in shadow, examining a numbered list of costumes hanging on a rolling rack.

Violet watches as they work, hung like a benevolent moon amongst her twinkling hoard of stage lights, of stars.

Olaf enters swiftly from stage right, footsteps sharp. His clothes are noticeably rumpled as if he has had to remove them several times already, swapping costumes and accessories. He stops near centerstage and examines the work of his Troupe. There is a momentary pause, counting heads, where Olaf glances towards her and immediately away, blinking against the temporary blind spots swimming in his gaze, she’s sure, from the great shine of lights that halo the catwalk.

“Olaf,” She calls. He squints to the floor, rubs his eyes. “I finished my invention. Come see.”

“If I can make it there.” He grumbles. “Who made these things so bright? Someone check the Dimmer Room.”

Still wincing, he makes his way to the audience floor and towards the back of the theatre where the sound booth conceals a tall ladder rising skyward and its netting of connected walkways. He flies up the ladder with practiced ease and heads straight towards her on steady legs, indifferent to the deep, open drop below.

“Not scared to fall, huh?” She calls, impressed and nervous.

Olaf shakes his head, sparing a glance to the long rows of seats below, shrunk with distance. “I’ve strutted plenty of catwalks in my time, my dear. This one is hardly the tallest.”

He shuffles beside her and sits, dangles his own legs to the air. “But I’ve been up here plenty of times. In fact,” He snakes an arm around her shoulders, draws her close. Violet leans into him, her cheek against his chest. “The first time we met on that stage, Fernald had just left because he lost our little game of seeing who could spit the farthest.”

“Eew.” Violet mumbles, pulling away. She glances critically at the rails holding them in place, wipes
her hands on her skirt. “You spat from all the way up here?”

“Yes.” Olaf insists. “And I won.”

Violet hums. “Remind me to clean this spot before the show.”

He shrugs, crosses his legs. “If you’d like. Now tell me about this invention of yours.”

Violet reaches into her satchel, which hangs knotted around a handrail, withdrawing two plums. She stands carefully, reaching for the long loop of bike chain. Olaf’s hand immediately slides up the back of her leg and beneath her skirt, squeezing her backside.

When she glares down at him, he flashes her a guiltless grin.

“Leave me alone, you cad.” She snips, shimmying her skirt, yet his hand remains where it is.

Olaf shakes his head. “I’m fully capable of admiring you and your invention at once, Miss Baudelaire. Get to it.”

Violet sighs in duel exasperation and affection and turns away. She grips a spot on the chain right above her head and rattles it. The wave travels the whole length of the theatre to its ending above the stage where the chain loops around a mesh of cogs from an old grandfather clock. Lengths of rubber-coated copper wire coil through the cogs and wrap around the lights hanging above the stage, the same ones that had tormented her so early into her residency at Eliade.

“So this—” Violet begins, rattling the chain yet again. “Is several bike chains linked together. Several. To get it to go this far. I can move it in rotation on these here.” She taps a gleaming cog above her head, the engraving so worn she cannot tell its make or model, yet the edges of it are still barbed and sharp as ever. “And the whole pulley hangs on these wires here—” She taps the wire closest to her where it is threaded through the cog and points to where it winds around the closest light above their heads. “And then I welded the wires together so they fused, on both ends. I know it’s pretty heavy duty for what you need but I wanted to be sure it would work.”

Olaf releases his grip on her backside to stand. He grabs a length of bike chain and pushes it away so it glides in a smooth rotation. “Looks perfect. Have you got a demonstration?”

“Of course.” Violet says. From the front pocket of her satchel, she withdraws a large silk handkerchief, pale pink and dotted with oil. “Elsie gave me this to test it out with fruit. We’ve got a larger sling for your prop but it’s up in my inventing attic. Watch.”

She places the plums inside the handkerchief and threads two corners between the rivulets on the bike chain, knotting the ends. With a grunt and a shove, she sends them zipping across the theatre.

“They’ll hit that street sign I’ve placed there.” Violet points to the end of the track where she has bolted an old yellow sign into place amongst the glow of the lights, the punched letters stripped of most paint yet still easily reading: SLAUGHTERHOUSE, followed by a downward arrow pointing to the stage.

“Where did you get that?” Olaf asks, disgusted yet amused.

“Watch.” Violet insists, pointing as the pair of plums speed across the theatre and finally hit the sign with a wet smack. The momentum sends them tipping out of the silk sling and dropping to the stage, hitting the black taped X with precision and slight mess.

“Ah. And that’s why my stage is sticky.” Olaf murmurs.
“You’re lucky it wasn’t a watermelon again.” Violet grins. “That one made a mess.”

Olaf hums, considers her out of the corner of his eye. There is a question there, some deeper suspicion. “Tell me, at least, that you didn’t loot a slaughterhouse.”

Violet shakes her head. “No. Just the dumpster behind the slaughterhouse that’s being renovated. See the things I do for you?”

Olaf grins. His hand brushes, calm and familiar, from her backside up the curve of her spine to rest hot between her shoulder blades. “Climb into a slaughterhouse dumpster? Create a marvelous, critical invention? Bear witness and collaborator to my many schemes and plots?”

“Those too.” She agrees.

They stand in silence for several moments, watching the Troupe recover from the unexpected slap of fruit to the stage and return to their duties.

“Are you nervous?” Violet asks, bending to a persistent curiosity.

“No.” Olaf answers, as if he has been asked the same question many times before. “I’m impatient. Excited, almost. No, the play isn’t…” He sighs, scowls down to the seats. “Violet, do you remember what I said this play would be about? On our very first date?”

She hums, considering. “You were pretty vague. I remember you mentioned manipulation by superiors but not much else. My memory of that night is cluttered by our other activities.”

“Wicked girl.” Olaf says fondly, reaching out to tuck her against his side. Violet wraps her arms around him and closes her eyes briefly, relaxing. Her body seems to melt, as if the proximity to Olaf had soothe her in a way unique to only him.

“If you had bothered to remember my words and not, perhaps, just my tongue, then you may remember I also mentioned other themes. Childhood trauma. Revenge. A feeling of doom one can never avoid. Sound familiar?”

“Sure.” Violet mutters, too pleased at being against him and weary from long nights of inventing to ponder his words.

“Violet.” He runs a protective hand over the crown of her head. “This play is a very thinly veiled insult to all of VFD. That’s what I couldn’t tell you before. It will make many people angry, volunteers and villains alike. Have you seen the Quagmires lately?”

Violet sighs, mood souring. “No. I haven’t seen them since before the fire at the Cathedral. They haven’t attended any sermons or classes or meals, and their bedrooms are always empty. I’m worried about them.”

“They’ve most likely been inducted by Snicket. Or nearly. I bet they show up on his heels tomorrow night. At least for the duration of the play, do not interact with them. And—” Olaf squeezes her close to his chest, kisses the top of her head. In a quiet, small voice, as if confessing a terrible secret, he says, “Just trust me.”

“I do, of course.” She says, just as quiet and serious.

“I know you do. I need to—” Before he can say another word, two happy girls tumble down the last few stairs and into the theatre, nearly bumping into the white faced women. Elsie spots them immediately, waving to the catwalk.
“Violet!” She calls, “We’ve got more fruit to drop!”

Dana stands beside her holding several grocery bags, at least one containing a large watermelon.

“Oh no.” Violet mutters, casting Olaf an apologetic look. “I don’t want to mess anything up by-”

“You’ve already got the plums to clean up, why stop there? It’s time for us to get going anyway. The longer we stay, the worse we’ll do tomorrow. Have fun with your friends. Smash some fruit.” He takes her face in his hands, kisses her roughly, and pulls away with a smack. “I’ll drive myself crazy if I stay a moment longer.”

“Okay.” Violet murmurs. Her hands form rings around his wrists as she eyes the tension in his face. Despite his rejection of nerves, she can still see the edgy, high-strung tick to his movements. “Don’t worry. It’ll be over soon.”

“You’re right.” He says, kissing her forehead once, twice, before leading the way off the catwalk. Violet follows easily, having grown familiar with each turn and every rung down.

Dana and Elsie meet them at the main aisle bisecting the first row of seats. They glance to Olaf warily, as if unsure how to address him.

“Have fun dropping your fruits, ladies.” Olaf says, nodding to the bags in their hands. “I’m off to spend the rest of my evening blissfully alone, trying not to think of everything I have left to do.

“Will do.” Elsie says. “We’ll clean up our mess.”

Dana nods, seconding the promise.

“Of course. Goodnight, ladies.” He casts Violet an amused, devoted look. “Goodnight, Miss Baudelaire.”

“Goodnight.” They return in unison.

Dana and Elsie stuff heavy fruit into her arms, already hurrying towards the ladder. Violet watches Olaf retreat to the long stairwell, worried.

She senses a greater secrecy in him deeper than hindered nerves.

Olaf takes to the stairs, back hunched, hands shoved deep into his pockets. Violet remembers his repetitive plea for trust and knows, above all else, that her devotion to him remains resolute and unwavering.

She trusts him.

It will have to be enough.
sits in the stuffy room before a glowing, wall-length vanity mirror. She is curled in on herself, shaking, face nearly pressed to her knees, shrieking with shocked, riotous laughter. Beside her, Olaf crouches at her feet, hands shaking the arms of the chair. He moves jerkily, as if trying to catch a glimpse of her face through the long curtain of her hair.

“Again!” Olaf demands through his cackling. “Let me see it again!”

Their laughter is so impassioned that they fail to observe the moment Fernald enters the private dressing room. They take no notice of the stricken, panicked look to his face until he steps inside, hooks outstretched as if to console, and asks, “Is she alright?”

Still grinning, Olaf rises and mutters, “Yes. Sort of.”

Violet flips her hair back, sitting straight, and looks into the mirror again, taking in her face painted white, her lips pursed and red, her three sets of pointy eyebrows, and matching mustache. She opens her mouth to speak and the gummy false insert of several yellowed, crooked teeth bounces off her knees and clatters to the floor.

“Fernald.” Violet forces through sputtering, embarrassed giggling. “I can explain. We-”

Olaf grabs her by the face, his fingers pressing against her cheeks, squishing them forward until her lips bunch. “Under the guise of dis guise training, I bet our little orphan that she couldn’t mimic the makeup of our lovely white-faced women. What happened after that is nothing short of a tragedy.”

Violet slaps him away, rebukes, “You insisted the eyebrows were off. How was I supposed to see what I was doing wrong if I couldn’t compare them?”

“Ah, logic.” Olaf says, rolling his eyes. He casts a hand through the air as if waving the notion away. “Who needs it?”

“And the, uh, mustache?” Fernald asks. “The teeth?”

“Just for fun.” Violet beams at him, utterly amused. “What, you don’t like them?”

“Who would?” Olaf offers.

Violet grabs the thin makeup brush she had used to apply her numerous eyebrows and brandishes it at him, warning, “You’re next, you fiend.”

“Oh, slay me, you little monster.” Olaf snickers, steps away.

Violet glares at him, hoping it is enhanced by her eyebrows, and swivels in her chair. Before she can retort or throw the brush, Fernald speaks with the hurried rush of someone desperately in need of expelling their bad news.

“Lemony Snicket is here.” He forces on a tight exhale. “He’s got a kid with him I don’t recognize. A boy. And the Quagmire triplets. And Larry.”

“Larry?” Olaf repeats, face contorted in nearly offended confusion. “Why would he bring Larry?”

A flash of memory accompanies the name. Violet remembers the man dressed in a white doctor’s coat, his voice even and calm as he discussed Duncan’s expulsion.

“I don’t know.” Fernald rubs his hooks together anxiously. The glow of the mirror highlights the nervous sweat streaking his brow. “But they keep walking around the building. Hanging out in the
alley. Like they’re looking for something. I figured I should tell you.”

Olaf hums, frowning at the floor. Violet watches the amusement fade from his face, replaced with mounting nervous tension.

“Do you think they’re going to try to take Violet?” Fernald asks. His voice is quiet in the small room, so soft he can barely be heard over the electric buzz of the bulbs.

“Hopefully. You think he’d want her like this?” Olaf taps the base of her chair with his toe, still attempting to make her laugh even as his greatest enemy lurks outside.

“Fun’s over.” Violet mutters, reaching for the closest rag to wipe her face. The makeup smears in great drags, eyebrows blurring across her forehead. She can feel Olaf’s eyes on her face, watching, plotting.

“Sorry.” Fernald mutters, backing away towards the door. “Just wanted you to be aware.”

“Don’t be.” Violet says, attempting to scrub her mustache away. “We’ve got less than an hour before showtime anyway. I shouldn’t be distracting the star.”

Olaf rolls his eyes at her in the mirror. Fernald casts them one last strained smile before shutting the door and slinking away.

Several minutes of silence follow the man’s exit as Violet scrubs the last traces of makeup from her skin and Olaf broods, his eyes distant and distracted. Once she is sure that her face is clean, she asks, “Why does Fernald think Snicket is going to steal me?”

“Another orphan to complete his collection? A deal brokered with the Quagmires for their compliance?” Olaf guesses, shrugging. “Like I’ve said, I cannot begin to understand him. I have anticipated the possibility that he might come after you. But I won’t let him get the chance.”

That being said, he walks over to a small table low to the ground and littered with highlighted, tattered scripts. From its surface he grabs a large circular object draped in thick black fabric. He turns carefully, crosses the room. The glass is cool and heavy against her thighs as Olaf sets it in her lap. He pulls the cloth away with a steady, slow hand.

Near the bottom of the domed terrarium, Violet spots layers of pebbles, sand, and silt, all covered with a film of withering detritus and bright bundles of moss. Numerous mushrooms sprout in close clusters from the soil, their grey bodies several inches in length and speckled with black dots like freckles. The caps swell towards the vaulted top of the glass, nearly as large as her palm. Papery gills hang beneath the caps, pale as bone.

A prickle of dreaded recollection hovers at the back of her mind.

“These are-” She mutters, gazing fearfully into the glass, unable to look him in the face. “They were- were in your study.”

“You’re right.” Olaf says smoothly. She can feel his heavy gaze on her face, studying her every reaction. Testing her. “You noticed they were gone, didn’t you? Last time?”

“I noticed something was different.” Violet admits. Her hands close around the glass, holding it in place. “But I couldn’t put my finger on it. Until now.”

Her mind churns with violent images too putrid to ponder. Her heart races, sick and aching on its hook of bone. Violet stares from Olaf to the terrarium and feels her face go pale in one vast flush.
“Olaf.” She begins, hating the horrified tremor in her voice. “These are those mushrooms, aren’t they? The ones my parents tried to protect me from? The poisonous ones?”

He watches her for a moment longer than necessary. When he answers, he is measured and calculated. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course.” Violet answers. “But—”

“Do you trust me, Violet?” He asks again, running his hands soothingly over hers. They are cold and clammy, proof of the nerves he had hidden from her the previous night.

A loud knock cracks against the door. Violet flinches, sending the mushrooms swaying.

“Twenty minutes!” The white-faced women call.

“I do. You know I do. But I don’t understand why—” She stops, frustrated, confused. “I have friends in the audience.”

“Violet.” Olaf says. “I need you to take this to the catwalk. You’re going to use that marvelous, genius invention of yours to send it to the stage for me. Remember your cue?”

“Yes. The poem. All the evil in the world, the wickedness and sin, can never sink your soul unless you let it in.”

“Good.” Olaf says, nodding. “Everything will be okay. Leave it to me, little sneak. Please. Trust me.”

“Okay.” She says, a fearful, teary catch to her voice. Although her throat constricts painfully and her stomach knots into an anxious coil, she kisses Olaf with all the fervor she can muster. She hates how even now his hands coax warmth into her body, shining sunlight onto the dark, wretched parts of her mind.

His mouth tastes of horseradish.

This fact alone is enough to send tears spilling down her cheeks.

“I can’t.” Violet says, face painfully hot. She imagines it clearly—her friends in the audience, having arrived early to claim front row in support, receiving the first dusting of the poisonous spores.

“Don’t cry.” Olaf says, kissing her nose, her cheeks, swiping his thumbs beneath her eyes. “You can do it. You can, Violet. For me. For us.”

Another knock sounds at the door, yet she barely hears it, too absorbed the resolute, tender gaze of the man before her. She kisses him once more, quick, as if afraid he’ll burn her, and leaps from her seat.

“You can do it.” Olaf murmurs. “Good luck.”

“Good luck.” Violet repeats, gesturing ambiguously towards the stage.

She wipes her face against her sleeve, attempting composure, takes one last look at Olaf, (who stands wounded and troubled, gazing at her as if worried she will betray him-) and hurries out of the dressing room.

By the time she crosses the labyrinth of back halls to the sound booth and scales its ladder to stand on the farthest edge of the catwalk, the room has settled and the lights have dimmed. From her perch,
she cannot make out individuals among the crowd. One bowl-shaped hat reveals another, and several more after. She cannot tell the difference between one student and the next, all wearing their Eliade uniforms. No shock of red hair blights the audience, which is suspiciously absent of Carmelita’s shrill complaints.

At Violet’s distance, she cannot pick volunteer from villain.

The anonymity doesn’t help her trembling hands or the sniffling catch of her breath. She stands in the catwalk, prepares the large sling so it hangs like a pale ghost from the bike chain.

A ripple of movement passes across the large drawn curtains, causing a swell of excited murmuring from the audience. With a resounding switch, a spotlight shines to the empty stage, appears suddenly as a sunray scraped past thunderclouds.

Nero saunters towards it from the right wing. He carries a microphone in his fist, the long cord trailing behind him like shadow. The unrelenting glow of the spotlight does him no favors. It amplifies the ruddy tinge to his face, casts his shadow lumpy and awkward up the curtain. He dresses in an ill-fitting suit, green as vomit, and spotted with stains.

Seeing him, even after so many months, evokes raging disgust in Violet. Her stomach flips in warning. She sits at the edge of the catwalk, curled around the terrarium.

Grinning nastily, as if he knows exactly what it will do, Nero taps the microphone. A metallic squeal rent the air. Through her wince, Violet sees the audience cringe, duck away.

“Students!” Nero barks before the ringing is truly done. “This is the night you’ve been waiting for all year! Besides, of course, my each and every violin recital which is undoubtedly the best you’ll ever hear! But tonight—” He pauses dramatically, scans the crowd with his red-rimmed, watery eyes. “You’ll enjoy a treat of another sort. Orphans, faculty, and orphaned faculty. Count Olaf and his Troupe present The Dire Deity!”

The crowd claps and cheers as Nero turns away. The lights dim and blink awake to the curtain being pulled.

Before a background of fluffy clouds and open sky, the two white-faced women have taken to centerstage as angels. They wear flowing white gowns, halos of tinsel, and two pairs of large, white wings apiece. Drawn onto their faces are several eyeballs, each one boasting full eyelashes and glitter to the iris.

Without preamble or fuss, the show begins.

“There once was a man with extraordinary talent!” cries an angel.

“And charm! And looks!” cries the other.

Count Olaf marches to the stage as the backdrop shifts behind him into a village with clay homes and a winding main street that disappears into its painted horizon. He is dressed in pale linen trousers with a flowing shirt to match. Above that he wears a velvet robe, golden, and heavily embroidered with intricate stitchings, the hem drooping to brush his calves as he walks.

Seeing Olaf atop the stage, finally performing his beloved show, has unexpected pride blossoming in Violet’s chest. Her hands itch against the cool glass terrarium, wanting to touch him, to reach out and claim him for herself if only for a moment.

He’s mine, she thinks, feeling small and extraordinarily lucky despite the biological weapon in her
lap.

An angel continues, “He was a powerful man, easily gaining respect and admiration from those
around him.”

Fernald enters from stage left dressed in dark, tattered robes and a pair of fake hands to cover his
hooks. He walks past the Count with a wave and says cheerfully, “Oh! My neighbor! I respect and
admire you!”

“Thank you.” Olaf purrs, bowing as he passes.

“But this man wasn’t just a man…” narrates an angel. “No. He was also God!”

“God?” gasps the other. “Which one?”

“Exactly! He’s all of them, of course. Every myth, legend, deity, and folktale wrapped into one!” An
angel gestures to Olaf, who walks slowly through the village as if surveying his own land.

“Women fall before him! Strangers beg for favors!”

Dressed in a pale floral dress, the individual of indeterminate gender rushes to the stage and into
Olaf’s arms, muttering, “Oh, handsome man. You’re the one performing miracles around here. Let
me follow in your shadow so that I might someday share your bed.”

“If you’re lucky.” Olaf boasts, pushing them onto their feet.

Violet laughs softly to herself, muttering to the empty air, “Agreed.”

Several minutes pass as Fernald, the bald man, and the individual of indeterminate gender appear and
disappear in loops of demands and costumes. Olaf uses his godly powers to summon water, to bless
crops, to heal livestock, to seek stockpiles of long-buried gold. He performs these miracles with
growing disinterest as the people around him ask for more and do not linger in his company.

“This man bends reality before him, makes it dance and shiver and change,” says an angel, once Olaf
is again left alone. He crosses his arms, glares at the ground. “He answers to no one, holds no
responsibility for his gifts. Yet, over time, he continues to grow dissatisfied.”

“It gets awfully lonely performing miracles for only a small moment of glory.” Olaf says. “What’s a
god without devoted, mindless, spineless pawns? Nothing! I’m nothing without validation!”

More villagers come and go. With each visit, Olaf grows more noticeably bitter.

“This god-man began offering a catch to his good deeds,” the angels explain. “He no longer wanted
to share his knowledge and power just for the sake of those around him. He wanted more. He
wanted devotion.”

“Come and follow me,” Olaf says, walking in circles throughout the village as more people trail
behind him, dummies and mannequins in the arms of his followers. “And I will give you what you
need.”

The disciples follow Olaf as the background ripples, revealing a shifting sun and moon in fast cycles.

“Over time he drew a small crowd, all noble and good people who wished to share their knowledge
and talents with one another. Soon, the man didn’t have to force them into devotion.” Both angels
pluck the halos from their heads and shrug out of their wings, setting them to the stage. “They
volunteered."

The two women join the march for several moments. A noticeable whisper gusts through the crowd like wind through wheat, each head bending to brush against its neighbor in hushed conversation. Violet looks to Olaf who leads his line with his head held high, his golden robe shimmering.

“But, as could be expected, this devotion left him bored. He wanted more. A wicked idea grew in his mind.” says a white-faced woman to the crowd, her mouth covered as if sharing a horrible secret.

Olaf stops in his tracks, turns to address his disciples under the warm glow of midday sun. He declares, “I’ve had an idea.”

“Oh wonderful!” Fernald cries.

“You must invest in me your multitudes of enormous fortunes. We can travel farther, explore the world, induct more like-minded, noble prudes like us!” Olaf says. Before him, the entire crowd of disciples nods in diminutive acceptance.

“And so they do,” says a white-faced woman. “But it takes little time for the man to demand even more.”

Olaf takes a few steps and pauses. He turns to his volunteers with a wicked grin on his face. “It has come to my attention that we do not have any young volunteers among us. Without them you lot will slowly die and I’ll be left alone. It’s time to induct children! We’ll train them to read and practice individual skills and think for themselves but only about subjects approved by me!”

He bald man asks, “How would we get young children?”

“We’ll steal them from their beds if they seem promising! Take them in the middle of the night! And, if they don’t comply-” Olaf shakes his head, grimacing. “We’ll murder their parents with poison darts. We’ll ruin their whole lives.”

Another harsh whisper races through the audience.

Violet feels the moment someone steps up to the catwalk, feels it in the slight shiver of the metal beneath her. She stands, preparing herself, clutching the terrarium like a precious treasure.

A vague silhouette shifts at the end of her aisle, searching.

Onstage, Fernald mutters, “Well that doesn’t sound very noble. But who am I to argue?”

“Exactly!” Olaf shouts.

She knows it is Lemony Snicket before she sees the outline of his bowl-shaped hat, before his face comes into the light, pale and serious, before he crouches beside her and offers his hand to shake as if they are strangers and not hereditary enemies.

“Violet Baudelaire,” Snicket says, hushed, calm. His dark eyes find hers and in them she sees a profound, depthless sadness. “It was difficult to tell in the collapsing tunnel but now I can see the resemblance very clearly. You look just like your mother.”

Violet keeps silent, her back to the stage against the handrail. She clutches the terrarium close despite her repulsion of it, unwilling to shake his hand.

Several ideas of escape or distraction assault her mind at once, not one of them worth trying. She
could scream, interrupting the production and drawing attention to the man blocking her path. Fighting comes to mind, of striking Lemony Snicket like she struck Carmelita, yet the thought of a wild brawl at such a height has her stomach dropping in forewarning.

Snicket withdraws his hand.

Onstage, a track is played of a baby’s wail.

“I was-” Snicket begins, hesitates. A pained look flickers across his face like a wince. “Close to your mother. I loved her deeply. Your father was one of my best friends. We grew up together.”

“I know.” Violet hisses, glaring, jaw set resolutely so it does not tremble. “In VFD. I know.”

“You might know the name.” Snicket concedes with a nod. “But there is so much about our organization that you do not know. I feel that it’s my duty as your parents’ friend and colleague to keep you safe. To keep you from getting involved in such villainy and woe.”

“Villainy.” Violet repeats, shocked, derisive. “As if you wouldn’t induct me the second you could.”

“Violet.” Snicket says, voice stern and aggressive. He seems foreign to bravery, as if having a spine was something he could never stomach. “I know it was you who burnt down the Cathedral. You and Olaf. Do you consider that entirely noble?”

“Anything to stop VFD.” She answers reflexively, so torn with fear and rage her hands rattle the terrarium. She glances critically to the audience then back to the man before her. “To stop the organization that stole my family from me. From all of us.”

A pinched frown hardens Snicket’s voice. “As I said. There is so much you don’t know. For instance, the terrarium you have in your hands is full of a deadly fungus known as the Medusoid Mycelium. A handful of spores could kill this entire theatre within the hour.” He reaches out, gesturing. Violet eyes his empty grip, seeing his hands lined with callouses and scars. They are the hands of a man who has labored and fought and suffered.

“It’s not in your nature to act villainous, Violet. Give me the fungus. Follow me outside. The Quagmires have been so worried about you.” His hands flex in the vacant air, pleading. “Trust me.”

“I can’t trust you.” She says, hating the clutch of mushrooms in her arms, hating the wretched guilt and self-loathing his words summon. “I’m not supposed to.”

The heel of her boot finds perch on the bottom rung of the handrail. Violet grasps the long sling in her free hand, hoping to keep the terrarium to herself.

A dangerous idea takes root.

She adjusts her grip on the neck of the sling.

Snicket advances towards her slowly, calculative. “You don’t have to do this, Violet. You can come with me. It’ll be easy and-! Stop!”

Before he can make a move to grab her, Violet hoists herself onto the handrail, secures a foot in the gut of the sling, fastens her grip on the terrarium, and leaps.

There is a moment that seems far too long where she falls, weightless, breathless, the entire audience beneath her. Then she is yanked to a halt, the sling holding her, spinning wildly as she zips across the theatre.
Violet hits the slaughterhouse sign at an angle, hip bashing against the metal, sending shockwaves of sharp, piercing pain through her body. The impact is so rapid and brutal she loses her grip on the terrarium, feels it slip from her hands as easily as smoke.

“No!” Violet cries, lunging. She leaps from the sling, reaching, yet the terrarium falls to the stage in an explosion of shattered glass.

After her fall from the catwalk, dropping to the stage feels instantaneous yet she still lands hard amongst the splintered glass, the sediment, the mushrooms with their torn caps.

A collective gasp swells from the crowd. Elsie’s voice finds her from the front row, scared, “Violet?”

Shaking, pained, Violet glances up to the catwalk in time to see Lemony Snicket hurrying away.

“Alas!” Olaf calls, running across the stage to kneel beside her. Dread drains the color from his face. “An angel from heaven!”

His presence soothes her in a visceral way, yet she still feels torn and useless and wrecked enough to whisper frantically, “I’m so sorry, Olaf, Snicket was up there trying to steal me. I’m so, so sorry—”

She stands shakily, Olaf’s arms under her, blood pouring in great swells from her knees, dripping stark and red from the palms of her hands. The room tilts beneath her feet. She feels hot and dizzy and slow under the stage lights.

“I’ll heal you, angel.” He calls, reaching into his pocket and withdrawing a small jar. Already, she can hear the front row’s inhabitants coughing. He reaches into the jar and withdraws two slivers of horseradish root shaved clean and circular as coins. He places one in her mouth, fingers lingering against her tongue, then in his. Violet bites hers bitterly, the flavor crisp and hot. It soothes an ache in her throat she had barely noticed.

“In fact! I think I know how to heal every one of you.” Olaf calls, gesturing to his Troupe and the concerned, fretful audience. “To kill a weed before it takes root. To scourge an ideology that promises nothing but an overwhelming feeling of doom one can never avoid.”

He bends at the waist, slipping an arm beneath her knees, and lifts her off her feet. Violet picks a shard of glass from her hands and tosses it to the stage. She slings an arm around his neck, mutters, “Thank you.”

The growing cough has spread to the second and third row. Violet can see patrons pull at their collars, rub their throats in confusion.

Olaf lurches towards the right wing and withdraws the long hook used to pull at the ladder of her trapdoor. He swings it through the air, taps at the bundle of metal, and steps aside as the ladder unfurls itself and straightens.

“What are you doing?” Violet hisses, squirming. “You never asked to use that. It’s my place, I need it—”

“Hold onto me.” Olaf demands, voice soft in her ear.

On either side of the stage, the bald man and Fernald stand with large steel drums at their feet. They nod to Olaf when he checks their positions, bending, preparing.

“Yes, I think the only thing that can be done to purge the world of this selfish, rotten, manipulative organization is to cleanse it once and for all. And do you know how only the best, most committed
gods destroy their disappointments?"

Fernald and the bald man yank the plugs from their drums, sending streams of amber liquid pouring to the front of the stage and beyond, seeping into the carpet before the audience.

Olaf raises his hand as if giving a signal, a wicked, ecstatic grin on his face.

The theatre is swamped with the putrid sting of gasoline.

Lemony Snickit heaves himself to the stage, shouts, “No!” but Olaf still smiles, still bows and rises, holding Violet tight in his grip as the audience coughs, fumbles in their seats.

“Holy fire!” He cries.

Reminiscent of the Cathedral of the Alleged Virgin, combustion is instant.

Violet screams as a wave of fire passes between the audience and the stage, obscuring them from view.

Olaf holds her close and leaps up the ladder, scaling it with ease. Clutching his back, she watches as waves of people dive for the exit doors, finding them locked and unmoveable. The Troupe vanishes backstage, drawing the curtains closed which catch fire with alarming rapidity. Lemony Snickit races up the ladder behind them, shouting, as the room fills with smoke black as char.

Horrified, weeping, Violet clings to Olaf, unable to hear her own voice over the roar of the fire and the screaming of the audience and Olaf’s rapid breathing.

“Why?” Violet forces through the smoke in her mouth, through her heart’s sick struggling. “Why?”

Olaf ignores her, throwing open the trapdoor and barging inside. He drops her to the floor amongst her pile of blankets, hurrying with levelled, practiced movements, as if he had prepared each step several times over.

“I will explain when I can.” Olaf says, kicking down the trapdoor as he turns. The velvet chair is heaved into his hands and held high over his head like a victor’s prize. Violet remembers him in that chair, sitting, biting his tongue so as not to scare her, his fingers on her hips and his voice tempting in her ear, “You are young and broken. I could eat you whole.”

“What are you doing?” Violet demands, dread pitching her voice high as she watches Olaf hurl her chair through the high tower windows. They shatter easily, sending nearly every photo and memento of their relationship into the alley below. Shredded bits of notes and glass fall to the floor, to her desktop, scattered by the new breeze.

Olaf yanks at the pouch strung around his waist. A small ladder with a hooked end rolls free and to the floor. He takes the hooked end and places it at the windowsill, tossing the long ladder to the open air fogged with smoke.

“Come here.” Olaf says, bending to take her into his arms again. Violet grasps his neck, weeping, a shrill whine building in the back of her throat. He steps atop her desk, crushing the candle stubs and bits of homework. He sends the beer can full of wilting wildflowers tipping to the floor amidst the glass.

With a harsh bang, Snicket throws open the trapdoor and staggers into the room.

Olaf curses, lurches towards the jagged hole in the open window. A swatch of color catches Violet’s
eye as he ducks into the air, foot on the top rung, and she snatches the remaining photograph from
the glass without thought, without recognition, crumpling it into her bloody fist with savage
protection.

They drop to the alley, Olaf’s shoes further cracking the shattered glass. He sets her to her feet as the
sky fills with black smoke.

“Come on.” Olaf hisses. “Where’s the damn car?”

Lemony Snicket drops to the ground with a grunt. His dark eyes find them both, the same desperate
horror in his that Violet can feel on her face. Protective even in a self-made catastrophe, Olaf throws
himself between them.

Broken glass and scraps of paper scatter about the alley. The velvet chair rests crippled and splintered
on the ground behind Snicket, swells of cushion split in the drop outside. Violet takes these things in
with sluggish emotional depth, as if her mind could only focus on survival instead of the panic
rattling every bit of her.

Fierce with concern, Snicket’s eyes roam her body, examining her clothes shredded and bloody at
the knees, her face red and tearstained, her eyes wild and horrified in the midst of a living, growing
tragedy.

“He didn’t tell you about this did he, Violet?” Snicket demands, waving to the high stained glass
windows. They flash with flame, the colors warped and tinted and steadily cracking. The fire has
spread to the first floor. “Why would he mention his plans with Nero or his deal with Esmé? Or how
they’ve been targeting noble families and sending their surviving orphans from Prufrock to Eliade?
He wanted to end VFD. To destroy its lineage in one night. To burn them all.”

“Wanted to.” Olaf scoffs. He nods to the cathedral swamped with smoke, a hard, restrained flex to
his jaw. “If you haven’t noticed, the cathedral is burning.”

“Not for long.” Snicket promises, and a sick swell of hope soars in Violet’s chest. “We’ve got noble
volunteers in that theatre. Kit. Larry. They’ve handled worse before.”

“The spores-” Violet starts, but Snicket cuts her off with a nod, says, “Are being handled by our
newest volunteer as we speak. You may remember him from our most recent induction.”

Olaf grins wickedly, shakes his head as if Snicket’s efforts are wholly futile. “You think nobility
means something. That it can save you. Inherited nobility won’t save those orphans and it certainly
didn’t save you or anyone else.”

“You planned this, Olaf?” Violet asks, the words so heavy and vile she can barely force them free.
She eyes the brace of his back, hunched, prepared for a fight. At her voice, his hands twitch.

When he speaks it is through clenched teeth, clinging to composure. “Haven’t you ever heard of a
mercy killing?”

Then, softer, “Violet. You know what I went through at the hands of VFD. What you would have
endured eventually.”

“That’s not fair, Olaf.” Snicket says, bracing his own shoulders. Violet sees him eye Olaf’s weak
points, looking for an unprotected weakness, an opportunity to take him down. “Your experience
was hardly-”

A car horn blares in warning, causing each one of them to flinch, and with a harsh scrape of tires on
gravel, Olaf’s car appears at the end of the alley through a sheen of smoke and speeds towards them. Three people round the corner behind it, bursting around the corner with impressive speed, and before Violet can get a good look at them straight, she knows it is the Quagmire triplets, would recognize Duncan and Isadora under any given circumstance, even calamity.

The car screeches to a halt beside Olaf. When the door is thrown open, she sees the Troupe tucked inside, the bald man at the wheel, the passenger seat empty.

“Let’s go!” Fernald shouts. “Esmé’s waiting at the safehouse!”

Olaf turns to her, an unspeakable question on his face.

Snicket takes this momentary distraction as his opening and lunges towards her. Violet shrieks, stumbles back, feeling the glass work deeper into her knees.

With a savage immediacy that shocks her, Olaf snatches the man’s arm from the air, knuckles white, and flips his switchblade from his pocket. The blade glitters even in the murky air.

“You.” Snicket says bitterly, yanking his hand free. “As if you have any right to her. You’re not her family. You’re not—” Snicket stops. A slow, horrified look crosses his face, the kind of dread that can only follow a devastating realization.

Olaf backs away towards the car. He seems to recognize the look for what it is.

“Shut your mouth.” He hisses, even as Snicket remains silent. “Shut your—”

“She doesn’t know, does she? About Beatrice and Bertrand.” Snicket says, revolted. “Her whole family. What you did to them.”

Beside him, Isadora gasps, her eyes finding Violet’s.

Sick realization, long-buried, rises in her like bile.

A slow ringing builds in her ears. As if from very far away she hears Olaf promise, “I’ll kill you for that, Snicket.” like a lengthy eventuality.

“He’s an arsonist, Violet.” Snicket shouts, adopting that same pleading tone he had used on the catwalk. “A thief, a cad, a murderer.”

“I’m also in love with you.” Olaf snaps, his eyes serious and grave. He holds out his hand, offering, as steady as the night they had stolen their dinner. She hears him then, so concerned over her loyalty, “I do not know how else to explain how much you gut me. I am distressingly devoted. To you, Violet Baudelaire. You.”

Although the mention of her family has that wounded, always-aching grief in her splitting open, there is also a staggering flood of (wretched, guilty-) relief.

Violet remembers her first thought upon seeing Olaf, how she had wanted to offer herself at his feet, and thinks she must have known somewhere deep and secretive with shame that in order to love him she would have to sacrifice every bit of herself- morality, innocence, family.

She is unsurprised simply because she has learned through repetition that there is no way she could
be plainly happy without consequences or entanglements or tragedy. As if cursed and still staggering, she is no stranger to misfortune.

She looks to Olaf’s willing, open hand.

Tragedy falls at her feet, offers itself like a blessing, and she cannot turn it away.

“Don’t.” Isadora says, stern, demanding. “Violet, don’t.”

Already weeping, she lurches forward, stumbling on legs still barbed with glass, and takes his hand. Something breaks in her, some final shred of identity wholly irreparable, yet it feels like nothing in comparison to the warmth of Olaf’s hand in hers, of his reverent and vindicated gaze.

He takes her into his arms, stumbles to the car.

They peel away in a flurry of gravel and glass, leaving Lemony Snicket and the Quagmire triplets behind in the stunned, gory aftermath.

“You knew, didn’t you?” Olaf asks, quiet, even as his Troupe hollers with victory. “You knew I was the one starting the fires to kill off VFD. You knew the mushrooms were the Medusoid Mycelium. And you did it anyway.”

“I don’t know.” Violet forces through sobs, her face in her hands gone grimey with congealed blood. “I don’t know.”

She remembers the night high up in the tower at Endtimes, hearing Esmé promise, “We’ll take it from here.”

“You killed my family.” Violet forces through her throat wrecked with weeping. “You would have killed me.”

Olaf’s arms come up around her, cradling her as if she is precious and fragile.

“I didn’t love you then.” He murmurs, voice honest and wounded. He presses a forceful kiss to her hair. “I didn’t know you.”

If only to look away from the mess of ash dotting the windshield, Violet unfolds the photograph in her shaking fist, finding it bloodstained and ragged, yet her mother and father still grin with the same radiance and love as when Olaf had first given it to her. Disgusted, Violet tosses it to the floor, knowing she has utterly betrayed them.

Olaf holds her till her weeping runs dry. She slumps in his lap, her vision hazy and washed-out, diffused with the trembling fine-edged panic that signals trauma in the making.

Through the rearview mirror, Violet watches the growing plume of black smoke at their backs and remembers the night she had first taken Olaf’s hand, wine-drunk, her heart in her hands, already impossibly in love.

She remembers him the next morning, gutted and awestruck, “You want to destroy VFD?” and feels such blistering amounts of stupidity and self-hatred that her stomach heaves, because even now she remembers that blessed, grateful tilt to his head, as if she were so precious he couldn’t suffer it.

“I’m in love with you.” Violet admits, frowning, shaking her head bitterly against his chest. Olaf holds her even tighter. She hears his heartbeat sputter and spike.
The smoke follows no matter how far they drive, climbing higher into the sky with every passing moment.

Olaf flinches when she touches his jaw, stares wide-eyed and waiting as if he expects her to strike him. Violet turns in his lap, her face still wrecked from tears, and kisses him so forcefully their teeth click. He melts against her, taking her face into his trembling hands, knowing, just as she does, that she has done this to herself, that Violet was always an eager and willing accomplice in the act of her own (lovely, desperate-) ruination.

"In the slaughterhouse of love, they kill only the best, none of the weak or deformed. Don't run away from this dying. Whoever's not killed for love is dead meat."

— Rumi

Chapter End Notes

The poem Violet mentions that would have been her cue is "Unless You Let It In" by Barbara Johnson.

Olaf's line "Come and follow me," is loosely based on Matthew 4:19.

As always, thank you so much for allowing me a platform to purge my demons as I have. Thank you for your kind words and dedication and patience. Over the year and a half it has taken me to finish this work, I've always promised myself that my next project will be an original novel. This idea terrifies and excites me in extremes. Thank you for giving me the confidence to move forward in that respect, too.

Again, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Please let me know what you think.

End Notes

The italicized lines at the exposition of this fic are mirrored from Dana Levin’s poem Banana Palace, which I love fiercely.

The title for this fanfiction was inspired by Louis L’amour’s book of poetry, Smoke From This Altar.
Eliade Cathedral of the *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans* is inspired by Mircea Eliade’s religious study *The Sacred and Profane* and Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*.

The first Part of this work (fourteen chapters overall) has been written in entirety. It should be updated every Saturday from now on, at least, while I continue the second Part. Then we’ll see.

As mentioned in the description, be warned. This fic contains some heavy language and smut, which I know you heathens have been waiting for from me.

To my readers, thank you, thank you, thank you. Here we go again.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://www.ficarchive.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!