take me to the stars

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take me to the stars

by iriswests

Summary

Isak thinks Even is pretentious and impractical. Even thinks Isak is arrogant and uptight. They’re not each other’s biggest fans, even if they do happen to have spectacular sex on a very, very drunken night. And Isak doesn’t mean to do it again, but he does, anyway, so now they’re establishing ground rules and deciding that maybe they can keep doing this, no strings attached, no commitments, no feelings, and, most importantly, no need to stop disliking each other.

And then it’s not quite that simple anymore.
Pablo Picasso

Chapter Notes

(title from Carly Rae Jepsen’s "Cut to the Feeling", which is, incidentally, what I have proclaimed to be this story’s official anthem. Thank you, Queen of Synthpop, for literally inspiring basically this entire thing.)

So like this is a thing that’s happening now, since this AU won the popular vote on my Tumblr, and so, you guys like, literally asked for it, over a hundred of you, so I hope you enjoy this. This chapter is a monster, and I can’t promise you every chapter’s going to be this long, but a lot of things do happen almost every chapter, so I’m hoping they won’t be disappointingly short, at least.

I wanna give a big shout-out to Rhae for literally like, being super helpful with the ideas when the AU was brought up and being very encouraging when I freaked out. I love her so very much and am so grateful for her face; and also a huge huge thank you to my ultimate love Cz, who encouraged me through the more difficult parts of these scenes and then actually thought it wasn’t trash when she read it, which, I appreciated, even if she might have been lying. I love you with all my heart, my writing soulmate ❤️

Warnings for this chapter: A comment that could be regarded as ableist, even though the character admits he realizes this.

A warning altogether: there are a lot of miscommunications. A lot of them. There are themes and issues that will be explored throughout the story. Everything is outlined and everything is addressed by the end of it. Please be patient, because I can assure you whatever you point out is bothering you is probably going to be resolved throughout the story. Patience is key, my loves!!!! (That said, don’t be afraid to point it out if it’s something big. I’ll be sure to double-check the issue is addressed, and try my best to reassure you if it is.)

Okay! Jump in! Have fun! Get ready to be very frustrated as you realize these boys are in love with each other before they do! I love you! I do!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Listen.

Isak likes working at the science museum. He does. He’d be stupid if he didn’t, like Chris Schistad, who only works here for the paycheck and (presumably) to flirt with every single one of his coworkers. Isak would be miserable if he had to walk a mile in Chris’s shoes, and not just because they look pretentious and uncomfortable, but because he cannot imagine having to come into a job you don’t particularly enjoy and then—

—having to clean piss off an exhibit.

This happens more often than you’d think. Like, listen – he gets it. It’s an interactive museum, so of course parents bring their kids whenever possible, because Isak imagines having an hour or two to themselves while their kids entertain themselves with the turntables or the kaleidoscope or the air
rockets must be heaven for them. Their kids will run around in an enclosed space with security guards standing at every entrance and exit and, hey, if they’re somehow still kidnapped, he’s sure they wouldn’t get too far before a parent notices. It’s fine, they’re fine.

But when your child pisses in the stream table, in front of multiple eye witnesses that can confirm this, by the way, Isak would hope you’d take responsibility like a grown-ass woman and let someone know before the water turns yellow and Isak has parents complaining to him while he’s trying to teach children how to work the wind column. And, Jesus, he can’t hear the end of it from other “concerned parents” whose children have probably pissed elsewhere in the museum, how is Isak to know, apparently no one wants to teach their children to take responsibility for their own actions nowadays; so he’s draining the stream and disinfecting the exhibit and listening to parents complain about this while he’s doing this and he likes the museum, he does, but oh, my God, he hates days like this one.

Isak can probably chalk it up to his feet hurting. Or maybe to the fact that he’s not working the space exhibit, which he’s far more comfortable with, considering he’s majoring in astronomy and enjoys the darkness of the room, illuminated only by the walls that project constellations and drones and, well, space, in general. He’s good at that. It’s why he wanted to work here in the first place.

So he can chalk it up to his discomfort, to working on the main floor instead of the space exhibit – or, hell, he’d take the front desk over this bullshit – or maybe even to the smell of piss and disinfectant, doing no favors to his stomach, but whatever it is, he’s frustrated enough to want to scream at one of the parents who keep complaining about this as if he weren’t already taking care of the “unfortunate incident”.

But Isak is good at grinning and bearing it, and when he’s done, he even manages to offer the parents a smile and an upbeat, “All done!” before marching past them and swearing up and down he’s never going to look in their uptight, pretentious, ludicrous faces ever—

“Hey, Isak.”

Isak halts where he’s been storming towards the employee break room to comfortably kick a chair or something, maybe scream into a pillow, you know, normal things like that, but instead he turns to find Julian Dahl behind him, grinning brightly, looking shiny and new and like he just clocked in, because don’t they all look enthusiastic and ready for the day when they first come in?

Isak sighs, but he offers Julian a wane smile. “Hi, Julian,” he greets in return. “Are you just getting in?”

He already knows the answer, but he still allows Julian to reply, as if this were new information to him. “Yeah,” he nods. He tilts his head. “You?”

Isak blinks at him blankly, then looks down at himself – uniform wrinkled, shoes dirtied, hair probably a mess at this point, considering Isak never actually brushes it anyway, so after a sweaty shift it must look like he’s just walked through the Sahara Desert – and then looks back at Julian, a little disbelieving. “No,” he replies, but his voice manages to sound amused. “No, Julian, my shift is about to be over, because somehow, the universe has granted me one thing to be happy about today, see: the end of my shift.”

Julian’s expression turns sympathetic. “Rough one, huh?”

Isak sighs a pitiful laugh. “Someone peed in the stream again.”

“Again?”
“Again!” Isak throws his hands up in defeat. “How does no one notice a child literally pulling his dick out to pee in the water? What kind of parents would raise such a monster?” He shakes his head. “Julian, were they just a tiny bit older, they’d be arrested for public indecency, and, listen—” he takes a step towards Julian, whose face begins to flush. Most likely from secondhand embarrassment, Isak thinks. “—I would be so happy to see them leave in a cop car and never return to this place.”

Julian raises both his eyebrows, his expression now amused. “Isak, you can just tell Eskild,” he points out. “He can ban these kids and their parents.”

Right, well. He’s aware, but he doesn’t actually hate the kids that much. Sure, he’s tired and frustrated and ready to pass the fuck out, and he really wishes kids wouldn’t piss so much in here, at least not while he’s on shift, but Isak also doesn’t think it’s fair that the kids miss out on a fun, educational experience just because their parents are failures and don’t know how to raise them properly.

He knows the feeling all too well.

So he shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head, tries to wave it off, pretend like he didn’t just turn into a jaded and vaguely threatening asshole for a minute there. “Nah, it’s not that bad,” he lies. “It’s just – been a long shift.”

Isak steps back, and when Julian exhales it’s almost in relief, and, wow, okay, Isak must have really come off as an asshole – one that looked ready to punch the next person he saw in the face, or something, because Julian looks like he’s out of the danger zone once Isak’s no longer in his face.

He offers Julian a grimace. “Sorry,” he apologizes tiredly. “I promise I won’t get in your face like that again.”

Julian blinks in surprise, then shakes his head profusely. “Don’t be ridiculous, Isak, you can get in my face anytime.” He pauses, then his face turns red again. “I mean – what I mean is – you know, that you can – I am here to listen to you rant, you know, because I share – your frustrations, and your – your experiences, so – not that I want you near my face, or anything—”

Truthfully, Isak stopped listening after ‘don’t be ridiculous’, because that’s as far as his attention span is willing to stretch for him at the moment, so he’s unaware he’s interrupting Julian when he says, “Hey, listen, I’m gonna go to the break room and try not to scream too loudly before I get to clock out in fifteen. Are you gonna be okay here?”

Julian looks like he absolutely hates himself, and Isak can relate, really – he’d feel that way, too, if he had to close tonight. “Yeah, uhm,” he nods. “Have a good, quiet scream?”

Isak smirks. “Thanks,” he reaches to pat Julian on the shoulder awkwardly. “Have a good shift, alright?” He sighs. “At least, a better one than I had.”

Julian stares at his shoulder for a moment, then he turns back to Isak and offers him a smile. “Sure, Isak,” he nods. “Thanks.”

Isak salutes him with one hand as he walks backwards towards the front desk. “Adios, amigo,” he calls out, then turns to face forward again and walks quickly and with purpose to his only safe haven in this place – apart from the space exhibit, of course.

The universe, however, seems to think Isak does not deserve any more favors than the last fifteen minutes of his shift, because he’s suddenly stopping abruptly in order to avoid running face-first into Eskild.
Eskild raises an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you knew Spanish,” he smirks. “A man of many talents, my dear?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Please don’t make me go back out there,” he pleads. “Listen, I only have fifteen minutes left and I haven’t taken my break so all I want to do is scream into one of the dirty pillows in the break room before I take my leave.”

Eskild frowns. “Uhm, our breakroom pillows are not dirty,” he scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest and throwing Isak an offended look. “They’re practically new, Isak.”

Isak stares at him, waiting for the punchline. But Eskild does nothing but stare at him, obviously affronted, and so Isak shakes his head. “Wait, are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious, didn’t we buy them like a year ago?”

Isak blinks. “No, Eskild, you’ve had those pillows way before I was hired,” he reminds him. “Like, way, way before.”

Eskild’s brows furrow. “Huh,” he breathes out pensively. “I could have sworn I spent company money on new pillows?”

Isak watches as Eskild’s expressions take turns painting his face, until finally Isak sighs, loudly and irritably. “Eskild—”

Eskild snaps his fingers in triumph. “Silverware,” he tells Isak. “I spent that money on new silverware.”

“Sure,” Isak grants him. “Can I please take my break now?”

“Isak, don’t be ridiculous,” Eskild rolls his eyes, and Isak’s stomach nearly drops to his feet. “You can clock out, I’m not going to make you stay for ten extra minutes if all you’re gonna do is take a break.”

Isak grins brightly and gratefully at Eskild, because – well, Isak likes to act like Eskild’s the worst, but, really, Isak is as fond of him as everyone else here is; when he’s the manager on duty, they can all rely on him, on the fact that he won’t overwork them, on the fact that he’ll be sympathetic to their problems and their frustrations and their exhaustion; Isak’ll never admit this, not out loud, but sometimes he thinks about inviting Eskild to parties, knowing fully well he’d be a great addition to them, but he’s been told multiple times during company training that they’re not to “party with their bosses”, lest they want to be fired when confronted with proof.

Still, Eskild would probably make a great friend out of the museum, and at the moment Isak is seriously considering giving him a hug before he sprints for the door, but he manages to suppress the urge and instead clasps his hands together in gratitude and glee. “You’re the best,” he tells him, and Eskild sniffs and wipes his hands on his vest, preening.

“I know.” He flicks at Isak’s shoulder. “Now go, before I change my mind and make you cover for Chris.”

“You literally threaten everyone with that.”

“I just don’t want him to come in, okay?” Eskild narrows his eyes and pouts, distaste clear on his expression. “I think he comes in high every shift.”

Isak squirms, doesn’t mention he’s done that a couple of times before, too, but he also knows that’s
not entirely the problem Eskild has with Chris – Chris is a serial flirt, and a lazy employee who makes the managers’ jobs extremely difficult, as far as he’s been told, but he’s never done anything to merit firing; at least, not legal firing, since they’ve never actually had solid proof Chris is high when he comes into work. Honestly, Isak thinks Chris is just naturally spacey and yeah, he probably always walks that slow. Maybe he thinks it’s a swagger, what the hell does Isak know?

And, you know, truth be told, Isak doesn’t think Chris would know shit about wrongful termination, would probably accept any bullshit excuse the managers gave him for firing him. But he also knows his managers have way too much integrity to go down that road, so they’re stuck with Chris for the foreseeable future, he’s afraid, but, wow, he doesn’t want to bum Eskild out when the guy’s literally just given him an out on this shitty shift.

“Sorry, dude,” Isak offers a sympathetic tone. “Maybe he’ll quit one day?”

“Or he’ll try to fuck one of us,” Eskild smirks. “That’s enough grounds to send him packing.”

Isak shrugs. “I wouldn’t put it past him,” he admits, and he wouldn’t, especially since Isak is pretty sure Chris is an equal opportunity employer, if you catch his drift.

“Anyway!” Isak waves lamely at Eskild. “I’m going now. I’m thankful I’ll at least get to scream into my very own, very clean pillow.”

Eskild huffs. “I’ll get to that,” he tells Isak. “You mark my words, Isak Valtersen, next time you come in, you’re going to find the fluffiest, prettiest, cleanest throw pillows on that couch, the best you’ve ever seen.”

Isak’s eyebrows rise. “Okay,” he offers Eskild, not really caring, but appreciating the gesture anyway. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Mhm,” he nods. “Now shoo, my little bird, fly from the nest.”

Isak rolls his eyes at Eskild’s dramatics. “Bye, Eskild.”

“Goodbye, baby bird!” Eskild calls out as Isak walks past him and behind the front desk, pulling up the system and clocking himself out.

He breathes a loud sigh of relief when it’s over, feels an incredible weight lift off his shoulders, and when he walks out of the museum, he feels—

Alright, he still feels pretty shitty, because he’s still dirty and his feet still hurt, but at least he gets to go home now, and doesn’t have to spend the rest of the day pretending to care about pretentious parents blaming him for not noticing a kid was pissing in the stream, even though he was on the far side of the museum, obviously busy with other children, and he is not a babysitter, oh, my God.

He’s riling himself up all over again, which is probably not a good idea, but before he can completely ignore his common sense and keep angering himself, his cell phone bursts into the default ringtone Isak’s never bothered to change. He fishes the phone out of his coat pocket, after wrestling with it for a good couple of seconds, of course, because he’s hopeless at everything, and when he holds it up to his face, he sees two things:

One, a big fat grease mark on his glasses, impairing his vision, which makes no fucking sense because he literally hasn’t laid a finger on them all day, and two, Jonas’s contact filling the entirety of his screen, waiting for his call to be answered.

Isak swipes his thumb over the screen and places it beside his ear. Without preamble, Isak says, “I
hate my life, Jonas.”

Jonas, ever the supportive friend, merely acknowledges this with a weak sympathetic grunt. “Yeah, man, I know, you always do,” he points out dismissively, and alright, so Isak kind of understands, because really, this is the only way Isak knows how to start conversations nowadays. “Hey, I need to ask a huge favor of you tonight.”

Isak reaches the tram stop while narrowing his eyes. “What is it?” he questions cautiously. Last time Jonas asked him for a favor, it involved a sack of potatoes and a washing machine, so he’s not very eager to go down that road again – he’d explain what had happened, but Isak’s not really sure himself, to this day.

“So I’ve got a date with this girl tonight,” he starts, and Isak is already groaning.

“No,” he deadpans, because this is either going to involve Isak looking after Jonas’s demon cat, or—

“Her friend wants to tag along.” And, yeah, there it is, he’s going to try and coerce Isak into a double date, with some guy so clueless and codependent he can’t take a hint when his friend wants to go out with a guy alone.

(Or, well, Isak’s aware it could be the other way around, but even then, those are signs of major codependency issues, which Jonas is better off staying far, far away from, but he never listens to Isak, because he claims Isak is too “cynical” to be a reliable objective third party, which Isak very much resents, because all he is is a reliable objective third party.)

“No,” he repeats, this time a little firmer. “Jonas, I’m not going to be your buffer so you can escape to the bathroom with the girl and then—”

“Isak,” Jonas interrupts. “Man, I don’t want to pull the lifelong best friend card here, but—”

“Get Magnus to do it,” he suggests as the tram pulls up to the station. He takes a couple of steps forward, anticipating the doors. “You know he’s been desperate to get laid.”

Jonas sighs loudly. “He’ll scare them both away,” he tells Isak, and Isak huffs. “You know this, dude.”

The doors to the tram open and Isak climbs inside, finding an empty seat far from the entrance, where less people seemed to travel. “Listen, I love you, Jonas, but dates with guys like that – if they like me well enough, they’ll want another one, and then another one, and then I’ll be roped into ‘steady dating’ status and you know I’m not about that.”

Jonas yawns exaggerated from the other line as Isak takes his seat. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, because you think no one is reliable and love is a fraud—”

Isak scoffs. “Of course I don’t think love is a fraud, Jonas, love is a science, it can’t be a fraud,” Isak looks out the window as the tram picks its route back up, watching the steady blurring of the buildings beside him. “But it’s also not easy, and I’m not up for navigating the stupid bumps in the road. I’m too busy. Besides,” Isak adds. “If the guy’s desperate enough to tag along with his friend on a date, then he and Magnus will hit it off just fine.”

There’s a pause on the other line. “I hate it when you make sense,” Jonas grunts, and Isak grins triumphantly. “But that doesn’t make what you’re saying to me any less cynical.”

“I’ve been burned too many times, bro,” Isak settles lower into his seat. “And once you’ve been burned, you’re not exactly eager to jump back into the fire, are you?”
“Stop playing with fire, dumbass,” Jonas says, and Isak laughs.

“Fuck you.”

“You’re okay, though?” Jonas asks, and suddenly his voice is quiet, it’s serious. There’s something unpleasant settling in Isak’s stomach – Jonas is perhaps the only person in the world who knows Isak’s struggles as well as Isak does, is probably the only person in the world who’s been able to deduce where his insecurities and his skepticism derives from, and it’s not always agreeable, knowing there’s someone out there who can see past his façade, who knows enough about him inside and out to realize everything about him is a front, that behind the bravado Isak’s nothing but a scared little boy, still reeling from abandonment issues, who refuses to let himself be betrayed like that again.

You don’t trust people, Isak thinks. People let you down.

And so he hates it, and even though he loves Jonas and his concern, he still cannot stand knowing there’s someone out there who can dissect his words and break them down into the truth, because that’s just as bad as letting someone in and giving them the power to break you.

“I’m okay,” Isak replies, trying not to snap at his best friend. “Seriously, I’m fine. I’m just tired and my feet hurt and I’m pretty sure I smell like piss.”

“You do,” says an old man sitting diagonal to him on the tram, leaning forward with a serious expression. Isak scowls at him.

“Could you mind your own business, maybe?” He snaps, and Jonas laughs, obviously having heard the exchange. The man shrugs his shoulders and turns to lean back, facing forward. Isak huffs, offended at the fact Jonas is still laughing at him. “Shut up, Jonas, your apartment always smells like piss.”

“That’s a lie,” Jonas scoffs. “My cat is the cleanest cat in the country.”

“I’m not talking about your cat,” Isak smirks. Jonas groans at the jab.

“Grow up, Isak,” he says, but Isak can hear the smile on his face. “You know Magnus can’t aim.”

Isak laughs as the tram nears his stop. “Hey, I’ve gotta leave you,” he tells Jonas.

“Weak.”

“I know,” Isak agrees, happy they’ve moved on from Isak’s mental state. “But I’m almost home, and I’m ready to shower and sleep.”

“So’s that guy on the tram with you,” Jonas snorts, and Isak has the urge to flip him off, despite Jonas not being able to see him.

Still, Jonas knows him well enough to know that’s exactly what Isak wants to do, so he says, “Put your finger down, I’m going.”

Isak laughs once. “Bye, dumbass.”

“Love you too, asshole.”

They hang up, and the tram pulls over at his stop.

Isak makes his way through the aisle and off the tram, gazing up at the sky, sullenly noticing dark
clouds gathering above him. Yes, Isak thinks, this is just what he needs to top an already shitty day. To be rained on on his way to his apartment, because nothing can be a more welcoming sight for his roommate: a drenched, tired man smelling of piss at the front door.

Eva’s probably going to make him strip at the entrance before he can even make his way to the bathroom.

Resigned to his fate, Isak decides to take his time on his way to the apartment anyway – walking any faster would not benefit his feet; would, in fact, make them hold a grudge against him, and Isak kind of needs his feet, like, every day. He has to walk pretty much everywhere and pretty much all day; to the tram, to school, to the tram again, to work, to the tram, home, rinse and repeat save for the weekends, where he might only have to walk to work, depending on how Eskild sets up the schedules.

Honestly, Isak gets plenty of hours at the museum – mostly because Eskild will actively try and avoid scheduling Chris at all, which is understandable, but sometimes he wishes he had more weekends to himself – as it were, he has this weekend off, mostly because he begged Eskild not to schedule him so he has time to work on his stupid paper on stars and molecular clouds, (which, if you’re interested, is not going well, or – at all, for that matter), which means he could get away with not walking at all this weekend, but still. He’s still got days to go before that happens, so, his feet? They’re gonna have to cooperate.

It doesn’t start raining until Isak is about a block away from his apartment, which is lucky for him, because it only starts downright pouring once he’s finally under the safety of the outdoor roof over the apartment doors. At least he’s got one thing going for him – he’s not wet, and Eva’s probably not going to make him strip at the front door. He’ll call this one a win, because he desperately needs one, and it makes him feel better.

He struggles with his keys for a total of seven seconds before he finally manages to turn the knob and open the door, then struggles for another ten seconds as he tries to remove the keys from the knob. His back hits the wall harshly with the force it takes to pull the key out of the knob, which is just part of his daily routine, really, and he scowls at the knob accusingly.

“Yeah, we need to do something about that.” Eva’s voice suddenly rings behind him, and he turns around to find her sitting on the kitchen table, scrolling through her laptop. She’s not looking up at him, rather staring at the screen, obviously aware of the show Isak was making a few seconds ago anyway – which isn’t surprising, considering he makes a show of it every time he comes home.

Isak scowls, closing the door behind him. “You mean I have to do something about that,” Isak says, knowing full well Eva won’t ever take the initiative to submit a work order. “Which I’ll probably never do because I’m always somewhere else.”

Eva glances up at him and smiles. “I guess it’s just a matter of who can get off their ass faster and do it.”

“It’s so easy,” Isak whines. “You’re literally online now, it would have taken you a minute, minute and a half, at most.”

Eva shrugs. “I’m doing important things.”

Isak narrows his eyes. “Like what, exactly?”

Eva grins brightly and waves him over. “C’mere,” she demands, and Isak might be annoyed at everything right now, but it’s very, very hard to be annoyed at Eva for long, and he likes her more
than he likes most people, so he dutifully drags his feet towards the kitchen table and leans down to take a look at where she’s pointing at the computer screen.

Her finger hovers below a picture of a young woman, blonde hair up to her shoulders, smile bright and teeth far too white to be natural, Isak thinks, eyes a bright green. Her lips are red, but the rest of her face looks free of makeup, and she looks like one of the models Isak pretended to like all through high school to cover up the fact that he was, indeed, incredibly gay.

“Pretty,” he admits. “Is she a friend?”

Eva eyes Isak. “No, I’m just stalking her on Facebook.”

Isak raises a judgmental eyebrow towards Eva. “Okay,” he shakes his head. “And how did you find her on Facebook to stalk?”

While Eva obviously considers whether or not to tell Isak the truth, Isak removes his coat and throws it on the couch, then takes a seat next to Eva and removes his shoes. He’s surprised his feet don’t cry out in relief as he does, but it’s probably a near thing, considering Isak himself exhales a relieved breath at the feeling of the air conditioning hitting his sweated socks. They’re disgusting, and they should probably be removed, too, but he likes Eva just enough not to put her through that.

“So?” Isak asks. “Where do you know her from?”

Eva sighs loudly, resigned. “She came up to my cash register at the store,” she admits, then frowns. “Do you smell like pee?”

“Yes,” Isak replies. “But how did you ask for her name?”

“I didn’t,” Eva tells him. “She was on the phone with her boyfriend, I think,” she gestures towards the screen. “William something or the other. His last name’s stupid. Anyway, we didn’t really talk, she said ‘hi’ and ‘thank you’ and ‘have a nice day’, so, naturally, I committed her name to memory.” Eva wrinkles her nose. “Oh, my God, you seriously need to shower.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Isak rolls his eyes. “But how did you find out her name if you didn’t exchange more than a few words?”

Eva looks at him. “Her credit card, duh.”

Isak blinks. “Eva, that’s so creepy,” he tells her, and Eva shrugs. “Why are you like this?”

“I don’t know, Isak, why did you plot to break me and Jonas up in high school?” Her eyebrows rise, silently judging him.

Isak rolls his eyes again, this time a lot more exaggeratedly. “We’re twenty-one, Eva, will you ever stop using that against me?”

Eva snorts. “Of course not,” she says. “It’s the only shitty thing you’ve ever done to me, I’m milking it for as long as it still bothers you.”

“It didn’t work.”

“Semantics,” Eva waves him off, turning back to her computer screen. “Anyway, circling back around to the way you smell—”

Isak sighs loudly and stands up. “Yeah, yeah, I’m gonna go shower,” he mutters, running a hand
through his sweated hair.

“*I left some panties on the shower knob,*” Eva calls out as Isak makes his way over. “*Don’t think about how they touched my lady parts when removing them.*”

“*You know I can hear the word vagina without puking, right?*”

“I’m being considerate,” Eva calls out as Isak opens the bathroom door.

“You’re being a twelve-year-old.”

“You’re being a twelve-year-old!”

“Girl, I’m at least being fifteen,” he calls back out, and he smiles when he hears Eva’s laugh ring through the apartment. She’s probably the one thing that makes coming home to this miserable excuse of an apartment worth it, because she’s always out of her room, watching TV, making food, scrolling through her computer – she never locks herself away in her room the way Isak does, and even if sometimes the music blasting from her phone is obnoxious, listening to the noises she makes ring through the apartment makes him feel infinitely less lonely.

He closes the bathroom door and after removing his glasses starts stripping immediately, stupidly bringing his pants up to smell them. Isak doesn’t know what he expected – but, yes, they do smell like piss, and so he throws them in the hamper Eva had pointedly set up for them in the bathroom after telling Isak for the tenth time to stop leaving his clothes all over the bathroom floor. When he finishes stripping himself of the rest unfortunate-smelling clothes, he pulls open the shower curtains and sighs at the red panties hanging on the shower knob.

Isak still doesn’t understand why Eva does this sometimes, and Eva’s never really been forthcoming about it, so he simply picks the panties up carefully with his index finger and throws them in the hamper.

(Eva can never know he actually has a very hard time touching women’s panties because she’d hold it against him for the rest of his life and he does not need her talking about this to strangers while she’s drunk at parties, thank you very much.)

His shower is long but uneventful, and when he’s finished drying and brushing his teeth, he hears Eva call to him from the kitchen again.

“I’m in a towel,” Isak protests.

“Nothing I’ve never seen before,” she points out, and, well, yes, that’s true, but it’s not like he’d ever ask Eva for something while she’s in a towel, because he’s considerate. And Isak’s also aware that she’d be cold as fuck, which is incidentally what he’s feeling right now, so when he opens the bathroom door to stomp over to the kitchen with a towel wrapped around his waist, he makes sure to offer Eva his most frustrated glare.

“What.”

“Can you help me with this paper?” Eva asks, completely bypassing his glare. She turns her computer screen over for Isak to see, and what Isak sees if half a page filled up, and that’s including Eva’s byline and title.

“This is what couldn’t wait until I was dressed?”

“Oh, no, I mean, I guess it could have.”
Isak scowls.

Eva sighs. “Isak, please, you know I’m hopeless at biology,” she reminds him. “I was hopeless at it in high school, and I’m hopeless at it now. Why do you think I put it off for so long? It’s the one course I hoped my curriculum would forget about.”

“Eva, did you think my answer was gonna be different half naked than fully clothed?”

“Why are you still on the half-naked thing? I’m clearly over it.”

“It’s not affecting you!” Isak exclaims, throwing one hand up exasperatedly. “I’m cold and uncomfortable and I am not over it. I’m very close to saying no now,” he says petulantly.

But then Eva pouts, in that way that looks real and pitiful, so Isak grunts in frustration.

“How long does it have to be?” he asks.

Eva grins sheepishly. “Three thousand words?”

Isak leans forward and narrows his eyes in an attempt to see the computer screen clearly, eyesight hopeless without his glasses on, then he tries to read the word count on Eva’s paper. When he does, he squawks.

“You have five hundred words so far, Eva!”

“So you can see why I need your help,” Eva tells him very seriously.

He scowls at her and turns around indignantly, marching towards his room. “You’re problematic,” he calls out to her. “You want to be successful but you don’t want to put in the work to be.”

“So is that a yes?” Eva calls out as Isak enters his room.

He peeks his head out of the door frame. “Ask me again with my clothes on,” he calls back, then promptly closes the door to his room.

His back presses against the door then, a loud sigh making way past his lips, the exhaustion finally hitting him full force – class in the morning, work in the afternoon, feet crying out for mercy every single day, and a paper due at the end of the year he hasn’t been able to crank out yet because of reasons he can’t put his finger on, but it’s hard, it’s ridiculously hard, and it’s about things he likes.

Isak walks towards the edge of his room and taps on Galileo’s fish tank, watching him swim around happily in his fake ocean. It’s not too big, not enough to disturb Isak’s room and make it uncomfortable, but Isak thought that his fish deserved more than a miserable bowl, so he made it work.

“Hi,” he greets him, and, predictably, Isak gets no reply. He taps the fish tank again in acknowledgment anyway, then retreats to his dresser to fish out his boxers and his Simpsons shirt.

Once he’s dressed he makes his way to the bathroom again to grab his glasses, and as he walks out he puts them on and walks towards the kitchen, where Eva awaits him, fingers laced and hands resting on the table.

Isak furrows his brows. “What?”

“Do you feel like saying yes now?”
Isak rolls his eyes. “Sure.”

Eva grins. “See, what I just did there, with the half-naked and fully clothed thing? In psychology it’s referred to—”

Isak holds up a hand to stop her. “I don’t want to hear about your bullshit science, Eva,” he tells her, and she gasps, offended.

“Why do you hate my major so much?”

Isak snorts. “I mean, I could sit here and explain it to you, but we’d be here for days.”

Eva flicks a pencil at him. It misses him by a thread, but it’s still enough of a gap for Isak to smirk at Eva’s lack of aim. “Nice.”

She rolls her eyes. “Like you’d do any better.”

“I’m the master of aim.”

“How many times did you hurt yourself trying to skateboard with Jonas?”

Isak scowls. “That has nothing to do with aim.”

“Hm, well.”

“I thought you wanted help, do you think insulting my athletic ability is working in your favor?”

“Oh, Isak,” Eva smiles. “You’d never leave me to my own devices when I needed you, anyway.”

Isak raises an eyebrow challengingly. “And how would you know that?”

Eva’s expression softens. “It’s just not who you are.”

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The next day, immediately after class and on his way to the tram station, Isak’s ringtone bursts through his earphones, obnoxiously interrupting his music. Isak scowls down at it, even as Mahdi’s contact shows up on his screen, and he takes his time adjusting his glasses out of pettiness before he finally picks up on what could probably be the final ring.

“Hello,” he speaks tiredly into his earphone’s microphone, not dreading the conversation with Mahdi, but dreading the rest of his day at work. He closes this time, and he’s already exhausted at the sight of running children and is already longing for his next shift in the space exhibition.

“You sound like you were just hit by a bus” is the first thing Mahdi says to him, tactful as ever.

“I’ve been up since six in the morning, I deserve to sound like this.”

“Hm,” Mahdi acknowledges lamely. “What are you doing Friday night?”

Isak thinks. “Probably cry into my pillow,” he admits. “Watch Galileo swim around while I contemplate my life until I fall asleep.”

“Good God, man,” Mahdi sounds scandalized. “Should I be worried?”

Should he? It’s become common practice for Isak now, to avoid going out with his friends on
weekends, lest he get extremely drunk and lose his head for the rest of the week. It’s hard trying to keep up with school and work when the boys try to get him laid at every single party, and when they make sure he is never without an alcoholic beverage in hand. It’s not that he doesn’t enjoy it when he’s there, it’s just he’d rather skip the experience altogether nowadays. He doesn’t mind joining them for a pregame, or a kickoff on their better days, so long as he can wear his hoodie and the same jeans he wears all week when he’s not at work and come back home without fearing a hangover the next day.

“Nah,” Isak decides on the simpler answer. “I’m just fucking tired.”

“Well, listen,” Mahdi starts as Isak finds his way to the tram stop. “Yousef and the guys are having a party that night, and it’s been too fucking long since you did something with all of us, so I’m not exactly inviting you so much as telling you you’re going.”

Isak scowls. “You are not the boss of me, Mahdi.”

“I’m the only reason you have any street cred.”

“Jonas would resent that.”

“Jonas knows,” Mahdi scoffs. “I’m the only reason he has any street cred, too.”

“Why are we talking about street cred again?”

“Because you owe me for that,” Mahdi’s bullshit excuse reaches Isak’s ears like nails on a chalkboard.

“Listen, I can live without it.”

“Can’t hear you, my reception doesn’t seem to cover the bullshit zone you’re in.”

“Mahdi.”

“Everyone misses you, man,” Mahdi switches gears to the guilt trip, which Isak hates, because it’s so effective nowadays. “It’s just one house party. The people there will be chill.”

Isak grimaces as the tram reaches him. “Not everyone.”

Mahdi sighs dramatically over the other line. “Dude, you don’t have to talk to him, it’s a big fucking house.”

“Knowing of his presence will be enough,” Isak sniffs indignantly. “He literally exudes pretentiousness, Mahdi. All over the house.”

“Even is cool, Isak,” Mahdi tells him, though this is what every single one of his friends have tried to convince him of for the year Isak has known Even. “I don’t even know why you guys dislike each other so much.”

Isak battles the memory trying to make its way to the forefront. “Irrelevant. I just don’t want to spend my Friday night in the same room with him.”

“Can you stop being so fucking dramatic for a moment?” Mahdi request, and Isak frowns.

“No.”

“You guys can’t keep taking turns on what events you show up to just so you can avoid each other.”
Mahdi bypasses Isak’s petulant answer.

“I mean, we can try,” Isak says truthfully. It’s worked well for the both of them in the past, and, sure, there have been times when there’s no avoiding their presence in the same place, but at least the rest of the guys make loud enough conversation so that they don’t have to look at each other once. “Maybe he shouldn’t show up this time, he got you guys last time.”

“It’s his house.”

“I’m not hearing the problem here.”

Mahdi grunts in frustration. Isak climbs onto the tram when the doors open, slightly amused. It’s definitely made his morning far more interesting, anyway. It’ll make the ride home before work more eventful, in any case, his nap more satisfying.

“Isak, if I have to drag you to the house myself, I will,” he warns. “Don’t be a fucking loser.”

“I’m not a loser,” Isak scowls.

“You’re acting like one.”

“I was big shit in high school!”

Mahdi laughs. “And now you’re a fucking nerd who can’t even spare one Friday night for his friends because he – fought with a guy over money?”

“Nope,” Isak pops the ‘p’, unsurprised at Mahdi trying to guess what the tension between Isak and Even is really about. All of their friends take turns guessing, but they can never really pinpoint the moment they stopped getting along, which, to be fair, was not very long after they met for the first time. He takes a seat on the tram and sighs. “Look, I’ll go, alright?” And Mahdi whoops on the other line. “But you can’t get me drunk.”

“Fine, whatever.”

“I mean it,” Isak snaps. “I have a paper to work on and the hangovers you guys leave me with impair me for an entire week.”

“Yeah, Isak, I said fine, we won’t get you drunk. We’re just excited you’ll be there at all.”

Something soft settles in Isak at the words, but he doesn’t let Mahdi know. “Whatever,” he dismisses it forcefully. “Are the girls invited?”

“You can invite them,” Mahdi tells him. “The more, the merrier. Plus, Eva’s fucking hilarious when she’s drunk.”

Isak scowls. “Maybe I won’t invite them.” He hates seeing Eva in that state, really, because he’s always worrying after her, knowing full well she loses all sense of herself when she’s inebriated to the point of no return. He’s seen both guys and girls try to take advantage of her disembodied state, and has very often forced himself to look past his own drunken haze to get her out of there and take her home safely.

“Eva’s a big girl, Isak,” Mahdi replies, as if he can hear Isak’s train of thought. “She can take care of herself. Besides,” he continues before Isak can interrupt. “She won’t speak to you for a week if she finds out you didn’t invite her to a party.”
Ugh, he’s not wrong. “Fine, whatever, I’ll mention it to her,” he says dismissively. “Are we done? I’m almost home and I want to nap before I go to work.”


“Yep,” Isak replies, and then the line goes dead, because Mahdi and his street cred never say goodbye.

When he gets home, Eva’s in the kitchen making soup, and Isak spends a full minute fighting with the doorknob.

He’s about to give up when the key finally gives way, pushing him backwards against the wall again. His back, so used to greeting the wall when he gets home, doesn’t even hurt that much on impact this time, which he counts as a win enough to not slam the front door shut this time.

“Isak?” Eva calls out from the kitchen. “I’m in the kitchen!”

“Yes, I know,” Isak calls back. “I can smell the soup from a mile away.”

“Does it smell bad?”

“Your cooking never smells bad, Eva.”

Isak can’t see her, but he can feel Eva preening from the kitchen, which is enough to lift at least one of the weights off his shoulders. He kicks off his shoes and drops them by the entrance, removes his coat and lays it over the back of a chair before making his way into the kitchen.

Eva’s standing in front of the stove stirring the pot, several chopped vegetables lying on the cutting board beside her, and she looks over to smile largely at Isak. Isak leans against the door frame, raises an eyebrow at her.

“Have you been here all day?” he asks, taking in her appearance – sweatpants and picked up hair, hanging clumsily by a loose hair tie. Isak doesn’t think she’s showered yet.

Eva frowns. “It’s eleven in the morning,” she reminds him. “You’re the only weirdo who takes classes so early. Besides,” she turns her attention back to her soup. “My only class was cancelled today, so I decided to spend a couple of hours making the perfect batch of soup.”

Isak smiles. “Are you gonna share?”

Eva sighs loudly. “I guess since you helped with my paper yesterday I can spare a bowl,” she returns his smile. “How was class?”

“Class was class,” he waves it off, leaving the comment as vague as possible, lest he burdens someone else with his problems. “Hey, Yousef and the guys are throwing a party at his place Friday night. I was told to let you know about this. But,” Isak holds up a finger when he sees Eva start bouncing excitedly. “You don’t have to.”

Eva scoffs. “Yeah, okay, good one,” she snorts. Then she pauses, as if considering this information. “Wait, doesn’t Even live with Yousef?”

“Yes,” Isak spits bitterly. “I found no way around that this time.”

Eva bursts out into a laugh. “Oh, that’s so good,” she grins. “Maybe you two can make friends after – insulting each other’s style choices?”
“Nope,” Isak rolls his eyes. “None of you are creative anymore with these guesses, oh my God.”

“Well, when long lost childhood lovers was off the table, I kind of lost interest in the turmoil,” Eva admits. “Still, don’t you think it’d be nice to, I don’t know, not hate him?”

“I don’t hate him,” Isak corrects, though sometimes it definitely feels that way. “He’s just a nuisance.”

“I dunno, he’s been nothing but nice to me,” Eva tells him, and Isak scowls. How dare that ten-foot giraffe with the five-foot-long neck try and steal his roommate from him. “He’s really sweet. And funny. I seriously think you two would get along, if you gave it a chance.”

Isak’s memory flashes with a bitter smile and an offhanded wave, and he scowls. “I doubt it.”

Eva sighs. “Alright, well, I’m not here to play mediator, I guess,” she grumps. “Still, it’d be super cool if you both didn’t make everything so fucking awkward when we all hung out together.”

Isak’s mouth parts in offense. “Excuse me?” He replies defensively. “I’m perfectly civil when we hang out together. If anything, he’s the one always glaring at me.”

“That’s such bullshit,” Eva laughs. “You two don’t even look at each other. It’s like you want to fill the room with tension and this, like, pissing contest you two are always silently engaged in, like, who’s gonna cave and leave first?”

“You make us sound like children.”

“If the shoe fits,” Eva smirks. Isak narrows his eyes at her. “I’m not flipping you off right now because I like you too much,” he says. “But just imagine that I am.”

Eva, on the other hand, flips him off happily. “I guess I just don’t like you enough.”

Isak rolls his eyes and turns around. “I’m gonna take a nap before work,” he calls out as he walks to his room. “Please don’t play Gabrielle on repeat for the next three hours.”

“I’ll try,” she calls back. “But I can’t control what the radio plays, so?”

Isak sighs as he walks inside his room and closes the door behind him. There’s a bitter taste in his mouth where before there was nothing but staleness, but it’s nothing new – it turns this way whenever Even’s brought up in a conversation, especially in regard to Isak’s relationship with him, because it’s something that’s irked Isak for an entire year – how easily persuaded his friends are that he’s something other than a pretentious asshole who thinks that just because someone criticizes something intelligently, that other person must have a stick up their ass.

Like, Isak’s not the kind of person to utilize a five-year-old’s argument, but if he were, he’d be pointing out that Even’s totally the one with the stick up his ass, he’s just saying.

He sits on his bed and removes his glasses, placing them gingerly on his end table. He’s ready to fall asleep and stop wasting precious time thinking about that tall douchebag, with his stupid eyes and his stupid lips and, okay, Isak is aware that Even is objectively attractive, no matter which way you turn it over, but once someone’s personality shines through, they’re not as attractive as they once were. Isak knows this, has learned this, and he’s glad he’s out of the mindset of Even being “his type”.

Because no, his type is definitely not pretentious art assholes. And, listen, maybe if Even’s ego
weren’t so easily wounded, they’d probably have a much better relationship today, but as it were, Even’s ego could probably fill the Eiffel Tower to capacity and then some, so the second someone even pokes at it deflates by a ridiculous amount.

Isak forces himself to lie back and lets his head hit the pillow before he rubs the bridge of his nose in frustration. This is not what he wants to be thinking about before he falls asleep. And he can usually look past the Even situation when it’s only brought up once and the conversation doesn’t lead to agreeing to be in the same place at the same time, but this time he’s been brought up twice, and both times the conversation has led to an agreement to share his space and, like, the same oxygen.

Even’s presence looms over any room obnoxiously, so it’s very, very hard to ignore him even if Isak wants to, and the thing is, Isak learned this the first time he met Even – the boys had dragged him to an art gallery, where they were showing some random paintings, Isak didn’t know, he didn’t care, he just went because they promised him free booze and food, so he skipped the questions and went straight for the engagement.

Which, in hindsight, might have been a bad idea and could have easily avoided this entire situation, if he’s looking at it objectively, but he’s not, surprisingly, so it’s still Even’s fault.

If you look at it from the very beginning, it’s maybe possible to think it was Isak’s fault, but, listen – Isak’s a little hopeless when confronted with good-looking people, alright, and the boys had ditched him to find some other friends they probably liked better, so Isak could do nothing else but stand in front of one of the paintings awkwardly, the frame holding several shapes Isak could not exactly make out, but the colors were dark and looming, and nothing about it made any sense; and Isak tried to make sense of it, he did, but all he saw were shades upon shades of the darkest versions of different colors, filling out every shape, and Isak just couldn’t understand it, he couldn’t.

And Isak hates not understanding something. That’s not how his brain is supposed to work, and he hates having his intelligence insulted, and so of course he automatically rejects the painting and decides it’s stupid, and that it’s not his fault he doesn’t understand it.

So he already had a standing rivalry with the painting when Even waltzed up next to him, champagne glass in hand, hair swooped backwards and button down shirt hugging his chest tightly, denim jacket swung over his shoulders like he wasn’t at a fucking art gallery where everyone else was dressed impeccably. It made Isak feel a little less out of place with his messy hair and dirty glasses, dressed top to bottom with a graphic tee and his favorite jeans.

(No one told him he’d have to dress up. But, to be fair, he probably wouldn’t have anyway, as his days had turned lazy even back then, to the point where he didn’t really care if he looked good or not.)

Still, he cared a little bit now, because Even was – right, well, Isak has already come to terms with the fact that Even is attractive, as you know, and that’s mostly because Isak can’t ignore that when he first saw Even his breath caught in his throat as he stood next to the towering man, with his stupid hair and his stupid sense of style, and who was looking pensively at the painting Isak was currently having a silent battle with.

“Do you like it?” He suddenly asked Isak, turning to offer him a smile.

And, really, okay, it’d been a while, give Isak a break, but he had no idea how to communicate with an attractive man willingly starting a conversation with him, the douche wearing jeans and a t-shirt at an art gallery, so he refused to look over at him and instead stared far more intensely at the painting in front of him, willing for it to communicate to him exactly what it meant so he didn’t sound like a complete moron.
Paintings don’t talk, though, so without turning to look at Even and considering this endeavor a bust already, he’d said, “I think it’s really pointless, actually.”

And through his peripheral, he could see Even’s eyebrows rise in surprise. “Oh?” He’d smiled at Isak, that much he can remember, almost like he was amused. And Isak remembers trying hard not to blush, both out of offense and embarrassment, because he did not appreciate being made fun of just because he wasn’t looking for meaning in pointless splashes of colors framed around the wall the way everyone else in the room seemed to be.

“Yeah,” Isak remembers clearing his throat, trying to talk past his ignorance. “Yeah, I mean, this?” Isak gestured towards the painting. “This literally doesn’t mean anything. What, did the artist just– throw random colors together and say, ‘yeah, that looks like something I could sell to some rich idiot’. Because, I mean, if that was the objective, then good for them – it’s incredibly smart. Otherwise, I think they think way too highly of themselves.”

The pause that hung between them should have been an indicator to Isak, really, but instead he held his breath through it, wondering why, exactly, the man beside him was staying quiet for so long.

He spoke up again right before the pause stretched into awkward territory. “I don’t know, I think this one’s different from the rest,” he’d said, and Isak finally turned to look at him and fuck, alright, his eyes were really, really blue. He remembers Even gesturing around the room, willing Isak to do the same, and Isak remembers staring uselessly at the color of Even’s eyes for a beat longer before he turned to look at the burst of colors captured inside different frames, a direct contrast with the one they were standing in front of. Isak could make out more than shapes around him – distorted faces, buildings collapsing over each other, sunsets that illuminated the rest of the canvas – Isak can’t exactly remember everything, all he can remember is that not all of them looked as pointless as his Worst Enemy, but he wasn’t about to let the handsome man beside him know that he’d just proved Isak wrong.

“Maybe, but that doesn’t mean this entire show is any less ridiculous,” Isak had snorted for good measure, then turned back to the painting hanging in front of them. “I thought art shows had to have a common theme?”

Even had hummed beside him. “The artist is bipolar,” he’d explained to Isak, and Isak remembers trying not to groan, because of course the hot guy he was trying hard not to scare away was friends with the artist. “I think the show is meant to depict different themes rather than a common one. To reflect his inner turmoil, his racing thoughts. How nothing’s ever a constant inside him.”

Isak can still feel his teeth biting down harshly on his bottom lip, trying to find a way out of this without also admitting defeat. “Regardless, I think there are better ways of depicting an illness than taking direct influence from – what, fucking Pablo Picasso, of all people, and turning it instead into a pity art show.”

And, right, Isak will admit that was definitely a problematic thing to say, considering he knows mental illness, has lived close to it for most of his life, and he understood then as he understands now that sometimes the way a person expresses their frustrations about their particular illness is unique and completely valid, whether or not Isak can understand it, and he was really ready to apologize, he was, but then Magnus was walking up to them and patting Even enthusiastically on the back.

“You two met!” Isak remembers Magnus almost bouncing out of his shoes in excitement. Isak blinked at him in surprise, though Even didn’t look too surprised at all.

“Isak, this is Even,” Magnus gestured to the man Isak just made himself look like an asshole in front of. “This is his show, can you believe it?”
Isak turns over in his bed now and buries his face in his pillow at the memory of the way his spine had gone cold and his face had flushed hot, embarrassment washing through him just as prominently now as it had then. He remembers Even offering him a small smile, one that didn’t exactly reach his eyes, but it was polite-ish, sort of, even though the rest of Even’s expression read like “what a fucking dick”. Which he did not appreciate, not even a little bit, because what did he know about Isak? So he couldn’t take a little bit of criticism from a – well, an admittedly ignorant source, but you weren’t going to catch Isak owning up to that, were you?

“I certainly can’t,” Isak had said, voice weak. “I really wish it wasn’t.”

Magnus had laughed boisterously, as if Isak had just made a hilarious joke instead of admitting to the fact that he would have much rather insulted this entire show in front of someone who wasn’t the fucking artist.

“We’ve been meaning for you to meet for forever,” Magnus continued, even though Isak was willing for him to disappear. He was slurring his words, though, which led Isak to believe that even if he could send him a warning glare, Magnus would definitely not be in a right enough mind to pick up on it. “We all kept saying, we kept saying – man, wouldn’t Isak and Even just get along so well? So we kept trying to get you two to meet but one of you or both of you were always busy when you were gonna show up to the same place at the same time, so today was like, a miracle. An actual miracle, oh my God.”

Isak wanted the floor to swallow him whole. How Even was managing to still look amused was beyond him.

Magnus proceeded to run a hand through Even’s hair, and it took every single drop of strength Isak had ever pretended to have not to stare in amazement at the way a string of Even’s hair softly dropped forward to his forehead. “Dude, you’re really hot,” Magnus blurted, and Even laughed. “We should make out.”

Even shook his head and patted Magnus on the shoulder. “Some other time, Magnus.”

“I’m keeping you to that,” Magnus had hiccuped, then he’d smirked at Isak and waggled his eyebrows, not gunning for subtlety at all, clearly. “Unless someone else beats me to it first.”

“Oh, I doubt it,” Isak muttered, face still flushed, but Magnus hadn’t seemed like he heard Isak – instead, he spotted Mahdi on the other end of the gallery, and called his name out loudly before making his way over to him, leaving Isak with nothing but an insulted artist and a very long, very awkward silence.

Isak cleared his throat. “Listen—”

Even held up a hand. “You don’t need to apologize,” he’d told Isak, and Isak remembers scowling bitterly at the words. “It’s not everyone’s cup of tea, I get it.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to apologize,” Isak had blurted, though that was definitely what he’d been about to do, but – Even had looked so sure of himself, like he was the one in the right because he was used to always being the one in the right, and Isak wasn’t having that, because that’d just inflate this guy’s ego, as if he needed it. He was an attractive, young white man with his own fucking art show, one he was sure everyone was going to love, and he’d watered down Isak’s opinion to a cup of fucking tea, when Isak was sure his opinion was just as valid as Even seemed to think his was.

“Oh?”
“Yeah, like, I mean. I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings, or whatever, but, isn’t that what art shows are about? Taking criticisms and opinions?”

“Oh, of course. I’m not saying they’re not. But you’re talking like you know better than every artist and art critic in history, so I’m curious to know what makes you qualified to be?”

Isak gaped. “Your painting doesn’t make sense.” He’d crossed his arms over his chest petulantly. “And, for your information, I happen to know more about history than probably anyone else in this room. So just – just accept the opinion and go. It’s not like I’ll make or break whatever career you’re trying to build here.”

“Oh, I’m taking your opinion into consideration,” Even had smirked. “Of course I am. I’m just not hearing an actual answer to my question?”

Isak fumed, and this is the reason why he’d stuttered next, and he’s sticking with that story. “It’s – art’s not a real – I don’t need to be a critic or an expert to know this is all – for all I know, this is all just a big ploy to make you seem, like, deeper than you actually are, or something.”

“Oh, really?” Something in Even’s gaze dimmed. “Did I also lie about being bipolar so I could earn pity points?”

Isak feels the guilt settle in his stomach even now, and he’s not proud of the way he handled the situation next, but God – God, Even was purposely riling him up, Isak knows he was, he was judging Isak without even knowing him, already thinking he was better than him before Isak could get a word in otherwise. “No, that’s not – I wasn’t saying—” Isak grunted in frustration. “Look, I’m not taking back what I said. I just don’t think your paintings are anything to write home about. Not everyone has to like them.”

Even considered Isak for a moment, and something in his smile had turned bitter, and disappointed, like he expected more of Isak. And Isak had hated that, because he shouldn’t expect something out of someone he doesn’t know, even if he acted like he did. “That’s just fine. I mean, I can accept that you don’t like my art the same way I can accept the fact that I don’t need the criticism from someone who thinks comparing my work to Pablo Picasso’s is an insult.”

Isak scowled. “He – the man was a perverted pedophile who had a kid with a seventeen-year-old when he was forty-five.”

By then, however, Even didn’t seem interested in continuing their conversation – he’d turned around and was walking towards the other side of the gallery, waving Isak off over his shoulder dismissively. “Nobody’s perfect,” he’d called out, then he paused and turned to look over his shoulder. His smile was tight. “Nice to meet you, Isak.”

And Isak wished he could say the same, wishes even now he could, if only so they could have avoided the fucking resentment they harbored against each other altogether, but God. God. The memory still manages to boil Isak’s blood, amongst other things, and he can’t believe his friends thought he could ever get along with someone so pretentious, so obviously enamored with himself that he couldn’t look past a genuine opinion without cutting off all communication with the other person, without deciding the other person wasn’t worth his time.

And maybe that’s the worst part about all of this – that someone out there thinks Isak isn’t worth their time, that thinks Isak’s the one with the problem when it’s obvious they are. They could have been friends, maybe, Isak’s not sure, and Isak doesn’t necessarily want to know anymore – he thinks they’re both stubborn, set in their ways, and Isak can’t appreciate the person that Even is without thinking it impractical. Isak thinks art, a form of expression of the subconscious made to be witnessed
by the world, made to expect praise and consideration, is subjective, and he doesn’t like the subjective – he likes objectivity, things he can explain, things he can understand, and he doesn’t appreciate people who pretend to understand things that are inherently not understandable, not really. Subjectivity isn’t a real thing. Things are either a fact, or they’re not.

And that’s the kind of person Even is. From what he’s been able to piece together by listening every now and then to what his friends say, he doesn’t really believe that things are black and white – he questions everything and seems to enjoy it, doesn’t care if he believes in things that have never been proven, believes in things that can break him easily. Isak thinks that’s ridiculous, to know someone is so carefree, like he’s never experienced heartbreak in his life, like he’s never been let down in his life, and that’s such an issue. Isak couldn’t possibly enjoy having a person so naïve in his life. He already has Eva, who believes far too much in love and possibility, and he often has to take care of her more than any friend and roommate should.

It reminds him of his mother, forcing her faith on Isak, telling him never to question God even though Isak couldn’t see him, or hear him, or feel him. Even though every time he asked a question about the bible he was made to read every Sunday, he never received a straight answer, like even the people meant to be the most faithful to their religion couldn’t understand what they were preaching, either. No one could ever prove to Isak that the bible wasn’t nonsense, that God was real.

But his mother would sit Isak down and make him pray, anyway, and he carried that with him into high school, thought everything about him was wrong and disgusting and abominable, until he learned faith wasn’t real, it wasn’t a science, and even though some people harbored it in them, it never did any favors to Isak. It broke him and made him hate himself for far longer than he should have, broke his mother when she decided it was more important to her than her own son was, and so he thinks that people who have faith in things they can’t know for sure are ridiculous, and are bound to end up bitter and unhappy when they’re confronted with the cruel reality of the situation.

So Isak plays it safe. For his sake, and for the sake of the people around him.

Isak turns over in his bed and rolls himself under the duvet, cheek pressing down on his pillow. He stares at the wall blankly, tries to ignore the unpleasant bubbles stirring in his stomach. He chalks it up to hunger, then shuts his eyes as tightly as he can, trying to force his mind to shut down, his body to sleep.

He has work in a couple of hours. He doesn’t have the luxury to question someone that will never be anything but a blip on his radar, someone he’ll forget about in a couple of years, where all he’ll be is a story to tell at parties, an example when Isak tries to prove a point. He doesn’t have the time to wonder how someone so unworldly can walk around with a smile on his face, without a care in the world.

Isak thinks it’s stupid. He thinks Even is stupid. He wishes he wasn’t such a god damn nuisance, a mystery, he wishes his head would stop questioning him, as if trying to figure him out. Isak doesn’t care, he doesn’t, and he’s really trying to convince the rest of himself of the fact, but it doesn’t work, never works. Isak’s always tried to find the fact in fiction, and to him, that’s what Even is – a work of fiction, unrealistic, meant for entertainment but never to look past the surface or the first impression.

Eventually, sleep does find him, but it does so begrudgingly, and it leaves him with lingering thoughts of the unexplainable and the doubts that follow after.

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On Friday, the boys are leading him to Yousef’s place after a pregame, where Magnus is already
drunker than any of them, stumbling over air and laughing far too loudly at anything Mahdi says. Isak would be annoyed, but he’s pleasantly buzzed, so it’s not as irritating as it would be sober – he plans to stay at this level for the rest of the night, enough so the loud party music and annoying presences don’t ruin his vibe, but not enough to ruin the rest of the week with the weight of a major hangover.

Mahdi had already expressed his disdain for Isak’s decision, but Jonas managed to make him lay off, telling him one of them has to be responsible to be successful in the future, because that someone’s gonna be the one they all bum off of for years to come. This made Magnus laugh out loud on the way out of his apartment and made Mahdi concede to the point, pat Isak on the back and calling him a trooper.

Isak had rolled his eyes, but didn’t object, knowing full well that if his friends ever needed to bum off of him, he was helpless to turn them away.

They’re not far from Yousef’s house, and that’s made clear to them by the loud music echoing down the street, most likely annoying the neighbors, Isak thinks, but it’s not like they can do much about it yet – it hasn’t struck midnight, which means they can’t complain for another couple of hours about the noise, so they’ll probably be able to enjoy the party until the police finds their way to the house and breaks it up.

Isak plans to leave before that, though, not eager to have to attest to his age, and Mahdi can kiss his ass if he tries to get him to stay. Though Isak thinks they’re going to be losing Mahdi first in the house, so he might not be a problem, and he tends to be able to sneak away from Jonas and Magnus once they spot an attractive someone somewhere in the house. It’s very easy for them to get distracted by women, or, in Magnus’s case, both women and men, which makes for a much more enjoyable party experience for Isak, who can drink and either sulk on a couch by himself or, on better occasions, make conversation with someone else that wasn’t exactly looking to pointlessly hook up or eager to have hangover the next day. The former was more plausible than the latter, objectively, but he doesn’t mind. He never minds a comfortable couch, a can of beer and a good sulk.

“Shit, do you think Thomas will be here?” Magnus slurs as they walk up the steps to the house. “Like, do I look good enough for him to be here?”

“I don’t think what you look like has any bearing on whether or not he’ll show up?” Jonas explains, a little perplexed. “And since when have you guys been hanging out?”

“Since you took me on that date, duh,” Magnus looks at Jonas as if he’s grown two heads. “He doesn’t have to do everything with Lydia, you know.”

Jonas frowns. “I mean, I figured, but,” he licks his lips. “I haven’t heard from Lydia since that night.”

“Well, to be fair, she hasn’t heard from you, either,” Magnus points out, which makes Jonas roll his eyes.

“Because I’m not interested,” Jonas tells him, and then Mahdi pipes up.

“Dude, then why the fuck do you care if she calls or not?”

Jonas shrugs. “It’s one thing if I’m not interested,” he tells him. “It’s a completely different thing if she isn’t, though. Like, that’s really hot, and also annoying.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “All of you are so fucking problematic,” he mutters as they make their way past
the lawn full of people. “This is why none of you can last longer than a month in a relationship.”

“Howa,” Mahdi looks at Isak. “Says the guy who hasn’t dated since high school.”

“Because I don’t try to date,” Isak points out as they reach the entrance, door wide open. “Not because I fuck shit up with my backwards thinking, like you assholes.”

Jonas looks sufficiently chastised. “No, you’re right,” he agrees. “That’s the drunken idiot in me talking. Both sober me and high me would be very disappointed by this.”

Isak extends a hand to pat Jonas’s shoulder comfortingly. “The first step to recovery is admitting that you have a problem.”

Mahdi snorts. “You two are unbelievable,” he says, and his voice has to get louder to shout over the music now that they’re inside the house. “Find yourselves someone to make out with and get over it.”

Isak is not going to do that, thank you very much, but he’s pretty sure Jonas is, so he watches Mahdi walk away from them and take his booze with him and then he turns to Jonas to gesture with his head towards Mahdi’s general direction.

“You should go with him,” he calls out over the music. “I’m gonna go find a bathroom.”

That’s not exactly true, but it’s easier for Jonas to ditch him if Isak gives him permission to first, so he doesn’t feel guilty and follow Isak around all night and not enjoy the party. It works, because Jonas nods and gives his arm a squeeze. “Find me after, alright?” he tells Isak, and Isak nods, even if he definitely won’t, because by the time Isak decides to look for him, he’ll have a girl pressed to the wall and his lips will be attacking her face.

High school him had to witness this countless of times, and back then it was torture – he’s aware that what he felt for Jonas was something resembling romantic love, but the more he learns about just what chemicals trigger love in the brain, the more he realizes it was more of a projection, coming to terms with his sexuality and eventually realizing that the less he feels for people, the easier it is to avoid the hurt that comes with the crushing disappointment of seeing them attack other people’s lips with their own. Isak is grateful he’s past all of that bullshit and that he can witness this unaffected enough to walk away and find something else to do, instead of wallowing all night and engaging in the masochistic ritual of watching Jonas make out with someone else.

He doesn’t realize Magnus is following him towards the living room until he yells in Isak’s ear. “There’s Yousef!”

Isak startles and turns back to glare at the blonde, who is waving enthusiastically to what Isak assumes is Yousef behind him, ignoring Isak’s reaction.

“Dude,” Isak furrows his brows. “What are you still doing here?”

Magnus’s eyebrows rise. “Is it a crime to hang out together at a party?”

Well, no, it’s not, but Isak’s not used to Magnus sticking with him or any of the other boys during one, so it’s more than a little suspicious. When Magnus gestures towards one of Isak’s hands, Isak realizes where he’s coming from.

“Besides, you have booze, and I do not,” he points out, and Isak snorts loudly.

“That’s because you finished yours at the pregame.”
Magnus pouts. “So you’re not gonna share?”

“No!” Isak looks at him, disbelieving. “Dude, you’re way too drunk right now, I’m not getting you even drunker.”

“It’s not like you’re gonna finish them,” Magnus points out. “You’re being boring and refusing to get drunk enough to have fun.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I’ll find someone to share them with,” he tells Magnus. “Someone who’s sober enough to warrant them.”

“Ugh,” Magnus grunts. “You’re such a fucking mom sometimes.”

Isak snorts. “I’m leaving now, Magnus.”

“Hey, look!” Magnus points over Isak’s shoulder, completely ignoring Isak’s announcement of retrieval. “It’s Even!”

Isak turns around instinctively to follow Magnus’s line of sight, and he’s not really sure what he expected to find, but there’s Even, sulking even more pretentiously than usual at the corner of the living room. Isak can’t believe he’s trying to sulk as much as Isak does right now, what the fuck, that’s his thing.

“Man, poor thing,” Magnus speaks into his ears, and Isak turns to glance at Magnus’s pitying expression before looking back towards a sulking Even.

“Why?” Isak rolls his eyes. “He’s just trying to look mysterious by sulking in a corner.”

“Nah, dude,” Magnus says. “His girlfriend, you know, Sonja? The one he’s been dating for five years? She just called it quits with him,” he says, and Isak raises his eyebrows. “He won’t tell anyone why, but he’s been pretty bummed out about it all week.”

And, alright, so Isak feels a little bad for him, but he also thinks this is his own fault, for putting so much of his trust into another person, and also, what is Isak meant to do about it? It’s not like he cares enough about Even to try and console him, and it’s not like he doesn’t avoid him enough so that he can bring it up in a conversation, ask if he’s okay, so Isak shrugs his shoulders and turns to look back at Magnus, patting his cheek.

“Go find yourself a nice person with booze, Mags,” he suggests, and Magnus rolls his eyes exaggeratedly, seemingly forgetting what they were talking about a second ago. “You’re not getting any of mine.”

“You’re a terrible friend!” Magnus shouts at him as he retreats. “A terrible friend, Isak Valtersen!”

Isak waves off his accusations guiltlessly as Magnus is completely overtaken by the crowd, disappearing entirely, and then Isak is left standing there alone, rooted to the spot.

He sighs loudly, not even sure why he decided to come in the first place, then makes his way literally anywhere else, away from the people trying to sweat on his fucking shoes. This used to be his scene in high school, honestly – when he was trying really hard to like girls and to forget his grievances – but now the atmosphere is really not his area, and the only times he enjoys loud music and sweaty people is when he’s at a gay bar, and even then, he mostly just watches.

The kitchen happens to be the only place not entirely swarmed by people, mostly only being used to throw empty beer cans away or on the counter and walk out, so it’s a breath of fresh air and the
perfect place for Isak to sulk until he spots the last person on earth he wanted to be in the same room with.

Even’s now graduated to sulking in the corner of the kitchen, long fingers wrapped around the beer can almost fucking twice, and, no, Isak doesn’t stare at them for a second too long, thanks, it’s fucking weird, not attractive, and you literally can’t prove otherwise.

He means to turn around and walk right back out of the kitchen, but Even’s caught his eye now, and Isak might dislike him, but he also doesn’t want to look like a coward and run out of there without preamble. If Even wants to be the first to walk out, then he can feel free to be Isak’s guest, but if Even thinks Isak’s going to be the first one to cave, then he has another thing coming for him.

Taking a deep breath, Isak makes his way over to the same part of the counter Even’s currently sulking in front of, their distance only being separated by the stove, and he settles his beer cans on top of it and, against his better judgment, takes one for himself and opens it. Call it liquid courage, if you must, but if he’s going to stand here in uncomfortable silence with the pretentious douchebag of his nightmares, he’s going to need to be a lot more inebriated than he already is.

He downs about half of it before separating his lips from the rim, then glances over at Even, who’s doing the same and pointedly avoiding Isak’s gaze. He looks positively miserable, almost like Isak’s presence can’t even bother him in his state, which inexplicably irks Isak to no end, so he does something stupid.

He talks to him.

“Hey,” he calls out, and the music’s not as loud here as it is out in the living room, but it’s loud enough so that Isak has to raise his voice a little. There are only about four other people in the kitchen, chatting aimlessly amongst each other, so Even looks at them first before he turns back to Isak, as if he’s surprised Isak is acknowledging him. He visibly sighs, but that’s the only way Isak notices he does, since it’s not loud enough to reach Isak’s ears.

“Listen,” Even calls back. “If you’re here to pick a fight, I’m not really in the mood, Isak.”

Isak scowls. “I don’t always pick a fight,” he says defensively, though, to be fair, he doesn’t necessarily start a forced conversation with Even in the nicest of terms.

Even communicates this fact to Isak with a Look, which Isak only acknowledges with a roll of his eyes. Yeah, he gets it, he’s always bitter about the fact that Even pretends to know him, know his struggles, but he’s also not a complete fucking asshole, right? Isak may not understand romantic relationships, but he can understand heartbreak, and he still knows what it feels like, even after years of avoiding it altogether behind the shield he’s built for himself.


Even’s smile is bitter. “That’s worse than you picking a fight,” he tells Isak. “You’re actually pitying me right now.”

And, well, yeah. Isak raises his eyebrows. “You’re telling me if I ever broke up with a boyfriend of five years you wouldn’t pity me, too?”

Even seems to concede to the point. “Yeah,” he agrees with a tilt of his head, and that’s the end of that conversation.

So now they’re standing about three feet away from each other and saying absolutely nothing, the both of them grasping at their beer cans a little too tightly, unsure of what to do next. This is the
longest interaction they’ve had in over a year that hasn’t ended in insults or one of them storming off, and the only noises around them now are that of loud voices talking over each other, trying not to be drowned out by the even louder music echoing around the house. Isak can feel the counter pulsate against his waist as he leans against it, to the rhythm of the song’s bass, and then he takes another swig of his beer to try and build up the courage to say something else.

“Did they throw this party to get your mind off your ex?” He asks, and, yeah, he’s totally nailing this being the bigger person thing right now. Isak, 2, Even, 0.

Even snorts. “Yeah,” he admits to Isak. “But it’s not working.”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “Maybe you’re not trying hard enough,” he tells him. “Since you seem to be mighty attached to corners tonight.”

Even throws him a bitter look. “You can’t possibly understand how hard it is to be on the rebound when you loved someone for so long, and then they decide to end it for good because they decided they’re in love with someone else.”

Honestly, Isak really feels for the guy right now, he does, and, if he were to follow the right social cues, he’d probably say something like, hey, I’m sorry, or, don’t worry, you’ll get back out there, but as it were, he’s getting a little drunker than before and also, it’s Even, so instead he replies, “Yeah, of course I don’t.” he taps a finger against his beer can. “Because I’m not stupid enough to start a relationship when I have to focus on my studies and my career and my passions, and romantic relationships are a distraction from that that lead to nothing but broken trust and heartbreak. See: you, wallowing in the kitchen corner, talking to me, of all people.” Isak pauses. “I don’t know how you willingly jumped into one like an idiot, honestly. Five years, fucking wasted because you chose to trust this girl.”

Even is looking at him, a little perplexed. “It’s called faith, Isak. Sometimes you love someone and you have faith they’ll make you happy.”

Isak snorts at the words, then laughs bitterly. “Yeah, that’s not a thing,” he tells Even, and Even furrows his brows.

“That is a thing.”

“No, it’s not,” Isak counters. “It’s not a science, so I don’t take it as fact. Simple as that.”

Even stares at Isak for a moment, almost like he doesn’t understand Isak at all, which is the first thing Even’s ever gotten right about Isak – he doesn’t know Isak, doesn’t know that faith and trust have led him to nothing but disappointment, and he’s smarter than that now. He’s stronger because of it.

“But, yeah,” Isak clears his throat, swerving his train of thought before he gets depressed-drunk. “Sorry you were an idiot who thought you could trust anyone with your love.”

“Seriously?” Even watches as Isak shrugs his shoulders, unmoved. “Why do you always find a way to insult me?” He asks. “I can’t imagine what I did so wrong that you hate me like this.”

“I don’t hate you,” Isak automatically replies, because that’s his usual defense when his friends bring up the same argument. “I just think you’re really pretentious and very impractical.”

Even snorts. “Well, you know, if that’s what you think,” Even nods. “The good news is that at least I’m not an uptight nerd who thinks he’s better than everyone in the room just because he knows a thing or two anyone can learn from a book.”
Isak glares at him, finishing the rest of his beer before he replies, “Stick to your art, Even. Insults certainly don’t seem to come naturally to you.”

Even stares him down for a moment, which makes Isak have to fight back a squirm, and then he finally turns back to look forward and he downs his beer – that must be filled more than halfway, Jesus – in less than five seconds. Isak thinks that can’t be healthy at all, and then Even’s reaching for another one, like the first one didn’t do anything for him.

He glances at Isak, and there’s a hint of smugness to his expression, and, oh, fuck him if he thinks he’s challenging Isak, because he’s not a child, and he’s not going to rise to the bait and risk a week-long hangover just to prove to Even that he can keep up with his alcohol intake, and that he can finish all of his beers and still be less drunk than him.

And then Even downs his next beer can, and Isak is suddenly a petulant high schooler again and reaching for another one of his own, popping it open and glaring straight at the side of Even’s face as he starts downs his own.

So it turns into this stupid, silent competition between the two of them, to see which one of them can drink the most without falling over, Isak guesses, and by the time they’re both on their last respective beer cans, they’ve moved close enough to each other for it to be a little uncomfortable, and Isak is flushed and dizzy and he doesn’t really think he can feel his hands?

He looks down at them and realize he’s still holding on to his last can, and notices Even’s holding on to his last one, too, and neither of them have exactly finished it, but Isak thinks it’s because they both might not have the coordination to try at this point.

Isak swallows and raises his gaze to meet Even’s glazed over one, and wow, Isak didn’t realize they were both standing this close together, and he thinks maybe he should take a step back?

He doesn’t, though, instead places his beer can next to them on the counter, offering to call this a draw. Even doesn’t drink the rest of his beer, but he also doesn’t put it down, and instead he tilts his head and his eyes flicker down to Isak’s lips.

“You know,” he says, and he’s not as loud anymore, considering they’re close enough to hear each other at a normal volume, but his words are definitely slurred, they definitely are. “If you hadn’t been such an asshole the first night we met, I probably would have taken you home and fucked you.”

Isak chalks the shiver down his spine to his alcoholic intake. “No wonder you were okay with Picasso being a fucking adulterer,” he counters, and his words are also very slurred, and his mind is a little hazy.

Even rolls his eyes. “See, I judge artists by their merits, not their fucking personal lives.”

Isak would like to strike this opinion from the record, because it is a stupid opinion. “So you were willing to cheat on your girlfriend to fuck me?” Isak snorts. “Yeah, I wonder why she dumped you.”

Even’s eyebrows rise, not looking offended at all. “What? You wouldn’t have fucked me anyway?”

And, well, Isak is really, really drunk, and he wants to say no, but also, he kind of wants to say yes, so he battles internally with both of these options until finally, “Yes, I probably would have,” is the argument that wins, and well, it’s out there now.

It’s something they’ve never talked about. Or, well, it’s something Isak never allowed himself to bring up around Even, not even once – he’s never allowed himself a lingering glance, never allowed himself to even look at his back, lest someone figured out his attraction to Even. He was never sure if
Even felt the same way, and he never cared, because it wouldn’t have changed anything, anyway. Even’s still a pretentious asshole, and Isak can forget about how attractive Even is with only this fact to sustain his position.

So it’s pretty stupid that Isak keeps talking, really, well against his point. “But, truth be told, it probably wouldn’t have happened, anyway, because—” Isak pauses to gather his thoughts. “Because I don’t fuck people that often anymore, so it’s been a while, so, like, I think I’d suck at it since, you know, I’m trying to focus on myself.”

Even’s expression turns amused, and damn it, whenever his expression isn’t resentful or angry or bitter it turns a thousand times more attractive, so, fuck him, honestly. “You don’t just forget how to have sex, Isak.”

“No,” Isak snaps defensively. “But, like. You can forget how to be good at it.”

Honestly, that’s too much information, Isak. You’re making yourself look stupid and insecure and this is why he hates drinking, oh my God, it manages to blur the line between his façade and his truth, and that’s so fucking dangerous.

But he immediately stops thinking about that the second Even steps closer to Isak, looks down at him and smirks, like he’s seeing Isak for the first time. Isak wants to swallow nervously, but he thinks his mouth’s gone completely dry.

“You haven’t thought about finding out?” Even mutters, and his eyes flicker to his lips. Something in his gaze darkens, and his tongue darts to lick his own lips. Isak follows the movement, annoyingly mesmerized.

And then Even doesn’t do anything, the fucker, and Isak realizes this is another challenge, and Even wants to see Isak back out of this first and then laugh in his face, prove that Isak is the one not strong enough to cross the line, and, you know, fuck Even; Isak can hold his liquor more than he can and he is not fucking better than Isak just because he thinks being cultured is more important than being practical, and, listen, if he thinks Isak won’t make out with him right here and now, he has another thing coming for him, buddy.

So that’s absolutely the only reason Isak fists his hand around Even’s shirt and pulls him down to press his lips aggressively to Isak’s, and it’s immediately hungry, and fuck, suddenly the desire Isak had done such a good job at burying deep in his subconscious to never see the light of day bubbles to the surface and sets him on fire, forces his hands to find Even’s hair and grip at it almost aggressively, bringing him as close as he’s physically allowed, kiss all tongue and teeth.

Even drops the beer can he’d been holding on the floor and wraps his hands around Isak to pull him closer, pressing him against his chest, but not before the beer bounces off the floor and spills unceremoniously all over Isak’s shoes and some of Isak’s jeans.

They’re so close together now that it’s hard to pull away, but Isak manages after grunting against Even’s lips, and he glares at him in contempt. “You just got my jeans all wet, asshole,” Isak says, managing to take a step back and collect himself, though his heart is racing against his chest and just about every other part on him refuses to be put the fuck out.

Even doesn’t seem too bothered by the fact, though. Instead, he smirks, wrapping a finger around one of Isak’s belt loops and tugging it forward, pulling Isak closer to him in the process. “Well, then I think we better get you out of them, hm?”

Isak’s heart jumps traitorously at the implication, and really, he’s totally blaming the alcohol for the
way his dick jumps in interest at the words – he’s drunk enough to want this, so fucking badly, especially when his eyes refuse to part from Even’s swollen lips, but he’s also not drunk enough so that he can’t refuse, so he has a choice here. He does. And he’s going to make the right one, just watch him.

“Then why aren’t you taking me upstairs already?”

Damn it, shit, fuck, why is he like this?

Oh, but Even’s smile is positively sinful around those lips, and they felt so fucking soft against his own and even when Even tasted of the same alcohol Isak is sure he tasted of, too, it was as pleasurable as charting constellations in his free time.

Which is a comparison this particular asshole does not deserve, but it already happened, and his drunk self is an idiot who leans up for another kiss, but this is more of an open-mouthed brush of lips, tongue darting experimentally against Even’s bottom lip.

Even groans, and the sound makes Isak dig his fingernails into the back of his neck, which makes Even’s breath hitch in surprise and then suddenly he’s pushing Isak away and grabbing at his wrist, tugging him out of the kitchen.

Isak’s not really worried right now about who can see them pushing past people and up the stairs, clearly with intent, but he’s pretty sure tomorrow he’s going to be freaking out about whether or not any of their friends had seen, because then they’ll start assuming, which is bad, because, like, Isak just really wants to fuck Even. A lot. He doesn’t really want anything beyond that, and, to be honest, he probably won’t ever want to see his face again after this night, and he makes sure to tuck that piece of advice away for sober him to pick up when he wakes up tomorrow, because Isak is pretty sure this is something he’s going to forget about for at least a day.

The temptation to do it again will probably have a lot to do with how good it is, so he’s willing himself to be strong and do this quickly, and this is what he’s repeating over and over in his head when Even slams open his door, interrupting a couple already making out in his bed.

Even lets go of Isak’s wrist and scowls at the pair, snapping his fingers right in front of their faces. “Out,” he demands, and though the couple looks peeved, they comply, walking out of the room together. Even follows them as they do and closes the door behind them, and suddenly Isak is hyperaware of everything right now – the emptiness of the room, the size of the bed, his uneven breaths, the way Even’s hair is tousled and the way Isak’s half-hard in his jeans, which are now uncomfortable and he’s pretty sure they smell like beer, but then Even meets his gaze and Isak’s not really thinking about anything else anymore because he’s just remembering what a fucking good kisser Even is, and Isak doesn’t know who moves first, all he knows is they meet somewhere in the middle and their lips are suddenly biting and pulling at each other, and then Even presses his hands behind both of Isak’s thighs and he’s hauling him upwards to wrap his legs around Even’s waist.

Even carries him to the bed, and Isak refuses to let their lips part at any point, so Even’s attempt to drop Isak’s back on it is clumsy, at best, but they still manage to pull it off without once letting their lips break apart.

That’s the thing, too – Isak thinks he can get off just from kissing Even, Jesus, and, to be fair, that’s probably due to the alcohol in his system, but it doesn’t sound like the worst thing in the world, either.

Even seems to have other plans, though, if the fact that he’s tugging Isak’s jeans down all of a sudden is any indication, and Isak arches his back to make it easier for him; Even’s lips start trailing
kisses down Isak’s jaw and to his neck and Isak gasps at the sensation, slipping his hands under
Even’s shirt and digging his fingernails into his hips, in what embarrassingly feels like desperation, then he starts unbuttoning Even’s jeans and pulling them down as far as they can go, and when he can’t reach with his hands anymore he continues pulling them down with his feet, palming Even over his boxers briefs.

Even groans against the skin of Isak’s collarbone, and things progress pretty quickly after that – somehow, they rid themselves of their shirts and their shoes and the rest of the clothes getting in the way, Isak’s glasses end up thrown somewhere on the bed, he doesn’t know, because all Isak can really pay attention to now is Even, and his mouth, his hands, the way his breath exhales in stutters, the way their thighs chafe sweatily together as they move against each other, the startling shiver running up Isak’s spine when Even’s hand finds its way between them, and, yeah, okay, okay—

Isak had definitely forgotten how much he enjoyed sex. Like, really forgot, and all they’re really doing so far is moving against each other, Even’s hand wrapped around the both of them, Isak throwing his head back and gasping his moans.

It’s not difficult after that. In one instance, when Isak feels his toes clench and his body tense in preparation, Even abruptly stops and leans away from Isak, extending an arm towards the top drawer of his end table.

“What are you doing?” Isak snaps impatiently, irritated at the pause. “Could you fucking hurry up?”

Even pulls out condoms and lube, in that order, and Isak’s stomach jumps at the sight.

“Could you maybe fucking chill?” Even counters, and Isak can tell he’s just as impatient, and he’s also got to admire the fact that he remembers to practice safe sex, something that Isak’s brain really wasn’t thinking about a second ago. He just kind of wanted to get off, like, immediately.

He doesn’t really think after that. It’s a blur of pleasure and moans and gasps and pleads, Even’s name leaving Isak’s lips over and over and over again, Even moaning Isak’s name into his mouth, Isak’s hands pinned to the mattress and the both of them clumsily moving against each other, Isak thrusting upwards to meet every single one of Even’s movements and eventually, when Isak finishes, he’s not sure why it’s so fucking ethereal, the sensation – can’t tell if it’s because he hasn’t fucked someone in so long, or if it’s because he’s drunk, or if it’s seriously just because he’s never had sex as good as he just had with Even, but whatever it is, whatever the reason, Isak feels it up his spine, down his toes, clench at his thighs and the sensation just triples when Even finishes a second afterwards, a sight that Isak takes in in amazement, and when it’s all said and done, Even leans forward to press his forehead against Isak’s, sweat mingling disgustingly with one another, both of them attempting to catch their breaths.

They stay like this for a moment, Isak refusing to look Even in the eye, and when another second or two passes by, Even finally manages to roll off Isak after a couple of practiced movements, leaving the two of them lying on their backs on the bed, side by side, plenty fucked and completely naked.

Isak should ask Even where he can clean himself up and get the fuck out. He’s pretty sure the door across the bed is a door to a private bathroom, and it seems so, so simple to get up, get rid of the condom on his dick, clean himself up, get dressed to go home and then never, ever think about this again.

It was furious, the sex, and maybe that’s why it was so good, because Isak and Even have so much pent up anger and resentment and it was easy to channel it all into this night, Isak overworked and annoyed and Even heartbroken and on the rebound. Which is all this is, really – a hazy way of relieving their tension, their frustrations, and as much fun as it was, Isak’s ready to forget about it, as
he’s sure Even is.

“You should probably go,” Even finally pipes up, and oh, thank God, Isak doesn’t have to get up in awkward silence and slip away without a goodbye.

“I should,” he agrees, and Isak means to, he does, but he’s literally tied to the comfortable mattress right now, and he’s exhausted and sweaty and his hips hurt, so he closes his eyes instead and tries to steady his breaths. “In a second.”

Even grunts in acknowledgment of the statement, and Isak focuses his hearing on the steady bass of the music coming from downstairs, trying to keep himself from drifting off. After a minute, he feels Even shift beside him on the bed, and when Isak opens his eyes to turn and look at him, he sees Even’s found his way under the duvet and has turned his back to Isak, hands tucked under his cheek.

“Er,” Isak says intelligently. Even grunts again.

“Do whatever you want, Isak,” his voice is muffled, which leads Isak to believe he’s digging his face into the mattress. “But I’m going to sleep.”

Isak rolls his eyes, and when he attempts to sit up, he remembers how drunk he actually is when the room starts spinning – thinking better of it, he lays back down on the mattress, exhaling shakily. No, he’s going to stay here a while. Though he was sure that climax would have sobered him up some, it seems that it didn’t sober him up enough to walk in a straight line, probably, so he’s just gonna—

He closes his eyes, just so he can find his balance, but he’s not going to stay. He’s going to get dressed and wake up in his own bed, event forgotten and never thought about again. He’s going to shower in the morning, ignore the soreness that is sure to accompany his back and his hips, and then he’s going to go back to disliking Even and his pretentious (very attractive) ass. That’s how it’s going to happen. Isak refuses to let this ruin his fucking week, and he refuses to let it shift the balance in his life, make him rethink his entire purpose.

It was just sex, a voice inside Isak’s head whispers to him. It was just sex. And, yes, that’s exactly what it was, meaningless sex, good for one go and then useless the next. It was good, but it was over, and just because Even impressively knew exactly what he was doing for someone dating a woman for over five years, it doesn’t make him any less of an asshole.

Isak feels his face heat, and then he feels warm all over – like, physically warm, because part of the duvet has been thrown over him, he realizes when he opens his eyes, and he looks over to see Even turning around to give his back to Isak once again, as if he’d made Isak’s decision for him.

He scowls, and has half a mind to slap Even in the head and march out of here naked, but then he’s really, really comfortable under the duvet now and the pillow hugging his head is very, very soft and the haze of his drunkenness is finally catching up to him, so he turns on his side, the very same way Jonas has taught him to sleep when he’s this drunk, giving his back to Even’s own, and closes his eyes.

He’ll wake up early, he decides. He’ll sneak out of here before he can even realize what happened tonight.

It’s never been this easy for sleep to take him under. He chalks it up to the exhaustion, and is unable to think too hard on it, anyway, because before he knows it, bursts of colors are overtaking the darkness behind his shut eyes, and then he’s dreaming about everything and nothing at all.
follow me on tumblr!
Isaac Newton

Chapter Notes

i really am sorry these chapters are so long, it's really a world-building problem, please love me.

a huge thanks again to my love ez for looking over this on her time off when she really didn't have to. i love her to the moon and back, no questions asked. i'll literally never leave you alone now you're seriously stuck w me!!!! too bad!!!!!

(warning for a small ableist comment.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Isak feels is the pounding of his head.

Then the second is definitely the dryness of his mouth. His tongue feels like sandpaper against his teeth, and he tries but fails to find enough saliva to rectify the situation taking place in there. Isak shifts slightly, enough to hug his duvet closer to himself, eyes shut tight in an attempt to ease the throbbing pain in his head.

He’s going to kill the boys. Like, for real this time. Even after they’d promised not to get him as drunk as he obviously got last night for the purpose of avoiding this exact situation, they still managed to fuck him over. To be fair, Isak was probably dumb enough to let them, because he can’t be trusted after maybe one more beer past what Isak considers his “ideal buzz”. Drunk him has no sense of self-awareness, nor does he seem to care about sober him’s responsibilities for the rest of the week, and he really hates that guy, honestly—

Isak scowls, train of thought cut short by the realization that there is too much light shining through, even with his eyelids screwed shut, which makes no sense, considering Isak very much enjoys shutting his blinds and his very dark curtains before he goes to bed on weekends so this exact scenario doesn’t happen. So not only is drunk him an asshole, but he’s also an inconsiderate asshole.

He has no choice but to let his eyes flutter open and let the sun blind them – Isak squints against the brightness of the light, holding up a hand to try and lessen the impact, but ultimately the attempt is moot – the damage is done, now his head hurts even more and the sun’s had the last laugh.

It’s only after a couple of more seconds that he realizes that’s not his window – the curtains are a moss-green color, opened gleefully to allow the sunlight to shine through, and there are no blinds, either, which only a monster would think of completely foregoing, and it’s much bigger than Isak’s window at home; there’s that, the fact that it’s in the wrong place, the fact the room is white and not blue—

Isak realizes he’s in someone else’s room, someone he’s probably never met before sober, considering he doesn’t recognize this room, and his eyes screw shut again, trying not to groan at his stupidity.

So this might not have been the boys’ fault. Isak kind of knows this because they’ve never really let him go home with anyone while drunk – they’d always told each other if they wanted to hook up
with someone, they were free to do it while at the party, but going home with someone was serious business, and risky as fuck, so if they were the ones getting him drunk last night, they’d either completely forgotten their vow to protect each other from going home with a stranger or Isak hadn’t listened to them at all.

He’s thinking it’s neither, though. Isak’s thinking his memory’s blanking because this might have been his own fault, so, hey, his memory’s definitely got some explaining to do. Preferably soon, if it doesn’t mind.

Isak takes a deep breath and can only hope the person next to him isn’t a psycho – or, worse, a guy in a man-bun, which Isak’s been proven to be attracted to while drunk, even though he absolutely realizes he’s completely out of his wits when he does and would never look at them twice sober. Otherwise, Isak thinks, it cannot be as bad as he thinks. It could always be worse, it could always be worse.

He carefully turns around and peers through one eye at the lying figure beside him, and then he has to open both of his eyes, because it’s kind of hard to make him out with just one of his eyes, and also, the figure is covered mostly by the duvet, so it’s also kind of hard to make him out altogether. Frustrated, Isak leans over as quietly and as tactfully as he can without waking the stranger up, just in case Isak’s going to have to sneak out of here—

Isak’s eyes catch sight of a hint of blonde hair, tousled and sweaty, which means he didn’t sleep with someone with a man-bun, at least, but then he leans forward just a tad more in order to get a better look at the man sleeping next to him, but he’s too ambitious; he leans a little too much and is suddenly tumbling over the man, which makes the other figure flail comically and push Isak off of him unceremoniously.

Isak lands with his back on the mattress and the hair he’d caught a glimpse of a second ago is suddenly attached to a very familiar face, currently sitting up and glaring at him intensely.

And oh, God. Oh, no.

This is so much worse than a man-bun.

“What the hell, Isak?” Even Bech Næsheim is glaring back at him, presumably just as naked as Isak is under the rest of that duvet, and seriously, seriously, drunk him has been an asshole before, inconsiderate, sometimes impulsive, but he’s never, ever been a fucking traitor. Drunk him can apparently only think with his dick, and not his common sense, and fuck, fuck, now Even probably thinks he merits feeling like he’s better than everyone else; or, at the very least, better than Isak. Nice going, drunk Isak. You’ve officially lost all of sober Isak’s trust in you.

He sits up as quickly as he can, which turns out to be a mistake – his hips are ridiculously sore, as are his legs and his back, and he hisses at the discomfort that runs up his spine at the sensation. Isak’s head is spinning, both because he’s still very much hungover and because he’s realizing very quickly that he consorted with the enemy last night, which, if any of the war movies Isak’s ever watched have taught him anything, is catastrophic. Like, sex with Even will probably lead to the downfall of the nation now.

“Anyone but you,” he groans, rubbing at his face miserably. “Literally. Anyone but you.”

He hears Even snort beside him, but he sounds more amused than surprised. This causes Isak to turn over to look at him again, glaring. Even’s considering Isak almost like he’s waiting for him to blow up, but when Isak doesn’t give him the satisfaction, his shoulders seem to relax by a fraction.
“Can you keep it down a little?” Even’s eyebrows rise, and his voice is far too soft and calm for someone who just slept with the guy he avoids at every fucking turn. “My head hurts, and my ass is sore, and I’d really like to go back to bed now. If you’d like to freak out, be my guest,” he gestures towards the door across the room. “There’s the bathroom. Yell at yourself in the mirror. Anything that will make you feel better. Make yourself some eggs downstairs. Hell, if you’d like to tell me off, feel free to shoot me a text. But please — *please* keep your voice down,” Even stares at him. “For both our benefits.” Even finishes with this, settles his back on the mattress once again, then turns over to give his back to Isak and wraps the duvet tightly around himself again.

Isak is staring at him, gaping, like the asshole he is, and suddenly he’s extremely irritated at the fact that Even’s not as affected by this as Isak is, so he does the only thing he can do in the state he’s currently in – he reaches over to yank the duvet completely off of Even, exposing his naked ass and, oh, okay, that was probably not the best idea.

Even squawks indignantly and scrambles to sit up again. “It’s *cold,*” he protests, and Isak gives him a disbelieving look.

“Well I wasn’t doing it to make you *comfortable,*” Isak snaps. Even rubs at the bridge of his nose, obviously feeling the same headache pounding away at Isak right now, which, good, he *deserves* it. He rolls his eyes as far back as they can go and throws the duvet off of himself, too, scurries out of the bed to hunt for his clothes. They don’t seem to be in any particular spot, which makes no sense to Isak, because he really doesn’t think they could have been doing this all over the *room,* right?

He’s picking up his jeans when Even pipes up. “If you remember as much about last night than I do,” he says, and Isak finds his boxers near his jeans, too. “Then I think we should try it again, just to see if it was good or not.”

Isak stops abruptly with both his jeans and his boxers in his hands and gapes uselessly at Even. He hates the fact that he has to fight a blush at all, because Even should not be having this effect on Isak, not when he’s sober, at least, but he’s suddenly very aware of his nakedness and of *Even’s* nakedness and the fact that they’re trying to have a conversation within their nakedness, together.

“Absolutely fucking not,” he snaps in reply, stepping one foot into his boxers and then another, pulling them up. “This?” He gestures between himself and Even. “This is never happening again. We were drunk out of our right minds and it was a mistake, alright?” Isak starts stepping into his jeans. “In fact, I’m already forgetting this. I’m erasing you from my mind. Your dick?” Isak zips up his jeans and buttons them. “It’s like one of those erasers. The ones that read ‘for big mistakes’. That’s how quickly I’m erasing this from my memory.”

Even seems to bypass the entirety of Isak’s point, though, choosing instead to smirk. “You think my dick is big, Isak?”

Isak grunts in frustration and doesn’t humor him with an answer, instead storms across the room where he’s spotted his shirt and picks it up to throw it back on, then finds his hoodie a couple of steps beside it, throwing that on, too.

He’s trying to figure out what else he’s forgetting, because he feels he’s forgetting *something* – he pats at the zipped pocket of his hoodie and feels his phone, so it’s not *that,* and it’s only when he realizes he’s straining his eyes looking around the room that he realizes he’s missing his glasses, which only serves to fill his stomach with even more dread, because he doesn’t think those will be as easy to find as the rest of his clothes.

Isak’s about to call it a day and just throw on his shoes – he can pay for another pair of glasses, it’s fine, he’ll just have to make some financial adjustments, cut down on the fast food this month,
negotiate with Ram about making biweekly payments instead, it won’t kill him – when Even clears his throat. Isak turns to look at him in irritation, but then realizes Even’s hand is extended towards Isak, holding his glasses in it.

Isak’s jaw twitches as he makes way towards the bed again and he quickly swipes his glasses out of Even’s hand, then points them at Even threateningly. “Not a word of this to anyone else, okay?” He warns. “Mistake. Probably sloppy and quick, if I know anything about the kind of person you are.”

Even’s brows furrow and his expression sober. “Right,” his voice is a little tight, and it’s so annoying that it makes Isak feel bad, as if he has anything to feel bad about. “I forgot how well you know me.”

Isak stares at him for a beat longer, then throws his hands up in defeat. “What do you want from me, Even? You want me to hold your hand and start singing Kumbaya with you? It was sex. Drunk sex. It was – I don’t – you know as well as I do that it shouldn’t have happened.” Isak pauses. “You know that, right?”

Even gives Isak a look. “Does that really matter?” He asks. “It already did. Why are you stuck on whether or not it should have?”

Grunting, Isak puts his glasses back on, in order to really see just how much of an idiot Even’s being. “Because it shouldn’t have,” he counters. “You wanting to do it again? That’s your head talking. And not—” Isak holds up a finger towards Even, who looks like he’s about to interrupt with a snarky remark. “Not the head between your legs, Even, the right one. It’s just the remnants of oxytocin and dopamine your body released last night. A biochemical high, if you will. It goes away, alright? By tonight you won’t ever want to look at me again, and we’ll go back to avoiding each other whenever possible. I promise.”

Even raises an eyebrow. “Oh, you promise?”

“I know my shit,” Isak huffs indignantly.

Even’s smile is amused, and damn it all to hell, Isak really, really hates when he looks like that, because then he remembers just how fucking attractive he really is—

This sparks a momentary flash of consciousness regarding last night, where Even smiled at him just about the same way he’s smiling at Isak right now and Isak’s train of thought was pretty much the same one it is now.

So, well, maybe sober him and drunk him have some things in common. Big whoop. At least sober him can keep it in his fucking pants.

“And what should I do if I still want to do it again by tonight?” Even asks him, eyes gleaming with what is obviously mischief. Ugh, Even’s trying to tease him, rile him up, and that’s so annoying, because Isak just wants to go home and throw up in the comfort of his own bathroom, not witness Even act like a fucking human so Isak can feel bad the next time he snaps at him. “Should I give you a call?”

Isak makes a noise. “Then that’s your problem,” he walks towards the door, where his shoes are lying beside it. “I’m going to be busy forgetting about this.” He quickly digs his feet inside his shoes, left one first, then the right one, before he turns back to Even, who’s running a hand through his hair and Isak’s stomach swirls when he suddenly remembers how soft Even’s hair felt under his fingers. He balls his hands into fists, because, no.
Even laughs, and the sounds is far too soft to irritate Isak the way he wants it to, which, really, serves to irritate him even more. “I’ll text you if I remember anything.”

Isak scrunches his nose. “Ugh, please don’t.” He turns around and aggressively opens the door of Even’s room the marches right on out of there, slamming it shut for good measure. He does it so it can hurt Even’s head, but then it backfires, as it presumably hurts Isak’s head a little more, considering he’s closer to the damage, so he hisses and stays where he is for a moment before collecting himself enough to walk down the stairs.

He makes it to the last step and he’s about to walk past the kitchen free when he hears a familiar voice calling to him from inside it. Isak’s eyes close in disdain.

“Heeeeey,” Isak prolongs, grabbing on to the railing as tightly as he can. “Hi, Yousef, good morning.”

“Good morning,” Yousef offers him a smile, nice guy that he is, but his expression still looks a little perplexed at the sight of Isak. “Did you spend the night?”

Isak’s quick thinking is usually on point, but at the moment, the process is kind of stunted by the soreness of his lower body and also his back and also the pounding of his head and also the bile threatening to rise from his stomach to his throat. So he pulls this one out of his ass, and replies, “Yeah, totally. I – uhm, I got really drunk and I think I fell asleep in the guest bathroom’s tub.”

Yousef’s brows furrow. “Really?” He asks, and Isak nods lamely. “I swear I didn’t see you there when everyone left.”

Yeah, Isak’s sure he didn’t. “Hah,” he laughs weakly. “Maybe I migrated there after I’d already passed out?”

Yousef still looks a little confused, but because Yousef obviously loves Isak, he doesn’t push it. “Yeah, maybe,” he concedes, shrugging his shoulders for good measure. Isak’s breath leaves him slowly in relief, which Yousef seems to purposely ignore. “Hey, you wanna stay for breakfast?” He asks. “Even makes a mean hangover breakfast.”

Isak tries his best not to look scandalized. “Th—thanks, but I think I’m gonna pass on that.”

Yousef’s expression turns understanding. “Oh, yeah,” he replies, sounding defeated. “That was probably a stupid offer, huh?”

“No!” Isak assures him loudly, and wow, that was a stupid idea. “No,” he lowers his voice for his own sake. “No, I just – I really have to go, you know, Eva needs me at home, and you know how she can be when she needs something.”

Yousef considers him for a moment, then finally offers Isak a sympathetic smile. “I hope she’s feeling okay,” he tells him. “I’m sure she’s recovering from last night same as you are.”

Isak frowns. “Do I – do I look like I was drunk last night?”

Yousef’s eyebrows rise, and his smile turns into a smirk. “Among other things.”

Oh, Isak’s gotta get out of here before Yousef puts two and two together, like, immediately. “Well,” he clears his throat loudly. “I’m gonna go now. Thanks for the breakfast offer. Next time?”
Yousef tilts his head. “Next time you spend the night, you mean?”

And, no, that’s not happening, so Isak laughs as if Yousef’s just told him the funniest joke he’s ever heard in his entire life. “What? No, dude, like, next time as in, I’ll take you up on your next offer, obviously,” he corrects him lamely, running a nervous hand through his extremely dry hair.

Yousef laughs and pats Isak on the shoulder reassuringly. “I’m messing with you, Isak,” he promises, and Isak’s shoulders relax a bit at the words. “Seriously. You should come over more often. I know it’s not your favorite place to be, but Elias and I like your company, you know.”

Isak seriously needs to get out of here before he gives away the fact that he just had sex with their roommate last night – the one Isak has sworn up and down he does not like multiple times within the past year, the one he has promised he cannot stand being around, the one he’s avoided this house altogether because – and breaks down the dangerous walls that have kept him upright for such a long time.

So he just smiles tightly. “Yeah, sure,” he says, though the words sound lame, even to his own ears. Yousef’s answering smile is a little rueful. “I’ll try, okay?”

Yousef nods. “That’s all I can ask for, really.” He smiles again, and Isak feels so bad. “See you later?”

Isak nods, unable to summon any more words without the danger of throwing up all over Yousef’s shoes. When Yousef finally moves out of his way, Isak makes a desperate beeline for the door, hoping the nausea will disappear before the gets to the tram, lest he finds himself throwing up in there and getting kicked the fuck out.

The brightness of the sun still hurts his eyes, so it takes a moment for his vision to adjust before he allows himself a couple of more steps, making his way past the littered lawn and onto the sidewalk. His phone vibrates in his hoodie’s pocket as he walks towards the end of the street, and he unzips it and fishes the phone out, holding it up close to his face, realizing the brightness has been dimmed almost completely.

The incoming text is from Even. The nausea in Isak’s stomach takes a couple of more laps.

**EVEN**
so just to be clear

**EVEN**
round two’s completely out of the question?!

Isak scowls. He wants to reply so many things, a lot of them with expletives, as it were, but all he manages to do is stop in his tracks long enough to find the appropriate emoji to reply with.

**ISAK**
[middle finger emoji]

He’s about to lock his phone again, when Even’s reply immediately appears in the chat.

**EVEN**
[eggplant emoji]

Isak turns back to look at Even’s house and glares pointedly at the top right window, even though he’s pretty sure that’s not Even’s. He hopes he can convey just how fucking angry Even makes him,
thinking he can just have fun with what was obviously a monumental mistake on both of their parts, but more than that, Isak is angry that Even’s able to have this effect on him when this entire year has been about him working towards being unaffected by Even at all, and drunk him has literally managed to take ten steps back on this endeavor, leaving him instead with scattered memories of what might have or might not have been good sex, Isak doesn’t know, but the worst part about it is the he knows eventually he’s going to find out, because if his memory’s working towards remembrance already, then logically he knows the rest of last night isn’t too far behind, and suddenly he’s so anxious he feels like – he feels like—

He bends over, and promptly pukes all over the sidewalk.

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The tram ride back to his apartment is a little uncomfortable. Mostly because he’s aware that he smells of alcohol and bile, and people are giving him so many judgmental looks, it’s not even funny. And Isak accepts them all in kind, because yes. Yes, he deserves them. He’s a mess of epic proportions, and he deserves to be shamed by the strangers on the tram right now. Not necessarily for the reasons they are shaming him for – what, they’ve never gotten a little too drunk on a Friday night? – but for the reason Isak feels most shameful of: fucking Even Bech Næsheim, the last person on earth who probably deserves his dick.

Isak presses his forehead against the cold window and shuts his eyes. He’s really, really trying to hold back two very prominent things: one, the bile threatening to rise up his throat once again, and two, the memories that are trying to make their way to the forefront, reminding him just how, exactly, he ended up in bed with Even, and to let him know that it might not have been as bad as he’d hoped it was. That it was, in fact, maybe even phenomenal, which is just really, really unfair, because it shouldn’t have been that good with Even, of all people, it should have been immediately terrible and instantly foregone.

Isak is trying to convince himself it was probably only good because he hadn’t gotten laid in a while – really, it’d been a long, long time since last night, which is also probably why he’s so sore, since he hasn’t really worked out much since then, either, so he’s kind of—

He screws his eyes shut. No, he’s going to stop thinking about it. The more he thinks about it, the more it might start making sense, and that’s not a route he wants to go down. Isak’s just going to pretend he’s sore because he ran a couple of laps around the park or something, and that he’s sick to his stomach because he ate some bad shrimp or something instead of because he got so wasted last night he had sex with the one person he genuinely thought he’d never even touch, the one person he thought he’d be able to spend the rest of his life without thinking about, without remembering, at that.

Now a voice inside Isak’s head is taunting him about how it’s gonna be pretty hard to forget the spectacular sex he had with this person for a while, at the very least, and Isak’s very angry at it.

The tram pulls over at his stop and he dejectedly makes his way across the aisle, ignoring the scrunched noses and affronted scowls that follow him. He steps off the tram, being the only one stopping here, he figures, and the doors close behind him in haste and then the tram is off, leaving him helpless and nauseous at the stop.

Oh, God. Isak can’t even tell what’s the hangover and what’s the regret anymore.

(If he’s being honest, he’s pretty sure all of this is the hangover. Once he feels better, Isak thinks he’ll feel more angry at himself than regretful, which is maybe why Even was so eager for a repeat earlier.)
The walk to his apartment feels like one of shame, probably because it is, and Isak avoids eye contact with any passerby awkwardly, willing himself invisible for the time being, just until he gets to his apartment. With any luck, Eva’ll still be sleeping her own hangover off, and they’ll be able to skip the questions – since it’s been a very, very long time Isak’s gotten so drunk he hasn’t come back home to sleep it off, and Eva will most likely certainly notice. Maybe when she’s not hungover anymore. Hopefully, Isak thinks, she’ll have been far too drunk to realize that Isak hadn’t come home with her, not earlier or later.

He walks up the stairs to his apartment when he finally reaches the building and fishes for his keys in his other pocket, forgetting for a moment about the standing rivalry between him and the door knob. Isak glares at it, tries to will it with his mind to not be a fucking dick this time, since he’s so, so tired and sore and he just wants to shower and sleep this entire fucking day off. Isak’s never been happier to have the weekend off – even if he highly doubts he’ll be working on the paper he promised Eskild he’d be working on all weekend.

Cautiously, he approaches the door and inserts the key into the knob, and for a second Isak thinks it’s going to be easy – and then it’s not, because of course it’s not, and he’s struggling with the door until it finally opens, and then he spends what feels like hours (but is most certainly a minute) fighting with the knob for his key.

Eventually, he manages to pull it out, and this time, when his back hits the wall, it’s even worse than before – it’s already sore, and the impact doesn’t help the situation any, so he hisses at the pain running up his spine and shattering his spirits a little more, because why not, right? It’s not like Isak needs anything positive to happen to him today. He can live with a shitty day. He’s had worse, he tells himself as he closes the door behind him. Oh, he’s had worse.

The thing about accepting a shitty day, however, is that you don’t really fully accept it – this is best emphasized by the loud, unforgiving noise that settles in Isak’s ears when he takes one more step into his apartment, and his head is suddenly ready to explode all over again; he realizes it’s a voice, and it’s coming from the kitchen, and it only takes him another second to realize the voice belongs to fucking Vilde, who’s probably supposed to be just as hungover as Isak, unless she has some kind of fucking superpower she’s forgotten to mention to everyone in their close group of friends; Isak considers for a second simply turning around and walking out the door again, not ready to deal with this bullshit, but then he remembers it’s his apartment, and he can be angry if he wants to, because it’s been a shitty morning and he deserves to be.

So instead of running away, he stomps over to the kitchen and stands at the door frame, glaring daggers at an unsuspecting Vilde, who’s simply babbling on loudly at Eva, who’s sitting on the small two-seat table situated inside for when they’re far too lazy to use the bigger table out near the living room, her elbow on top of it and her chin resting in her hand. She looks as miserable as Isak feels right now, her hair a mess and her eyes half-open, and she also looks like she wishes Vilde would stop talking, except Isak thinks Eva likes her a lot more than Isak does, so she won’t say anything to her, especially not if Vilde was kind enough to bring her home last night.

Isak, on the other hand, has no debts to pay, so he interrupts Vilde with a sharp whistle. Vilde turns from where she’s brewing a pot of coffee, looking at Isak in surprise.

“Oh, hi, Isak,” she greets him. “Did you want some coffee? I’m making some for Eva, she had a rough night.”

Isak holds his hand to his forehead. “No, Vilde,” he replies slowly. “I don’t want some coffee. What I want is for you to stop yapping like you’re carrying around a microphone wherever you go, because my head hurts like a bitch, and I’m trying not to let it explode before I shower this stench
off.”

Vilde’s expression turns from surprise to offended in two point five seconds. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she sniffs. “I wasn’t aware that you were the only one who lived here.”

Isak gapes, then turns to look at a sullen Eva. Isak gestures towards her wildly. “She’s not even paying attention to you, Vilde!” he snaps, and Eva blinks out of her stupor long enough to glare at Isak, obviously peeved at the fact that he’s called her out. “She’s just as hungover as I am!”

“Shh,” Eva shushes him, most likely because he’s being too loud and also because he’s exposing her ass.

Vilde, however, pays no mind to the truth, because she’s delusional and also hates Isak, apparently. “Of course she’s paying attention to me, Isak,” she says. “She’s my best friend, she’ll listen in whatever state she’s in, right, Eva?”

She turns to look at Eva, who looks like she’s been run over by two buses, buried alive, escaped, then shit on, but she nods anyway and offers Vilde a smile. God, Isak thinks, that girl is definitely something else. Isak loves and appreciates Eva, he does, but sometimes Isak has to question her choice of friends. Vilde’s more of an acquaintance to Isak, and that’s because he likes to keep it that way – the closer you get to Vilde, he’s realized, the longer she’s prone to talking to you, and Isak knows he’s an asshole, he’s aware, but he just doesn’t have the patience for her rants or shenanigans. She tends to go on and on and on about subjects that are only important to her, which is probably what makes her such a good wedding planner’s assistant, he guesses, but it definitely doesn’t mean it makes her good company outside of that.

Isak sighs loudly, throws his hands up in defeat, because today is not the day for winning. “Fine, you believe what you’d like,” he concedes, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to – I’m gonna implore you to try and keep it down so I can sleep the stench of alcohol, sweat and vomit off of me.”

Vilde looks like she’s about to reply with something snarky, but then Eva perks up a little from her zombie state and tilts her head, considering Isak for the first time since he walked in. “Did you just get home?” she asks, and Isak stiffens a little. “Did you spend the night at Jonas’s?”

Isak nods dumbly.

“Wow,” Eva’s eyes widen by a fraction. “Were you really that drunk? You haven’t been that drunk in a while,” she tells him thoughtfully, as if Isak isn’t fully aware of the fact. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Eva,” Isak snaps, then immediately regrets it. “Just, uhm, obviously very hungover, and tired, and there are so many questions, I can’t answer them all at once.”

Vilde narrows her eyes. “Are you sure you’re okay, Isak? You look a little—”

“I’m fine, God,” Isak swivels, then walks off to the bathroom, where no one can try and pry about the night he had. “I’m just tired!” He calls out, and then he reaches the bathroom and scrambles inside it quickly, shutting the door behind him in a rush and pressing his back against it, breathing a sigh of relief. The back of his head hits the door and he closes his eyes, trying to calm his racing heart, trying to convince himself he hadn’t been acting suspicious at all, but even the part of him that is often happy to lie to him doesn’t do him any favors this time – he’s acting ridiculous, like a child, which irks at Isak more than it should.

He strips carefully, as to avoid invoking the soreness more, and when he makes it inside the shower,
it’s really, really hard not to remember then—

Listen. He’s pretty sure his Sober Dick doesn’t mean to betray him like this. Isak can probably blame it on his sensory memory – he’s not sure how water would trigger this, mind you, but he’s convincing himself that’s what this is, and he refuses to close his eyes because oh, Isak knows what’s coming if he does – he knows. He’s not going down that road. He’s not even going to look down at his dick, nope. He’s ignoring the existence of the genitalia between his legs. A penis? He doesn’t know her.

Isak’s aware things don’t work that way. But it’s nice to pretend for a while, until it becomes far too irritating to ignore, so he finally looks down at his dick and glares at it. He has half a mind to scold it, and were he a more ridiculous person, that’s probably exactly what he’d be doing now – as it were, Isak likes to think he reserves some dignity, so instead he does what any normal, twenty-one-year-old man would do in the shower.

That in mind, when he steps out of the shower he feels both a little relieved and a little ashamed; one, because he always hates to think he’s jerked off in the same shower Eva uses, and two, because he couldn’t keep his mind off of Even the entire time, and the night before, and the memories that he couldn’t escape every time he closed his eyes and the fact that it felt even better that way. Isak keeps wanting to chalk it up to the fact he thought about before – that it only felt that way because he hadn’t been laid in a while, but the more he thinks about it, the more he wants to blame the fact that they both reserved so much aggression and tension towards each other that it simply made the sex that much better.

Which is annoying, as he keeps remembering that sex doesn’t necessarily always have to be better or worse, not if you find the right ways to pleasure yourself and you’re able to communicate that to your partner, but somehow he still manages to label his sex with Even as one of his better lays, most likely because he seems to really be focusing on both the climax last night and today in the shower.

He’s cleaning his glasses in the sink, towel around his waist, when a sharp knock raps the door. Isak flinches, headache not entirely disappeared, but he doesn’t have the energy to glare through it – so instead he sighs, and calls out, “Yeah?”

“Are you done?” Eva asks, and Isak turns to glance at the shower, which is switched off, then turns back to the door incredulously.

“Yes,” he replies slowly. “I’m just ridding my glasses of reincarnated booze.”

“Okay,” Eva sounds as tired as Isak feels. “Vilde’s gone, so I just really want to get in there and go back to sleep.”

Isak snorts, knowing the feeling. He dries his glasses off with his towel, puts them back on, then makes sure to throw all of the clothes he was too lazy to throw in the hamper when he stripped earlier there now. He turns to the door and pulls it open to find a wrecked Eva, who’s looking like she’s about to fall over. Isak frowns, reaches over to squeeze her shoulder. “You okay?” he asks cautiously. “You sure you won’t fall over in the shower?”

Eva snorts quietly. “I’ve been through worse, Isak,” she pats his arm reassuringly. “I think I can stand upright for a couple of minutes in the shower this time around.”

Isak eyes her suspiciously for a moment, before sighing in defeat. “Alright,” he concedes, and Eva steps aside to let him walk out of the bathroom. “Listen, I may be passed out, but just yell as loud as you can until I wake up if you need anything.”
“I won’t need anything, but okay,” Eva rolls her eyes. “Go to sleep, Isak. We can reconvene in the kitchen when we wake up and I’ll make some greasy food for us.”

Isak sighs loudly. “You’re a hero,” he confesses, and Eva smiles at him.

“Oh, trust me, I know,” she teases, before she turns to walk inside the bathroom and then closes the door behind her quietly. Isak adjusts his glasses and stands there for a moment, gathering his thoughts, before he turns and walks towards his bedroom. When he walks in, he closes the door behind him, and his eyes find Galileo’s fish tank immediately. He groans and walks over to grab the food that rests on top of Isak’s dresser then walks over to the tank, sliding open the top and sprinkling some food into the water.

As Galileo chomps happily at it, Isak says, “I’m so sorry I betrayed you like this.” He finishes sprinkling the appropriate amount of food, then sprinkles some more, just because he feels bad. “I didn’t mean to abandon you last night, but when I’m drunk I apparently have no sense of self-respect, so if you’re going to blame anyone, blame him.”

Galileo, as per usual, does not reply, and does not care, so Isak slides the top of the tank closed and returns the food to its usual spot. After quickly changing himself into some clean boxers and a clean shirt, he immediately faceplants into his pillow, eyes shut and body sore. He exhales sharply, annoyed at everything and everyone but mostly at the situation last night and at himself, and he wills himself to sleep, forget for a moment, let his dreams take the reins for a little while.

It takes him about half an hour of struggling with his conscience and his memories, but sleep finally takes him under, and he dreams of fishes and breathing underwater.

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When he wakes up, the first thing Isak hears is the soft music traveling from what he assumes is the kitchen to his bedroom, not loud enough to be annoying – just enough so he can catch the rhythm, but none of the lyrics.

He sits up and rubs at his eyes, reaching for his phone on the end table – it’s about two o’clock in the afternoon, and he still feels a little sore, but at least his nausea’s left the building for a little while. Isak has no doubt it’ll return some time tomorrow, and his exhaustion will not go away for another couple of days, but that’s the price he has to pay for his stupidity and he’s going to pay, he will, but there’s nothing in his handbook that says he can’t pay it while complaining about it.

Isak allows himself to yawn deeply before walking slowly out of his bedroom, phone still in hand, and dragging his feet into the kitchen. Eva’s standing in front of the stove, looking far better than she did before and definitely far better than Isak even now, and she’s flipping hamburger patties on a pan while singing softly along to a song Isak doesn’t recognize.

“Hey,” he greets her, and Eva looks up to meet his gaze.

She smiles. “Hi,” she greets right back, then gestures to the stove with her free hand. “I’m making burgers,” she points out, and Isak nods his head in agreeance, because he can tell, but he’s also been enough of a dick to her for the day, so he’s not going to snark about it. Instead, he makes his way to the small table, sits on one of the uncomfortable chairs, and rubs at his temples tiredly. “You still feeling like crap?”

Isak grunts. “In a way,” he mutters. “I think the fact that I didn’t suffer from fucking alcohol poisoning is a win, though.”
Eva hums. “I’m sure,” she replies, then her phone goes off with a text notification, and she sets down the spatula she’s been working with to reach for it on the counter. She reads the text and Isak catches a glimpse of her dopy smile, which immediately sets off Isak’s curiosity.

“Who’s that?” he asks, raising an eyebrow. When Eva finishes sending her message, she turns to look innocently at Isak, shrugging her shoulders.

“Just someone,” she replies, turning her attention back to the stove. Isak narrows his eyes at her vagueness – usually, Eva’s more than happy to share information about her conquests with Isak, which makes the fact that she’s being vague even more suspicious.

So he pushes. “Someone like…?”

Eva sighs, turning to meet Isak’s gaze again. “Noora, okay?” she tells him, and Isak’s brows rise in surprise. “I got her number a couple of days ago and we’ve been texting ever since.”

Isak blinks at her. “Noora.” He repeats. “The girl you met at the supermarket. The girl you stalked on Facebook with the serious boyfriend?”

Eva rolls her eyes. “I’m not expecting anything from her, Isak,” she says. “We just got to talking the next time she showed up at my register and it turns out she just moved back from London with her boyfriend and she’s just kind of lonely,” she waves it off. “In need of some friends. So I offered my services, of course, because what kind of bitch would I be if someone said that to me and I didn’t say, well hey, give me your phone number, we can hang out sometime?”

Isak stares at her. “The kind of bitch who’s a normal employee?” He offers. Eva glares at him. “It’s fine,” she insists. “I’m seriously only being her friend.”

Isak watches as she starts serving the patties onto the hamburger buns. “Eva,” he starts warningly. “You realize that there’s a ninety-percent chance that she’s straight if she’s been with her boyfriend for this long?”

“Straight is not the default.”

“I know it shouldn’t be,” Isak agrees. “But unfortunately sometimes we have to accept that it is. You need to be careful.”

Eva is silent for a moment while she walks to the fridge and pulls out veggies and condiments, obviously annoyed at Isak, and he sighs, about to pull her out of it, when his text notification goes off.

Isak looks down at his phone and frowns when he sees his dad’s name on the screen – he has half a mind to immediately delete the message and never read it, but he hates, hates that small part of him that will always want to know what his father has to say, that is twelve years old and begging for his father’s attention.

He clenches his fists and then releases them, reaches for the phone to unlock the message. It takes him immediately to the conversation between him and his father, which is stilted and mostly one-sided, Isak never prone to replying.

DAD

Hi Isak. It’s dad again. I was wondering if we could meet up for dinner sometime next week. I have many things to tell you. Please reply as soon as you can. Love, dad.
Isak’s jaw clenches for a moment, and he’s about to reply with nothing but the middle finger emoji because, yes, sometimes he is a child in the face of the man who made him believe he was nothing but; but instead, he locks his phone and refuses to acknowledge its existence at all.

Eva speaks up again while all of this is happening. “You know I know what I’m doing, right?” Isak looks up to find her on the counter besides the stove again, cutting at some tomatoes. “I’m not completely helpless. I know how to keep my hands to myself and refuse to blur the lines.”

Yeah, Isak’s sure. But he also remembers just how much of polar opposites he and Eva are sometimes – Eva craves love, she believes in it more than anyone Isak knows, was heartbroken for months after she realized she and Jonas weren’t in love anymore, that she hadn’t found her soulmate from the get-go. Isak doesn’t believe in soulmates, of course, because they’re bullshit, but he understands the concept they’re built from, at least, so he also doesn’t think that’s someone you find in high school, of all places. Isak doesn’t know what he’d have done if he met someone in high school and then decided to spend the rest of his life with them.

He was naïve in high school, still thought there was a chance to find something that didn’t resemble his home life, but at least now he realizes that’s a stupid and unrealistic idea; if you avoid getting close to someone altogether, letting them know every single inch of you, then you avoid the pain that comes when you realize they’re not perfect, and they’re going to inevitably hurt you, and they might not always feel the same way about you every day.

So Isak thinks Eva’s playing with fire, allowing herself to get close to Noora. There’s about a ninety percent chance she’s going to be heartbroken by the end of the endeavor, realizing there’s never going to be more between the two of them, and then Isak’s going to have to find some way to reassure her life’s not always going to be heartbreak, even though it’s evident to everyone who knows him that’s all he believes.

He’s about to reply with what he thinks might be bullshit, maybe, when his text notification goes off again. He grunts, expecting it to be his father once more, when his eyes widen marginally as Even’s contact name appears on his lock screen.

He almost scurries to lock it in case Eva looks back and for some reason peeks at his phone, but she’s moved on to quietly chopping at some lettuce, so Isak unlocks the phone quickly and scowls at the conversation.

**EVEN**

So I think I remember your jeans getting wet??

**EVEN**

Can’t pinpoint if it was because of me or because I dropped something on you

Isak’s jaw twitches. He’s such an asshole, oh my God. The bubble appears underneath the message again, then another text appears.

**EVEN**

Your tongue was definitely attacking my mouth though. Was your mouth dry this morning? It’s probably because you left all of your saliva in mine

Isak’s face heats miserably as he reads the words, and he’s about to reply with some choice words of his own, when Eva turns around to look at him again. Isak scrambles to lock his phone and silence it, then stares up at her innocently, but Eva seems oblivious to his panic.

“Are you not answering just to spare me?” She asks, raising an eyebrow. She turns back to the
cutting board, starting to place the tomatoes and lettuce on top of the hamburger patties. “I know there’s a whole speech about how I’m being stupid for trusting that nothing’s going to happen, or I’m going to fall for her and then never have her, but for once I’m very aware of my situation, Isak.”

Isak makes a noise with the back of his throat, glaring at the phone lighting up again with a text notification. He surreptitiously unlocks it, reads the messages Even’s sent him next.

**EVEN**
Also your dick was definitely in my ass

**EVEN**
And you left your dirty condom on my bed. That’s just bad manners, Isak

Isak wishes there was some way to reach through the phone and strangle him.

Eva starts playing around with the condiments, already knowing by now what Isak likes in his burger. “Yeah, alright, okay, I know, I understand I’ve said that before and then never gone through with it, but I’m being positive this time. You’re always so cynical, always so ready to believe people don’t deserve your trust when all they’re going to do with it is break it, but if you don’t trust someone then what’s the point in living, you know? Like, you’re going to be so lonely for the rest of your life, if you don’t take risks. Isn’t that kind of what science is all about, too?”

Isak’s barely paying attention anymore, what with the conversation bubble appearing underneath Even’s messages again. Still, he manages to catch the last of that, and says, “Science doesn’t break your heart.” His gaze doesn’t waver from his phone screen. “Science is about discovery, and when it doesn’t work out, it lets you try again.”

A new message comes in.

**EVEN**
Though it must have fallen off in your sleep because I don’t really remember you taking it off???

Isak’s face flushes once again. Eva continues to speak, ignorant to all of this. “Yeah, but so do people, sometimes,” she tells him. Isak grunts in acknowledgment, then begins to type furiously and quickly a response onto his phone.

**ISAK**
FUCK OFF EVEN

Eloquent. Short and to the point. Effective, he hopes.

“A little pain is worth a whole lot of happiness, don’t you think?” Eva finally turns around, plates in her hand, then drops one of them in front of Isak. She drops the other one across from him, where her place is going to be, then she walks to the fridge. She pulls out two waters when the next message comes in.

**EVEN**
Roger that

Isak exhales quietly in relief, then locks his phone. Eva continues, walking back with the bottles of water and dropping one in front of Isak before taking her seat across from him. “All I’m saying is I’m aware people aren’t perfect. I get it. But somewhere out there is the one person who’s willing to try to be the closest to that as possible for you. And don’t you think trying to find them is worth a shot?”
Isak furrows his brows, losing track of the conversation. “I’m sorry, what does this have to do with Noora?” Eva avoids his gaze, and Isak gapes. “Did you seriously find a way to segue into my issues?” Eva rolls her eyes and takes a bite out of her burger, but doesn’t reply. Isak throws up his hands, wishing he’d intervened before, but thanks to Even he was now too late to escape this conversation without getting a bit snippy.

“First of all, I know you think they’re issues, but they’re actually very valid concerns on my part,” he tells her. Eva hums and continues to eat. “And second of all, they happen to be my very valid concerns, which leads me to ask, as always, why you’re so adamant on trying to address them and fix them, somehow?”

Eva gives him a look. “It’s really hard to live with you when you lock yourself in your bedroom all the time and refuse to talk about your problems, Isak,” she glares at him. “I ask you how class was, or how work was, or what’s bothering you, and I never get an answer. I seriously feel like I’m the only one who can start a conversation here, and that’s really annoying sometimes. You’re supposed to be one of my closest friends, but you’re so sure I’m somehow going to leave you or something you refuse to just let me in – even just a tiny bit! Even just to tell me about why you had a shitty day!”

Isak squirms uncomfortably in his seat. This is definitely not where the conversation was meant to go. He can see where Eva’s coming from, but he doesn’t know how to assure her that with her, it’s not about her betraying his trust. He loves her, Isak’s aware, that’s just a fact, but she doesn’t deserve to realize what a mess he truly is, the same way Jonas is aware, the same way he’s sure his parents are. Isak’s problems should not lie as a burden on someone else’s shoulders, not even if they ask for it, because he’s seen the toll it takes to take on other people’s problems, even if it’s just by listening to them. He’s been that person, and it’s broken him so entirely he’s this now.

(And, yes, maybe that circles back to broken trust, eventually, to seeing someone turn away from him because they know just how much baggage he carries and eventually decide not to deal with it at all, but that’s not how it starts, and he always tries to convey this to Eva in the simplest terms possible without being called out for it.)

Isak stares at his burger for a while, then finally meets Eva’s gaze again. “It’s not that deep, Eva,” he sighs. “I just don’t know how to talk about shitty days. I get home, and I kind of want to forget about them, you know? Talking about them just prolongs them for me, and it’s nice here. It’s nice with you, it’s nice to be able to focus on what happens to you instead of turning everything that happened to me over and over in my head until I pick it apart so much I realize everything what actually went wrong, and every single thing I could have done to avoid it.”

Eva looks at him for a moment, then licks her lips. She shakes her head and takes another bite of her burger, then washes it down with a drink of water, until her mouth is free of it all. She sighs loudly and shrugs her shoulders weakly. “You know I’ll always be here even when shit gets rough, though, right?” She searches his expression, which Isak keeps carefully blank. “I’m not just gonna feed you to the wolves.”

“I should hope not,” Isak jokes, trying to get rid of the tension and change the subject. “You’d have to go a long way to even find some.”

“Some live here, don’t they? In Norway?”

“Hardly anymore,” Isak nods. “You would know that if you paid attention to class or, like, the news.”

Eva rolls her eyes. “Asshole,” she mutters, but there’s a small smile lining her lips.
The tension dissipates.

Isak’s phone lights up again with a message on the lock screen, and he stiffens, ready to fight Even once again, but then relaxes immediately when it’s Jonas’s contact that pops up instead. Isak unlocks the phone.

**JONAS**
Dude, where the fuck did you run off to last night. Couldn’t find you for the rest of the night. You alive?

Isak rolls his eyes and types his reply.

**ISAK**
Fine, I got way too drunk, don’t remember how. Found my way home though, no worries

**JONAS**
Nice, I’m glad. Mutta and Mahdi are coming over later tonight, if you wanna come over too. We’re just gonna chill, smoke, I think we’re all too hungover to drink again

Isak smiles, huffs out a laugh.

**ISAK**
Sounds good I’ll be there

**JONAS**
Sweet

Isak locks his phone, then meets Eva’s curious gaze. Isak furrows his eyebrows.

“What?” he asks, looking at her suspiciously. Eva’s expression looks just as suspicious.

“Okay,” Eva holds up a hand. “Serious question – did you get laid last night?”

Isak’s stomach drops in panic, and he’s pretty sure he blinks one too many times, trying to feign surprise. “What?” He hisses. “No! No, what?” Is he replying too quickly? His heart’s not doing him any favors. “No, why would you say that?”

Eva frowns. “I don’t know, you just look different.”

Isak scoffs. “Different how?”

“Like…” Eva tilts her head. “Well-fucked.”

Isak chokes on his burger. “How do you—” He swallows some water, trying to get rid of the sensation in his throat. “How do you even know what I’d look like after I got laid?”

“I’ll admit, it’s been a while,” Eva smirks. “But you’ve got that post-sex glow. I would know, I have it a lot.”

“You’re delusional,” Isak rolls his eyes exaggeratedly for good measure. “Don’t you think if I’d gotten laid I’d be bragging about it already?”

Eva snorts. “I don’t know, Isak, would you be?” She raises both her eyebrows. “I don’t necessarily understand how your head works, remember? We literally just had a conversation about this.”
“Well,” Isak clears his throat. “I would tell you if I got laid, at least. That’s – something we could, like, you know.” He clears his throat again. “Compare notes on.”

Eva laughs out loud. “Fine,” she allows him. “I believe you. But then I don’t know what kind of nap you took right now, buddy, because it sure did wonders for your skin.”

Isak flushes, but really tries his best not to. He takes a large bite out of his burger in order to avoid saying another word, and when he swallows, he’s managed to find a way out of the conversation.

“So what have you and Noora been talking about, exactly?”

Eva’s expression lights up, and she begins to talk about it; Noora’s life in London, how she’s lived in Madrid, her hobbies, her favorite literature and movies and her interests, how she’s majoring in Women’s Studies, blah, blah, blah. For someone swearing up and down she won’t get obsessed with Noora, Eva sure sounds obsessed with Noora.

Still, Isak listens to her, lets her say what she needs to say, so long as he doesn’t have to talk. And if his mind keeps wandering to the text messages Even sent him earlier, talking about their night together, triggering memories he’s been trying so hard to suppress – Even’s teeth scraping down his chest, the way he moved on top of him, feeling his bottom lip between Isak’s teeth – well, no one needs to know.

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Isak really shouldn’t be smoking right now, but it’s managed to make him feel less stressed, so he allows himself this. The boys are chatting amongst themselves, talking about nothing interesting, Isak doesn’t think, so he lets his mind settle quietly, lets his body relax and forget, the soreness in his legs and his back and his hips momentarily disappearing.

He likes being high. Being high makes him feel like he’s got no problems, like no one can see him, like he can spew nonsense into the world and the world won’t give a shit. He likes to forget. It allows Isak a couple of hours of peace, of relaxation. He forgets that he’s so fucked up even his friends bring it up every other fucking week, that he’s so hard-headed hardly anyone can break past his walls. Isak likes his walls. He especially likes them when the smoke gets trapped inside him, making them settle, making them weaker. It lifts something from his chest – something so tight and so resilient he can never let it go, never make it stop. Not completely.

Isak tunes back into the conversation after a little while, and it seems like Magnus is insisting Thomas isn’t calling him because he’s no longer interested.

“But it just doesn’t make sense,” he whines, and Isak meets Mahdi’s gaze, who shares an amused glance with Isak. “We were hitting it off so well, and then – radio silence. Won’t answer my texts, won’t answer my calls—”

“Maybe if you stop looking so fucking desperate,” Mahdi suggests, and Magnus glares at him.

“It’s not desperate when we’d been texting nonstop since the date. It doesn’t make sense to me. And, like, I went over every text I sent him, and nothing was like, offensive or anything, I don’t think?”

Mutta leans over, extending his hand. “Alright, let me see.”

Magnus doesn’t object as he pulls out his phone from his pocket, unlocking it before handing it to Mutta. Mutta sits back on the couch and opens the text conversation, scrolling through it, expression intense.
Jonas continues the conversation while Mutta investigates. “Magnus, if the guy’s ghosting you, then maybe it’s time you gave it up. Like, why would you want to keep pursuing some asshole who’s just playing you like that?”

“But he’s not,” Magnus insists. “He wasn’t. He can’t be.”

“What were you reminding him of when you said, ‘Remember the pasta?’” Mutta asks, lifting his gaze from the phone screen for a moment before looking at Magnus.

Magnus smiles dopily. Isak makes a face. “We were watching this documentary together – like, not together, together, we were watching it on this video-sharing website, and he was eating pasta and then he stopped answering for a while in the chat so then he texted me and—”

“Stop,” Mutta interrupts, going back to scrolling through the phone. “Just wanted to make sure it wasn’t something stupid.”

“That’s not stupid?” Mahdi asks, obviously perplexed, pointing at Magnus. Magnus scowls at him.

“It was cute,” he snaps, and Mahdi rolls his eyes.

Jonas reaches out to squeeze Magnus’s shoulder. “Listen, we’re all saying this because we care about you, dude, not because we’re trying to kill your trip. The guy’s not worth your time if he’s got you on edge like this. Man, just ask Isak,” Jonas gestures towards Isak, who blinks uselessly at him.

“What?”

“You know better than anyone people like that aren’t worth your time, right?”

Isak should feel offended that his friends always looked to him for the cynical point of view, but he’s too high to care, and also, they’re probably right, even though it’s not cynical, it’s objective, thank you very much.

“Yeah, Magnus, if he’s doing this now, what’s to say he won’t be doing it again later?” he asks. Magnus frowns crookedly. “Guys like that love you and leave you. I mean, most people do,” he adds, which makes Jonas roll his eyes. “But these actually fucking enjoy it. It’s like a game to them.”

Magnus looks at his hands. “Am I seriously that fucking undesirable that I can only attract assholes who want to play me?”

There’s silence for a moment, everyone in the room obviously trying to come up with something comforting to say. It’s Mahdi, surprisingly, who speaks up first.

“Dude, fuck him,” he scoffs. “He’s got no idea what he wants. You’re dope, and if he can’t see that, then he can suck all of our asses, honestly. Except Isak’s, because he’d enjoy it, and that’s not the point.”

Isak glares at him, but it rattles a laugh out of Magnus, which he guesses was the point, so he doesn’t snark back.

“Nothing,” Mutta finally hands the phone back to Magnus. “Everything really was chill. I agree with the boys, pretty sure he’s just a fucking asshole.”

Magnus sighs as he takes the phone back. “This is like Vilde all over again.”

Jonas shakes his head. “Vilde actually thought she liked you, dude. You can’t account for
internalized homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality. That had nothing to do with you.”

Isak agrees, but it’s not like he says so.

Mutta bumps his shoulder against Isak’s, who looks up at him.

“Why so quiet today?” he asks, and Isak’s lips thin. “You’re always so chatty when you’re high. You talk to us about all your science nerdy stuff.”

“True,” Mahdi agrees. “Is this Magnus thing buming you out? ‘Cause he can stop.”

Magnus squawks indignantly. “One hour of me and you’re all worn out already.”

They all ignore this, and Isak shakes his head, obviously not planning to tell them why, exactly, he’s so quiet. It’s the Eva thing, and then it’s the Even thing, and then it’s just everything that came before and afterwards, and he really, really just wants to revel in this high, where it doesn’t seem all too bad. Still, they’re all waiting for an answer, and a convincing one, at that, so he says, “Nah, I’m just thinking about my stupid paper.”

Jonas’s eyebrows rise. “The one due at the end of the year?” he asks, and Isak nods. “The semester just started. What the fuck are you stressing for?”

“I can’t think of a single thing to write,” he admits. “It’s supposed to be easy, because I like the subject, but it’s stressing me the fuck out, and I’ve got to do all of these observations, and it’s gotta be long as fuck, which is why they assign this to us at the beginning of the year, and the longer I wait to start on it, the harder it’s gonna get.” Isak grunts. “It’s just buming me out.”

“Astronomy sounds like a shitty subject, dude,” Mahdi admits to him. “For real, in high school, I was positive you were gonna go for something in Biology or like, even Chemistry.”

Isak shrugs. “It would have been too easy.”

All of them groan.

“Show off.”

“You have nothing to prove,” Jonas pipes up after Mahdi. “Literally. To no one. No one would have looked at you, majoring in Biology, and said, man, Isak sure took the easy way out, didn’t he?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I’d be fooling myself,” he tells them, even though he’s got his own reasons. Still, that’s the one thing he keeps to himself, the one thing no one’s been able to pry out of him, the one thing no one can use against him. And maybe that’s what he’s proudest of – being able to keep one thing to himself, one thing no one can use to break him. “Besides, I wanna be the type of astronomer that discovers shit, you know? So people remember Norway in the future and don’t keep forgetting we exist. Something life changing, like – like Isaac Newton.”

“Isaac Newton was Norwegian?” Magnus asks, confused.

Isak rolls his eyes. “No, Magnus, I mean I want to discover something astronomical the way he did.”

Mutta furrows his brows. “I thought he was a mathematician?”

“No, wasn’t he a physicist?” Mahdi asks.

“Yeah,” Magnus jumps in. “Didn’t he, like, invent gravity or some shit?”
“Jesus, Magnus, nobody invented gravity,” Isak gives him a disbelieving look. “Gravity’s always been there. He discovered gravity.”

Magnus shakes his head. “What’s the difference? Like, it’s like that question – if a tree falls in the forest and no one’s around to—”

“Yes.”

“But—”

Isak glares at him. “Gravity was always there whether or not Newton discovered it, Magnus, what the fuck.”

“Damn,” Magnus holds up both his hands in defense. “What’s with your mouth today, dude?”

“Is it in an odd place?” Isak frowns, momentarily worried.

“I mean, why do you keep spewing insults at me? I’m trying to learn and grow and shit. Plus, I’m pretty heartbroken, you all should be nice to me.”

Isak sighs loudly, leans back on the couch and closes his eyes. He’s just trying to ride this high quietly, and Magnus is right – he’s getting riled up again, for no reason at all. Magnus has always been a curious idiot, there’s no reason for Isak to get so frustrated with him. “Sorry,” he apologizes. “It’s probably still the hangover. Last night was brutal.”

All of the boys grunt in understanding and empathy, and then Mutta suddenly bursts into a gleeful laugh.

“Dude, speaking of!” Isak opens his eyes when he feels Mutta shift beside him on the couch, sitting up excitedly. “I went over to their place earlier, because I felt they owed me breakfast for getting me so wasted, and Even was so out of it.”

Jonas furrows his brows. “How do you mean?”

Mutta grins mischievously. “We’re pretty sure he hooked up with someone last night.”

Isak freezes while the rest of the guys rejoice with whoops and cheers.

“Yes,” Mahdi celebrates. “Seriously, when I’m on the rebound, it literally only takes me like a day to find someone else to hook up with. I was worried he’d be down for ages before he found someone to hook up with.”

“So did we,” Mutta agrees, and Isak can’t feel his legs. His heart is pounding in his ears and he hopes the boys can’t see how tense he is all of a sudden, but they all seem to be paying eager attention to Mutta, so Isak has time to try and compose himself. Mutta seems to have no idea about who Even’s slept with, though, since he’s not looking over at Isak suspiciously or with a smirk or anything, so Isak tries to convince himself to calm the fuck down.

“Who with?” Magnus asks, and Mutta shrugs his shoulders.

“Dunno. He wouldn’t tell us. Actually, he tried to deny he got laid at all,” Mutta admits. “But we could tell. When he was showering, we all peeked into his room and saw a dirty condom in his trash can.” All the boys holler at this. “And we’re pretty sure whoever it was snuck out through the window, because it was wide open.”
Isak’s throws his head on the back of the couch in relief. Oh, thank God. They have no idea. Even kept his word, after all, didn’t tell them a thing, even if he had been bugging Isak earlier this morning to try it again, like an idiot. Then again, Isak really shouldn’t be surprised Even kept his word – ever since Isak told him to fuck off, Even’s been compliant, not texting him again once. It bothers him – not because Even hasn’t texted him again, because fuck him – but because it just means that some of what his friends have told him about Even has some merit; that maybe he’s a good person, after all, somewhere underneath all of that pretentiousness and assholery, and that’s not something Isak wants to think about now, after he’s had his dick in Even’s ass.

Isak’s glasses start fogging with the smoke gathering around him, and he closes his eyes, willing himself back into the relaxed place he found himself in earlier. Where there are no thoughts about Even, or Eva, or papers, or parents or anything of the sort – where Isak doesn’t have to be anything, doesn’t need to be open, doesn’t need to be better, doesn’t need to be whole – he can just be.

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Monday is brutal.

Not only because his class is so early and he realizes he’d probably have been better off not going at all, because he didn’t pay attention to a word his professor was saying, couldn’t, really, with the pounding of his head and the soreness of his body and the energy completely drained out of him, but because now he’s walking towards the museum, ready to work for the rest of the day, as it’s his turn to close.

And he’s working the main floor again today. So he’s really, super excited to deal with angry parents and disrespectful children pissing in the stream or something.

Days aren’t always like that, Isak’s well aware. Sometimes they’re good, and calm, especially on Mondays, when parents don’t have the time to bring their children, but Isak feels so tired and dejected and drained that his thoughts can’t be anything but negative at the moment, and it’s so exhausting – he wonders if this is what his friends feel like every day when they hear him talk, then he shakes the thought out of his head, lest he dives further into very dangerous, far more cynical territory.

He focuses instead on his own misery as he pulls open the doors to the museum, walking inside. The air is warm to battle the cold outside, and he walks over to the front desk, where Sara sits, scrolling aimlessly on the computer.

“Hey, Sara,” Isak greets morosely, and Sara looks up from her computer with a smile that immediately disappears when she sees Isak’s face.

“Oh, God,” she blinks. “Did you get hit by a bus?”

Isak grunts. “Basically,” he admits, then walks behind the front desk to clock himself in. Sara allows him, still looking at him in complete surprise, and Isak finally sighs and looks at her again.

“I’m hungover, Sara, it’s not that exciting.”

Sara frowns. “I’ve never seen you hungover.”

“You and many other people.”

Sara frowns. “You partied on a Sunday?”

Isak grimaces. “Friday,” he admits, and so then Sara looks even more perplexed, which Isak thinks
“You’re hungover from *Friday*?” Sara shakes her head. “How drunk did you get?”

Isak takes a deep breath to avoid snapping at her useless inquiries. “I’m going to let your imagination answer that,” he replies, voice leveled. He’s proud of himself, actually. First person he’s interacted with and he’s avoided snapping. Maybe things’ll be fine from here on out. “Who’s manager on duty right now?”

“Eskild,” Sara replied, still looking Isak over. “You could probably get away with telling him you’re sick. You look it.”

Isak shakes his head. “I already asked for the weekend off,” he tells her. “I’m not gonna be a dick and also ask to go home today.”

Sara shrugs her shoulders. “Good luck in there, then,” she offers him, and Isak walks towards the other entrance, and he waves at her in goodbye, not offering any more words because he’s trying to save the rest of his voice for trying to talk angry parents down.

As Isak walks inside, he looks around, finds that there are very few people – thankfully. He sighs a little in relief, adjusts his name tag and walks towards his section, which is empty, for now, but before he can get there, he hears Eskild call his name from behind. He turns around to find him striding over to him in glee, then see his expression turn scandalized when he stops in front of Isak.

“Were you trapped in a tornado?” He asks, and Isak rolls his eyes.

“No, I’m just a little, uh – under the weather,” he coughs, trying to avoid the truth in front of his boss, but Eskild looks like he understands, anyway.

“Well, maybe next time try a little more medicine, yeah?” Eskild reaches over to pat his shoulder reassuringly. “Anyway, what I came to say – I need you to go into the employee break room.”


“It’s important.”

Isak feels like questioning it a little more, but even if he does get along well with Eskild, he’s still Isak’s boss, so he forgoes the rest of the questions and follows him towards the back and into the employee break room. Eskild stops in the middle of the room and dramatically extends his arms towards the couches, shaking his fingers wildly as he does. “Ta-da!” he exclaims.

It takes Isak a moment, but then he realizes Eskild’s referring to the throw pillows on the couches – they’re no longer the flattened, tired-looking old things they had before, but they’re instead fluffy, clean-looking orange ones, resting happily on the seats as if they’d always belonged there. It makes Isak smile, if only slightly, but it’s says something about his day when this is really the very first time he’s smiled in all of it.

“The throw pillows,” he nods, looking over at Eskild. “You finally got them.”

“Did I not promise?” Eskild raises an eyebrow.

“You did,” Isak nods. “Though you do realize I never actually doubted you, right?”

Eskild preens. “I appreciate that. But it still feels good to come through. Don’t you feel good when you come through?”
“I mean, sure,” he nods. “It’s satisfactory, if a little selfish.”

Eskild scoffs and waves him off. “Off to the floor with your logic, little one,” he says, and Isak rolls his eyes. “That’s where it belongs.”

Isak’s smile is crooked. “Hey,” he says. “I’m going, but just – thanks,” he nods towards the pillows. “It was a really cool gesture, Eskild.”

Something in Eskild’s expression softens, and Isak tries to figure out what in the world it could mean, but in an instant it’s gone, replaced instead by his usual cheerful expression, large smile in place and ears perked up on his sides. “You’re welcome,” he tells Isak, then waves him over towards the door again. “Now shoo. You’re on the clock now, I can’t pay you to just stand here and admire my work.”

Isak laughs and turns around, leading Eskild out of the break room. Once out, they part ways, Eskild walking back towards the main entrance and Isak finding his place on the main floor, running a hand through his hair uselessly and trying his best not to appear like he’d been hit by a bus or caught in a tornado. Isak thinks it’s useless, though, because some of the people walking by him give him worried looks, which he guesses are better than judgmental ones – maybe he really does just look sick, which’ll maybe get him out of a lot of parents’ yelling, since they’ll most likely not want their kids anywhere near the sick man.

Still, standing around and aimlessly cleaning his section over and over is boring and repetitive and still tiring – he sees some of his coworkers doing the same around their sections, once in a while talking a kid and helping them with the exhibits around them, but Isak remains alone, which is a good thing, he tells himself, but that doesn’t make it any less irritating.

It’s probably been about half an hour of this, maybe, even though it feels like eternity from where he’s standing, when he sees Julian making his way out of the space exhibit, the lucky bastard, smile on his face when he spots Isak and makes his way towards him. Once he gets near enough to get a closer look, however, his expression falls, turns a little worried.

“Jesus, Isak, are you okay?” he asks, and Isak nods at him dismissively.

“Yeah, yeah, just—” he shrugs as nonchalantly as he can muster. “You know, just one of those days.”

Julian stares at him, a little incredulously. “Uhm,” he clears his throat. “No offense, but this kind of looks like more than just one of those days. Maybe five of them rolled into one?”

Isak huffs, gives Julian an affronted look. “Et tu, Julian?”

Julian laughs. “Sorry,” he holds up his hands. “You just really do look like you need a nap. Or ten. Has Eskild seen you?”

“Yes,” Isak assures him. “He showed me the throw pillows and everything.”

“Okay,” Isak assures him. “He showed me the throw pillows and everything.”

“His’s very excited about those.”

“Oh, yes,” Isak smiles. “I wish I could get as excited as him by the little things.”

Julian tilts his head. “You do look miserable, though.”

“Ugh,” Isak’s shoulders slump. “I just hate working the main floor, you know? It’s fine, though, there’s hardly anyone here, so it’s not a big deal. It’s the tiredness talking.”
Julian shifts his weight. “I can switch with you, if you want.”

Isak blinks at him. “What.”

“Sections?” he gestures towards the door of the space exhibit. “There aren’t too many people in there, either, but I know you like it better than you like the floor, and I don’t mind it.”

Isak shakes his head. “Why would you do that for me?”

Julian’s face blushes red, and Isak thinks he’s finally realized what he’s offering Isak, and is maybe regretting it. Isak is about to tell him not to worry about it, but Julian beats him to a reply—“You need that exhibit more than I do,” he tells Isak. “And we’re friends, right? Friends do things for friends.” He looks at Isak expectantly.

To be honest, Isak thinks of them more as work acquaintances, since they’ve never really done anything outside of the museum and Isak’s never really been himself around Julian, at least, not the “himself” he pretends to be around everyone else, so that says something—still, Julian’s being so nice to him, so it’s not like he’s gonna be an asshole and say, no, absolutely not, are you kidding? Get back to work.

So Isak smiles at him, and nods. “Yeah, we’re friends.”

Julian visibly lets out a sigh of relief, nodding. “Also, I don’t like the space exhibit,” he admits. “I don’t get it. Space and stuff – not my speed. So we can just ask Eskild if we can switch, since I’m pretty sure we’re working the same amount of hours,” he tells Isak. “And closing together.”

Isak seriously doesn’t know how to handle someone who barely knows him be this nice to him. Like, Isak really thinks he doesn’t deserve this, considering he just kind of walks around this place and complains a lot, save for when he’s in the space exhibit, which, come to think of it, might be why Julian’s offering this to him at all – so maybe Isak can complain a little less, and maybe actually talk to him about other things while they close together. Isak can appreciate that much, actually – Julian knows how to look after himself. It’s admirable.

He can’t help his relieved sigh and his grin. “Man,” he shakes his head. “You’re a lifesaver, honestly. And way too nice for your own good, I think.”

Julian smiles lightly, shakes his head. “It’s nothing. Benefits the both of us, right?”

Isak’s grin widens. “A symbiotic mutualistic relationship.”

Julian laughs. “Sure,” he agrees. “Let’s go find Eskild.”

Eskild agrees, of course, because Eskild is awesome, and Isak can’t help but turn around afterwards and grin as brightly as he can at Julian, hoping he doesn’t scare him off because that’s probably a huge contrast with the rest of his self. Julian, however, just blinks at him uselessly, probably because he’s never seen Isak smile so big, which, okay, fair.

“I owe you one,” Isak tells him, and Julian shakes his head.

“Honestly, don’t mention it.”

“Hm, but I probably will,” Isak smiles and gestures towards the exhibit. “Okay, I better get to it. I’m glad it’s dark in there, less people will see what a mess I look.”

Julian nods. “You’ll benefit from that.”
Isak laughs at his quip. “Julian’s got some snark in him, alright,” he shakes his head. “I’ll see you for closing?”

Julian nods his head enthusiastically. “Yeah. I can, uhm – I can walk you to your tram stop afterwards, if you want?” He offers. “I live just a couple of blocks after that, so.”

Isak huffs, amused. “Yeah, sure,” he accepts. “We can walk together, no big deal.”

Julian visibly swallows. “Yeah, none,” he clears his throat. “Okay, I’ll see you.”

Isak walks past him, but waves to him over his shoulder. “I’ll see you in a couple of hours!”

He turns back and walks a little too quickly towards the exhibit’s door, and Isak literally has to take a moment before he opens it – he breathes in deeply, wipes his hands on his pants in anticipation, before pushing it open.

Julian was right – there aren’t many people here, either, but the darkness welcomes him, the shifting stars and the traveling moon and the different drones all illuminating the room, not enough to uncover the cloak of darkness, but just enough so that different faces, filled with wonder and delight, are illuminated.

There’s a little boy who keeps pointing at different constellations as they move, his hand in his father’s, and his father keeps smiling down at him as he talks and talks and talks – Isak can’t really hear what he’s saying, but for a moment his heart squeezes so desperately; he remembers being that young. Remembers being that enamored with the stars, wanting to learn everything about them and tell everyone about them and he wished, for a very long time, that his father would spare him an hour, even half, to listen to him speak, to listen to what he had to say, instead of spending every day all day working; which Isak learned far later in his life was simply an excuse to escape that house as much as he could, his mother and him unable to stand the sight of each other – his mother because of her deteriorating mental health, and his father – well, Isak supposes it’s for the same reason.

Isak can’t remember why he fell in love with the stars in the first place; it almost feels like they’ve simply been a part of him all his life. Which is why it’s frustrating, to think he can’t sit down and write a paper about his passion, can’t remember what it feels like to freely talk about what he loves, to remember why they’re his passion in the first place. He wonders if this is how others feel – like school has jaded their passions, worn them down to nothing but an obligation, and maybe this is supposed to be Isak’s life after all; never allowing himself to love, and never being able to love what he does want to.

He walks around the exhibit, smiles softly at the constellations, and knows that every single one he can name – they’re tattooed to his memory, whether or not he feels jaded, whether or not he remembers what’s led him here, and Isak thinks that’s maybe what it is; knowing they’re a constant. Stars can’t let him down. So maybe he can’t remember the reason why he loves them so much, why he wants to know so much about them, but he knows they’re a part of him now, and he knows, he’s aware, that there’s still so much more to discover about them. They’re so much, and they’re infinitely bigger than all of them, and he thinks maybe he likes feeling this insignificant in the face of everything else. Maybe it proves his point – that he doesn’t necessarily need a place in the world, doesn’t need to be the most important thing to someone, because they’re all nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to what’s out there.

The shift goes by quickly. He helps some kids with the interactive screen, talks to them about where the stars are shifting and what they’re made of, simple things that won’t confuse them too much, and
he always enjoys seeing their eyes widen and he’s always thrilled when they look eager to learn more – it’s like he’s shaping inquiring minds, which is thrilling in and of itself.

It’s easy to close the space exhibit – mostly turning off the projections and turning on the lights to be able to sweep and mop comfortably. Then it’s just shutting everything down again and leaving the room, locking the door behind him. It’s why sometimes whoever works the space exhibit stays behind to help close the main floor, and today is no exception for Isak when Eskild finds him.

“Hello, little one,” he greets him with a smile. “Had a good shift after that rocky start?”

Isak smiles. “You know I did,” he replies. “Thanks for letting me switch.”

Eskild considers him for a moment. “You know,” he says. “If you’d just ask me, I’d schedule you in there more often,” he tells Isak softly, and Isak can’t stand the way his heart squeezes at the words. “I know I seem all-knowing, but I can’t actually read minds, Isak. I’m not here to make my employees miserable,” he rolls his eyes. “Except for Chris. But that’s only because I want him to quit.”

Isak laughs, then shifts his weight, feeling like a ten-year-old again, wanting to ask something of his father and bracing himself for the rejection, even when Eskild is already assuring him he’ll get a yes. “So, Eskild,” he clears his throat. “Think you could, uh, maybe keep me in mind for the space exhibit more often? I promise I’m a much more productive employee in there.”

Eskild hums, taps his chin with his index finger for an excruciatingly and unnecessarily long time. Isak huffs and gives him a look, which only serves for Eskild to grin at him.

“Okay,” he clasps his hands together. “I promise from here on out you’ll see a lot more shifts in there. But,” he holds up a finger. “I can’t promise every shift, alright? I don’t want the rest of the managers thinking it’s favoritism, or something.”

Isak raises his eyebrows. “Is it?”

Eskild smirks. “Wouldn’t you like to know,” he teases, then flicks at Isak’s vest. “Anyway, I’d say you should help Julian with his section, but he’s actually a speedy closer,” he says. “Also, I’m pretty sure he sped up times a thousand just to be able to leave with you.”

Isak laughs. “He’s walking me to the tram station,” he explains. “He’s a good pal.”

Eskild stares at him, before shaking his head in disbelief. “Oh, Isak,” he sighs dramatically. “It is a very good thing you’re pretty.”

He furrows his brows. “What?”

Eskild smiles at someone over Isak’s shoulder. “Hi, Julian!” he greets, and Julian appears beside Isak, vest thrown casually over his shoulder. “Are you all set?”

“Yes,” Julian smiles at Eskild, then glances at Isak for a moment. “Er, is Isak—”

Eskild waves them off. “I don’t need him for the rest of the night,” he promises, and Julian grins. “Go on, you two, have a nice night. And walk safely!” He adds quickly. “There are ugly people out there.”

Isak laughs. “It’s alright, Eskild, it’s always been.”

Eskild shoos them away, and Isak unbuttons his vest, but doesn’t entirely remove it like Julian – they find their way to the front, where they both retrieve their hoodies and coats, and once they’re set,
they walk together out the door and into the darkness of the cold night, illuminated by the street lamps, not quiet at all – the streets are busy with people coming to and from, night shifters and people going home, which is probably one of the things that Isak likes most about Oslo; never a quiet moment, not unless you live like Yousef and the guys.

“It’s a nice night,” Julian says, and Isak nods his assent.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Kind of the only reason I like the closing shift, to be honest. Though you can’t really see the stars here,” he points up to the sky, where Julian follows his line of sight. Isak wrinkles his nose. “A couple. You can see them pretty clearly from my place, weirdly enough.” And Yousef’s, but he doesn’t add that, because Julian doesn’t really know him all that well. He knows Jonas and the others pretty well, and Isak’s still not sure why – probably because they like to sneak into every single part of Isak’s life whenever they can, but it’s not like he can tell them not to befriend Julian. That’d just be weird.

“So you really wanna be an astronomer then?” Julian asks him, and Isak nods.

“Pretty much,” he says. “Always wanted to work in an observatory and shit.”

Julian hums. “Sounds fun, I guess.”

“Hah,” Isak glances at him. “It’s not for everyone, Julian.”

Isak can tell Julian’s blushing in embarrassment, only because the street lamps allow him to. “Yeah, and definitely not for me,” he agrees. “I’m actually a public relations major.”

Isak backtracks. “What?” He literally can’t believe he’s worked with Julian for over a year and has never once known this. “What the hell are you doing working at the science museum, then?”

Julian raises his eyebrows. “Well, for one, the money,” he says, and, well, fair enough. “And I don’t hate it. It was one of my better subjects in school, I’m just not as passionate about it as, well, you, for example.”

Sometimes Isak forgets how lucky he is to be working somewhere he actually likes, until he gets to work in something he actually loves. “Better than a restaurant, I guess,” Isak mutters, and Julian laughs, perhaps a little too loudly.

The phone in Isak’s coat pocket buzzes, and he reaches inside to fish it out and stare at the screen. His gaze immediately dims at the sight of his dad’s contact name, and he doesn’t know why he can never resist unlocking the phone and reading his message, why there’s still this undeniable desire to connect with the man that never loved him, never really wanted him.

DAD
Hi Isak. It’s dad again. I know you don’t want to answer me, but I think it’s very important that we talk. I understand that you’re angry, but I want you to meet Kim. She’s a very nice woman and she and I have been seeing each other. She’s heard a lot about you and so has her son, and they’re very eager to meet you. I think it’d be good for you to connect with them. So please, reply to me. Or call me. I will keep reaching out until then. Love, Dad.

Isak doesn’t notice how tight the grip on his phone has become until his palm starts to burn, and then he angrily locks it and shoves it back in his pocket. There are tears stinging at his eyes – they’re angry tears, Isak recognizes the from years of experiencing them, and he feels so—

He absolutely detests his father in this moment. Even when he still desperately seeks his approval,
even when he wishes his father would tell him that he wants him, that he’s sorry, that he isn’t only reaching out because he’s now under no obligation to look after him or provide for him; there’s fury in his stomach at the words he’s just read, talking about a new girlfriend, and her son, like he’s marched straight out of his and his mother’s life and into someone else’s, ready to play family, ready to take over as if he hadn’t fucked the first one up.

Isak swallows the knot in his throat back, unwilling to show this kind of emotion in front of Julian, and Julian seems to be none the wiser about it when they reach the tram station. “Okay,” Julian says, and thankfully, the tram station pulls up just as they reach it. “I’ll see you next time?” He asks.


“No problem,” he replies, then waves at Isak as he makes his way past the tram. “See ya.”

The doors to the tram open up and Isak practically sprints up them, then makes his way to the very back, where he makes sure no one can see his pathetic attempt at hiding his emotions. He sits down quickly and looks out the window, where he sees his reflection, looking back at him pathetically, nose red and eyes red and face red and he cannot believe there’s nothing, nothing he can do to calm himself, nothing in the world he can think of doing to forget this, forget it, if at least for a moment—

His brain freezes for a second. It suggests something Isak almost doesn’t want to take it up on, but then, he knows it’d help. He knows. There’s no doubt in his mind that he’ll forget about this during, and then maybe in the aftermath, and then maybe during an awkward conversation and he could, he’d been willing—

Isak pulls out his phone hastily and opens up his messages app, clicking on Even’s conversation. He types furiously.

    ISAK
    Are you home??

His leg bounces impatiently and nervously, hoping Even’s reply won’t take too long. Surprisingly, it doesn’t, but then again, it might not be too surprising – what does Isak know about Even, anyway?

    EVEN
    Yes

    ISAK
    Are you alone

    EVEN
    Yes

Isak considers it one last time. He knows he’s probably doing this for the wrong reasons. He knows there’s a chance he’s going to regret this immediately afterwards. But at the moment, he also knows he doesn’t exactly care.

    ISAK
    I’m on my way

Even’s neighborhood is by far quieter than the way to Isak’s apartment, which is a little eerie, Isak
won’t lie, but he’s walking with so much purpose he doesn’t really have time to think about it too hard.

He walks up the house’s lawn and raps at the door quickly and harshly, pocketing his hands in his coat and bouncing on the balls of his feet, trying to warm himself up as he waits for Even to answer the door. After a minute, Isak huffs impatiently, knocks on the door again, this time louder.

He’s in the middle of a knock when Even finally opens the door, eyebrows rising in surprise, and then he leans against the doorframe like an asshole, and looks around, as if expecting there’s someone here with Isak.

“No camera crew,” Even hums. “Thought for sure you were playing a joke on me.”

Isak glares at him. “Can I just come in?”

Even looks at him, and his smile is crooked and a little smug. Isak irrationally wants to kiss it away. “I think you should tell me what you need from me, first?” Only one eyebrow lifts this time. “It’s pretty late to be showing up randomly like this.”

“It wasn’t random, I texted you,” Isak snaps. “And you know. You know why I’m here.”

Even shakes his head once, purses his lips exaggeratedly. “Nope,” he says. “I really don’t.”

Isak’s hands are trying not to freeze, but the flushing of his face is doing good things to warm him up. “Don’t make me say it. Please.”

Even suddenly leans forward, very closely, looks down at Isak and licks his lips – and Isak hates the way the movement finds its way down his fucking spine. “I want to hear you say it, though.”

Isak swallows, staring at Even’s lips. “Stop being a fucking dick,” he replies, but his voice is quieter this time.

“But tell me what you want here, Isak,” Even tells him, and this time, his voice is just as quiet as Isak’s.

And Isak – Isak wants to give in, but he’s also irritated, and he’s cold, and Even doesn’t deserve a reply, he doesn’t, and he was definitely out of his mind for even considering this in the first place, so he decides to shake his head furiously and take a step back from Even.

“You know what? Never fucking mind,” he snaps, then turns around, fully intending to walk down the lawn and never turn back, the fucking dick—

But then a hand is wrapping around his wrist and turning him around swiftly, and then Even’s lips are on his, and suddenly Isak’s warm all over, and his brain short circuits and fuck, fuck, this is so much better sober, like, unfairly so, and Isak’s kissing Even just as aggressively as Even’s kissing him and after a moment, Isak pushes Even inside forcefully, where Even lifts a leg beside Isak to kick the door closed before he stands upright again, arms desperately grasping at either side of Isak’s face.

Isak doesn’t stop kissing him, instead lifts his hands to grip Even’s hair and bites down on Even’s bottom lip, their bodies already pressed far too tightly together, Isak’s pants already feeling too tight to be comfortable.

He remembers this. This exact feeling, except now it’s multiplied tenfold, where Isak’s mind is clear and not foggy and he can feel every single one of the hair on his arms stand on end, the sensation of
Even’s tongue tracing his bottom lip, can feel exactly how close they are and the shivers running down his spine and he’s hyperaware of just about every single part of Even pressing against him.

Somehow they find their way to the stairs, where Even manages to trip backwards, and Isak falls with him. Even huffs in annoyance, but brings Isak forward to keep kissing him, and Isak is very seriously considering just grinding up against him on the staircase until they finish.

It’s a different story when Even suggests it, though. “This really isn’t a terrible place to have sex,” he mutters against Isak, and Isak snorts at the ridiculousness of the suggestion, even though he’d been suggesting it to himself just a second ago.

“I’m not defiling Yousef and Elias’s house,” he mutters, tracing kisses down Even’s jaw, nipping at it. Even’s huff this time is a pleased one, his hand falling to Isak’s back where he pulls him closer.

“We’re doing this in your room or not at all.”

Even laughs, but it’s not cruel – it’s more resigned, and he pushes Isak back only to pull him up with him and lead him to the bedroom.

They close the door behind them, and this time Isak whispers into Even’s ear about how he needs this, needs Even to do the work this time, he needs it more than he can know.

Even pauses at this, pulls away, still out of breath but looking at Isak suspiciously. “Isak,” he starts. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Isak snaps. “Can you just—”

“I don’t want to do this if you—”

Isak shuts him up with another kiss. Even whimpers against his lips, obviously wanting to object, but Isak doesn’t give him a chance to, tugs at Even’s shirt instead and removes it for him.

“I want this,” he mutters at Even firmly. “I want you to fuck me,” he whispers, kissing down Even’s neck. He feels Even shiver against him, a sharp exhale leave his lips. “Even, please,” he whimpers quietly, turning to kiss Even’s lips again. “Please.”

Even looks at him one last time before nodding, furiously removing Isak’s coat, then his hoodie, and then they’re both rushing to rid themselves of the rest of their clothes and when they do, Even walks away from him to dig through his end table, Isak standing where he is naked, and then Even walks back and turns Isak over to press him against the wall. Isak closes his eyes, quietly moans in pleasure and anticipation, wanting nothing more than this right now. Knowing nothing else but Even as he feels him behind him, readying himself.

And wanting to know nothing else but him.

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When they’re done, Isak is sweaty and perfectly fucked, and they’re lying on the bed now, catching their breaths.

They kissed for a long time afterwards, aggressive and hungry, which is how they found their way here – and now Isak’s riding on the high of his climax, so much so that he doesn’t find it strange to be lying next to Even, who’s sitting up against his bed’s headboard and smoking a joint.

Isak’s eyes are closed when he feels Even tap at his forehead. He opens his eyes to glare at him, only to be greeted by the sight of Even offering him a joint of his own. Isak sits up and only eyes it
suspiciously for a moment before he takes it, and lets Even light it for him. He brings it in between
his lips and takes a happy drag, closing his eyes at the sensation of the smoke filling his mouth, filling
his lungs.

He’s exhaling when Even speaks for the first time after they finished. “What happened?” he asks,
glancing at Isak. Isak doesn’t look at him. “Seriously. Why’d you come over?”

Isak inhales and exhales once again in one easy movement. “I’m not talking to you about my shit,
okay?” he looks over at Even. “This doesn’t mean we’re friends all of a sudden.”

Even searches Isak’s expression for a moment before nodding his consent, sharp and quick. “Fair
enough.”

Isak looks forward again, and the conversation hits a lull. It’s not exactly awkward, but it’s not
exactly comfortable, either, it’s just kind of – there. Isak doesn’t know what else to say, he doesn’t
even know exactly how to make his exit; they’re both still very naked right now, obviously not
bothered by it, considering they’ve seen all they’ve needed to see of each other, and Isak’s mind is so
– it’s so at ease, like it was never angry in the first place, like it’d never escaped his control.

He turns to look at Even again. “How often do you do this?” he asks, and Even furrows his brows at
him in confusion. “You know. Sleep with people.”

“You’re literally my first rebound.”

Isak had forgotten, actually, but he hums in acknowledgment, brings the joint back up between his
lips. He inhales deeply, eyes fluttering shut for a moment as he lets the smoke settle inside him, then
exhales as slowly as he can.

He can feel Even looking at him, so he turns over to meet his gaze. They look at each other for a
beat, before Isak sighs. “I was angry,” he admits, and Even’s eyebrows rise in surprise, like he hadn’t
been expecting Isak to admit it. “And this was – this was the only way I could think to get my mind
off of it, I guess.” He shifts his weight on the bed, grimacing because of the soreness of his ass, but
also because of the confession he’s just made. “It wasn’t – it was a little impulsive, yeah, but it
wasn’t like I wasn’t completely aware that I wanted it.”

Even smirks. “Yeah, you said that a couple of times,” he turns to look forward, smirking through the
joint in his lips, and Isak glares daggers at the side of his face.

“You’re the one who wanted this first,” he snaps, and Even looks at him, nodding.

“I’m not saying I wasn’t.”

Isak furrows his brows, looks down at his legs. “How did—” he clears his throat. “Why did you
want it again?”

Even hums. “Well, to be honest, at first I was just teasing you,” he glances at Isak with a small smile.
Isak scoffs. “But the more I kept remembering about that night, the more it just – wouldn’t go away,”
he admits. “Jesus, I’ve – thought about it everywhere I was free to, but you didn’t want a repeat, so I
backed off.” He considers Isak for a moment. “And then I guess you started remembering, too?”

Isak huffs. “Yeah,” he mutters. “Yeah, just – it was – I think it’s just this good because we—”

“Aren’t each other’s biggest fans, yeah,” Even smiles. And God damn it, Isak fucking hates it when
he smiles, and doesn’t smirk, because his face lights up all – all handsome-like, and then Isak’s
thinking about kissing him again and gripping at his hair and it’s a good thing Isak doesn’t think he can get hard again, because if Even keeps smiling like that, it’d be a very real possibility. “You still enjoyed it this time, yeah?”

Isak gives him a look. “The pleading and moaning wasn’t enough to clue you in?”

Even huffs a laugh. “Just checking,” he says. “And you think you’d enjoy it again?”

Isak shakes his head furiously. “No,” he replies firmly. “Twice. Twice is good. I just needed it tonight, but we’re not – I’m not doing it again.”

Even looks at him for a moment. “You don’t think you’ll be this angry again?”

Well, no, that’s not it. So long as his fucking father exists, Isak thinks he’ll find himself this angry for a very long time. But he’s not about to admit that to Even – even though it looks like he’s already found his answer, and that irks Isak to no end, because Even doesn’t know him, can he stop pretending like he has Isak all figured out?

“I don’t—”

Even holds up his hands. “I’m only saying that it worked for me, too,” he tells him. “I was having – there were some things that weren’t exactly making my day too swell,” he admits, and Isak narrows his eyes at the confession, but also at the word swell, because who the fuck is Even, anyway? “And then you showed up, and – suddenly I feel like they’re not too bad, after all. Or,” Even reconsiders. “I’m less tense, anyway.”

Isak crosses his legs on the bed, trying not to give it too much thought. “Okay,” he deadpans. “So what are you trying to say to me?”


Isak licks his lips and looks away from him, taking another drag from his joint. He does know. He’s very aware of where Even’s taking this conversation. And Isak can think of a thousand reasons why this would be a very, very bad idea – all of them derived from the theory of probability, and really, none of the possibilities are looking too desirable to Isak at this very moment. But – but then he can think of one reason that it could be a good one, and it’s a very superficial reason, he’s aware of that, but—

It really was very, very fucking good. Like, exceptionally good. Like he can still feel Even inside him at this very moment, as uncomfortable as it sounds, and he’s pretty sure his toes are still quivering from his climax. And it worked to keep his mind off of things, and it’s even working now; he’s not really angry anymore, can’t really think about anything other than the fact he’s just had spectacular sex, and Isak’s aware that it’s not a permanent solution, not by a margin, and eventually he’ll go back to turning every problem he’s ever had over and over in his head, but even if it’s for an hour or two, even if Isak can just escape this fresh hell he’s trapped himself in, just for a little while, just to the point where it doesn’t matter, nothing matters but the skin against his skin and the way to his orgasm—

Well, then it doesn’t sound like a terrible idea.

Isak licks his lips. “Okay,” he agrees, and Even snaps his head over to him in surprise.

“What?”

“I said okay, Even,” Isak rolls his eyes. “Are you deaf now, too?”
“Really?” Even still looks baffled. “Okay, I seriously thought you were going to turn this down and walk out the door, to be honest,” he tells him. “So I was just kind of – not really thinking it through.”

“Well, now you’ve put it out on the table, and I’m calling your bluff,” he tells Even. “But this isn’t – this doesn’t mean I like you, or that I’ll ever like you, for that matter, it just means I’d really like an outlet for a while. I forgot how great sex was to find that.”

Even’s still staring at him incredulously. “Are you sure you don’t want to—”

“Are you seriously taking this back right now?”

Even pauses. “Well, no. I guess I’m not. Not if you really want this, and you’re not just saying that because your ass is still sore.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Fine,” he nods. “But – but there’s gonna have to be rules,” he demands, and Even shrugs.

“Okay.”

Isak puts his blunt out inside the mug Even’s rested between them on the mattress, then stands to find his boxers. When he does, he swiftly puts them on, then looks around Even’s room. “Do you have a pen?” he asks. “And some paper?”

Even blinks at him. “For what?”

“For the rules, dumbass.”

Even seems to be biting the inside of his cheek. “You want to write them down?”

Isak glares at him. “Obviously,” he extends his hands in an impatient gesture. “How else are we going to stick to them?”

Even purses his lips, snorts a little quietly, but loud enough so that Isak catches the sound. “Maybe by remembering them?”

“I don’t trust you,” he crosses his arms over his bare chest. Even huffs a laugh, and seems to finally let himself look amused. Isak hates it – it’s such a natural, normal expression that reminds him that Even is a whole other person outside of the person he is with Isak, and that will always make him uncomfortable.

“You’re such a nerd,” Even shakes his head. “But, fine, fair enough.” He gestures towards the desk parallel to Isak. “In the drawer.”

Isak marches over to the desk and pulls open the drawer, a man on a mission. He pulls out a notebook, then dives back in for the first pen he sees. Once he’s done, he closes the drawer sharply, then walks back towards the bed.

He climbs onto it knees first, tucking them under his thighs, then opens the notebook to the very last page, just so he doesn’t catch a glimpse at anything relating to Even’s life outside of this. He flips the cover over and lays the notebook on his lap.

Isak starts off by writing RULES in capital letters, and he underlines the word twice. He hears Even snort across from him, and Isak looks up to glare at him. Even still looks amused, but he holds his hands up in defeat, as if promising he won’t say anything condescending from here on out. Which, yeah fucking right.
“Number one,” Isak proclaims. “And this starts right now, by the way.” He looks at Even until Even realizes Isak’s expecting for some sort of acknowledgment, so he nods. “No spending the night. Ever.”

Even shrugs. “Alright.”

Isak writes it down. “And we don’t linger after sex, like we’re doing right now. This is the last time.”

“Sounds fair,” Even concedes as Isak writes this down, too.

“No conversations outside of this,” he warns Even. “Texts are strictly to ask for what we need.”

Even huffs, but agrees.

In the end, it’s mostly Isak making up the rules, but Even doesn’t technically object to any of them, so Isak counts that as a win. The list, when Isak can’t think of anything more, looks a little like this:

- No spending the night
- No lingering after sex
- No cuddling
- No texts beyond booty calls
- No jealousy
- No gifts
- No dates
- Can date someone outside of this (this was mostly for Even, really, considering Isak isn’t really interested in “dating” anyone)
- Can sleep with someone outside of this
- Can end this at any given time without owing each other an explanation
- No talking about personal things
- No telling ANY of our friends, no exceptions
- Absolutely NO FEELINGS ever

Even sighs deeply when Isak rips the page out of the notebook, looking at it proudly.

“Are you done?” Even asks, and Isak looks at him.

“Do you even care about these rules?”

Even shrugs. “They’re important to you and they make you feel better about this,” he says. “So if it’s what you need, then yes. I care.”

Isak’s stomach flips uncomfortably at the admission, so he clears his throat and tries to ignore it altogether. “So you’re not going to break them?”

“Why would I?” Even’s brows furrow.

Isak eyes him suspiciously. “So you won’t?” he presses.

“No, Isak, I won’t.”

“Okay,” Isak nods, satisfied. “Then I’m leaving,” he says, dropping the paper on the bed and standing to find his clothes. When he finishes dressing, he swipes the paper from the bed again and folds it in four, stuffing it in his coat pocket. “I’ll email these to you.”

Even barks a laugh. “What?”
“I’ll email them to you.”

“Isak, you might as well just make a copy and fax it to me.”

Isak furrows his brows. “You have a fax machine?”

Even blinks at him. “Oh, my God,” he shakes his head. “I thought you were smart?”

“Oh,” Isak rolls his eyes. “You’re making fun of me. Yeah, okay, what a big surprise.”

“You don’t even have my email,” Even points out, not denying the accusation. “And I don’t check it. Ever. It’s mostly spam, anyway, and that’s probably where your rules would end up, too. I only ever check my work email, and that’s definitely not where I want your – our – rules to end up.”

Isak makes a noise. “Fine, then I’ll write them down again and bring them to you next time,” he throws his hands up in defeat. “But you need a copy, too, because – like I said before, I don’t trust you.”

“That’s fine,” Even huffs, amused. And fuck him, fuck him, fuck him. “I’ll see you next time with the rules and hopefully with some condoms, because I can’t be the only one providing them.”

“You have more than enough.”

“Lube, then.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Fine, whatever,” he finishes zipping up his coat. “This was—” Isak gestures awkwardly. “Well, this was.”

Even smirks. “Yes, it was.”

Isak grunts and then opens the door, not bothering with another goodbye. He makes it down the stairs and out the front door, and suddenly his stomach is bursting with what might be excitement or regret, he can’t really tell right now, but he hopes he figures it out by the time he gets home.

--

Isak’s decided it’s anxiousness.

He keeps thinking of the theory of probability, and keeps thinking of all the ways this could end, and none of them are really in Isak’s favor – it’s midnight now, so Eva’s asleep, and Isak’s doing nothing but pacing back and forth in his room, while Galileo hides inside a makeshift rock cave.

It’s bugging Isak, really making him feel like he didn’t really know what he was agreeing to, and it doesn’t feel too late to back out – Even looked far more confident this could work out than Isak, though, and if he’s sure this won’t backfire, then Isak should be sure, too, right?

He can’t give himself an answer without it being totally biased, so he picks up his phone quickly and presses down on Jonas’s contact through his favorites, then listens to the line ring about four times before Jonas picks up.

“Yo,” Jonas answers, not sounding like he’d been sleeping at all. There’s noise in the background, what sounds like the television, and it’s times like these that Isak is grateful his best friend’s such a night owl. “What’s up?”

“Have you ever—” he clears his throat. “Have you ever had, like, like – a fuck buddy, of sorts?”
Jonas pauses. “You mean like a friend with benefits?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah,” Jonas tells him.

“How’d that go?”

Jonas makes a noise on the other line. “Fine, I guess. It lasted about two or three months I think, and then we went our separate ways when she found someone she liked.”

Isak exhales, a little relieved. “So it was fine, then. Nothing complicated?”

“Nah,” Jonas replies. “Nothing complicated. I think if you do it right, it never is, you know?”

“Huh,” Isak feels himself start to relax. “Okay.”

There’s a silent beat, and then, “Waiiiiit,” Jonas prolongs. “Are you getting laid?”

Isak scoffs, a little too quickly, really. “No, no – don’t be stupid, of course I’m not, I don’t have time for casual sex, I was just – just curious because, uhm, Julian – he hinted at maybe having one – a friend with benefits, I mean, or whatever – and I wanted to know – I wanted to know whether or not I should be supportive.”

Isak can practically see Jonas’s eyebrow rising. “At midnight?”

“Yeah, we were texting.”

He can hear the smirk on Jonas’s lips when he replies, “Isak, I don’t think Julian’s gunning for casual sex, you know?”

Isak shakes his head, not understanding where Jonas is coming from. “I don’t know,” he replies. “I don’t know what you’re getting at, either.”

Jonas sighs loudly. “Never mind,” he says, and Isak hears a knock on the door in the background. “Oh, hey, I’ve gotta go, Mahdi’s over.”

Isak backtracks. “At midnight?”

Jonas makes a noise of assent. “Yeah, he couldn’t sleep, so I invited him over to watch some movies.”

Isak doesn’t understand why they’d do this at midnight on a school night for the both of them, but, okay. Who’s Isak to judge? He just had sex with his mortal enemy, and shit. Everyone’s got their quirks.

“Yeah, alright,” he concedes. “I’ll leave you both to it. Bye.”

“See you later, man,” Jonas replies, and then the line goes dead.

Isak exhales deeply and slowly, puts his phone down back on the end table. Okay. Okay, if Jonas, of all people, could make this work, could make it through three months of casual sex without anything getting complicated, then surely he and Even could do the same? Because he’s sure Jonas actually liked this girl, and Isak and Even, well, they don’t like each other at all – find each other attractive, sure, that much is obvious, but they don’t like each other, so—
They’ll be fine, Isak reassures himself. The odds are in his favor, not against it. He can be brave enough to do this. He is brave enough to do this. He’s been through so many riskier endeavors in his life, so sleeping with someone he doesn’t like to release a little bit of frustration, a little bit of anger, and, granted, to have some fun – he can do that. He can.

Just watch him.

Chapter End Notes

lol. famous last words, am i right?

follow me on tumblr!

also, a lot of you have been asking how frequently i'll be updating! the answer is: i plan on updating as soon as the chapters are done and looked over. i can't really say how often that'll be, because muse is always a fickle thing, but i promise i won't try to make it more than 7 - 10 days. thank you for sticking with me!!! and the slow burn!!!! there's gonna be a lot of fluff in the future ok so i hope it'll be worth it. ily all. ❤
can you believe this is the shortest chapter yet?? wow amazing

a huge thank you as always to my love cz for looking over this chapter even though she's exhausted from doing things all day. i love you with all my heart even if you think you love me more, babe.

also, please excuse if this is a mess; i wrote all of this through a terrible cold so i'm pretty sure it's like. killing my writing skills - IF THERE EVER WERE SOME, AM I RIGHT?

okay anyway i love y'all enjoy ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isak is totally owning this fuck buddies thing.

Or, friends with benefits thing. Whatever, they mean the same thing, as far as Isak’s concerned, but the term “friends with benefits” makes him cringe a little bit, considering he’s not actually friends with Even, but, then again, they’re not exactly buddies, either, so. Acquaintance fuckers? Oh, no, that sounds like an insult. It doesn’t even make sense, thinking back on it. Enemies with benefits. Isak supposes that makes more sense, but, after all the fucking they’ve done? Enemies just doesn’t feel right anymore.

(To be fair, it never really felt right before, but Isak’s aware that sometimes – maybe – not always, but there are instances in which he can maybe be a little – a tiny bit – almost like a one-twentieth bit dramatic, or whatever.)

Well, in any case, whatever they’re doing, this “no strings attached” situation they’ve got going on, is by far probably the best idea Isak’s had in a very long time. And yes, he’s aware that it was technically Even’s idea, but Isak wrote the entire list of rules with absolutely no help from him, so he’s going to go ahead and take credit for it.

The first time after the fact was a little – weird, Isak will admit. He’d rewritten the rules on another piece of paper and had shoved them at Even’s chest, said, “Keep them somewhere where no one can find them,” and Even looked way too amused for Isak to be comfortable.

Even had said something like, “I didn’t actually think you’d do this,” and Isak had scoffed at him and watched Even walk towards his desk drawer and slip the notebook paper inside, which Isak had argued was not a safe place to keep them, to which Even assured him that Yousef and Elias did not care about the shit he had in that drawer.

Isak wanted to keep arguing, because apparently, that’s just his nature, but instead Even had walked over to him and started kissing at his neck, and then at his jaw, and Isak kind of lost his train of thought for a moment until he found it again and scowled at Even and demanded he put the rules somewhere else. Even had sighed deeply and detached his lips from Isak’s neck (which Isak immediately regretted, if he’s going to be completely frank) and walked back towards his desk,
pulled the rules from his drawer, and walked over to his closet.

Even then proceeded to move some things around in there, and Isak couldn’t really tell where, exactly, he’d hidden the rules – when Isak pointed this out, Even had raised an eyebrow at him and asked, “Isn’t that kind of the point?”

Which was a point well made, but Isak was annoyed by the reply anyway, and he bitched about it for a minute or two, and then Even bitched back a little bit, and then they ended up fucking against the open closet door, both thoroughly annoyed with the other.

So, weird, but ultimately a success.

After that it got a little easier. Their text conversation, as it stands, looks like this on Isak’s phone:

**EVEN**
Come over

--

**ISAK**
Are you busy?

**EVEN**
On my way

--

**EVEN**
Boys are gone

--

**ISAK**
Eva’s with the girls for a couple of hours

--

**EVEN**
We’ll have to be quick, but got the house to myself

And so on, so forth.

On days where they have to be quick – which, Isak thinks is a very risky endeavor, but apparently their dicks don’t really give a damn – they mostly only get to strip down to their boxers, and Isak will straddle Even’s lap and they’ll grind against each other, Even’s hands on Isak’s ass willing him closer and faster, and it really is quick; sloppy, even, and very dirty – and he means that literally, as they end up coming in their underwear, which is just such a bad idea, but they end up doing the same thing the next time and the next time, because apparently they don’t really care for learning their lesson – but it’s satisfactory anyway, and they manage to go their separate ways afterwards without complaint.

It’s mostly dumb luck that they haven’t been caught yet by any of their friends, because they’ve been doing this for two weeks and every other day, basically, and no one’s really noticed – Isak thinks it’s because they just wouldn’t believe they’d be doing any normal things together, like maybe hanging out or watching a movie or other things friends do, whatever, much less sleeping with each other.
Isak thinks it’s both wishful and blissful ignorance, which is fine, if it keeps them off the scent.

So it’s been two weeks, and it’s – well, it’s really fucking good, Isak won’t lie. He hadn’t realized how much he missed having sex on the regular until now, when he’s allowed to, and he’s allowed to enjoy it without worrying about it turning into anything more; they mostly communicate while they’re having sex, and even then, they’re mostly moaning each other’s name or demanding something of each other, which, well, that’s pretty normal, it’s not like they’re gonna be talking about what they had for lunch with their dicks up each other’s asses, or down each other’s throats, or whatever.

Things are good. They haven’t broken a single rule – they don’t even technically say goodbye to each other when they’re done, just clean up and offer a half-hearted wave when they make their way out, and Isak goes on about his day, the same way he’s sure Even does. He was right to trust Jonas about this – if you do it right, then things don’t have to get complicated. Which is good, because not only does Isak not want them to get complicated, he doesn’t even think he has the time for them to get complicated.

In between all the fucking they’re doing, Isak still has classes, he still has work, he still has to hang out with the boys to put up a normal front, he still has that damn paper he hasn’t been able to start – and maybe this is why he’s so addicted to the sex, because it helps him forget just how stressful his life actually is, and for about an hour – or however long they can stretch the activity, to be honest; they try their best to make it last as long as possible when they have the time, but there’s only so much they can do when it’s really good and they’re both horny men – he gets to forget about all of it. Every single thing.

It’s different, somehow, than getting high. When he gets high, he still feels the walls around him. They’re lighter, easier to break through, but they’re never really gone, they’re never really forgotten. For a second he’s there, and for another he’s not, and it comes and goes; it’s never permanent, never consistent. He still enjoys it, of course, and when he doesn’t have the time to have sex with Even, it’s his best option, but it’s nothing compared to be able to forget completely – forget that he has walls at all, enjoy Even’s touch all over his body, like there’s absolutely nothing to break through.

The only problem nowadays is that he’s constantly thinking about it – which wouldn’t be a problem if he didn’t have a penis, of course, that is very eager to perk up at any moment Isak remembers Even’s lips around him or the way he’ll aggressively turn Isak around or his face when he rides Isak; his memory isn’t exactly his friend right now, considering it’s not really listening to Isak when he begs it to keep all Even-related material in the back until he can get in the shower or his bed at night, at least, but it’s not really listening. Isak knows that memories don’t exactly work like filing cabinets, but man, would that be really fucking helpful these days.

So on the walk back to his apartment from both work and school he has to constantly think about things he hates – which are a lot, thankfully, or, that’s maybe worrisome, but in any case, they also serve to put him in a bad mood, which is never a good thing for Eva, who just looks at him like he’s officially lost it every time he slams the front door shut after fighting with the door knob and makes a beeline for the bathroom.

(She’s also been pointing out that Isak’s been far more eager to take showers nowadays, but Isak just mutters something about better hair-care and letting him live and improve his lifestyle, Eva.)

Today’s no exception, which marks week three of whatever he and Even are doing, and he’s thinking back to two days ago when Even decided to try his luck with his tongue elsewhere this time, and it’d settled very well with Isak, to say the least. It’s getting more and more impossible to avoid the memories, so he’s thinking maybe they should cut down on how often a week they see
each other, because one, too much stimulation is a bad thing, no matter which way you look at it, and
two, he can’t keep running to the bathroom at work and doing breathing exercises whenever he gets
a boner anymore. He just can’t. Eskild had asked him on Saturday if he had a bladder infection, to
which Isak had weakly replied, “I don’t know, maybe.”

He’s going to mention it to Even next time. If he can get a word in during the main event, that is.

Isak walks up the stairs and down the hallway to his apartment door, and he’s not even dreading the
battle with the door knob this time; he’s far too tired to glare at it, so he allows it to fight him for a full
three minutes before his back hits the wall inside, and he shuts the door – loud enough to convey his
annoyance, but not too loud as to convey anger, because he’s not at that point yet. Today. Right
now. He probably will be after furiously masturbating in the shower, though.

He doesn’t have time to walk straight to the bathroom this time, though. When he’s inside, he
immediately hears laughter in the kitchen, but it’s not only Eva’s – it’s mixed with someone else’s,
someone’s laughs he’s never heard before, and it’s so prominently different that Isak’s sure the
person is a stranger to him. Narrowing his eyes, he makes his way slowly towards the kitchen, as if
to not spook Eva like one would a wild animal, and when he’s finally at the open-door frame, he
finds none other than the infamous Noora, whom he’s only known in pictures up until now, laughing
with Eva as she peels some potatoes on their cutting board.

Eva’s talking about a movie or a television show or something they’d watched together that
referenced potatoes when Isak clears his throat to get their attention.

They both look over at him, and where Eva’s eyes widen with something akin to panic, Noora
smiles and raises her eyebrows.

“Hi,” she greets, putting the peeler down and wiping her hands on her jeans. “You must be Isak,”
she walks over to him and extends a hand, which Isak takes cautiously. “I’m Noora.”

Isak doesn’t know if telling her he’s well aware of who she is would benefit Eva in any way, so he
plays it safe, pretends he’s never seen Eva stalk her Facebook. “Nice to meet you,” he clears his
throat while taking his hand back. “Sorry, I just didn’t expect Eva to have anyone over.”

Noora looks back at Eva, who clears her throat and shrugs. “I thought you’d be working,” she
admits, and she sounds a little defensive, though that might only be to Isak’s ears, considering how
long they’ve known each other. Isak narrows his eyes almost imperceptibly at her, but she doesn’t
seem too affected by it. “In fact, why aren’t you at work right now?”

“I switched shifts with Sara,” he explains, not looking away from her. “She needed Wednesday off.”

Noora pipes up. “I’m teaching Eva how to cook,” she says, gesturing towards the half-peeled
potatoes. Isak’s eyebrows rise in surprise.

“I’m sorry?”


Noora adds. “I’m teaching Eva how to cook,” she says, gesturing towards the half-peeled
potatoes. Isak’s eyebrows rise in surprise.

“I’m sorry?”

Eva looks like she’s trying very hard to fight back a blush by holding her breath, which Isak wants to
make fun of her for, but he’s also not a complete dick.

“Yeah, she mentioned how you both weren’t very good cooks, so you mostly relied on TV dinners
and fast food, so I offered to teach her some neat tricks,” she explains. Isak purses his lips in an
attempt not to laugh.
“Oh, Eva doesn’t know how to cook?” He looks over at Eva, who is currently glaring daggers at Isak. “I mean, of course Eva doesn’t know how to cook. She’s the worst cook in the world. She’s burnt water before, did you know? Just useless in the kitchen,” Isak snorts, gesturing dramatically with his hands. “Doesn’t even know how to work the toaster, that one.”

“Okay,” Eva interrupts loudly, shaking her head at him. “I think she gets the point, Isak.”

“I just want her to know what she’s dealing with, Eva,” he blinks innocently at his friend. “You have to know exactly what you’re jumping into when you’re teaching a student who is absolutely clueless about a subject. I should know, I teach clueless children all the time at the museum.”

“Well, she’s been doing a great job so far,” Eva says pointedly. “So, you know. If you’d let me concentrate—”

“Would you like to join us, Isak?” Noora asks kindly, and both he and Eva look over to Noora in surprise. “I think it might benefit you both if you learned how to cook. You might even be able to take turns.”

Isak and Eva share an amused glance, before they both turn back to Noora.

“That’s very kind of you, Noora, but I know how to cook,” he lies, and Noora’s brows furrow.

“Oh, really?” Noora asks, a hint of skepticism in her voice.

“Okay,” she replies slowly. “Then why haven’t you cooked— before?”

Eva is waving her hands desperately behind Noora, in a gesture Isak is taking to mean “abort”, but Isak’s really not sure how to backtrack from this one. He does make an aborted noise with the back of his throat, then he clears it, buying himself some time. It turns out to not matter, however, because Eva speaks up for him when it’s looking like he’s not going to say anything soon.

“He’s just lazy,” she replies, and Noora turns to look back at him.

“And busy,” Isak snaps a little in reply, narrowing his eyes at her. “I’m always working or at school or—” he stops himself before he says ‘fucking the guy I really dislike outside of his physical appearance’, because then that’ll be a whole Thing, and then Isak won’t have the upper hand in this situation, which is mostly ‘what the fuck is Eva doing still flirting with the straight girl with a boyfriend’. ‘Both of those places. And – working on homework. It’s a matter of time,” Isak turns to look back at Noora. “Which is why Eva assumes I don’t know how to cook.”

Noora nods her head as if she understands, but Eva smirks behind her. “You should cook for us some time, Isak.” When Noora turns to look back at Eva, her smirk turns into an innocent smile, which Isak counters with narrowed eyes. “You know. Since you know how to cook so well.”

Oh, Eva’s treading dangerous waters here. Isak totally has the upper hand in this situation, since he can call her bluff even sooner than she can call his, considering he doesn’t care if Noora knows the truth about him, not if Noora knows he lied because his roommate has a big, fat, gay crush on her.

So Isak tries to convey all of this with an equally innocent smile, a message Eva seems to receive very well, if the way her smile disappears immediately is anything to go by. “Maybe when I’m not so busy, Eva,” he tells her. “I’ll cook for all of you. Even you, Noora,” Isak turns to look at Noora, who’s looking a little out of the loop. For good reason, of course. “Just a big meal in celebration of Eva learning how to cook.”

Noora huffs a laugh. “Okay?” she shakes her head. “No, yes, okay, that sounds fun,” she turns to look at Eva. “You trust him enough not to poison us, right?”
Oh, she made a joke – Isak’s happy to know she’s actually human, and not just an android Eva built for herself who looks perfect and knows how to cook and walks around just majoring in Women’s Studies like she actually has a future with it and living in Madrid and London and all those things that happen to literally no one normal.

Eva’s smile at her is a little star struck, and oh, Jesus, woman, keep it in your pants. “Yeah, I guess he’s alright enough,” she waves Noora off. “I’ve known him long enough to trust him. Except with my boyfriends. You see—”

“Fifteen, Eva!” Isak interrupts with a huff. “Fifteen years old. It’s time to move on.”

Eva scoffs. “Not when it makes for a great story, it’s not.”

“Ugh,” Isak spits. “Whatever. I’ll just—” he gestures lamely behind him. “I’ll go play some video games or something. It’s been a while.”

Noora nods. “Yeah, of course,” she smiles at Isak, and oh, Jesus Christ, is she a fucking Barbie doll or something? Is this like that Lindsay Lohan movie Eva made him watch a couple of years back? “I’m keeping you to that cooking offer, though,” she teases, and Isak has a momentary lapse of memory until he realizes she’s talking about the lie he just made up literally a minute ago.

Isak’s pretty sure Noora will forget about it eventually, or maybe just not push it, so Isak fakes a laugh and waves her off. “Of course,” he says, smiling brightly at the both of them. “So I’ll just be out in the living room,” he says pointedly, looking straight at Eva. “Where I can hear everything that’s happening in here. Clearly. Just – in case anyone wanted to know.”


“Have fun learning how to cook, Eva,” he grins brightly, then turns around and walks to the living room, where he finally removes his shoes, left and right, and then his coat, and then his smile immediately disappears, replaced by genuine worry for his friend.

It’s not that Isak thinks Eva doesn’t think she knows what she’s doing. Isak is sure she does. Eva’s stubborn that way, where she thinks she has all the answers and control over her feelings, like she’s invincible when she sets her mind to it, like she’s forgotten all her previous endeavors and the way they’ve ended in nothing but disappointment and heartbreak.

But Isak remembers them. Always does, when Eva sets her sights on the impossible. And there’s only so much Isak can handle when he sees his friend broken like that, curled into herself, tears running down her face, wondering what exactly is wrong with her. And the thing about Eva is that she’s strong – she learned a long time ago that her opinion of herself is worth more than anyone else’s, which Isak was very proud of her for, but sometimes it seems like she forgets – or, rather, remembers, remembers the way her mother left her alone for months at a time, remembers when her friends decided she wasn’t worth their time anymore, remembers the small things that shaped her into the greater person she is today, and Isak gets it, he does, he’s been there, and maybe they both handled it differently, they were both shaped into completely different people—

Isak into someone who refuses to take the bait, let someone have his trust again, and Eva into someone who trusts far too much, adamant on finding proof that the world isn’t as cold as it’s taught her it is.

In one particular instance, when Eva had just been broken up with by an idiot man with a stupidly shaped head and a ridiculous tendency to wear fucking bow ties and a man-bun (Isak shivers at the thought of them, and frowns at his drunk self once again) wherever he went, Eva told Isak that the
douche had asked that if they were meant to be, then why did he feel like Eva loved him more than he loved her?

Which is just not the way you let down someone easily, that fucking idiot, at least go with the ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ line, rather than dumping all the fault on the other person. Just leave with your conscience clean, at least. Though Isak’s learned not everyone has one, though that’s just a psychological anomaly, which he tried to explain to Eva while he held her on the couch and which she wasn’t having.

“Not everything has to be a science, Isak,” she’d snapped at him. “Sometimes people are cruel. And there’s no reason for it. They have no excuse. Not everything comes down to a – a brain defect, or whatever. They’re cruel, and that’s it. And it doesn’t mean I’m giving up—” here, she’d sat up to looks Isak straight in the eye. “Because not everyone is cruel, and not everyone will break me.”

And Isak had looked her straight in the eye and said, “Ultimately, it’s your decision.” Because there’s only so much Isak can do, and that’s what his friend needed to hear in the moment, and she cuddled back into Isak’s chest and sniffled for a little while longer before she fell asleep.

Isak can’t protect Eva the way he protects himself. Isak is aware that some people are stronger than others, and that’s just fine. Eva is hopeful, and Isak is not, and yet they still manage to stay in each other’s lives and accept each other. But that doesn’t mean they’re always happy with the life the other’s chosen to live, and Isak is never, ever happy to see Eva breaking down, broken again, after another failed attempt at finding the person she’s meant to be with. He doesn’t think it’s fair, that Eva lets herself be played by the world this way, but Eva also doesn’t think it’s fair that Isak doesn’t.

And so they end up here, every single time. Where Isak is trying to protect Eva from falling into that deep, ridiculous hole it takes her days to climb out of, and Eva insisting Isak is far too cynical for his own good. And Isak knows, he knows this is where they’re going – eventually, Noora will marry this boyfriend of hers, or assure Eva that she can never be interested in her the way she’s clearly interested in Noora, and Eva will break again. And Isak will be there, wondering once again why she lets this happen to her. When it’s so much easier to build the walls Isak has spent years building around him, and not allow anyone to have the power to take you under.

Eva’s lived through people letting her down, lived through having the people closest to her never meeting her expectations. And yet she still has faith in things beyond her control, and Isak will never understand her.

He hears her giggle loudly in the kitchen with Noora, and something undefinable squeezes at his heart. Isak really wants to believe she’ll tread lightly this time. Maybe she’s grown, and maybe she’s learned.

(But Isak knows better.)

He falls onto the couch with a loud sigh. Well, at least this has definitely ruined whatever hard-on he was planning on getting in the bathroom. Now his thoughts are mostly filled with worry for Eva, overshadowing any memory of Even, which – Isak isn’t sure whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing, but he’s going to say it’s the former, because he’s just so tired of masturbating; and there’s something he never thought he’d say. But it’s just not as satisfying as the real thing, and also, his hand can only do so much every other day. He still needs to take notes at school and, you know, use it for other things, things that are important. He needs the use of it and it’s no use to him if it’s always so fucking sore.

Isak rubs at his eyes and wonders if he’s going to play video games at all. To be frank, he hasn’t played in a very long time – he has the console because once in a while Eva will like to play with
him, and sometimes the boys will come over and play, too, and that’s fine, but he hasn’t gamed alone since high school, he thinks, and that’s also fine. Gaming alone can be a good experience or a lonely one, depending on the kind of person you are, and for Isak, it’s long become the latter.

And he can’t stop hearing Eva and Noora’s quiet mutters in the kitchen, and hating the way he can’t do anything, and he thinks about just locking himself up in his bedroom and taking a nap, like he always does, naps during the day and hardly sleeps at night, but before he can even try to stand, his text notification goes off.

He’s ashamed to admit that his stomach jumps a little in anticipation, thinking Even needs an outlet, and Isak being more than willing to provide it, despite how much he’s tried to convince himself it’s been too much all day. And he hates the fact that he’s a little disappointed when he pulls out his phone and sees Jonas’s contact on his screen instead, when it’s usually a pleasure, of course, considering that’s his best friend.

This whole situation with Even is great, but he’s starting to realize now it’s really messing with his head.

Though, that really doesn’t stop Isak from wanting it. Which he knows is part of the problem, but Isak, like many other things in life, is choosing to ignore the fact.

He swipes at the screen of his phone and is taken straight to Jonas’s text conversation and reads the new message.

   JONAS
   Hey, Mahdi’s coming over to hang. You want in?

Isak snorts. Jonas asks as if Isak’s ever refused.

He types a reply.

   ISAK
   Yeah, on my way

   JONAS
   Cool

Isak looks over at where he’s left his shoes, then at his coat, and finally looks over at the wall covering the kitchen – he grimaces, suddenly afraid to leave Eva alone with this – situation, but he knows he’d be better off hanging out with the guys and getting high, trying not to worry about this, trying not to think about having sex with Even every other hour. In the end, it comes down to what’s best for his sanity, so he gets off the couch and walks over to his shoes.

Once he puts both of them on and grabs his coat, he hesitantly makes his way to the kitchen – Eva and Noora are standing far too close together, Noora laughing at the way Eva is clearly pretending to be hopeless at chopping carrots, and Isak bites his lip, worried. He doesn’t know if he should interrupt them and announce his exit, or if he should let this go on uninterrupted – he wants Eva to know he’s absolutely on to her, but he also doesn’t want Eva to rant to him for about half an hour when he comes home about how Isak doesn’t have to mom her all the time, and she knows what she’s doing, Isak, can you just for once leave her alone?

So Isak licks his lips and quietly makes his way out of the kitchen unnoticed, grabbing the keys he’d left on the table and making his way out of the apartment.
He fights with the doorknob for half a minute, then finally makes his way down the hall and down the stairs.

It’s cold, but Isak can’t really feel it when he’s thinking about – he’s thinking about many, many things, and not all of them are good, but not all of them are bad, and he thinks that’s what he’s made up of; nothing concrete and nothing special, a mess of ultimate proportions.

--

Magnus and Jonas’s place is always weirdly clean – Isak thinks it’s either Jonas’s doing, or one of them is springing for a housekeeper, because he’d never in a million years would have guessed they could keep things this tidy. Not the two of them together, at least. And Isak likes to joke often about how their apartment smells like piss, but it usually always smells of lavender, and Isak can never find the source of the scent, so it like, really bothers him.

The only thing Isak doesn’t like about their place is Jonas’s demon cat – sometimes the cat will leave them alone, stick to Jonas’s room and ignore their puny human existence – but other times, the cat makes it his mission to walk all over them, hiss at Isak at every turn, and make sure Isak knows Jonas is his property, and his property only.

Which, alright, cat, he’s not going to fight you for him.

So today’s one of those days where the cat’s decided to roam around the living room with them, eyeing them all suspiciously, like he’s waiting for Mahdi or Isak to make the wrong move. Isak thinks the cat doesn’t exactly like Magnus, but he tolerates him, as he lives with him, so his usual prey is Isak or Mahdi or both.

Both he and Mahdi keep eyeing the cat just as suspiciously, even though they’re both probably high off their asses by now.

“Your cat’s literally trying to kill us,” Mahdi tells Jonas, and Jonas frowns.

“He’s not,” he gestures towards the cat. “He’s literally fat and orange. He wouldn’t lay a finger on you guys.”

Isak and Mahdi exchange a look.

“This is why we don’t stay over anymore, man,” Mahdi looks back at Jonas. “We’re both pretty sure we’ll be murdered in our sleep by him.”

Jonas rolls his eyes. “You’re both so fucking dramatic.”

Magnus makes a noise. “He’s alright,” he says. “Just a little creepy sometimes. Like, I’ll be eating a Dorito, and he looks at me as if I’m eating his fucking sibling or something. I think he might be a little overprotective of everything else that’s orange.”

“He’d love early 2000s Kim Kardashian, then,” Mahdi mutters, and Isak laughs at the ridiculousness of the statement. Also because he’s high, and right now any joke anyone makes is probably the most hilarious joke he’s ever heard in his life.

“You can all stop being mean to Garfield now,” Jonas protests, frowning slightly.

“And that’s another thing,” Mahdi says. “Did you make him fat on purpose? Just so you could justify the name you gave him?”
Jonas sniffs. “I’d never do that to him. He’s just a glutton, and it’s his life to live. I’m not going to control him, I don’t own him. He’s just my bud.”

The rest of them roll their eyes in tandem.

“Oh, hey,” Jonas looks over at Magnus, who looks like he’s starting to realize he’s grown more than one head. Sometimes weed just isn’t Magnus’s best friend, Isak thinks. “What’s the deal with Thomas? You never said another word about him, and I haven’t asked because I haven’t been high enough to try.”

“Har, har,” Magnus rolls his eyes. “No new developments. He’s definitely ghosted me. I’m left here, in ghost town, pretending I didn’t ever have feelings for him.”

“Dude, you knew him for like, a couple of days,” Mahdi points out.

“A week and a half,” Magnus snaps back. “That’s longer than Britney Spears’s first marriage.”

“I don’t think that’s really getting your point across, Mags,” Isak offers, and Magnus sighs dramatically, falls back against the back of the couch – he’s nearly pouting, and Isak would say it’s a full-on pout, but his glasses are fogging up again, so he can’t be sure.

You’d think Isak would learn to take his glasses off in cases like these. But regardless of the situation – glasses on and fogged or glasses off completely – it’s not like his vision would be any better either way, so he’s going to stick with his glasses. At least the fog sometimes helps clear them up afterwards.

“The bad thing is that I didn’t even get laid,” Magnus says. “I mean – it was great for what it was, don’t get me wrong, but it really would have been nice to get some action, too. At least that way, I’d know the reason why he ghosted me, too.”

“Why’s that?” Jonas asks.

“Because of my sex skills,” Magnus sighs. “I hardly ever get to practice.”

Mahdi snorts. “Magnus, I’m sure you jerk off, don’t you?” He waits for Magnus’s responding blush.

“Don’t you just – do with your hand what you do with yourself?”

Isak glances at Mahdi, eyebrows raised judgmentally. Mahdi mutters something that might be an apology, Isak can’t know for sure, and turns his attention back to the weed. Magnus is sighing deeply across from him, digging a deeper hole into the couch when he sinks down into it further. Magnus has confessed to Isak before he doesn’t really have much practice with “gay sex”, and he wasn’t sure about the logistics of it – he’d told Isak he’d watched gay porn after Vilde left him, proclaiming herself a lesbian, and it definitely “did something for him”, but even if he watched it over and over and over again, Magnus said it didn’t really help him know to place what where. Isak had pointed out it’s a very simple process – much like having sex with a woman, if you’re talking penetration, but in his experience, he’s at least sure both parties actually come. He’s sure the same can be said for girl on girl sex, too – straight sex must be so disappointing for both parties, but mostly women, he thinks.

Anyway, he digresses – he tried to explain to Magnus that he was under no obligation to do anything he didn’t want to with another man, and if all he ever wanted to do was jerk someone else off, that was fine, or if all he wanted to do was penetration, then that was fine, too. He remembers Magnus trying not to giggle every time Isak said the word “penetration”, which led Isak to point out maybe he wasn’t mature enough to have sex anyway, which led to a whole other argument until they landed
back on sex and porn and the difference thereof.

So Isak had recommended he watched boyfriend porn – far more realistic, sex was shown to be much less hardcore, and it was easy to make out what they were doing if what Magnus was looking for was a lesson. Magnus had asked Isak if that’s what he watched, and Isak stuttered that sure, of course, and tried not to think back to all the public toilet sex porn he’s ever bookmarked.

So this means Magnus’s experience stretches to some boyfriend porn he’s watched and Isak’s expertise, though he does recall advising Magnus something similar to what Mahdi has just told him – practice on yourself, do what you would do with yourself, which is fine, but Isak doesn’t really think straight people should have a say on what and how they should learn to have sex.

“Even what I do with myself sometimes doesn’t do the trick,” Magnus admits quietly, face flushed with embarrassment. “I mean, hands, sure, but everything else? Just can’t do it.”

Isak sighs. “Doesn’t always do the trick the first couple of times, Mags.”

Magnus stays quiet for a moment, and the rest of them let him gear up to speak, since they know this is something bothering Magnus very prominently – even if all of them do want to move on to safer, less depressing topics.

“Okay,” Magnus sits up, leans forward with his elbows on his knees. “Real talk. Have any of you ever tried to suck your own dick?”

They all groan. Well, at least they know he feels better now.

“Magnus, what the fuck,” Mahdi rolls his eyes.

“That sounds uncomfortable as fuck,” Jonas adds with a grimace.

“It’s a thing!” Magnus exclaims defensively. “It’s totally a thing. I’ve watched guys in porn do it and it looks like it feels really good.”

“Porn actors are supposed to make things look like they feel really good,” Jonas points out. “Besides, I really doubt porn actors actually ever masturbate, like. Don’t you think they’re way too tired of all the sex they have during the day to try again at home?”

They all look at Jonas.

“That has nothing to do with the fact?” Magnus blinks, and Jonas shrugs his shoulders, conceding. “But, seriously – none of you have ever tried it?” They all shake their heads. “Isak?”

Isak furrows his brows. “Why would I have tried it? Why aren’t you specifically asking Jonas, or Mahdi?”

“Because,” Magnus scoffs. “You’re probably the most flexible out of all of us.”

Isak raises an eyebrow, and they all sit in silence for a moment before Mahdi snorts loudly.

“Dude,” Mahdi laughs. “How would you know that?”

Magnus is blushing underneath his glare. “I pay attention, God,” he mutters, and both Jonas and Mahdi keep laughing at the admission.

“Do you check Isak out?” Mahdi asks between laughter, and Magnus rolls his eyes.
“Before! I used to!” he snaps defensively. “I was trying to come to terms with my sexuality, okay, it was merely for science.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek in order to avoid laughing out loud with the other two boys. “Aw, Magnus,” he looks at him. “I’m so flattered.”

Magnus mutters something unintelligible under his breath, then Jonas bumps his shoulder with Magnus’s. “The real question is,” Jonas starts. “Have you tried it before, Magnus?”

Magnus snorts. “Duh,” he replies quickly and easily, and, well, fair enough. “Couldn’t do it, though. Like, I rolled over on my bed and fell on my ass instead.”

Jonas raises a judgmental eyebrow. “All to suck your own dick?”

“In an attempt to, yes.”

“Why don’t you just try and go to a gay club with Isak?” Jonas asks. “People offer to suck your dick there all the time. I’ve gotten plenty of offers I’ve actually been tempted to accept, myself.”

“No, but I want the first guy to suck my dick to be special—”

“The first guy who attempted to suck your dick was you.”

“No, I – listen, what I mean is—”

This is where Isak tunes out of the heated conversation Jonas and Magnus are now having, not really here for it. His body feels light and his eyes want to close, and all this talk about sucking dick – whether by other people or themselves, he guesses – just kept reminding him of his time with Even, which is not a good idea, not in front of the rest of the boys. They’d think he was getting turned on at the thought of Magnus sucking his own dick, God forbid, and the worst part is he wouldn’t even have anything smart to counter with, as he can’t really come out and say, no, that’s not it, I’m just thinking about Even.

Isak allows his head to go to other places, out of bounds, visiting the stars and everything he’s learned about them, running them over and over and over in his head, like he’s got nothing to do down here, and everything to do up in the sky. He lets his brain teach him lessons he’s already been taught, paint him memories he remembers every day, loses control of his thoughts for just a moment, doesn’t let himself think about Even or the way his lips feel attached to his neck or the last time he—

“Hey.”

Isak opens his eyes to look over at Mahdi, who’s looking at him curiously. Magnus and Jonas are still bickering across from them, something Isak is sure they do every day, considering they see so much of each other, and Isak has to blink a couple of times before he breaks completely out of his stupor.

“Hi,” Isak greets back, raising an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

Mahdi searches his expression for a moment, then tilts his head. “Are you okay, man?” he asks quietly, and Isak is trying to pinpoint how literally everyone can ask him that while he’s high off his ass. “You look way out of it.”

Isak smiles crookedly. “Weed’ll do that to you.”

“Nah,” Mahdi shakes his head. “I mean, like – out of it out of it. Like you don’t want to be here, so
you’re purposely going somewhere else. You’re usually babbling nonsense to us.”

Ugh. Does Isak really talk that much about science when he’s high? There’s no other explanation for why both Mutta and Mahdi keep noticing this.

Isak sticks with his usual story. “I’m just stressed,” he tells Mahdi. “It’s not a big deal.”

Mahdi hums contemplatively, then grins. “We can go to a gay bar on Friday, if you want,” he offers, and Isak scoffs, amused. “What? I’m serious.”

“Mahdi, we don’t have to go to a gay bar,” Isak tells him. “We can literally go to any bar, I don’t mind it. I never have.”

“Yeah,” Mahdi agrees. “But the chances of you getting laid triple at a gay bar. And they’re darker, for some reason, so the guys can’t get a good look at your ugly mug.”

Isak scoffs. “You’re a wonderful friend,” he replies, biting his lip to keep from saying something like, I really don’t need to get laid right now, it’s happening regularly nowadays. “I really don’t have time for hook-ups right now. And I’m not really interested in them. I know it’s a hard concept to grasp for you, but really. I don’t need to get laid right now.”

Mahdi’s eyebrows rise. “Oh?” he grins mischievously. “Have things finally developed with Julian?”

Isak stares at him. “Why do you think there’s something between me and Julian?” Isak asks, perplexed. “We’re literally just coworkers. Or, friends, or whatever,” he amends, because that’s something Julian’s decided they are, and Isak can see it, considering Julian’s friends with the rest of the boys, so it’s not like he necessarily has to bump him down immediately to coworker anymore. “You guys are going to get ideas in his head if you keep this shit up.”

“Okay,” Mahdi holds up both of his hands. “Alright, man, no stress,” he sits back on the couch, but there’s a hint of a smirk on his lips, which serves to irritate Isak further.

“I’m—” he’s about to start complaining some more, when his text notification goes off in his pocket. Isak’s heart races of its own accord, without Isak’s permission whatsoever, and he can’t help the haste with which he digs his hands into his pocket and pulls his phone out to look at the screen.

Isak’s stomach swoops at the sight of Even’s contact lighting up his screen, and he licks his lips, making sure to angle the phone slightly away from Mahdi when he unlocks it.

**EVEN**

Boys are gone, I think for three hours or so. Busy??

Isak really hates how quickly he types a reply, and how eager he is to immediately agree.

**ISAK**

On my way

He locks his phone and pockets it again, looking up at the boys. He interrupts Jonas’s and Magnus’s bickering by clearing his throat loudly. “Hey,” he calls out, and they all turn to look at him. “I’m gonna bounce,” he says, putting out his joint and standing from the couch. “I just got a text from E—skild,” he amends quickly. “Yeah, work. He wants me to, uh, come in for inventory.” Isak clears his throat, not suspiciously at all.

They all look at him incredulously. “That’s kind of random, don’t you think?” Jonas asks cautiously. “Are you sure he’s not calling you over just to seduce you?”
Isak glares at him. “Seriously?” he snaps. “Don’t talk about Eskild that way.”

Jonas holds up his hands, placating. “Yeah, okay, sorry dude,” he apologizes, and it seems like he means it, so Isak lets it go. “Do what you have to do. You still coming to the bar on Friday?”

Isak starts putting on his shoes, left and right, and then his coat. “Yeah,” he tells him. “Of course, why wouldn’t I?”

The boys all exchange a glance, so Isak raises an eyebrow at them suspiciously.

“What?”

“Just – you’ve been ditching us a lot lately,” Jonas starts slowly. “Or showing up really late, or something. I don’t know, we just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Isak sighs loudly. He hadn’t noticed, exactly, just how much he’s been ditching his friends in favor of sex – he might definitely be an addict at this point, Isak doesn’t know, and he would ask Eva if he didn’t think sex addiction and her major were bullshit, so he’s not actually going to. Still, he feels a little guilty about this, even if he does ditch them for absolutely magnificent sex, so he shifts his weight and sighs loudly.

“Yeah, sorry,” he apologizes sincerely. “It’s just – I’m either stuck covering someone’s shift or trying to finish homework,” he lies, and his stomach doesn’t seem to agree with his bullshit. “But I promise I’ll finish everything by Friday so I don’t ditch you guys again, alright?”

They all look at him, a little suspiciously, and Mahdi is the first one to nod.

“That’s chill.”

Isak smiles at him gratefully.

“Alright,” he announces, saluting them with one hand. “I’m off. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, boys.”

“That means we can barely do anything,” Magnus scoffs, and Isak promptly flips him off.

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Isak doesn’t want to readily admit that he spent the entire way to Even’s place thinking about what he wanted to do, but if you think about, there was a lot of dick-sucking talk back at Jonas’s and Magnus’s place, so it’s only normal that’s exactly what he was thinking of doing when he got there, right?

It was good. It’s always good, mind you, but this time he immediately forced Even down to his knees and didn’t really have to say much after that – Even quickly got with the program, and all Isak could do was tug at Even’s hair, throw his head back against the wall and gasp Even’s name repeatedly; when Even seemed to want to help himself out, Isak kicked his hand away, and when Even finished with him, Isak eagerly returned the favor.

It was good because they’re starting to communicate exactly what they want now without actually demanding it out loud; not that they’re not demanding it aggressively, but it helps with the “no talking” rule, and it’s so much easier to get dressed and leave without really saying a goodbye, since they’ve both silently agreed that’s not necessary, lest they start acting like polite acquaintances, which they’re not, if their sex has anything to say about it.
Today, though – today, Even’s lying on his bed with nothing but his boxers on, sifting through a photo album of some sort while Isak gets dressed, and Isak plans on making his usual exit – quietly slip out the door, say nothing to Even as he does, and go on about his day like nothing had happened, spend the rest of the day in enough post-sex bliss so that he doesn’t have to jerk off for the rest of it. This is a win, really. He’s glad Even asked him over.

Isak is pulling up his pants and zipping them up when he catches sight of the drawings taped to Even’s closet doors – Isak supposes that subconsciously he’s always known they’re there, but today’s the first time he actually pays attention to what they are, and he glances at Even hesitantly. He seems to be enthralled with whatever he’s looking at, so Isak picks up his shirt from the floor and quietly steps closer to the closet, pretending to take his sweet time putting on his shirt and perusing the drawings.

They’re nothing like what Even had shown a year back, at the gallery. These are drawn on torn notebook paper, or torn printer paper, and they’re either drawn with pencil, blue ink, or black ink, which Isak supposes means they’ve been drawn over time and not in the same day – he furrows his brows as he walks, takes them all in; there are drawings of Muslim women wearing burkas or hijabs, then there are drawings that turn into comic strips – silly things, things Isak might find on the internet, funny stuff that leads Isak to deduce Even is actually a funny person – and there are sketches of different people in Even’s life – he spots one of Elias and Yousef, sitting next to each other on their front porch, spots one of Jonas and Mahdi, even, one of Magnus hanging on some monkey bars, spots one of Mutta and Elias arm wrestling.

They’re cartoonish sketches, almost, but it’s easy to make out who’s who – they seem to be made in humor, nothing serious, and something like curiosity squeezes at Isak’s heart, something he most definitely doesn’t want.

“You like them?”

Isak startles and immediately turns around to find Even looking at him a little contemplatively, and Isak swallows harshly in an attempt to hide his blush. He’s quick to slip his shirt back on, as if that’s what he meant to do all along, but turns back around to look at the sketches again.

“Did you draw them?” he asks, skipping over Even’s question.  

Even snorts from where he sits on the bed. “Yeah,” he tells Isak. “You were at my art showing a year ago.”

The silence that hangs between them at the memory isn’t long, just tense – Isak doesn’t want to be a part of it, doesn’t want to live in it longer than he has to.

“Yeah,” Isak concedes. “But these are funny, and those were pretentious.”

For a moment Even’s silent, as if he’s trying to figure out whether or not Isak is joking, and then he snorts loudly once again. “Shut up, Valtersen,” he replies, but there’s no actual malice behind the comment – something Isak finds strange, but doesn’t really allow to settle; instead, he keeps looking through the sketches, laughs quietly at some that are ridiculous enough to merit the laugh, now that he doesn’t necessarily have to stay quiet so Even doesn’t notice him snooping.

He purses his lips before asking, “So you just draw these for fun?” He looks back at Even, who looks a little somber.

“Yeah,” he admits. “Gotta remind myself sometimes I still like to draw.”
Isak’s brows furrow. “How do you mean?”

“Well,” Even shifts his weight on the bed. “The more I keep drawing things that other people tell me to draw, the more difficult it gets to remember why I started,” he explains. “To remember that this is something I actually like to do, that there are the styles that other people expect from me, and then there’s my own.”

Isak glances back at the sketches. “Why are you drawing what other people are asking you to draw?”

“I’m a freelance artist,” he tells Isak. “And a freelance photographer. It’s the only way I’m getting myself through film school.”

Isak blinks stupidly at the words – film school? Isak was sure art was the only thing Even did for a living – photography, even though it never crossed his mind, it’s close enough to art that Isak can understand. But film school? Out of everything else he could have guessed about Even? It doesn’t really make sense.

Isak licks his lips. “So the stuff you drew at the gallery last year,” he starts looking back at Even. “Not your style?”

Even hums. “No, that’s not it,” he says. “It’s more like – the gallery space for the showing was a favor from a friend,” he explains. “I needed the money, and that’s what people look for the most. Surrealists paintings.”

Isak frowns. “Like the literary movement?”

“Yeah,” Even nods. “Like that. Except in art, which is pretty much the same concept. Just – dream-like paintings, taken from the subconscious mind, meant to unnerve the human eye, or fight against the suppression of the rational mind, or whatever.”

If that’s what Even’s paintings were meant to do at the gallery, then he certainly did a good job – Isak remembers being unnerved and frustrated at the sight of the first painting he stood in front of, before Even came around and turned it all into complete shit.

“So like Pablo Picasso,” Isak offers, and Even laughs softly, most likely remembering their first meeting, as well.

“Yeah,” Even agrees. “Though he didn’t join the surrealist movement until later. You said my paintings were influenced by him, but that’s not true,” he shakes his head. “I took more inspiration from Frida Kahlo. She used to deny her art was surrealistic; she insisted she didn’t paint dreams, didn’t paint the subconscious mind the way the movement warranted – her paintings were conscious. She painted her life.”

Isak shifts his weight, not understanding, and hating it.

“So the paintings shown in the gallery were just that – my life, my feelings, distorted to look like something out of a dream, except they really just expressed just how little control I feel like I have over my life, and how I wish I did. I didn’t fight against the rational mind; I expanded on it.”

Isak doesn’t know what to do with this information. It strikes him, suddenly, just how little he actually knows about Even – and that everything he’d assumed about him seemed to be falling apart around him and he doesn’t like it. He doesn’t want to see this part of Even. He doesn’t. The theory of probability swims around in his head like a warning, but his feet aren’t listening, glued to the carpet of Even’s room.
“Hence, the comics,” Even finally finishes, gesturing towards the closet doors. “Reminds me not everything has to be a chore, or have a meaning. Sometimes things can be taken at face value, and I can enjoy drawing for myself. At least I have control over that.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek and looks back at the sketches. He can see where Even’s coming from – they’re lighthearted, but Isak can almost feel the care and fondness jumping off the pages, like even if Even meant them to be taken at face value, meant them to be nothing but silly comics, silly drawings of his own, he drew them with care, with admiration, with inspiration. And Isak realizes now why maybe his subconscious refused to notice the sketches taped to the closet doors – it reminds him that outside of this, Even is still his own person, a person Isak knows very little about. And Isak thinks that’s okay, he shouldn’t, they work well this way; the less they know about each other, the easier it is to keep this as it is, nothing complicated, nothing but sex, nothing but something to make the both of them feel good and forget they’re people outside of the argument they once had.

He realizes, yes, that this is probably the longest conversation they’ve had since they started this thing three weeks ago – no, maybe the longest conversation they’ve had at all, barring any drunken conversation they might have made that first night. And it hasn’t once felt – bitter, or aggressive, but just like a chat, like any normal acquaintances would, something scratching at the surface, something you’d talk to a stranger about when you’re trying to get to know them.

And that’s not exactly good, not for Isak. That’s not something he wants to think about when he kisses Even, or feels his teeth scraping at his neck, or his hands gripping at his hair; he doesn’t want to know that there’s more to him than physical appearances, that there’s an entirely different person inside of him making Isak feel good, feel better than he has in years.

Isak finally walks over and grabs his glasses, then to where he dropped his shoes and coat, putting both articles of clothing on at the same time. Even is looking at his feet in amusement, which Isak doesn’t understand, but he lets it slide, if only because he’s learned enough about Even for one night.

He lingers at the door for a second longer, before he offers Even an awkward wave. “I’m going to go now,” he says, something they’ve never actually done – it’s not technically a goodbye, but it is an announcement of retrieval, and that’s different enough for Isak to panic, just a little.

And then his mouth decides to keep on running, because why wouldn’t it go against Isak’s wishes? “I do, by the way,” he says, and Even tilts his head in a manner that’s way too fucking endearing to be comfortable, and Isak has the crazy urge to tug at his hair.

“Do what?” Even asks.

“Like them,” he gestures towards the drawings on the closet doors. “You asked if I liked them. I do.”

There’s a second where they both look at each other awkwardly, and then Even’s lips turn upward into a small smile. Isak has to fight his lips before they do the same.

“Thanks,” Even replies, and Isak nods once, tightly. He finally turns to open the door, and he walks out of the bedroom quietly, closes the door without trying to make a sound. He stands outside the bedroom for a moment longer, trying to gather his thoughts, trying to make sense of what had just happened, but the longer he stands there, the more his stomach churns – so he licks his lips and walks towards the stairs, where he takes them down one step at a time, eyes glued to his feet. Three weeks – they’d done so good for three weeks, and then Isak decides to go ahead and notice the drawings taped to the closet doors, and—

“Isak!”
Isak quickly snaps his head up, almost tripping when he misses a step – Elias is looking at him from the bottom of the stairs, kindly, as it were, but very, very confused, the same way Yousef had looked that first morning after. He’s definitely out of excuses this time – he can’t blame it on his drunkenness, and he can’t exactly explain he’d been fucking Even upstairs for fun, so his mind is trying to quickly come up with an explanation that makes sense, and isn’t suspicious, but he’s blanking completely.

Elias seems to find the lack of response from Isak weird, which, yeah, fair, so he presses a little. “Hey,” he greets again, voice puzzled. “What are you doing here?”

Isak stutters for a moment. “I’m – I was, uhm—”

“He was scoring some free weed from me,” comes Even’s voice from the top of the staircase, and Isak turns around from where he’s stuck three steps up from the floor; Even’s leaning against the railing at the very top, dressed from head to toe, cool and collected, as if he hadn’t just had Isak’s dick down his throat, and vice versa. Isak has no idea how he’s doing it – Isak’s knees are about to give way, to be honest.

He turns back to look at Elias, who looks even more perplexed than before. “What?” he looks between the two of them. “You guys are sharing weed?”

Isak shrugs his shoulders, trying for nonchalant.

“Why is that so weird?” Even asks from the top floor, and Elias gives him a disbelieving look.

“Maybe because you guys couldn’t stand the sight of each other a couple of weeks ago?” He offers, and Even hums, as if considering the reply. Isak just really, really wants to leave, before his mouth opens up and spills the beans and ruins everything.

“Desperate times, I guess,” Even shrugs casually, and Isak really, really needs to get out of here before he blows the entire thing.

“Yep,” Isak pipes up happily. “Had to get my weed somewhere, you know?”

Elias furrows his brows. “But doesn’t Jonas—”

“Shit, look at the time,” Isak looks down at his wrist. “I’ve gotta go, Eva’s expecting me home soon.”

Elias looks at Isak’s wrist, which does not, in fact, have a watch that can tell him the time. “You’re —”

“Bye, Elias,” Isak exclaims cheerfully, walking down the last three steps and bolting for the front door, not looking back once.

He takes a deep breath when he’s outside, off the porch and walking down the lawn and towards the tram stop, not sure why his heart is pounding so loudly. Isak thinks, sure, they almost got caught, but there’s a small part of his brain that’s wondering what exactly would be so bad about that. It’s not like their friends don’t have any concept of what friends with benefits entail, and they would probably understand, considering their history—

But then he thinks about all the questions, and the warnings, and the assumptions, and the idea evaporates as quickly as it’d appeared, because no, it would be very bad, and they’d already had a really weird moment up there today, so. That’s enough, Isak thinks. He’s probably going to go ahead and keep his distance, at least for a week, let that settle in and be forgotten so they can start over
again, no conversations, no lingering, no reminiscing. It was easy before – Isak’s sure starting over will be easy again, no problem.

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It’s Wednesday – two days since the Incident at Even’s place – and neither of them have contacted the other, which actually fills Isak with a sense of relief; it means Even’s probably feeling as awkward about what happened as Isak is, which in turn means they can probably go back to their regularly scheduled programming in no time.

Though Isak’s also not sure if he’ll text first, or if Even will, or if this is some sort of a standoff until one of them can’t stand the tension anymore and needs another quick fuck – but Isak’s stubborn, and he knows Even’s stubborn, too, so that might be a while to find out, and thankfully Isak’s been far too preoccupied with both trying to forget what happened on Monday and trying to get some homework done. He’s been keeping himself far too busy – and maybe on purpose, yes, but it’s working, so it doesn’t really matter.

He’s buttoning up his museum vest as he walks inside, not really facing forward when he bumps chest-first into someone. Isak stumbles backwards, then looks up to find Eskild, looking dejected and exhausted. Isak furrows his brows, then tilting his head to the right.

“Are you okay?” he asks cautiously, and Eskild sighs dramatically.

“The lion is on the prowl today,” he tells Isak, which doesn’t make any sense to him. “I even had to bring Linn in on her day off so we could manage the situation together.”

Isak blinks at him. “Eskild,” he starts slowly. “I want to feel your pain, I do. But it’s kind of hard when you keep speaking in metaphors,” he points out, running a hand through his hair in an attempt to tame it.

“Chris!” Eskild exclaims dramatically, and, oh, there it is. “He finally got a shift and he’s been flirting with literally everyone instead of doing his work. And Linn’s already scolded him for it, and I’ve already scolded him for it, and he just keeps flirting. Listen,” Eskild looks at Isak. “I understand the male’s instinct to spread their seed, whether that seed takes or not,” he tells Isak, and Isak doesn’t really think this is a conversation that can happen between an employee and a manager, but Eskild’s not exactly stopping him, and it’s not like Isak’s going to report this, so he lets Eskild go on his tangent. “But there is only so much seed you can spread at your workplace.”

“Eskild,” Isak stops him before someone hears this entire conversation and actually does report him. “Listen, I know it’s hard to work with him, but—”

“He’s coming after you, Isak,” Eskild interrupts him. “He’s been asking around about whether or not you’re working today. If you want to call in sick right now, I’ll let you.”

Isak stares at him. “I need the money.”

“Oh, you poor, unfortunate soul,” Eskild says, reaching out to squeeze Isak’s shoulder. “God speed in there.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I’ll be fine,” he assures Eskild. “It’s not like I’m going to be swooning over him. He smells like an Axe body spray convention.”

“That’s what you say now,” Eskild tells him. “But you have to admit he has a charming face.”

Isak laughs. “Not my type.”
“What is your type?” Eskild tilts his head curiously.

Well, blonde, for one. Blue eyes. Stupidly deep voice. And Isak would very much prefer it if the other person didn’t like him, for starters.

“Taller,” he pats Eskild on the arm. “Can I clock in now? I’m losing precious money standing here.”

Eskild sighs. “Fine, fine,” he steps aside and waves over to the front desk. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I would never,” Isak smiles at him, then makes his way past, walking over to the front desk. Julian’s behind it today, scrolling through the computer with furrowed brows, and Isak stops in front of him to look at him in amusement for a moment before he says, “Hey, Julian.”

Julian flinches as if he’s heard the world’s loudest Latin football announcer yell out a goal, then composes himself when he sees Isak, face flushing a crimson red. “Oh, hi, Isak,” he mutters, and Isak can hear the embarrassment in his voice. Isak doesn’t want to be a dick and dwell on his antics, but it was really funny – still, Isak bites the inside of his cheek, holds back his laughter, and instead tries for a kind smile that probably looks a little forced.

“Hi,” he clears his throat. “Mind if I clock in?”

“Oh,” Julian scrambles to get out of the chair. “No, no, not at all, you can – yeah, go ahead,” he gestures wildly to the computer screen, and Isak walks around the desk, leaning over to commandeer the mouse.

“You know you don’t have to stand, right?” Isak asks him, raising an eyebrow when he glances over. “Like, you’ve done this before. We can all reach the computer.”

Julian clears his throat, shrugs off the comment. “Yeah, but—” he clears his throat again, this time louder. “You know, I was getting tired of sitting down, anyway, so I thought, what the hell, right?”

Isak finishes clocking in, then straightens his back and looks at Julian in amusement. “Sure, dude,” he huffs a small laugh. “Whatever you need, you know?”

Julian’s mouth parts open, as if he’s about to say something, but then it shuts tightly, like he’s thought better of it. Isak would be curious, he would, if he wasn’t already dreading his shift on the main floor – ever since he asked, Eskild had scheduled him much more often at the space exhibit, but since he switched shifts with Sara today, he’s scheduled on the main floor where she would have been working, so it’s just something he’s going to have to put up with, he guesses. He’s not dreading it as much as he used to – after being away from it for a while, it doesn’t sound like the hell it used to be. He can survive one shift away from the space exhibit, really, he can.

“—so, you know, maybe we could do that.” Isak’s snapped back from his thoughts by a babbling Julian, his hands tied behind his back and his gaze on his feet. Isak blinks, catching only the last of what Julian’s said, so he makes an apologetic face and clears his throat.

“Sorry, dude, my mind was somewhere else,” he explains. “What did you want to do, again?”

Julian’s gaze rises to meet Isak’s again, and he suddenly looks both relieved and dejected – he shakes his head once, as if shaking himself out of his thoughts, and shrugs. “No, nothing, I just – wanted to know if you’d like to walk to the tram station together again. Like – you know, like we did a couple of weeks back.”

Did they do that? Isak can’t pinpoint the day, but he’s sure Julian’s right, if he’s reminding Isak. He
doesn’t see any reason why Julian would lie.

“Yeah, sure,” he smiles at Julian, who suddenly looks relieved. “I can meet you here after closing, if you want.”

“Yeah,” Julian nods enthusiastically. “Yeah, sounds good.”

Isak smiles one last time at Julian before walking past him and making his way to the section he’s been assigned to today – thankfully, far, far away from the stream. That’s not his problem today. Isak adjusts his glasses to get a better look at who’s standing over at that section, and almost laughs when he sees Chris, leaning against the wall and seemingly talking a single mom up.

He really does hope some kid pees in the stream today. Or two.

The first two hours of his shift are boring; he gets a couple of questions from some kids and helps some others steer some of the interactive exhibits, but it’s nothing to write home about. He enjoys it, though. Better than having parents screaming at you because they didn’t raise their children right, in any case.

It’s about a half hour later when it gets irritating – it has nothing to do with the people walking around the museum, mind you, but somehow, when the museum quiets down enough, Chris manages to stride over to Isak’s section, and Isak knows this without having to look over – he smells him immediately.

Isak busies himself with wiping some of the exhibits down, pretending he doesn’t feel Chris’s presence looming behind him. After about a minute of this, Chris clears his throat pointedly, and Isak closes his eyes and inhales, gathering up the strength to get through this – whatever it’s going to be.

Isak turns around and gives Chris a look. “Yes?” he asks, bypassing any kind of greeting that might give Chris the wrong idea. Which, come to think of it, might just be every kind of greeting – including a ‘yes?’

His point is proven when Chris smirks at Isak, shrugs his shoulders casually. “Just came over to say hi,” he tells Isak.

“Hi,” Isak deadpans, then turns back to continue disinfecting the exhibit as if he hadn’t been interrupted at all.

Isak can feel Chris’s irritation coming off him in waves, which only serves to fuel Isak to ignore him even more – still, it only takes a moment for Chris to shake this off and try again. He walks around the exhibit so that he stands across from Isak, and now Isak can see him from his peripheral, which is probably just as bad as seeing him in full HD. He has half a mind to take his glasses off just so he can get a little bit of space and not have to brave through his face.

“So,” Chris leans against the exhibit in what Isak supposes is meant to look like a seductive move, but it only serves to irritate Isak further. He looks up and glares at Chris.

“I’m cleaning that,” he snaps, and Chris promptly takes his hand off the exhibit, holding both of them up defensively.

“Alright, alright, I get it,” he tells Isak. “A model employee, I can respect that.”

Isak thinks Chris must definitely be terrible at this job if he thinks disinfecting an exhibit makes anyone a model employee – but he doesn’t say this out loud, instead, he crosses his arms over his chest and raises his eyebrows at Chris. “What do you want, Chris?” he asks, if only to move this
conversation along. “We’re working.”

“No stress,” Chris smirks, and ugh, Isak wants to punch it off his stupidly and yet admittedly handsome face. “I was just going to make you an offer you can’t refuse.”

Isak blinks at him. “What, are you in the fucking Godfather?”

Chris frowns. “The what?”

Oh, my God. “Never mind,” Isak rolls his eyes. “I can assure you, though, whatever you’re thinking about offering me – I’m already passing on it.”

Chris walks around the exhibit to lean closer towards Isak, and Isak, in turn, leans further away – he glares up at Chris, annoyed, and so obviously not interested, but does Chris know how to take any signs?

Isak’s bet is on no.

“Listen,” Chris says. “You’re hot, right?” He pauses, as if waiting for Isak to confirm this allegation, which, what the fuck.

“What do you want me to say to that?”

“Never mind,” Chris waves it off. “You’re hot. And I’m hot. And lately I’ve been thinking about how – absolutely attractive we would look together. In bed. Late at night. Most likely sweating, I don’t know.”

Isak takes an entire step back, making sure there’s at least two feet of distance between them. He’s about to reply with something along the lines of, “stick your own dick up your ass”, when Chris decides to continue.

“Nothing serious,” he assures Isak. “Just once. One time, and then we’ll never have to talk about it again.”

Isak pulls a face. Okay, sure – Isak might be getting laid by a person he doesn’t very much like at the moment, he’ll concede to that, but if there’s one redeeming quality Even seems to have so far, it’s that fact that he’s not Christoffer Schistad – playboy extraordinaire, laziest employee of the year, walking Axe body spray commercial, egotistical and disgusting asshole who thinks that he can win anyone over with a fucking smile, and his looks, and who gives a damn about his personality, right?

Isak knows that may work for some people, otherwise Chris would not be this confident when walking up to people he’s hardly ever spoken to and propositioning them. But Isak likes to think he has standards, and those do not include brown-eyed men with carefully waxed eyebrows. Not that Isak has anything against men waxing their eyebrows, it’s just that he thinks Chris could probably do a better job at it.

“Pass,” Isak spits through a cloying smile, but this doesn’t seem to deter Chris at all – if anything, it seems to egg him on further, and takes one step closer to Isak, which only makes Isak take another one back.

“Do you not understand the concept of personal space?” Isak barks.

Chris rolls his eyes. “I’m not trying to kidnap you, Isak. I’m just trying to sleep with you. It’s not that hard a concept to grasp.”
“Well, so is personal space,” he repeats, and Chris sighs loudly.

“I’m going to keep pushing this,” Chris warns him, and Isak stares at him as if he’s grown two heads.

“I could report you,” Isak warns him, and man, would the managers really love that, finally having an excuse to fire Chris, kick him out the door and watch him fall on his ass. “That’s sexual harassment.”

“What’s stopping you?” Chris ignores the threat, which just proves to Isak he most definitely does not care about his job. “Is it the way I look? Is it intimidating? Because I get that a lot, but listen, Isak, I think we’re at the same level of—”

And oh, Jesus. “I have a boyfriend,” Isak interrupts, holding up both hands. Chris’s eyebrows rise.

“Oh?”

“Yes,” Isak repeats through gritted teeth. He can’t believe he’s resorted back to his high school excuse when older men tried to hit on him. He’s suddenly seventeen again and way out of his comfort zone. “So – I don’t know how you do it over there in Chris Land, but I’m not eager to become an adulterer.”

Chris studies him carefully. “What’s the lucky guy’s name?”

Okay. Okay, Isak can do this. He’s about to yell out whatever name comes to mind, any name he can make up right here on the spot. Any name. Just – whatever name you want, brain. Any second now. A second longer and then it becomes obvious it’s a lie, so, if you’d like to hurry up—

“All right,” he blurts, and oh, Christ, seriously?

Chris’s eyebrows rise. “All right,” he repeats slowly. “Is he hot?”

“I—” Isak’s regretting everything ever. “Conventionally, yeah, it doesn’t – does it matter?” Isak scoffs. “I’m dating him, and I’m not going to cheat on him just because you’ve got this – this obsession with sleeping with all of the employees in this place. And I don’t – I don’t know how you haven’t contracted an STD at this point—”

“Isak,” Chris sounds scandalized. “I practice safe sex, I’m not an animal.”

Isak stares at him in disbelief. “Leave, oh my God.”

Chris nods and holds up his hands once again, surrendering. “Alright, alright,” he concedes, and Isak can finally exhale a quick sigh of relief. “I can respect loyalty, I guess. To an extent. But you won’t last forever,” Chris starts walking backwards and points accusingly at Isak. “Bring him over some time. I’d love to meet the guy who tied you down, Isak Valtersen.”

Yeah, that’s never gonna happen. “Bye, Chris,” he dismisses him, clenching his jaw.

Chris turns around and Isak watches his back as he reaches his section. Isak’s angry at himself and his traitorous mouth, or brain, or both – but he supposes it’s logical to come up with Even’s name first, considering Isak is sleeping with him, so it’s not like he can lay the blame completely on his train of thought, and also, there’s the fact that he’s been thinking about him lately due to the – the Incident, and the fact that he doesn’t know when he’s going to text him again, and the frustration that comes with the thought of not getting laid for another week, and—
Isak hears Chris grunt in frustration. He turns to look, and see Chris staring down at the stream dejectedly.

“For the love of Christ.”

Isak purses his lips.

So maybe things were looking up, anyway.

Isak finishes closing his section in the nick of time, and is relieved when he finally walks back to the front desk to clock out. He just wants to get home, feed Galileo, and spend a couple of hours fighting his consciousness for sleep. The usual. He’s very excited.

He spots Julian lingering at the entrance, and when Julian spots him back, he waves at Isak enthusiastically. Isak offers him a tired smile as he walks to the computer, pulling up the system and clocking himself out. Man, if he could only be as energetic as Julian after a shift, things would probably be a lot easier for Isak in the aftermath. As it were, it’s far too tiring, and Isak really likes being tired and hungry and in a bad mood, but when he walks over to Julian after he finds his coat, he resolves not to be an asshole until he reaches the tram.

“How was the shift?” Julian asks him as they walk out of the museum. Isak sighs.

“Uneventful,” he lies. “Though someone peed in the stream again.”

Julian laughs. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“Was it your section again?”

Isak shakes his head and grins. “Julian, do you think I’d be this marvelously cool and collected if it’d been my section?” He shakes his head. “Nah, it was Chris’s.”

Julian snorts. “Oh, that’s even better.”

“I know,” Isak agrees, and they both exchange a smile.

The rest of the walk is pretty quiet, which Isak appreciates – he’s not really in the mood for small talk, and Julian seems to be lost in his own thoughts, so instead they walk in comfortable silence, the same way they work together on the main floor, sometimes. Isak’s head is starting to hurt, just a little bit, and he wonders if he and Eva have any painkillers left at home when the text notification of his phone goes off inside his pocket. Frowning, he reaches inside to pull it out, then slides the conversation open when he sees the text is from Jonas.

JONAS

Dude

JONAS

Your dad just called me

Isak feels his spine go cold, his face flush hot. Why does that man insist on making Isak’s life a living hell? Why does he keep trying when it’s so obvious Isak is trying to move on, trying to make a life without him – the same way his father had obviously tried to make a life without Isak?
He doesn’t care about him.

(He cares about him a little.)

He doesn’t want to see him.

(But the little boy inside him wants to so badly.)

Isak hates this, hates the constricting of his heart when this comes back, and he angrily types a reply to Jonas, hoping to convey that anger in a couple of words.

**ISAK**

Did you hang up on the fucker??

It takes but a second for Jonas to reply.

**JONAS**

Yeah, of course

**JONAS**

But it sounded like he really wanted to talk to you

Isak scoffs.

**ISAK**

I don’t care

**ISAK**

Thanks

Isak locks his phone and ignores the notification going off again, most likely a small text of acknowledgment from Jonas. He feels like his legs weigh a thousand pounds now, the walk to the tram station seemingly endless, and he wants to forget about this, he hates that he feels this way, hates that his father still has so much control over him, and he thinks—

He thinks there’s a way to get rid of this, to make this go away, but he refuses. He’s not going to. Isak doesn’t think it’s the appropriate time, and he thinks they need their space, and he’s not going to be the one to fucking text first, so he’s going to have to do what he used to do pre-Even – scream into his pillow until he falls asleep.

“Isak?”

Isak blinks over at Julian, who’s looking at him both expectantly and worriedly.

He shakes his head. “Wow, sorry, uhm,” he clears his throat. “Sorry, what did you say?”

Julian takes a deep breath. “I said that, uh, there’s this really nice bar on your tram route,” he explains. “And, you know, it’s not too late, and if you don’t have anything to do right now – we should maybe go have a drink?” His offer is slow, his expression wary. “Just to, you know, uhm – wash off the day.”

Isak keeps thinking about his father, and how angry he is, and then he’s thinking about the last time he got drunk. He looks over at Julian and smiles regretfully. “Hey, listen, I’m just – I’m really tired, Julian, so I think I’m just gonna – I’m gonna head home, sleep it off, instead.”
Julian licks his lips and nods, understanding. “No, yeah, totally, I get it.”

Isak feels like an asshole of multiple proportions, anyway, because here Julian is, trying to get to know Isak as more than his coworker, maybe even be friends the same way he’s friends with the other boys, so Isak smiles crookedly. “I’ll take a raincheck though, yeah?”

Julian looks up at him in surprise, a small smile perking at his lips. “Yeah?”

Isak nods. “Yeah, we can invite the boys and everything,” he suggests, and something in Julian’s gaze falls.

“Oh, yeah,” he nods. “Yeah, that sounds nice.”

“Good,” Isak reaches over to pat at Julian’s back awkwardly, and then tries his best to forget about his father and about Even and about everything, just until he reaches the tram station, just until Julian retreats and can’t see the anger which will most likely seep through his veins, and just until he can look at his reflection in the window of the tram to remind himself just how fucking pathetic he looks, and how pathetic he is, for letting someone in his life break him over and over and over.

--

There’s a battle with the knob, because of course there is, but after Isak’s back promptly hits the wall and he slams the door closed, he manages to kick off his shoes and throw his coat on the couch angrily and stomp with purpose towards his room.

On his way, however, he stomps by the kitchen, which Eva probably heard – she calls out his name in question, and then Isak stops in his tracks and inhales, hoping she’ll forgo the questions, at least for tonight, so he can stew in his own anger in peace.

He turns back at makes his way over to the open-door frame of the kitchen, and there, standing in confusion, is Eva, chocolate batter all over her face, and beside her – fucking Noora again, like they both don’t have anything better to do than spend time with each other. As if Noora doesn’t have anything better to do than lead his best friend on, and Eva doesn’t have anything better to do than to let her.

“Seriously, Eva?” he snaps, and to Noora it might sound like he’s annoyed at the fact that Eva called him over, but Eva knows what his words are about – his disbelief, his disappointment, an accusation, a blatant call-out. Knows what she’s doing, Isak’s ass. She’s purposely setting herself up for heartbreak and disappointment, and he wants to scream in her face suddenly, shake her shoulders and remind her about how awful it feels, for someone to take your heart and stomp all over it, remind her how there’s no one in this world that can’t make you feel that way, even when you’ve built up your walls, even when you’ve decided you won’t take anymore.

Eva’s going to get hurt again, the way Isak’s hurting right now, and he hates the thought.

Noora and Eva exchange a glance, then Eva turns back to look at Isak. “Isak, are you—”

Isak shakes his head and scoffs in disbelief. “I’m going to my room,” he snaps. “Do whatever you want.”

He turns and makes a beeline for his room, and he petulantly slams the door closed behind him.

Isak paces back and forth, back and forth, forgetting for a moment all about feeding Galileo, or screaming into his pillow, or anything of the sort – he’s debating whether or not he should just text Even, forget about this entire situation for a little while, blow off some steam until this feels less than
it actually is, but he knows now’s not the time. He knows it’s not. Isak’s aware that after the sex, he’d most likely break down, and that’s not something he wants. Even to see. Not now, not ever.

He marches over to his bed and sits at the edge of it, taking a deep, shaky breath, trying his best to steady it. The thoughts begin to race, and he’s an idiot for letting them, he knows. His father’s started reaching out to the only friend he thinks Isak’s ever had – he’s desperate to make amends, to make himself feel better, to show his new family that he can be a good father to a boy he ran out on when he needed him the most. That he can be a good person, even though he couldn’t stand another moment of his mother’s illness, couldn’t even spare the time to take his only son with him, left him at fifteen to brave his mother’s episodes, to hear her cry herself to sleep at night, to deal with the repulsion and guilt when he found out he was gay, when he found out his mother might not love him anymore, much like his father, and—

The tears fall of their own accord, but Isak immediately wipes them away. His father doesn’t deserve his tears. He never has – it’s taken a long time for him to learn that. He’s not willing to unlearn it today, because of the smallest trigger.

There’s a quiet knock on his door, and Isak composes himself enough to say, “Come in,” without sounding like an asshole, and Eva pushes open the door carefully.

“Hi,” she greets him quietly. Instead of angry, she looks concerned, and that’s not something Isak deserves. He snapped at her when this clearly wasn’t her fault, made a fool out of himself in front of Noora, all because he can’t handle the mere mention of his father anywhere near him.

Eva walks over to where he sits on the bed with a plate full of brownies. She sits down next to Isak and holds the plate out for him. “Want one?” she asks. “I mean, don’t get too excited, there’s no weed in them, or anything, but I think we did a pretty good job.”

Isak laughs quietly and shakes his head. “No, thanks.”

Eva considers him for a moment longer, before setting the plate beside her on the bed. “Isak,” she starts quietly. “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong this time?”

Isak looks over at her and sees the sincerity in her eyes, along with the worry, along with the frustration Isak’s sure she must feel at the fact that she can’t seem to help him, that Isak won’t let her help him. He wants to do better, he wants to make it better, but he doesn’t know how to. He doesn’t know how to anymore.

Isak sniffs. “Maybe tomorrow,” he lies, and Eva seems to know he is, but she doesn’t push it. Instead, she reaches a hand over to lie on top of Isak’s.

“You wanna sleep in my room tonight?” she offers. “There’s plenty of room in my bed, you know that.”

Isak shakes his head. God, the fact that Eva can be so kind after – after—“I’m sorry,” he apologizes quietly. “That was – about back there. That was – rude, and uncalled for, and I’m sorry.”

Eva shrugs her shoulder. “It is what it is.”

Isak licks his lips, shamefully looks down at his lap. “Will you tell Noora I’m sorry, too?” he asks quietly. “I didn’t mean – I don’t want her to think she’s not welcome, or anything. I’m just—” Isak stops himself there, afraid of giving away too much afterwards.

But Eva seems to understand anyway. “Take care of yourself first,” she tells him softly. “I’m always scared that you forget to do that, and then you end up taking care of everyone else, and then you end
up here,” she squeezes his hand. “And I don’t like seeing you here.”

Isak looks at her, and God, she suddenly looks so lovely, like the best person in Isak’s life. He wishes he could say that, could articulate it correctly, wishes for a second he was brave enough, but there’s a knot in his throat that won’t allow it, and so he nods his head instead. “Okay.”

Eva nods, though she doesn’t exactly look like she believes him. “Okay,” she agrees, reaching back to grab the plate of brownies. “If you change your mind, we’ll be in the kitchen for a little while longer,” she tells him. “And if you need anything—”

Isak nods. “I know.” He smiles softly up at her. “I don’t deserve your kindness, you know.”


Before Isak can tell her that’s absurd, she’s quietly making her way out of his room, closing the door behind her with an almost soundless click.

Isak stares at his hands and tries to gather his wits about him. He’s okay, he tells himself. He has people in his life, people that know him, and people who don’t—people who won’t—

No. Isak can’t say the words yet. Can’t even think them.

There’s so much wrong with you, he tells himself. There’s so much wrong with you.

His phone goes off in his pocket again, and he wipes at his nose uselessly before he reaches inside to pull it out – he looks down at the screen and freezes when he sees Even’s contact shine back at him; he’s probably alone at the house, looking for Isak to come over, and for the first time – for the first time Isak is going to refuse.

Isak sniffs uselessly as he unlocks the conversation, readying his thumbs to write the words “can’t tonight”, when he realizes it’s not a text message at all.

    EVEN
    [image attachment]

Isak stares at it in wonder, then in confusion, and finally, he laughs once, disbelieving. It’s a stupid picture. It’s a stupid meme. It’s ridiculous, and so is Even, and he shouldn’t be doing this, it’s against the rules, and Isak can call him out right now, can tell him he’s close enough to ending this for good, but it’s surprising and maybe it’s a way to break the ice after the Incident and—

And it might be exactly what Isak needs right now.

Licking his lips, he types and retypes and retypes his reply, until he finally settles on one.

    ISAK
    2010 called. It wants its memes back

It only takes Even a couple of seconds to respond, Isak paying close attention to the typing bubble.

    EVEN
    The 90s called, they want their insults back

The bubble appears again, bringing another message in its wake.
EVEN
Besides, those are some fighting words for a guy who’s got a Spiderman meme as his Facebook profile picture

Isak scoffs.

ISAK
At least its face is nice to look at

ISAK
Though I suppose that meme is an accurate representation. Their faces are just as ugly as yours

There’s a moment in which the bubble doesn’t appear at all – and there’s something in Isak that panics for a second. He’s not sure if he’s taken it too far, if maybe it was meant to last only a couple of messages, if Even’s realized what Isak had realized before – that this is not something they should be doing, not if the rules hidden somewhere in Even’s closet and folded neatly in Isak’s underwear drawer have anything to say about it.

He’s about to lock his phone and throw it across the room, when the bubble appears again. Isak holds his breath the entire time.

EVEN
That’s funny, because that’s exactly the face you make when you come

Isak stares down at the message for a moment, then barks out a surprised laugh.

ISAK
Asshole

Isak puts his phone down and takes a deep breath.

He’s okay, he tells himself. He’s okay. He’s going to be okay, and even if he knows he’s lying, he’s doing a pretty good job at convincing himself.

At least, long enough to fall back on the mattress and let sleep take him under.

Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr!

next chapter brings a lot more evak content i’m really excited to write. please pray for me and hope that my damn cold goes away soon so i can actually write iiiit.

as always, i love you all, and i appreciate you all, and i thank you all from the bottom of my heart for reading this silly little story of mine. ❤
thank you as always to my darling love cz as always for looking over this chapter - she came home exhausted and wiped out and she still looked it over for me. i love you, babe.

listen, i really was aiming for 17k at most. but then isak decided to go ahead and keep rambling so here we stand, at 21k. i hope y'all enjoy it, because from here on out it's gonna be like fluff central for these two. so much so that i'm pretty sure the next chapters are gonna be either as long as this one or longer. wish me luck.

anyway, i hope you enjoy! i love you to the moon and back!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Isak’s not sure when it happened, but suddenly he knows a lot more about Even than he’s comfortable knowing.

Not on purpose. It’s not like they’ve sat down and talked about their lives, or whatever, because that’s still against the rules, and they’ve already broken one of them enough (though none of them have really stopped breaking it over the past two weeks – it’s easy enough to pretend it’s not a big deal when they’re just a couple of text messages here and there, mostly memes they decide to share with each other, but not much else, so it’s not a big deal, really) to go on their merry way and break another one.

It’s just – that maybe these text messages reveal a little more than they should. Isak’s been very careful to not let that happen on his end, but it seems like Even is far too open – or maybe just not as paranoid as Isak – for the same thing to be said about him. So Isak starts making a mental list of what he’s deduced about Even through their (very short, alright) text conversations, just to have leverage on him the next time he brings up them breaking the rules or something—

Isak has noticed Even is loyal. Maybe to a fault, Isak doesn’t know, but once in a while he’ll refuse Isak’s propositions when Eva’s gone for the day because Elias is feeling like shit, or Yousef needs some help moving furniture, or Mutta needs to come over to talk about something, or whatever. Once, he mentioned going to visit his mom because she had the flu, so he told Isak they wouldn’t be able to do anything for about three days, maybe.

Which was fine, considering they’ve cut down their sexcapades to three days a week, but it still doesn’t sit right with Isak that he knows this. He has half a mind to text Even and tell him to stop sharing these things with Isak, he doesn’t need to know, but every time he’s going to he just – doesn’t.

So that means he learns more about Even. He learns that Even really does like to take control over his life, and isn’t as carefree as Isak once thought – he does sometimes throw caution to the wind, don’t get Isak wrong, but sometimes he’ll make a comment that reminds Isak of the conversation they had two weeks ago, about his art; and Isak will file it away for later, try to make sense out of it, and he thinks that’s normal, considering he’s always been a man that likes to study, and sometimes – well, sometimes he even makes a comment to Eva, with her bullshit science, a throwaway question,
really, that Eva answers with a smirk on her face that Isak doesn’t like, thank you very much.

(So he sticks to the internet now, mostly.)

He learns that Even is funny, in a stupid way, and Isak hates it when he catches himself laughing at his stupid puns and the stupid outdated memes he sends Isak sometimes. And he mostly hates the fact that Isak can see himself being friends with someone like him, and that maybe in another life, or if they had met under different circumstances, they would have been, and it irks at him to no end. Isak doesn’t like to think of things that could have been – he knows it’s all part of the greater picture, obviously, and every choice you make just makes way to a lot of different scenarios and so on, so forth, until you have endless possibilities of the future, and it repeats every single time, with every single choice you make.

Isak and Even chose to dislike each other. From the very beginning, maybe, and maybe had they both said different things when they first met, acted differently, then they’d be in a universe where they were friends. And not in a universe where Isak is wondering if they could have been.

Which Isak thinks is the worst part of this. Because, sure, he’s wondering, but everybody wonders. But he’s not sure he wants to be Even’s friend. In Isak’s mind, he’s still the same pretentious asshole who decided he knew Isak from the start, acted better than him just because Isak didn’t like or understand his fucking painting, and that’s the person Isak doesn’t want to be friends with. There may be more layers to him, sure, but somewhere between those layers is the one Isak first interacted with, and that’s the one that’s helping Isak keep Even at arm’s length. That’s the layer that reminds Isak that, even if Even is loyal, or careful, or funny – there’s a side of him that’s ugly, and a side of him that Isak is better off never interacting with again.

But – he doesn’t stop it. For the past two weeks, he’s let Even reveal sides of himself Isak never knew he had before. And Isak’s not sure what his subconscious is playing at, but he really wishes it would stop, because he’s not here for these games anymore.

And he’ll definitely get back to that – right after Even finishes riding him.

It doesn’t take too long for the both of them to finish, since they haven’t seen each other in four days now, both of them busy with work and school and shit, so Isak can blame this on the frustration. Masturbation just doesn’t do it anymore, not when his dick is so used to the real thing, and it apparently doesn’t do it for Even anymore, either, if the way he so quickly and enthusiastically finished off there says anything, so when Even rolls off of him, they both lie there for a second, panting and basking in post-sex bliss, just letting it consume them for a moment.

They’ve been doing this more often, too – not necessarily lingering, but letting themselves enjoy the aftermath a little longer without glaring at the other pointedly and waiting for them to go. Isak thinks it’s because they’ve been seeing less and less of each other, so there’s an understanding between them that at this point, they’re probably allowed a little bit of leeway, since their sex isn’t as regular or as long-lasting as before. Their text conversations last longer than their sex, even, but that’s not something either of them admits to, either.

After about another minute of trying to catch his breath, Isak turns over to look at Even. “What time is it?” he asks.

“Hm,” Even leans over to the end table and looks at his phone. “Three o’clock.”

“Ugh,” Isak grunts, sitting up on the bed and removing the condom. “I have work in two hours.” He stands up and throws the condom in the trash bin, then walks around the room to start retrieving his clothing. “I think we need to find a specific place to throw our clothes when we’re undressing.”
“It’s not like we’re thinking too hard about it while we do,” Even points out, and yeah, Isak knows that, but—

“It wouldn’t hurt to try,” he tells Even, and, oh, God, he sounds like Eva now. He manages to collect his boxers first, pulling them up, before he finds his jeans. While he’s buttoning them up, he glances at the closet doors, as he’s become accustomed to now, and both his eyebrows rise when they spot a familiar sight. “Is that the meme you sent me two days ago?” he asks, pointing at the printed picture.

“Hm?” Even stands from where he’d still been lying on the bed to give it a closer look. “Oh, yeah. It is.”

Isak rolls his eyes and swipes his glasses from the desk, putting them on swiftly before walking past Even to pick up his shirt. “How do you find those things, anyway?” he asks. “They’re all so fucking outdated.”

Even walks over to pick up his own boxers, stepping in them one foot at a time before pulling them up. “The internet is forever, Isak,” he tells him. “You can find just about anything if you dig deep enough.”

“No one has the time,” Isak counters, finding his shoes. He puts them on before he grabs his coat, around the same time Even’s slipping his shirt back on. “Except you, apparently.”

“Except me,” Even grins at him. “Don’t be such a downer. You know you laugh when I send them to you.”

Isak holds up an accusatory finger towards Even. “You have no proof.”

“I’m going with my gut on this one.”

Isak rolls his eyes as he shrugs on his coat. “Sounds exactly like what an artist would say.”

“Aww, Isak, do you actually think I’m an artist now?”

They both walk out Even’s bedroom door, find their way to the stairs and start stepping downward.

“I don’t know what you are, because you’re all over the place, but certainly nothing concrete.”

“So I’m a mystery,” Even hums as they reach the bottom floor and walk towards the front door. “Is that what I am to you, Isak? A mystery?”

Isak reaches to turn the knob and open the front door, then stands at the frame as he looks back at Even. “No, you’re a nuisance,” he tells him. “A mystery would actually be interesting.”

“Ouch,” Even grins, holding up a hand to dramatically clutch at his chest. “I’ll be carrying that one with me for the next minute and a half.”

“I’m sure you’ll live,” he rolls his eyes and steps onto the porch, offering Even a half-hearted wave over his shoulder. “See ya, Bech Næsheim.”

“Hasta luego, Valtersen.”

Isak hears the door click shut behind him as he walks off the porch and onto the lawn, watching his breaths turn into clouds in front of him. He wonders why Norway tends to skip the fall and go straight to winter sometimes—it’d be so much easier to get through this whole back-and-forth thing he and Even are doing if they didn’t freeze every time they were on the way to each other’s houses.
Then again, it’s not it takes them long to warm up, but it’d still be really nice to have his lips unfreeze before he kisses Even.

He doesn’t realize someone’s calling his name until he trips over a stray pebble on the front lawn, and then he’s blushing in embarrassment and looking up. Isak blinks and panics for a second when he sees Yousef walking up to him, having no idea what excuse to come up with this time – though, technically, Yousef has no proof he’d just been in the house, so – okay, no, that’s ridiculous, it’s so obvious, and it’s much better to let him know than to let him think he was just lurking outside his home like a fucking stalker or something.

“Hey, Yousef,” he greets, and he’s very proud that his voice sounds as steady as it does. Nerves? Anxiety? Those words aren’t in Isak’s vocabulary anymore.

“Were you with Even?” Yousef asks curiously.

Suddenly the words are back in his vocabulary. He shifts his weight, almost guiltily, and stutters for a second before he takes the easy way out – Even’s excuse the last time Elias almost caught them was good enough for him, and he thinks that it might be their only chance at getting their stories straight.

So Isak runs a hand through his hair, aiming for casual, but Yousef just looks even more confused. “Uh, yeah,” Isak clears his throat. “Yeah, I was.”

“Oh?” Yousef blinks at him, almost like he wasn’t expecting that to be the answer. “I – didn’t know you two were hanging out now.”

“Oh, we’re not,” Isak is quick to amend. “I just came over for some jay. No big deal, he just – has the better stuff, you know? Better than what Jonas gets, and, you know,” Isak clears his throat again. “He’s just – I still don’t like him, but I have to make some sacrifices, you know? For – for the weed.”

Yousef stares at him for a moment, completely perplexed. Isak squirms under his gaze uncomfortably, wondering when, if ever, he’s going to reply to him. It doesn’t seem very likely at this point, so Isak gestures a little lamely over Yousef’s shoulder, raising an eyebrow. “Uhm,” he licks his lips. “Hey, I don’t mean to cut this short – or be rude or anything – but I have work soon, and I gotta get home to shower and whatnot—”

Yousef shakes himself out of his stupor. “No, yeah, that makes sense,” he nods quickly. “Sorry, I’m just a little out of it. Too much going on in my head, you know?”

Oh, he knows. He just hopes none of what’s going on in his head involves him, or Even, or the combination thereof. “Yeah, I get it,” Isak tries for an amused smile, but he’s pretty sure he looks like the Joker trying to make someone believe he’s innocent of all the murders in Gotham. “Uh, have a good day, yeah?”

“Yeah, Isak, you too,” he smiles at him, far nicer than Isak could ever hope to muster, and then he walks past Isak and towards the front door.

Isak hurries to pull his out his phone and slides it open to Even’s conversation, typing furiously as he walks.

**ISAK**
If Yousef asks, I was here for weed

**EVEN**
Aw, you weren’t just here for my company??
ISAK
I stg I’ll strangle you Bech Næsheim

EVEN
Save the aggression for the bedroom, Valtersen

And, well, Isak can hardly argue with *that*. Still, he rolls his eyes and locks his phone, pocketing it in his coat once again. He takes one last glance towards the house, which hasn’t looked as uninviting as it used to for about two weeks now; and that’s probably something Isak should dig deeper into. But at the moment, he’s mostly worried about having enough time to get home and shower, wash the stench of sweat and sex off of him, and go to work without Eskild asking unnecessary questions.

Because he would, Isak thinks. Eskild has no boundaries, and even though sometimes Isak appreciates the trait, other times it does him no favors. And, yes, once again, he realizes that and employee and a manager should probably not have as close of a relationship as they do, it’s not like Isak’s the only one who has this certain rapport with Eskild – he’s a happy guy, and a sweet guy, and everyone’s attracted to him. He doesn’t sugarcoat things for you unless you need him to, and that’s why Isak thinks he’d be better off as a therapist than, you know, the manager at a science museum, a subject Eskild has proclaimed time and time again he has no interest in.

When Isak asked him once why he even bothered to accept the managing position there, Eskild had looked at him like Isak was absolutely the most ignorant person he’d ever come across – then he’d told Isak it was *obviously* for the benefits and the pay, which Isak should know, he gets paid a pretty penny as an employee, too. Isak had conceded, mostly because it looked like Eskild was going to go off on a tangent, and it’s better to escape those as soon as possible.

When he reaches the tram stop, it’s surprisingly full – Isak furrows his brows and looks at the time on his phone again. It’s still three o’clock, which usually doesn’t bring too many people to the tram, and Isak’s not really curious to find out *why* – he’s mostly bothered because he has to *stand*, and knowing what he looks like and probably smells like, he was really looking forward to sitting in the far back of the tram and pretending he didn’t exist for the sake of everyone else in here. Then again, these people have no one to blame but themselves, since they all decided to infiltrate Isak’s tram route when they had no business to, so, smell away, corporate douchebags – Isak hopes they can smell exactly what he’d lazily attempted to clean up before he left Even’s place, just so that next time they maybe chill and, like, don’t take over his fucking tram.

Isak’s not really sure if anyone notices. And if they do, they don’t really seem to care – he thinks it’s because there are way too many people here to really find the source of the smell he’s probably emitting, so they’re not really bothering. Or maybe someone else smells worse than Isak, who knows? From where he’s standing, there’s really no way to tell.

It makes the tram ride decidedly less fun, in any case, because he has no one giving him any ugly looks which he can petulantly collect as a prize, and he’s standing. Isak doesn’t mind standing on the tram, no – he just minds it when he’s got several people pressed against him, people whom Isak has no idea where they’ve been or what they’ve done or what kind of life they lead.

Eva would be laughing at him if she knew he was having these thoughts. She’d claim Isak just wasn’t street smart enough to handle these kinds of situations, and then Mahdi – whom Isak has no idea how he showed up in this scenario – would bring up something about his street cred again, and neither of them will ever let him live it down, not if they have anything to say about it.

So he grins and bears it for the sake of hypothetical Eva and Mahdi – well, not actually grins, but he’s at least doing his best so that his face doesn’t look like it’s about to hunt down the man who
kidnapped his daughter, which is a win in and of itself, so Isak’s going to count it as one. Take that, hypothetical Eva and Mahdi – he can bullshit his way out of uncomfortable “street” situations if he has to.

Still, it’s a relief when he finally gets to find his way out of the tram and start walking towards his apartment building – several people got off with him, which, of course they did, because that means the tram isn’t as crowded anymore as when Isak got on, and the universe likes to send Isak a big “fuck you” every once in a while, just so Isak doesn’t get too comfortable in it. Reminds him that life sucks, no matter which way you look at it.

And lately, Isak’s been looking at it a lot of ways. Specifically in a lot of different positions. And Isak has half a mind to argue with the universe that not everything in it sucks, unless it’s talking about the kind of sucking Isak’s been doing lately, in which case – he agrees.

He must look like a strange man, walking up the stairs of his apartment with a small smirk on his face, laughing at the ingenious pun that no one will ever get to hear or appreciate, lest they find out about him and Even – but there’s also no one around, so he can’t actually be bothered to care what he looks like, also considering the fact that he’s sure he already looks strange, anyway, and suddenly Isak stops in his track right in front of his mortal enemy, the doorknob, and thinks.

Isak’s aware of what he looks like and smells like – does this mean when he ran into Yousef, he was aware of this, too?

And suddenly Isak can feel the color drain from his face, feeling stupid and embarrassed; sure, Yousef seemed to buy the weed excuse, but Yousef almost always lets you believe he buys everything you say as to not make you uncomfortable, and now he’s freaking the fuck out all over the place, because how had this not occurred to him before?

Before he can engage in battle with the knob, he pulls out his phone quickly and huffs a cold cloud, typing furiously into Even’s conversation.

**ISAK**
Did he look like he bought it??

**EVEN**
????

**ISAK**
Yousef, you know I’m talking about Yousef, you don’t even have to scroll up to know, probably

**EVEN**
Tbh he didn’t look like he really cared

**EVEN**
I think he’s got something else on his mind?

**ISAK**
Oh

**ISAK**
Well I hope he’s ok

**EVEN**
And that’s about as far as Isak is willing to engage in this conversation, because if he proceeds, then he’s going to learn more about how Even is frustratingly loyal, and he can’t be bothered. Not right now, he has to shower and go to work and pretend none of this actually happened.

He pockets his phone, then turns to look at the knob again; narrowing his eyes with purpose, he inserts his key, struggles with it for about a minute before the door finally unlocks – he opens it, and then struggles for about another two minutes before the key finally gives way, and, what do you know—

Isak’s back hits the wall.

He grunts in frustration and closes the door with his feet, taking off his shoes right after – when he looks up, however, he sees both Eva and Noora looking back at him from the couch, amused. Isak is about to scowl at them and tell them to fuck off, but then he realizes just how close they’re sitting together, and, wow, okay – they’re cuddling.

Cuddling. They’ve fucking graduated to cuddling. Or, Eva has, at least. He realizes to Noora this is probably nothing extraordinary, but here Eva is, playing with fire once again, like a child who just won’t learn her lesson.

The thing is Noora has been over almost every single fucking day. And don’t get Isak wrong, it’s not like her presence isn’t welcome, or whatever, even if she speaks at the pace of a fucking sloth unless she’s ranting, but this isn’t about Isak – this is about Eva completely ignoring the warnings Isak has given her and the promises she’s made to Isak about not falling in so deep until she can’t crawl out the fucking hole. Eva claims it’s not really her fault, Noora is lonely because her boyfriend’s always at work and hardly ever spends time with her anymore, and Eva feels bad, because Noora’s her friend and blah, blah, blah, a lot more bullshit excuses that sound like “I’m gonna go ahead and fall in love with the straight girl and have my heart broken anyway” to Isak.

“You alright there?” Eva asks, smirk prominent on her face and eyebrow raised. And, oh, she has got some nerve making fun of Isak when she’s practically got a lapful of heterosexual Barbie, he’s just saying.

“Fine,” Isak replies through gritted teeth. “Hi, Noora,” he greets, because he doesn’t want to seem rude.

“Well, okay. Now he’s going to be a little rude. “Uhm, Eva,” he clears his throat. “May I speak to you in the kitchen for a moment?”

Eva furrows her brows. “What can’t you say in front of Noora?”

Oh, way to make him look like an asshole, Eva.

“It’s a personal medical issue,” Isak stares at her pointedly. “I would rather not traumatize Noora for life, Eva.”

Eva and Noora exchange a glance, and then Eva sighs heavily, uncurling herself from Noora and walking over to the kitchen with Isak. When they make way past the frame, Eva turns around and crosses her arms over her chest, raising a challenging eyebrow at Isak. “What?”

Isak stares at her. “What are you doing?” he whispers furiously.
Eva rolls her eyes. “Shut up, Isak,” she says. “It’s innocent! Friends cuddle all the time, there’s nothing wrong with it. We cuddle!” she insists, gesturing between her and Isak.

“I’m gay,” he deadpans. “And you’re not in any way attracted to me. That’s different.”

“I don’t see how it is.”

“Why are you putting yourself through this, Eva?” he sighs, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “You know this’ll lead nowhere but heartbreak. You know that.”

“Listen, Isak, when you like someone enough – you can settle for their friendship. And, eventually, the feelings will go away and you’ll get to keep them in your life and that’s all that matters, right?”

Isak narrows his eyes. “Are you telling me you see yourself just being friends with her? And being okay with it?”

“Stop parenting me, you don’t need to make up for the times my mother didn’t.”

“I’m not parenting you, Eva, Jesus Christ, I’m just trying to get you to see the reality of the situation —”

“Well, Isak, I see it clearly, seeing as I’m the one in the situation, and – what’s this?” Eva’s suddenly looking him over.

“What’s what?”

“This,” she gestures at him from head to toe. “What were you doing? Why do you look like this?”

“I’m – I don’t look like anything, stop deflecting,” Isak snaps.

“You – were you having sex?”

“What? No, I wasn’t,” Isak scoffs, hoping he sounds disbelieving instead of guilty. “I was – I was exercising.”

“Exercising what, your dick?”

Well, yes. “No,” Isak scoffs once again, and is that too much scoffing? Is it starting to sound unnatural? Telling? “Just – my quads.”

“You were exercising your quads.” Eva deadpans.

Isak crosses his arms over his chest defensively. “Yes, I’m – I’m trying to build some leg muscle.”

Eva’s eyebrows rise. “Oh, oh really? Is this part of your better life routine? Like your new hair-care routine?”

“Stop acting like this is weird!”

“You haven’t worked out a day in your life!”

“False, I have, and I just started up again, so stop questioning me, you’re not – you’re not my mother,” Isak sniffs, repeating Eva’s words back to her.

“Okay,” Eva looks at him. “What gym are you going to?”
Isak panics. “The one – in – the south.”

“The one in the south.”

Isak tries a different tactic. “I’m not going to a gym, I’m exercising at the park.”

“You’re – it’s okay if you got laid, Isak, I just don’t know why you’re not admitting to it.”

“I didn’t!” Isak insists. “I was doing squats.”

“Okay,” Eva nods. “Show me.”

“What?”

“Show me how you did your squats.”

Isak gapes at her. He doesn’t understand her – and he certainly doesn’t understand why she’s pushing this so much. Wouldn’t it make sense that Isak would tell her if he’d gotten laid? He said this to her a while ago. She’s either doing a fantastic job at deflecting, causing Isak to get frustrated and angry, or she genuinely believes Isak is lying to her.

Which, alright, fair, because he is, but not for the reasons she probably thinks he is.

“Eva, what the fuck, I’m not showing you how I do my squats in the kitchen, that’s fucking weird.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Eva raises an eyebrow. “If you know how to do them.”

Isak blinks at her, completely perplexed. “I’m gonna go take a shower now,” he says slowly, backing away and towards the door frame. “Because you are being ridiculous and strange and I hate you.”

“I hate you right back,” Eva sniffs, and Isak offers her one more roll of his eyes before exiting the kitchen. He tries to quickly walk past the living room and into the bathroom, but he feels Noora’s gaze on him, so he glances over at her and clears his throat.

He offers her an awkward wave. “I’m gonna shower,” he tells her, which is probably unnecessary information.

Isak is sure of this when Noora purses her lips, probably in an attempt to not laugh. “Okay, Isak,” she nods. “Have a good shower.”

He blinks at her uselessly, then nods a little stiffly before walking the rest of the way to the bathroom. Once inside, he closes the door and exhales shakily – Isak’s almost eighty percent sure that Eva’s suspicion was more of a distracting tactic than it was genuine curiosity, but then there’s the other twenty percent that’s sure Eva’s on to him. Maybe not about who he’s sleeping with, mind you, but definitely that he’s sleeping with someone, and the who doesn’t trail that far behind. If she is suspicious, she’ll eventually dig deep enough so that she figures it out, and then there’ll be the whole – explaining situation, and she’ll throw it back in his face, and she’ll bring up that he’s a hypocrite for telling her she’s playing with fire, even though they’re entirely different situations, alright—

Doesn’t matter. Isak has to convince himself it doesn’t matter. He needs to calm down, get in the shower, and get to work. The longer he lets himself linger in his thoughts, the harder it’ll be to get anywhere – physically or mentally. He knows this. He’s also aware the knowledge of this doesn’t ever really help in deterring his thought process, but sometimes he can pretend, and pretending is just as good as the real thing, if you’re stubborn enough.
And, if any of his friends have anything to say about it, Isak’s pretty fucking stubborn.

His shower’s uneventful. He can’t even work up a boner this time – but then again, he’s focusing so hard on not thinking at all even Even’s out of his mind for now. It makes the shower quicker and easier, in any case, which means getting ready for work afterwards is swift and uneventful as well.

Isak’s walking back from his room to the bathroom after getting dressed in order to brush his teeth when he hears the laughter. It’s kind of pathetic how much it irritates Isak – he wonders, briefly, if Noora knows exactly what she’s doing. Isak wonders if she’s so starved for the attention her boyfriend hasn’t been giving her that she tries to find it in Eva – a girl so obviously enamored with her, she’d be willing to take that over nothing at all.

It’s a hypothetical. Or, maybe a longshot, anyway. But the point is now the seed has been planted in Isak’s head, and it’s going to haunt him, and it’s going to impair his productivity at work, and now he’s probably going to do something stupid like snoop on Noora’s Facebook or something else of the kind, in order to try and gather enough evidence to prove to Eva this girl might be using her.

Again – it’s not a fact. But with enough evidence, it could be, and if he’s able to save Eva from another heartbreak, then – doesn’t the end justify the means?

Isak brushes his teeth a little too aggressively before spitting in the sink and wiping his face. He adjusts his glasses and attempts to flatten his vest – which he hasn’t really steamed since the last time he wore it, but, you know, he’s been busy – with his hands, before deciding this is as good as it’s going to get and stepping out of the bathroom.

Walking past the living room is a nightmare, considering there Eva is, cuddled right back into Noora and watching some Hugh Jackman movie about cows or something; Isak doesn’t know, there’s too many jump cuts and he’s not really interested.

They seem to be making fun of the movie more than actually watching it, and Isak wonders if he should interrupt them just to be a dick or move on and get back to this later.

He decides on the latter, because he’s already going to be late to work, and he slips out of the apartment and closes the door behind him quietly.

Isak doesn’t even attempt to lock it this time. Eva can take care of it, he’s sure.

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The tram ride is less crowded this time around, which works well for Isak, who can sit in the very back even when he smells and looks clean and ignore people.

He needs the solitude, because he keeps trying not to think about Noora, which in turn means he ends up thinking about Even, which is not any better, so then he thinks about his dad, which is even worse, then he thinks about his mom and then Eva’s mom and then Eva and then Noora and then—

It’s a never-ending loop in there. Like someone’s playing a horror movie on repeat, except it’s played for him every single night – and that’s if he’s lucky. Sometimes, it’s played for him every other hour.

Isak wonders if this is what’s wrong with him. He’s aware there’s something off about him, something that must not be wired right, and it makes him feel off, makes him feel tired, but he’s never been able to pinpoint exactly what it is; all it’s ever done is keep him up at night, laugh at him when he tries to sleep, then counter the next day by begging him to take nap after nap after nap, if he’s able.
There’s a quiet voice inside his head that tells him a different story, offers a different alternative for what might be wrong with him, but Isak has spent his entire life suppressing that thought, that entire part of him, and he’s not going to let it come to light now.

(It comes to light, though. When he least expects it to. Mostly on lonely nights. It’s triggered, he realizes, and it’s ugly, but he does a good job at hiding it during the day. That’s what matters.)

He’s probably better off thinking about Even, considering that’s the lesser of all evils – and then there’s something funny that moves in his stomach, like there’s something inside that’s shifting without consent, and Isak looks down and frowns at it.

He might be getting sick. And it’s not a very good time to get sick – he’s got his homework, and his paper, and class and work—

(And he’s trying to make more time for Even, too, but that’s only because he needs that, it’s maybe the only fuel Isak can help himself to that isn’t pills or any other unhealthy, addictive option. Not for any other reason. It’s simply logic.)

—but then his stomach stops swirling inside of him, and Isak exhales a sigh of relief. It must have been a temporary wave of nausea, maybe from the long tram ride, and nothing too serious; which makes a lot more sense, because Isak’s immune system is impeccable, what with all the vitamins he obsessively takes and the – well, his eating habits aren’t exactly the healthiest, but there are enough greens and proteins in there to hold him over, which is all it takes, really.

Isak licks his lips and tries to get back to thoughts about – right, Even; him, and – their sex life, and – what he’s been learning about him so far, and – all that jazz.

Listen. Isak has no idea what to think about Even anymore. All he knows is that there are several sides to Even, none of which Isak is comfortable knowing about, but some of which – some of which, deep down inside him – very, very deep down – he does.

Isak thinks it’s the scientist inside him. Genuine scientific curiosity. It’s almost like an instinct – when there’s a lead towards something discoverable, a scientist will almost always follow it and do their best to discover it in its entirety; then they’d take all the credit and the fame for it, of course, but what would getting to know sides of Even really bring Isak? Certainly not fame. And he doesn’t want credit for it; in fact, he doesn’t want anyone to know, ever, especially not Even.

Which brings him back to point one – he shouldn’t be comfortable knowing so much about Even now. Not if they’ve never – well, they’ve never brought up their argument from over a year ago, not in depth; they’ll make a snip about it maybe once or twice, but the air gets far too tense when they do, and it doesn’t even make for better sex; it just puts both of them in a bad mood, and so they have to find a way to rectify it by making small talk, or something.

And that could be the problem. The texting, of course, but the small talk before intercourse – the more they avoid the issue, the more they get to know each other, weirdly enough, and that’s a backwards way of working. It’s curious, but it’s true, and Isak wonders if maybe they say their piece about that night, the curiosity Isak harbors about Even inside of him may go away.

He wonders if it’s even worth attempting, because, according to the theory of probability, that could also go an entirely different way.

Ugh. His head hurts. Maybe choosing to think about Even wasn’t the best idea – still, it got him through the tram ride, which Isak guesses counts for something. The tram halts where it’s meant to and its doors open just in time for Isak to climb down and step on the cement in front of him. His
walk to the museum is uneventful, but ridiculously cold.

A couple of feet away from the entrance, Isak’s text notification goes off in his pocket – huffing some of the cold away from his nose, he reaches inside and pulls it out, only to see Even’s name flashing back at him.

Isak bites his lip. Even just has impeccable timing, he supposes.

He toys with the idea of not replying until after his shift, just to screw his head back on right, but he’s completely hopeless against his curiosity, as he’s now learned – so he slides the notification open, which takes him straight to his and Even’s conversation.

**EVEN**
[Image attachment]

Isak hates that he laughs. He really does. He almost always hates himself when he laughs at the stupid shit Even sends him, because, well, one, he’s not supposed to be sending Isak this stupid shit, and, two – well. He knows two by now.

Sighing loudly to himself, he types out a quick reply, closing in on the museum’s entrance.

**ISAK**
And where did you find that meme, exactly??

By the time Even replies, Isak is pulling open the entrance door.

**EVEN**
Google :)

Isak rolls his eyes.

**ISAK**
Ridiculous

Isak doesn’t exactly realize he’s smiling down at his phone while he’s replying to Even until someone clears their throat loudly, directly in front of him.

He stops in his tracks and looks up to find a smug Eskild looking at him. Isak locks his phone and immediately narrows his eyes, but before he can actually say anything, Eskild asks, “Well, why are we so perky today, little one?”

Isak blinks at him, then scoffs. “I was reading something funny, Eskild.”

Eskild hums. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with that new boyfriend of yours, would it?”

Isak freezes. “What boyfriend?”

“Oh, stop,” Eskild rolls his eyes. “A little birdie told me that you’ve gone and found yourself a man. I never thought I’d see the day my young little cynical grump would find love.”

“No, hang on,” Isak is quick to hold up a placating hand. “Whatever ‘birdie’ told you this is completely misinformed. And probably fell out of its nest,” he tells Eskild. “Because I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Then, pray tell, who is *Even*?”
Isak quickly looks down at his phone screen to make sure it’s pitch black, lest Eskild’s read the contact glowing up on it, but it’s not giving anything away – he pockets it in his coat quickly, just to avoid the possibility, then looks back up at Eskild.

“Where do you know that name from?”

Eskild raises an eyebrow. “You told Chris,” he points out, and Isak relaxes. “And you know him, he can’t shut up about anything, so I think he’s pretty much told the entire staff by now. Gossip spreads pretty quickly around here, Isak,” he intones. “Though why you would tell Chris, of all the disgusting people in the world, and not your manager and friend—”

“Eskild, stop,” Isak interrupts. “First of all, I don’t think I’m in any way contractually obligated to talk to you about my personal life because you’re my manager,” he points out, and Eskild looks both hurt and offended. “That doesn’t mean I wouldn’t,” he amends a little hesitantly, if only to make Eskild feel better. “But I think that’s an issue we ought to address. And second of all—” Isak proceeds to remove his coat and throw it over his arm. “I don’t have a boyfriend. I made him up to get Chris off my back.”

Eskild stares at him, then his expression turns disappointed. “Seriously?” He sighs loudly. “I think you’ve just ruined my entire week.”

“Sorry,” Isak replies, amused. “But he kept hitting on me, and so I had to resort to the oldest trick in the book.”

“And he backed off?”

“Surprisingly,” Isak nods, just as shocked as Eskild. “Guess there has to be some shred of decency in that guy.”

“Or he’s hoping for a threesome.”

Yeah, well, Isak can see that, too. “Either way, he’s not real, so he’s never getting that threesome.” He pauses. “Not that – he would anyway, I’m just—”

Eskild laughs. “Oh, Isak, just know when to stop talking, okay, little one?” He pats Isak on the shoulder in which Isak assumes is meant to be comforting, but it feels a little condescending, to be honest. “Just make sure poor Julian knows next time he’s on shift with you.”

Isak furrows his brows. “Why?”

Eskild stares at him, then sighs deeply, as if he’s giving up. “Just because he’s your friend, of course, he’d like to know you didn’t also forget to tell him about your boyfriend.”

“Okay?” Isak is still confused. “I’m sure he’ll survive, though.”

“Sure,” Eskild sighs. “Yes, Isak, I’m sure he will. Well, in any case,” Eskild turns his back and starts to walk away from him. “Clock in now, you’re already late.”

“You were holding me back!” Isak calls out, a little defensively.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Eskild stops a couple of steps ahead of Isak and turns around. “You were already late when you got here, don’t lie to yourself.”

Isak sighs.
Before he can make his way to the front desk, however, Eskild holds up a hand to stop him in his tracks once again. Isak makes a face at him.

“Eskild—”

“Just one more question and I’ll let you go,” Eskild assures him. “This Even guy – do you know him, or did you just make up his name?”

Isak clears his throat. “He’s – a friend of a friend,” he tries. “Just the first person to pop into my head.”

Eskild smirks. “And why is that?”

Isak narrows his eyes. “There are still many things humanity doesn’t know about how the brain functions, Eskild,” he near-snaps. “So, whatever you’re thinking is the reason, it’s probably not. Now if you’ll excuse me—”

Eskild steps aside and waves towards the front desk. “Please, please, be my guest,” he offers, and Isak walks past him. “Don’t forget to tell Julian!” He calls out behind Isak.

Isak looks over his shoulder to offer Eskild a confused look before turning back ahead. What is it with everyone in his life and their obsession with Julian Dahl? Does he have some sort of irresistible charm that Isak’s not picking up on?

Thoughts of Julian cease and desist when his text notifications goes off, and before Isak can reach the front desk, he looks down at the phone in his hand. He knows who it is. He hates how hastily he unlocks his fucking phone.

There’s the text Even sent before Isak had to lock his phone quickly, the one he hadn’t gotten to see, and then a new one below that.

**EVEN**
Ridiculous enough for you to sleep with, apparently

**EVEN**
Did my amazing meme skills scare you off?

Isak bites the inside of his cheek and types a reply.

**ISAK**
Are you so desperate for attention you’re looking for it from me???

**EVEN**
Idk why it’s so surprising that I’d choose to look for attention from the guy who’s showing my dick a good time

**EVEN**
Which reminds me, that thing you did, last week??

Isak’s face flushes hot at the memory.

**ISAK**
What about it

**EVEN**
Think you can do it again sometime this week??

Isak bites his lip to keep himself from smirking.

**ISAK**

We’ll see

Eskild walks past him and sighs loudly, which causes Isak to almost drop his phone in surprise.

“If it’s not a boyfriend then it’s certainly someone you like,” Eskild calls out as he walks towards the managers’ office. He doesn’t even have the courtesy to turn around when he says to Isak, “Don’t hurt your face by smiling too much,” and then proceeds to walk inside his office and shut the door behind him.

Isak scowls. He doesn’t *like* Even, Jesus. He likes the memories he’s bringing up, sure, and he definitely likes the idea of doing to him exactly what he’d done last week, but Even? No. Isak thinks there’s still too much pent-up resentment in him to actually *like* him.

(How many times has he said that to himself today, exactly? He’s lost count.)

Before he can put his phone away petulantly, Isak catches one last glimpse of Even’s responding text.

**EVEN**

Can’t wait

And, yeah. There’s a small, traitorous part of Isak that can’t wait, either.

--

Three days later, Isak can’t sleep.

Not an uncommon occurrence. It happens more often than not – it’s happened since his father left him and his mother six years ago; Isak can’t remember the last time he’s slept peacefully. He dreams every night, and almost every night the dream turns sour, turns into all of his fears rolled into one. It doesn’t matter what he takes, or what he thinks about when he goes to bed, the dreams are never peaceful. The dreams are never helpful. The dreams just come, and when Isak wakes up, they don’t go.

At one in the morning, Isak spends about half an hour looking at Galileo. He’s hidden inside his makeshift cave, presumably asleep, but Isak can see his tail poking out of the entrance. He wonders if the fish has any idea what he means to Isak, if he has any idea whatsoever who Isak is. Logically, Isak knows that it’s impossible, but he likes to think he does. When he first got him, Isak would talk to him, much like he does now – but back then, Isak would talk to him about what he never dared utter to anyone else: his fears, his sadness, his anger. Galileo knows perhaps more about his goings ons than any person in his life, including Jonas.

Jonas knows what happened to Isak. Maybe he even has an idea of how it’s affected him. But he doesn’t know what goes on inside Isak’s head, he doesn’t know his past as much as he likes to think, doesn’t know the unimaginable pain and suffering and fear and anger that Isak went through when his father left. No – maybe even before that.

Isak knows he was alone far before that.

At two in the morning, Isak lies on the floor, stares at the ceiling. He’s got a poster of Orion’s Belt...
stuck up there, just for the illusion – stars make him feel less lonely. He tries to remember why again, but there’s a part of Isak that refuses to remember. The more he forgets about his past, the easier it is to live his present. He counts to three – Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka – and takes a deep breath, closing his eyes and counting them over and over and over again, until maybe sleep will do him the favor of taking him under.

It doesn’t.

At three in the morning, Isak sits at his desk, stares at the Word document that’s been taunting him for about a month and a half now. He’s started on the introduction – talks about the formation of stars in molecular clouds, about the study he’d started working on his freshman year of college about the properties of Cepheus OB3 and its related molecular cloud complex, etcetera, etcetera – but it’s only a paragraph. And sometimes Isak wonders if it’ll ever be more than a paragraph. He’s got all the facts, the information is all his, he’s known this stuff since he started studying Cepheus years ago, and yet here he is, unable to put everything he knows down on paper, unable to muster up the passion to talk about it in length and in detail, the way he’s always been able to when he talks about the different constellations at the science museum.

He thinks the difference is maybe that when he talks about the constellations in the space exhibit, it hardly ever feels like a chore – there are curious minds wanting to learn more about them, about the history of them, about the countless of stories that live inside them and Isak can talk about all of this for hours and hours if someone would just let him; the difference is that the stars are close to him in the space exhibit, and that’s all he’s ever felt like he wanted – to get closer to the stars.

At four in the morning, Isak switches tactics – he tries to jerk off.

Judge him all you want, but there’s only so much thinking he can do before he’s spiraling into a dark place, so he tries to excite his dick enough so that maybe he can think about things that don’t make him want to, you know, not exist. And hey, sometimes, when he finishes, he’s exhausted enough for a nap, so this might really be the best idea he’s had all night.

The only problem is his dick is not responding, because it must be pissed at Isak or something – mostly, though, Isak is pretty sure that, as per usual, it’s so used to the real thing it’s not interested in Isak’s clammy fucking hands.

Doesn’t stop him from still trying, though – he tries porn for a little while, but none of it is really keeping his attention; he tries thinking about Even, as much as he hates it, but even that doesn’t help his petulant dick; he tries every trick in the book, even tries to google some things, but nothing’s helping. There is no way he’s going to be able to do this by himself. Which means he’ll probably start thinking the way he was thinking before, and it’ll end up with him curled up in his bed and thinking about maybe not going to work or do much else for the rest of the day.

At five in the morning, Isak does something stupid.

It’s ridiculous. But you have to keep in mind he’s gone nearly twelve hours without sleep now, and he’s desperate to escape his own head, and there’s really only one way he can think of doing that – he could get high, sure, but he’s got no weed on him at the moment, and Jonas is probably not awake right now and, besides, weed is not as good as this. It hasn’t been in a long time.

His phone is way too bright for this time of night, but considering he hasn’t really been sleeping and he’s been staring at his laptop for most of it, it doesn’t hurt Isak’s eyes. He bounces his leg nervously for a moment before unlocking it and finding the texting app.

Opening Even’s conversation is almost instinctual.
Are you up

Isak waits for about ten minutes before he tries again.

Are you awake

Five minutes, and he’s pretty sure this means Even’s not, so he thinks about giving up, except—

Does he really care about waking Even up?

He mulls this over for only a moment before he decides to press down on the call button, brings the phone up to his ear and listens to the dial tone.

On the fifth and most likely last ring, Isak hears Even pick up on the other line.

“Hello?” Even’s voice sounds hoarse.

Isak clears his throat. “Hey.”

There’s a pause. “Isak?”

“Do you not know how to read a contact?” Isak grunts.

There’s a shuffling on the other end of the line. “It’s five in the morning,” Even points out slowly. “I wasn’t really looking.”

Isak pauses awkwardly.

“You still there?” Even asks quietly.

“Yeah,” Isak clears his throat. “I’m—” his leg is still bouncing uncontrollably. “Listen, I’m – I need —”

“Right now?”

Isak huffs. “I’m frustrated.”

“The boys are asleep.”

“So we’ll be quiet.”

There’s silence.

“You’re serious.”

Isak stands from the edge of his bed and runs a nervous hand through his hair. Yeah, Even’s right. This is ridiculous. “Look, I – never mind, that’s – you’re right, this was stupid—”

“Wait.” Even interrupts. Isak hears him yawn. “Just – okay, come over, but text me when you’re outside so I can let you in and not wake the guys.”

Isak blinks. “Seriously?”

“I would hope if I called at five in the morning looking for a fuck you’d extend me the same
He’s joking. Isak can tell, and he doesn’t know when he started to tell, but he *can*, and Even is doing this because – because he’s *kind*, there’s no way around it, because Isak can hardly believe he actually *wants* this at five in the morning when he’d been sleeping, and that’s so *annoying*. Part of Isak had actually expected Even to turn him down, tell him to go back to sleep and point out that this has never been a part of their deal. And it’s stupid, it really is, and risky, because both Elias and Yousef are home and sleeping, so they’d – they would really have to be quiet, which Isak has proven many times before he has difficulty with, and now it’s *really* starting to hit him just how bad this idea is—

“Hey,” Even’s voice is quiet and it interrupts Isak’s train of thought. “Stop thinking so loudly.”

Isak scowls. “I wasn’t—”

“If you need this, then I’m willing to give it to you,” Even tells him, and something in Isak’s stomach shuffles uncomfortably again. “But if you don’t, that’s fine, too. I’m happy to hang up right now and go back to bed, let you do the same, and forget any of this ever—”

“I wasn’t asleep,” Isak blurts.

Silence. “Oh?”

Isak throws his head back dramatically. He’s such a fucking *idiot*, Even doesn’t need to *know* that; his mouth tends to run off idiotically when he’s lacking so much sleep. It’s a wonder he hasn’t scared anyone off in the museum when this happens. “I couldn’t – that’s not important, you don’t—”

“Come over,” Even yawns. “But remember to text me when you’re outside. I’ll let you in.”

Isak swallows. “Okay.”

“And —”

The line goes dead.

Isak hangs up his own phone and locks it, stares straight into Galileo’s tank as he tries to wrap his head around what he just asked of Even.

He hates this. He hates not – not having *control* over what he’s doing. This is what lack of sleep does – makes you irrational and impulsive, stupid, at best, and this is what this is. Stupid. Reckless. Irrational, impulsive. If Isak has any right of mind left, he’d stay put where he is, text Even he’s changed his mind, and just ride out the entirety of the night without sleep.

But right around the time he finishes the thought, he’s already fighting with the door knob, on his way out.

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Right, so it’s fucking *freezing*.

And Isak should have really seen this coming. It’s nearly six in the morning now, and there’s still no sight of the sun, and the streets are empty save for what Isak assumes are a couple of night-shifters or early birds; Oslo’s pretty like this, he’ll admit, but it’s fucking freezing, and the fact that he’s waiting outside of Even’s place for Even to come downstairs and open the fucking door for him isn’t helping.
He keeps bouncing on his feet, trying to keep himself warm, glaring at the front door. It’s been at least five minutes – Isak hopes Even didn’t fall asleep on him, because if he did, he’s not getting any from Isak for at least a month, that motherfucker—

Before he can finish the entirety of that thought, the front door quietly opens and Even pokes his head out. His hair is tousled, not at all styled like it usually is, soft and falling over his forehead and – Isak tries not to find it attractive. He really, really does. In fact, he tries to convince himself he finds Even a lot more attractive when he styles his hair and wears his stupid jean jackets and shit, but Even looks so much more – casual, like this, a little more – candid, Isak supposes, and it’s really fucking with him, the fact that he has this insane urge to run his fingers through Even’s hair.

He supposes that’ll be first on his agenda tonight.

Even raises an eyebrow. “Are you just going to stand there?” He asks, voice barely above a whisper.

Isak shakes himself out of his stupor, then quickly makes his way inside the house when Even pulls the door further open. Isak allows the warmth of the house to envelop him as Even closes the door behind them with a quiet click, almost imperceptible. Isak is biting his lip nervously and still bouncing on his feet when he turns to meet Even’s gaze, which is calculating, pensive.

Isak throws him a look. “What.”

Even shakes his head. “Come on,” he says quietly, then leads the way upstairs. Isak follows dutifully.

Once Even leads him to his room, he closes the door behind them just as quietly as he did the front door, just as Isak walks further inside the room and tries to warm up the rest of his body.

He’s feeling a little out of place – they hardly ever see each other when it’s dark, considering they’re either both busy when the sun’s gone down or one of their roommates is always home, and technically, they shouldn’t really be seeing each other this night, either, but yet.

Isak licks his lips nervously and turns back to see Even looking at him a little contemplatively again. Isak scowls, at him, holds his arms out in question.

“What?” He snaps once again. “What are you looking at?”

“You look like a mess,” Even points out without missing a beat, small smirk tainting his lips. Isak narrows his eyes.

“Good to know you’re an asshole even when you’ve just woken up.”

Even shrugs. “I guess that’s not a trait you can get rid of.” His smirk turns into a teasing smile, and Isak can’t bear to look at it – so he turns to look at the bed instead, taking in the slept-on pillow and messy duvet. He clears his throat stupidly, glances at Even for a second.

“So—”

“If you want to do this, it’s probably going to have to be quick,” Even tells him, walking towards the bed. He sits on the edge of it and looks up at Isak, eyebrows rising. “And quiet. You realize you’re going to have to be quiet, right?”

“I know,” Isak scoffs. “I can be quiet.”

Even purses his lips. “Uh huh.”
“I can,” Isak insists, though he absolutely cannot.

“We’ll have you bite into a pillow or something,” Even waves him off, and Isak huffs, irritated.

“This is not good foreplay.”

“It’s not like you’re doing any better,” Even laughs quietly. “You’re just standing there. I thought you were frustrated enough to show up at five in the morning?”

“I am,” Isak tells him. “I just – I don’t know, we’re talking now, and it feels weird to just – transition.”

Even sighs. He pulls his shirt off, which easily leaves him in only his boxers, and raises an eyebrow at Isak. “Easy. Just undress.”

Isak thinks this is totally unfair, because he’s got a coat and a hoodie and a shirt and sweatpants on and it was really easy for Even to undress, because all he had on was his shirt and his boxers, but now Isak’s going to have to stand here and let Even watch him undress like an idiot, which he’s not on board with.

“Look away,” Isak demands, and Even huffs a surprised laugh.

“What?” he shakes his head. “It’s nothing I’ve never seen before, Isak.”

“Yeah, but we’re usually doing it together, and while we’re – you know,” he gestures lamely. “And now you’re just going to sit there and watch me take off my clothes, and that’s weird, like, it’s not – you know, it’s not attractive to just watch someone undress.”

“I disagree.”

“Oh, my God,” Isak rolls his eyes. “Can you just look away, please?”

Even smiles, clearly amused, but holds up two conceding hands. “Alright,” he says, turning to his right to give Isak some space. Isak starts by taking off his shoes, then his socks, while Even talks to him some more. “For the record, I would have been more than happy to help you.”

Isak swallows. Yeah, well, that didn’t really occur to him – still, he’s not going to tell Even that, so instead he replies, “You look like you’re about to fall over from tiredness.”

“Yet you’re still willing to have sex with me.”

“I’m letting you wake up,” Isak snaps quietly, working on his hoodie now. He’s kind of throwing all of his stuff in a pile, which he thinks will be very helpful for when he makes his exit; which is what he’d said to Even a couple of days ago, and he kind of wants to bring it up again by pointing out just how good of an idea it actually is, then say I told you so, but then again, he thinks about the point Even brought up before – when they’re in the heat of the moment, they’re not really thinking about where their clothes fall, and he thinks if they ever take their time to take each other’s clothes off, it’d be – weird, so, maybe not.

This train of thought gets him through the awkward silence while he undresses, and when he’s finally down to just his boxers, he clears his throat. “Okay,” he calls to Even quietly. “I’m done.”

Even turns around and gives him a once over, then meets Isak’s gaze. “Yep,” he says. “Exactly the same as last time.”
“Oh, fuck off,” Isak rolls his eyes.

Even eyes the pile of clothes to the left of Isak. “Damn,” he says. “You could have at least folded them.”

Isak grunts and walks over to Even, pushes him a little further onto the bed and then swings a leg over his lap, settling himself down on it. “Seriously. You have a real fucking smart mouth for someone who just woke up.”

“What can I say,” Even replies, placing his hands on Isak’s lower back. “You bring out the worst in me.”

Isak huffs. It doesn’t take long for the friction between the two of them to start waking his dick up – then again, it was pretty much demanding Even instead of his hand, so this might just be Isak reacting to the actual frustration he’d been feeling all night; and it’s not like he’s not quick to react all the time, they both usually are, especially when they know exactly what they’re there for, but—

Isak frowns down between them. “What’s this?” he asks, looking back up to meet Even’s gaze. “Nothing’s happening.”


“Which means nothing if you’re not.”

“Well, maybe it’s still asleep.”

“Okay,” Isak looks at him. “So what do I do?”

Even blinks at him. “Wake it up?”

Isak looks back down at it. Okay, that he can do. He’s done it several times before, right? Or, maybe not. This has never actually been a problem. If he’s going to be honest, he’s a little offended at the fact that Even isn’t immediately reacting to him, and annoyed now at how quickly Isak reacted to him. He keeps telling himself he shouldn’t take it personally, Even did just wake up – and not willingly – but that doesn’t stop him from huffing petulantly down at Even’s dick, trying to figure out what he should do.

He’s seen this shit in porn countless of times. It’s easy. It should be easy. Isak clears his throat and places his hand on a limp Even over his boxers. He tries rubbing him slowly, rhythmically, not too enthusiastically, as if Isak’s afraid to scare it off.

Isak’s not looking at Even, but rather at what he’s doing, and then he tries a stupid thing he’s probably going to regret as soon as he tries it. He says, “Alright, it’s time to wake up.”

Yeah. He regrets it.

He feels Even stiffen and Isak closes his eyes in embarrassment. He shouldn’t have. Oh, my God, he shouldn’t have.

Isak hears Even snort. “Did you – did you just talk to my dick?”

Isak snaps his gaze up to meet Even’s amused one, and he scowls. “You told me to wake it up!” he whispers furiously.

“It’s not a child,” Even looks like he’s trying not to burst out laughing. “Did you expect it to yawn
and say good morning?”

“Stop.”

“I am so embarrassed for you, oh my God,” Even’s laughing quietly. “How many porn movies have you watched?”

Isak shakes his head furiously, leaning away from Even. “I’m leaving,” he snaps.

“No,” Even holds him in place. “Oh, my God, stop, okay, okay, look – look, Isak,” he insists when Isak refuses to look him in the eyes. This is stupid. Isak realizes he was stupid about it, and Even making fun of him isn’t unexpected, but it’s certainly not helping this situation any. “Don’t leave. You’re already here at nearly six in the morning, just – let me show you what I meant—”

“I was trying a thing!” Isak snaps defensively, turning to look back at Even.

“Well, you know,” Even licks his smiling lips. “We’re gonna figure out that kink later, but right now is not a good time because you just – really caught me off guard,” he sighs, and suddenly looks very somber. Isak eyes him suspiciously. “I should have told you my dick only responds to the Latin American version of ‘Happy Birthday’.”

Isak blinks. “What?”

“Las Mañanitas?” Even looks extremely serious. “It’s all about waking someone up at the crack of dawn, which, I think is appropriate for this particular situation—”

Isak shakes his head and starts standing. “Okay, I’m seriously leaving.”

“Isak,” Even laughs, takes Isak by the hands and pulls him back down gently. Isak doesn’t really fight him – and that’s probably because he really should take of the pressing matter between his legs, not because of anything else. “Stop, stop, okay, just – here,” he takes Isak’s hand and places it over his boxers again. “You’ve done this a hundred times before,” he reminds Isak, starting to guide Isak’s hand into a soft stroke. “There’s no need to talk to it.”

Isak narrows his eyes, but doesn’t stop stroking. “It’s never taken you this long to get hard.”

“Well, that’s why we’re waking it up,” Even points out.

Isak huffs. “How long am I supposed to keep stroking it like this?”

“You’re saying it like you’re not enjoying it.”

That’s definitely not the case. “I am seriously about to burst with how frustrated I am, Even.”

Even huffs a quiet laugh, then pulls Isak closer to him and presses his lips against Isak’s. “This might help speed up the process,” he mutters against Isak’s lips, and, well, Isak can hardly argue with that.

It still takes Even a while – the kiss is heavy, Isak biting down on Even’s lip every once in a while and Even doing the same – it’s all tongue and teeth, mostly, and Isak keeps stroking him while they do this; but after a while it starts to get tiring, so when Even starts trailing kisses down Isak’s jaw, Isak removes his hand from between the two of them and instead runs it through Even’s hair – and, yeah, that feels as soft as it looks – before he starts slowly rolling his hips against him. Even hums pleasantly at what Isak presumes is the sensation.
“That’s working better,” he mutters, lips now attached to Isak’s neck. He scrapes his teeth there softly, and Isak huffs in pleasure, hands fisting in Even’s hair as he keeps moving. “Keep doing that.”

“If I keep doing this for much longer I’m gonna finish before you even get hard,” Isak breathes, and Even huffs out a laugh before biting down on Isak’s shoulder.

“You can take breaks,” he offers, and Isak starts kissing at Even’s temple.

“ Fucking hurry up instead,” he grunts, annoyed. “I’m starting to take it personally.”

Even pulls back and finds Isak’s lips again, hips arching upwards. “You feel that?” he smiles against Isak’s lips. “I think it might actually be responding to your words. Maybe you should have kept talking to it.”

Isak bites down a little too harshly on Even’s bottom lip this time, and he feels victorious when he feels Even flinch slightly. He smirks. “Sorry,” he says.

“You’re a little shit, you know that?” Even mutters, but it’s not malicious, or offended – it sounds amused, and it does stupid things to Isak’s stomach.

“I’m aware,” Isak breathes into Even’s mouth. In a particular roll of the hips, Isak finally feels just how much this has worked, and he groans stiltedly. “Oh, God.”

Even shushes him. “You’re supposed to be quiet.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do about it,” Isak snaps back.

Even attaches his lips to Isak’s jaw again. “You want me to take care of you tonight?” he asks quietly, trailing his hands down Isak’s back.

Isak shivers and nods dumbly.

Even smiles against the skin of Isak’s neck. “I can do that,” he tells Isak, and then he’s grabbing Isak’s legs and turning him over on the bed, letting Isak fall on his back. Isak is quick to pull Even back towards him, but Even refuses, instead turns Isak over on his chest, cheek pressed against the mattress.

“You’ll make less noise this way,” Even points out, starting to trail kisses down Isak’s spine, and, alright, that’s a fair point. Isak arches his back towards Even, which he responds eagerly to, fingernails trailing down either of Isak’s sides.

“Into the mattress, alright?”

Isak nods uselessly.

He feels Even smirk against his back. “Alright.”

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By the time Isak is lying with his back on Even’s bed, breathing deeply beside him, the sun is filtering in through the window curtains, heating up the room a little more. He’s still sweating, a little bit, and Even’s staring up at the ceiling beside him, too, attempting to catch his breath.

Isak closes his eyes. Yeah, he thinks he can probably fall asleep now. Not here, obviously, because he’s pretty sure “no lingering” also translates into “no spending the night”, but he’s so comfortable
his body is seriously considering a nap.

It was good. Even with all that ridiculous build up, it was good. He can still feel Even’s lips hot on his back, his teeth bite down his shoulder, the quick and aggressive rhythm he adopted behind Isak. He can still feel the sting of the mattress on his forehead as he moaned uselessly into it, fisting his hands around the sheets and shivering every time Even gasped his name quietly into his ears.

And it’s incredible, Isak thinks, how sex with Even helps him forget about literally everything – the only thing that matters in the moment is the two of them, moving in sync, the only thing he’s looking forward to is exactly what he’s going to feel next, the only thing he worries about is how long the pleasure’s going to last.

Even afterwards, Isak can only think about how good it was, and how much longer it’ll be until they can do it again.

It’s a nice break from reality. It’s easy for his subconscious to want to take him under, like this.

Isak opens his eyes when he hears shuffling beside him, and when he turns to find the source, he finds Even sitting up now, his back pressed against the headboard. He’s looking at Isak curiously, like he’s trying to figure out if he’s going to fall asleep or leave or say anything after this, but Isak doubts he’s going to find answers – Isak doesn’t have any himself.

It takes him a moment before he mimics Even’s actions; he sits up and presses his back against the headboard, stares straight at the closet doors and lets his eyes scan the the drawings taped all over them. He can’t see any of them, mind you, his glasses somewhere on the floor, but it gives him something to do, allows him to ignore Even’s intense gaze burning a hole through Isak’s cheek.

Finally, Isak sighs loudly and turns to look at even, raising a challenging eyebrow. “What?”

Even’s expression doesn’t waver. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Isak’s heart does something stupid – it’s almost like it’s trying to reach out, trying to tell Isak that he should, that all of this is too much to keep to himself, that maybe if he fucking talks to someone about his fears and his concerns and his passions, he’ll be able to find a way out of this black hole he’s managed to suck himself into – but Isak ignores it.

“No personal shit, remember?” Isak replies, and he makes sure his voice is tight and final.

Even nods once, turns to look back at the closet doors. “Okay.” They sit like this for about a minute, silence definitely awkward, but before Isak can quietly make his exit, Even says, “But I might be the best person to talk about this shit to.”

Isak scoffs. “How in the world——”

“The way I see it,” Even interrupts. “You’re already here. You’ve obviously got something on your mind. I’m an objective ear you probably don’t care for advice from. It could help you, you know,” he points out, far too softly for Isak’s comfort. “You can’t just keep letting your frustrations scream at you all night.”

Isak thinks about it. His heart is still yelling at him, and for once, his mind is agreeing – they’re usually at opposite ends of decisions, but Even’s not exactly wrong about this; Even doesn’t know anything about Isak. Anything he hears, Even will probably not judge, or not care enough to judge, anyway. It doesn’t have to be anything Isak is not willing to share with anyone else – just what scratches the surface. Just enough to maybe keep his thoughts quiet for a moment at night, enough to fall asleep, enough to keep his mind from screaming.
“Do you remember what you told me a couple of weeks ago?” he asks, glancing at Even.

Even frowns. “What do you mean?”

Isak looks down at his hands, fidgeting. “I mean – you said you drew all of that”—and here, Isak gestures towards the drawings taped to the closet doors—“to remind yourself that you still liked to draw. To not lose yourself in the job.”

Even’s face clears. “Oh, yeah. I remember.”

Isak licks his lips. “I can’t do that with mine,” he admits. “I – I want to remind myself how much I love astronomy, but I’m doing so much work for my final thesis that I keep forgetting.”

Even doesn’t say anything, which Isak appreciates.

“And it’s not – right, it’s not that I don’t love it still, it’s just that – sometimes it’s easy to forget why I loved it in the first place, and it – it gets so frustrating, because I want to remember, I want to love it as much as I used to, but thinking about it as a chore isn’t helping anything and sometimes I – I want to look at the stars and just remember why I was drawn to them in the first place, but it gets harder and harder every day.”

He looks at Even nervously.

Even looks pensive, then looks at Isak, almost in wonder. “You’re an astronomy major?”

Isak lets out a surprised laugh, because, yeah – they hardly know anything about each other, don’t they? “Yeah,” he says. “I work at the science museum so I can work at the space exhibit. You ever been?” Even shakes his head. “It’s just – a dark room, and the entirety of the sky is projected around it, and I can talk about the different constellations to people who want to listen, and I think – I think that’s the place I remember my passion the most. Like the closer I am, the more I remember, you know?”


Isak looks at him, furrowing his brows. “What did you think I studied?”

Even shrugs. “I pegged you for a biology asshole,” he confesses, and Isak rolls his eyes.

“Yeah, I’m pretty good at that, too,” he tells him, and Even snorts. “What? That was my subject in high school. Pretty good at most everything else, too.”

“How do you walk around with that big head of yours?”

“Oh, look who’s talking,” Isak retorts, and Even shakes his head, clearly amused.

There’s a pause, and then Even says, “So your fear is forgetting why you love the stars in the first place.”

Isak nods. “Or just ending up not loving them at all,” he admits. “Like – I have this recurring nightmare, right, that no matter what I do, what I discover, none of it is going to matter in the long run. That I’ll end up like Clyde Tombaugh, stripped of what I’m proudest of. And then maybe, that’s when I’ll stop loving what I do. And then I think – is this really what I want to do with my life?” He looks at Even. “That’s a fucking risk, right? Getting into something you love and then – then coming out of it hating it.”
Even frowns. “…who’s Clyde Tombaugh?”

“He discovered Pluto,” Isak tells him. “And then – just like that, they decided to take it away. Can you imagine that?” Isak looks at him. “Someone taking away the biggest discovery you’ve ever made? Stripping it of a label you helped put on it, have someone write it off as unimportant?” Isak shakes his head. “Someone looking at what you’re proudest of and saying – well, you really shouldn’t be.”

There’s a moment of silence between them, then Even smiles softly at Isak. “That’s a risk I take every day in film school.”

Isak sighs. “I know, but—”

“Do you know if the Pluto thing affected this Clyde guy?” he asks Isak. “Like, is he still alive?”

“Well, no, he’s pretty fucking dead, but—”

“Then what does it matter?” Even asks. “If he’ll never know?”

“That’s not the point—”

“Do you think he’d care?” Even sounds genuinely curious. “I know that was – pretty important for him, but, really; is that all he ever did throughout his career?”

Isak shakes his head. “No,” he says. “But that was maybe the most notable. Had to be what he was proudest of.”

“And you know this for a fact?” Even asks. “You don’t think that maybe he’d be happy science has advanced enough throughout the years since he’s been gone to discover that Pluto wasn’t a planet after all?”

“It’s a dwarf planet,” he mutters. “I just – I don’t think it would have been easy for him, Even. I don’t know if my love of the stars could ever survive that kind of blow.”

Even shifts his weight on the bed. He looks like he wants to say something – maybe a lot of things – but he seems to think better of it at the last minute, and instead offers Isak a kind look. “I hope you remember why you love the stars,” he tells Isak quietly. “But I don’t think a couple of setbacks are what’ll make you stop loving them.”

Isak frowns. “So you’re saying you don’t believe your love for something can fade?”

“No. I’m saying that if you love something enough, you actually can take more than one blow.”

Isak looks at Even for a moment longer. He sounds so sure about this – how he can live so naively in this world, Isak doesn’t know. Still, he knows there’s nothing he can say that’ll make Even see what he sees, just like there’s not much Even can say to change Isak’s mind. He – appreciates, he supposes, that he’s trying, though. Isak really didn’t think he would at all. He’s thinking of something to say – if he should say anything at all, really, and as he thinks, Even turns over to the left of him and reaches to pull open his end nightstand drawer. He reaches for something inside, and Isak can’t help it; he peeks, trying to figure out what it is.

It’s a small prescription bottle, and Even sets it on the nightstand, presumably to keep it out of Isak’s sight – he’s got a half empty water bottle sitting next to the pills, and he manages to drop a pill (or two, Isak can’t tell) onto his palm and surreptitiously down them with the water bottle.
Isak licks his lips. “Are those—” he clears his throat. “Are those for—”

Even glances back at him. “Snooping?”

“No, I just – it’s not like you’re being subtle about it—”

“Chill,” Even rolls his eyes as he twists the cap back on the water bottle, then moves on to the pill bottle’s cap. “Yeah, they’re for my bipolar. Weirded out?”

“No,” Isak scowls. “It’s just – I’ve never seen you take them before.”

“Well, you’ve never exactly been over this early in the morning before,” Even points out, twisting the cap on the pill bottles this time.

“I just – keep forgetting about it.” Or, rather, he’d forgotten about it altogether. Up until now, that is. Almost like he’d been purposely blocking it from his memory.

Even snorts. “Yeah, well, I make it a point not to bring it up to people anymore. Lest they think I’m gunning for pity points.”

Isak frowns. “Are you still angry at me for that?”

Even glances back at him, a little disbelievingly. “I didn’t know I wasn’t allowed to be.”

Isak scoffs. “I apologized for that,” he snaps, crossing his arms over his bare chest. “So sorry if I thought you wouldn’t be angry about it anymore.”

Even pauses in the middle of opening the drawer. He glances back at Isak before turning back around, avoiding Isak’s gaze. “You didn’t,” he says quietly.

Isak blinks at the back of Even’s head. “Didn’t what?”

Even fidgets with his meds for a moment longer, then finally sets them gently down inside the drawer. When he closes it, he turns to face forward again, but he’s still avoiding Isak’s gaze. He looks down and plays with his hands, which makes Isak look down at them, too. When Isak’s gaze rises back to Even’s, he’s still looking at his hands, expression closed off.

“Apologize.” Even replies, voice barely audible.

Isak opens his mouth to immediately argue the fact, but then snaps it shut, wracking his brain to find the moment in his memory when he did. When he realizes he didn’t, in fact, ever apologize for his stupid, reckless comment, so preoccupied with driving Even away as fast as he could, he feels his face flush hot and his stomach fall to his feet. Oh, Jesus. Oh, God. Fuck, he’s such a fucking asshole. No wonder Even couldn’t stand the sight of him – in Even’s shoes, Isak would probably avoided him just the same.

That was fucked up. That was so, so fucked up. And the fact that Isak hadn’t apologized—

“I’m sorry,” Isak tells him, and Even snaps his gaze up to meet Isak’s. Isak tries to make his expression as sincere as possible, so Even knows he truly means it. “For – for not apologizing then, and for – for even saying that shit.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” Isak snaps, angry at himself. “It’s not okay. I was just – I was so angry I might have – glossed over it, and that’s not – that wasn’t cool. I don’t think – I don’t think your bipolar has any
bearing on what you do, or, no, that’s not right, I don’t think you use it to get ahead, I think – I know people with mental illnesses have different outlets, and, like, it wasn’t my place at all to say that shit, or even doubt you, or – I’m not – you just – you walked up to me and you looked – and, anyway, I panicked, because I’m not – always very good at social interaction with – people like you, and I tend to run my mouth about things literally no one else cares about, so I just – went on the defensive, I guess, and I took it out on you, and that’s not an excuse, of course, because what I said was fucked up and shouldn’t have been said in the first place, whether or not you were the artist, and – yeah. Yeah, I’m really sorry.”

Even stares at him for a long moment, then breaks into a smile. “Thank you,” he tells Isak, and his eyes are shining far brighter than Isak’s ever seen them shine before. It’s blinding and obnoxious but Isak wants to stare at them for a long time. “Really. I – it’d been – just. Uhm, thank you.”

Isak smiles back.

Even clears his throat. “Uhm, I guess I’m sorry for being so—”

“Pretentious?” Isak offers solemnly.

“Sure, pretentious,” Even laughs. “Let’s go with that.”

Isak huffs a laugh. “No, I think – it was just – I was also mostly angry with myself. Frustrated. Embarrassed. I couldn’t understand your painting and I hated the fact. I hate subjectivity, it irritates me, because it’s not – I like fact, you know, I like things I can touch and see and understand and learn the same as everyone else. And art – it’s not like that,” he looks over at Even. “But, you know, maybe that’s okay. If you need art, then – who am I to take that from you, right?”

Even smiles softly. “Right.”

“I mean,” Isak smirks. “Doesn’t mean I don’t still think it’s bullshit.”

“Oh, my God.”

“I mean, I get that it’s your feelings and all, but that one painting – shapes?”

“You were doing so well.”

“I mean, maybe if they looked like something, like all your surrealist artists’, then maybe I could have —”

Even hits Isak’s face with a pillow. “Shut up.”

Isak laughs and takes the pillow from Even, throws it on the floor. “I’m just fucking with you.”

Even looks at him for a moment, and Isak looks back, and then Even raises an eyebrow.

“Maybe one day I’ll paint the stars for you.”

“Oh, you will, will you?”

“Yeah, but I’ll paint the constellations all wrong.”

Isak blinks. “Stop it.”

“It’ll frustrate you so much,” Even grins. “Because you’ll be yelling at me about what goes where —”
“This is cruel.”

“And it’ll have a deeper meaning, but you won’t know what it is.”

“That’s torture,” Isak argues. “You’d just be torturing me.”

“What does it matter if you think it’s bullshit?” Even challenges.

“If it’s based on fact then that’s just a massacre.”

“I’ll make sure that it goes down in history—”

“Stop!”

—as one of the greatest paintings known to man, and for years, scientists and artists alike will wonder, what the fuck does this mean?"

Isak reaches back towards the floor to retrieve the pillow he’d just thrown down there, then turns around to hit Even’s face with it this time. Even laughs gleefully and takes it from Isak’s hands, throws it over the bed again. Isak doesn’t know how to uncurl the smile that’s taken over his lips, and when Even turns back to look at him, Isak thinks he has the same problem.

And it’s stupid, the fact that they stay like this for a moment, just smiling at each other, like they’ve finally found common ground to start from, like they can maybe move forward from here as more than – more than they were. Like maybe they’re both not as bad as the other thought, and maybe they built the memory in their heads to be far more than it actually was.

And so Isak thinks back on the idea that maybe they could be friends, and now he thinks: yeah, maybe.

Even licks his lips after a moment. “But, uhm—”

Isak will never know what Even was about to say, because suddenly there’s a quick knock on the door. Isak and Even both freeze.

“Even?” It’s Elias’s voice, and Isak blinks over at Even in panic. “Is someone in there with you?”

They both scramble out of bed immediately, Isak hastily grabbing all of his clothes from the floor to destroy all evidence of his existence here. His glasses fall off his coat, and he reaches down to grab those, too.

“Uh, no,” Even shoves Isak’s shoes at his chest. “I was just talking to my mom earlier.”

“Oh,” Elias calls back. “Okay, well, can I open the door then?”

“Nope, I’m naked!” Even calls back. “Just give me a sec while I throw something on.”

Even pushes Isak towards the closet. “Get in the closet,” he hisses.

Isak gapes. “I’m not going back in there.”

“You’ve never been in there, what—” Even pauses, then snorts. “Oh, good one.”

Isak preens. “Thanks.”

“Now get in the closet.”
“Right.”

Isak runs into the closet when Even opens the doors for him, then he lets Even close the doors. It’s dark, but it smells surprisingly good, almost like Even’s using one of those air fresheners in here. He wonders if he can find the source of the smell—

—before he can finish that idiotic train of thought, Isak hears Even’s door creak open, and Isak holds his breath.

“Hey,” he hears Even say. His voice is steady, not out of breath at all, and Isak envies the way he can just do that, just turn this charm on that doesn’t make anyone suspicious of him. It’s ridiculous, and also, Isak’s probably fallen for it a million times, too.

“Yo,” Elias replies. “What were you doing naked? I thought you couldn’t sleep like that.”

“Pft, I was jerking off, dude,” Even says. “What else do you think I do naked?”

There’s a pause. “After you were on the phone with your mother?”

“I don’t question your life choices, do I?”

Isak hears Elias grunt in assent. “Well, yeah, I guess not. Anyway, we’re gonna go meet Mutta for breakfast at the usual place, if you’re interested in coming along.”

“Yeah,” Even replies. “Let me just get dressed and I’ll meet you guys there.”

“You sure you don’t wanna leave together?”

“Nah, I’m gonna shower and shit, so you guys go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

Isak holds his breath. “Alright, man,” Elias replies, and Isak exhales in relief. “See you there.”

“See ya.”

Isak hears the door click closed, but he stays put, just in case. It’s about half a minute when the closet doors finally open, and he sees Even standing in his boxers, looking far too amused for his own good. Isak’s not really paying attention to that, though – he’s looking at his hair again, and just how good it looks like this.

“Did you feel like a teenager again?” Even smiles.

Isak meets Even’s gaze again. “More like the other woman,” he rolls his eyes and steps out of the closet. “I’m glad I’m not in there anymore. It was weighing me down.”

Even laughs and takes Isak’s shoes from him. “Get dressed,” he tells him. “The guys are downstairs and about ready to go, so I’ll walk you out as soon as the coast is clear.”

Isak does as he’s told and takes his time, because he realizes that – maybe there’s no hurry anymore. And Even doesn’t seem to make it so; he walks inside his bathroom and Isak hears him turn on the sink, which Isak thinks might be to either wash his face or brush his teeth, but either way, Isak continues to dress himself and when he’s finished, glasses resting on his nose, he closes the closet doors quietly.

Even walks out of the bathroom, clean shirt on. “I have to clean my sheets,” he sighs forlornly. “That’s the worst part.”
Isak scoffs. “The worst?” he asks. “You mean there’s more than one bad part?”

Even grins. “Sure,” he says. “Like when you leave.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek and refuses to let himself blush. “Asshole.”

Even laughs then walks towards his bedroom door, pressing his ear against it. He hums for a second, and then grins triumphantly. “They’re gone,” he announces, turning back to look at Isak. “I think you’re safe to go.”

Isak sighs in relief. “That was way too close.”

“Yeah, well,” Even smirks. “You’re the one who wanted to come over so early.”

Isak narrows his eyes. “Shut up.”

Even walks over to Isak and starts messing with his hair. Isak huffs petulantly, but doesn’t stop him – when Even steps back, he appraises his work. “There,” he tells Isak. “Now you look like a functioning human being. You don’t want to scare the people on the tram.”

“I’m always scaring the people on the tram,” Isak rolls his eyes. “It’s nothing new.”

“Well then it’s time to give them a break,” Even points out, then walks over to his nightstand to check his phone. “It’s eight,” he announces. Isak blinks. Has he really been here for that long? “You got anywhere you have to be?”

Isak sighs. “Yeah, work in two hours,” he rubs his temple. “Shit.”

Even walks over to him. “You didn’t sleep at all.”

“I wasn’t tired.”

“And now?”

Isak shrugs. “Doesn’t matter.”

Even’s lips thin. “You don’t—”

“Even, it’s fine,” Isak rolls his eyes. “It’s not the first night I’ve gone without sleep. I’ll manage.”

Even frowns. “You mean this happens often?”

Isak squirms. He’s already said too much, and he’s not willing to delve deeper into his issues. Even’s learned enough for one day. In fact, Isak thinks Even’s learned enough about him for a lifetime. Whatever breakthrough they’ve had today, it’s not enough for Isak to let someone in; he can barely let himself in, let alone someone who may or may not be his friend now, or, at least, on the way to becoming his friend. Isak doesn’t know. Isak doesn’t want to know right now. Mostly he wants Even to stop asking questions he’ll never receive answers to. “Let’s go,” Isak pushes. “I have to go get ready.”

Even sighs, but steps aside to let Isak walk by him. He does, then pulls the door open himself, and they both walk down the stairs in silence. Even walks past him quickly, silently telling Isak to wait at the bottom of the stairs, then proceeds to search the house quietly. When he looks sure of himself, he looks over at Isak and grins lazily. “Alright, come on.”

Isak furrows his brows and walks towards him. “What the fuck was that?”
Even shrugs. “Sometimes the guys like to stay behind and fuck with me,” he admits. “I forgot about it until just now. But I guess their hunger won out this time.”

Isak’s not surprised. Those boys eat anything in their path, if they’re able. “Good, ’cause I have no idea how we’d explain my presence this time.”

Even nods. “Agreed.”

They both walk towards the front door, and Even pulls it open for Isak. “Go,” he gestures. “And make sure you get some sleep.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Yeah, alright.” He steps out the door and onto the porch, momentarily blinded by the sun, before something occurs to him.

It’s stupid. He shouldn’t ask. He shouldn’t say a word. He really should just keep walking.

“Isak?” Even asks. “You’re kind of just frozen there.”

Isak spins around quickly. “Do you think the sex won’t be as good now?” he blurts, then snaps his mouth shut in embarrassment. That was definitely stupid. He’s being all kinds of stupid today, it seems.

Even furrows his brows. “Now that what?”

“You know,” Isak mutters, squirming. “Now that I apologized, and shit.”

Even snorts. “Seriously?”

“I mean,” Isak crosses his arms defensively. “The sex before, it was good because there was so much – so much pent up anger and resentment that—”

“We can find out,” Even interrupts, smirking.

Isak gives him a look. “Shut up.”

“We can,” Even insists. “The guys just left, and I can tell them I fell asleep again and couldn’t meet them—”

“I have work.”

“Call in sick.”

“I’ve never called in sick.”

Even raises an eyebrow. “More reason for them to believe you this time.”

“I’m—”

“Come on,” Even mutters, tugging on Isak’s coat to pull him closer. He kisses at Isak’s jaw, and Isak’s eyes flutter shut at the sensation. “It’s for science.”

Isak leans his head back a tiny bit, allowing for Even to trail the kisses down to his neck. “For science?”

“Mm,” Even nips at his skin. “For science.”
Isak licks his lips. “Well, if it’s for science—”

Even laughs and pulls Isak back inside, closing the door behind them and leading them right back to where they started.

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It’s still good.

Maybe even better, Isak thinks, because this time they can actually communicate with their words, and they’re a lot more open about what they want, and Isak doesn’t feel the anger and resentment brewing between them. It’s not aggressive, it’s more passionate, and it’s good. It’s like a veil has been lifted from between them, and they’re seeing each other for the first time, and they happen to like what they see now better than they did before.

Isak feels lighter, somehow, like a weight’s been lifted off his shoulders, and there’s nothing about that night that his mind is trying to hide from him; it’s like he’s finally seeing himself in a new light, like he’d just figured out that maybe things can be his fault, that maybe – sometimes – he can be rash when he’s angry, when he feels like he can’t understand things.

He can’t believe Even’s spent a year thinking Isak’s an ableist piece of shit. And, to be fair, that’s exactly what he’d sounded like – that comment had been stupid, and he meant to apologize right after it happened, but then – he thinks that Magnus showed up, and then—

Isak sighs. It doesn’t matter, not anymore. He’s an idiot, and he’s admitted it, and he thinks from here on out, he and Even can actually – not actively dislike each other as much. And if that makes for better sex, then, what could the harm be? Now Isak thinks they’re well on their way to actually calling each other friends with benefits, and maybe this time warranting the title.

The tram isn’t as busy as Isak thought it would be, so he found his usual seat in the back, and he’s currently looking out the window in wonder. Things don’t look as – he doesn’t want to say bleak, because then he’d sound like a dramatic idiot, but they just don’t look as bad as they did before. He wonders if this is how addicts feel when they get things off their chest in support groups, when they admit to the guilt they’ve been trying to suppress for a long time. Though he’s not a big believer in support groups, or any kind of therapy, he can appreciate the goal they work towards, he supposes.

Isak looks down at his phone. He’s got about half an hour before his shift starts – he sighs deeply and looks through his contacts for the manager on duty phone, then presses down on the call button before bringing the phone up to his ear.

It rings twice, and then, thankfully, it’s Eskild who picks up. “Hello, Eskild speaking.”

“Hey, Eskild,” he coughs once, but just because he’s nervous, not because he’s actually trying to fake the sickness, or whatever – though, that might have been smart, Isak doesn’t know. “I – I know I never do this, but I was just calling to say—”

“You’re calling in sick,” Eskild gasps on the other end. Isak rolls his eyes at the dramatics. “Oh, my God. How bad is it that you’re calling in sick for the first time?”

“It’s – I just didn’t—”

“You don’t have to tell me, Isak, I believe you,” Eskild promises, and Isak feels a wave of guilt pass through his stomach. “You sound exhausted. Get some rest, little one. And don’t think for a second I won’t mark this special occasion on the calendar,” he warns. “I’ll make sure everyone knows about it.”
Isak sighs. “Eskild—”

“Go to bed,” Eskild demands. “I’ll see you for your next shift, okay?”

Isak smiles softly. “Okay.”

“Bye, little one.”

“Bye, Eskild.”

The line goes dead.

Before Isak can lock his phone again, he gets a text notification from Mahdi in the boys’ group chat, which he unlocks and reads curiously.

MAHDI
Guys

MAHDI
Elias just texted me

MAHDI
They’re pretty sure Even had someone over last night

Isak freezes. Jesus Christ, they really are being reckless, aren’t they?

MAGNUS
WOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!

MAGNUS
Do you think it’s the same person from the party

MAHDI
Idk but Elias and Yousef seem to think so

MAHDI
Says he was acting shady, so they tried to wait him out at the end of the street to see if they caught a glimpse, but they got tired of waiting and left

MAHDI
And now he ditched them for breakfast so they’re pretty sure he just stayed with the person for the rest of the morning

JONAS
Nice

JONAS
Good for him. The only way I could get over Eva in high school was by sleeping with as many people as I could until she was out of my system.

MAGNUS
Yeah, we know, Jonas, you’ve got game, blah blah

JONAS
And don’t you forget it

Isak scowls and joins the conversation.

**ISAK**

Why are you dicks so fucking invested in this guy’s sex life??

**ISAK**

It’s fucking weird

**MAGNUS**

Chill Isak. I know u don’t get it, but Even’s our friend, and u didn’t see how bummed he was about Sonja

**MAHDI**

Yeah, Isak, like, he was out of it for a while there

Isak swallows. That’s something Isak and Even never really discussed, not even when they had that stupid, drunken conversation the first time at the party – Sonja, and her particular impact on Even. He’d admitted he was having a hard time with it, sure, not in so many words, but just enough of them – but it’s true. Isak doesn’t know how much this affected Even. He found the Even after the fact, the flirty Even, the one with the smirks and the lips and the kissing and the good times, and now – the near-vulnerable one, the one Isak managed to make insecure about his illness, because he’s the world’s biggest fucking asshole.

That’s the Even Isak knows. And now he’s curious to know about the Even he missed out on, the Even during the Sonja period.

**MAGNUS**

We kept insisting he find a rebound and then FINALLY at the party he found one, and since then Yousef says he’s been a lot better

**JONAS**

Or, at least, that he’s stopped walking into Yousef’s room at midnight and talking about his feelings.

**MAGNUS**

Like Yousef minded [eye roll emoji]

**MAHDI**

Elias is gonna keep me updated once they get home

**MAHDI**

But they’re all pretty lit about this

**MAHDI**

They’re discussing if maybe this’ll turn into something serious

Oh, God, no. Never. That’s not happening. They really shouldn’t be getting their hopes up.

He exits the group conversation, lets the notifications go untouched, and opens Even’s conversation instead.

**ISAK**
My intel says the guys were def onto us

**ISAK**
They think you’re getting serious with “the person you’re sleeping with”

**ISAK**
Fix it

**EVEN**
Sir yes sir

**EVEN**
Maybe I’ll just tell them I had a random girl over

**ISAK**
They think it’s the same one from the party

**EVEN**
Then I’ll say it’s not

**EVEN**
We’re fine, Isak, you’re probably not even a viable option in any of their minds rn

**ISAK**
Yeah, they know I have better taste

**EVEN**
Than me? Impossible

**EVEN**
You should be so lucky

**ISAK**
I’m already sleeping with you!!

**EVEN**
And you’re welcome for that

**ISAK**
Your dick is not a gift

**EVEN**
It’s a little bit of a gift

Isak smiles despite himself.

**ISAK**
A little bit

**EVEN**
Hah!!!!! Knew it

**EVEN**
Guess your dick is ok too
ISAK
My dick is better than all other dicks you’ve ever seen

EVEN
I mean, you could definitely make an argument for it

EVEN
Though I have to say, your dick definitely looks better now that I know //you’re// not a complete dick

ISAK
How much better???

EVEN
Enough

Isak bites his lip and rolls his eyes, exiting the conversation and tuning back into the boys’ group chat. There was some more talk about Even and his possible new partner, and then Magnus geared into Thomas somehow, and now they’re yelling for Isak to reply. He frowns and scrolls up a bit, only to find that they somehow brought Julian up again, and Jesus Christ, why are they like this?

MAGNUS
Seriously Isak answer us

MAGNUS
Are you seeing Julian at work today

ISAK
I called in sick

MAHDI
WHAT

MAGNUS
WHAT

JONAS
WHAT

ISAK
I feel sick!!! Shut up

JONAS
Dude. Do you want me to bring you anything??

ISAK
No, Jonas, I’m fine, I just need to sleep it off

JONAS
Let me know if you do. I’ll be around

MAGNUS
Why are you never this nice to me when I’m sick
Be you’re a baby when you’re sick. And we live together, I don’t need you to get me sick, too

No sweat, Mags, I’ll take care of u next time ur sick

Isak locks his phone. His friends are all ridiculous. All of them. Every single one of them.

He purses his lips to keep from smiling. Good thing he likes them well enough.

Isak fights with the doorknob again, but, weirdly enough, it’s not that long of a fight – sure, his back still hits the wall once he manages to pull the key out of the knob inside, but it doesn’t hurt as much as it usually does; though that might be because he hasn’t slept and he’s losing all of his necessary senses as he kind of floats through the morning, so maybe it’s not something that should really be looked into.

He closes the door behind him and closes his eyes, sighing tiredly. Yeah, he thinks maybe he can sleep now. And without the stress of work, he can probably stay all day in bed without remorse. It’s a good day, he decides. And it's only ten in the morning.

“Hey,” Eva calls out from behind the kitchen. “Is that you, Isak?”

Isak scoffs, takes off his shoes. “Have you given someone else a key?”

Eva walks out from where she was presumably sitting at the kitchen table, looking confused. “I thought you were supposed to be at work?”

Isak shrugs, too tired to be anxious. “I called in sick,” he admits. “I’m just – feeling sick.”

Eva’s expression turns into a concerned one. “Shit, are you okay?” She makes her way closer to Isak. “You’ve never called in sick since you’ve started working there.”

“I’m—”

“Isak called in sick?” Someone calls out from the kitchen table, and Isak turns towards the voice, confused.

“Is that Chris?”

Eva nods. “The girls are over,” she tells him. “Vilde needs help with some wedding’s seating arrangements.”

Eva leads him towards the table, where Vilde, Chris, and Sana are sitting around it, piles of paper and a huge board filled with different-colored pins is laid out. “Oh,” Isak blinks at it. “That sounds – fun.”

Vilde huffs. “My boss decided I needed more responsibility,” she explains. “So she gave me the seating arrangement this time around. But I’m pretty sure she only gave it to me because it’s impossible,” she growls at the board in front of her. “Honestly, does everyone in this woman’s
“Hey, we’ve managed to seat an entire table,” Chris points out proudly, pointing at a table filled with orange pins.

“Which we’ll probably have to rearrange anyway, if we want to get them all right.” Vilde sighs loudly. “This is too much pressure.”

Sana reaches out to rub Vilde’s arm comfortingly. “Calm down,” she tells her. “If anyone can find a way to make this work, it’s you. You’re going to show your bitch boss you can do this, and, what’s more, you can do it better than she ever could – considering she couldn’t even do it at all.”

Vilde looks at Sana gratefully. “You’re right,” she nods. “I can do this.”

Eva sits back down on the table. “That’s the spirit,” she pipes up, then looks back up at Isak. “Oh – do you need me to make you some soup?”

Isak shakes his head, completely exhausted by the conversation happening before him. The girls are always chatting far too quickly for Isak to keep up – though, to be fair, he thinks he does the same things with his friends, so he can’t really judge, but it’s still tiring to try and be a part of their conversation.

“Oh, Isak, you’re really sick?” Vilde frowns at him. “Chris said you might have been faking to get out of work.”

“I said that before I saw you,” Chris says. “You really do look like crap.”

Isak looks at her. “I liked you better when you wanted to sleep with me.”

Chris snorts. “This ship has sailed, my friend,” she tells him. “I’ve moved on to bigger and better waters.”

Isak grimaces, and doesn’t remind her he’s gay and it’s technically his ship that’s sailed, if only because he likes Chris well enough not to kill her trip.

“Anyway, I’m going to just go grab a water in the kitchen and head to bed,” he yawns. “You girls have fun with – whatever this is, again.”

“Thank you,” Vilde says, looking back at a list in her hands. “Though I doubt we will.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Good luck, then.”

Vilde looks up and beams at Isak. “Thank you, Isak,” she repeats. “That we will need a lot of.”

Isak huffs a small laugh before turning around and walking towards the kitchen, dragging his feet in the process. He’s trying not to think about the sex he had with Even earlier – the two times, that is – and their differences, but he can’t help it; they’d both been so good, in completely different ways, and now he thinks he’s far more excited for them to see each other, if only because this has probably marked an entirely new era for their sexual experience.

And it helps, thinking about it. Makes him even more tired, ass sore and mouth dry.

He opens the fridge and pulls out a water bottle, and when he turns around he jumps, startled at the sight of an unamused Sana, arms crossed over her chest and staring at him.

“You can’t do that,” Isak insists. “I’m running on no sleep.”
Sana ignores this. “I need to know what you know about this Noora girl,” she tells him, and, oh, Sana’s aware of this, too, huh? Isak really shouldn’t be surprised. Eva can hardly ever keep her mouth shut when it comes to people she likes, especially not to her best friends.

“Uhm,” Isak scratches at the back of his head. “Honestly, Sana, not much,” he admits. “I know that she’s been over way too much, and that she and Eva have been practically inseparable, and Eva’s graduated to cuddling with her and lying about what she can do in order to spend time with her.”

Sana looks at Isak pensively for a moment, before offering him a tight nod. “That’s all I know, too,” she admits. “And I’m a little worried about her getting so close to a straight girl with a boyfriend.”

Isak throws his hands up in the air. “Thank you,” he says. “I’ve been telling her this from the beginning, Sana. But she won’t listen to me.”

“I can see why,” Sana tells him, and Isak blinks, offended.

“You know I don’t mean any offense, Isak,” she says, and, yes, Isak does know. “But she’s not exactly keen on following any romantic advice you have to give her.”

“Well, maybe she’ll listen to you?”

Sana shakes her head. “She’ll try, but she won’t take it seriously from me. Write me off as someone with little to no experience with romance.”

Isak frowns. “That’s unfair.”

Sana shrugs. “She doesn’t mean it,” she says. “Anyway, we need to do something. She can’t get hurt again. I’ve seen her go down this road too many times, and I’m worried for her.”

Isak nods his assent. “I know,” he sighs. “A couple of days ago I decided to start and try to gather intel on Noora,” he confesses. “Just to see if she’s not – you know, one of those girls who preys off the attention of other girls just because they’re starved for it. I’ve watched all of the documentaries!” He insists. “They’re out there. They exist.”

Sana’s lips twitch. “I mean, we can’t discount it,” she tells him, and Isak feels proud. “Work that angle, I guess. In the meantime, I’m going to try my best to keep her busy, try to wean her off this girl slowly. But you’ll text me if anything major happens?”

Isak nods. “Yeah, I can keep you updated.”

Sana smiles. “Okay,” she walks over to the pantry and grabs the kettle. “I told her I was in here to make tea,” she explains when she sees Isak’s questioning look. “It’ll look a little strange if I don’t walk out with a cup.”

“Fair,” he tilts his head in acknowledgment. “I’m gonna—” He pauses. “Hey, Sana?”

Sana hums, readying the kettle.

“Do – you know Even, right?”

Sana raises and eyebrow and glances at Isak, actually looking surprised. “You know I know Even,” she points out, furrowing her brows. Isak admits that was a stupid way to start a conversation – as far as Isak knows, Sana’s known Even as long as Elias and Yousef, which is far longer than anyone in
their circle. “And we all know he’s the guy you fought with over – the fluctuations of your voices during a conversation?”

Wow, that one’s actually not very far off. “No,” he tells her anyway, and Sana shrugs. “Uhm, do you – the guys have been weirdly interested in his sex life lately,” he explains, and Sana snorts, but when she does it, it’s really delicate, like she’s just laughing. It’s mesmerizing.

“Yeah, I know,” she tells him, turning on the stove. “Elias has been talking about it nonstop. I think they’re just ready for him to move on.”

Isak clears his throat. “Yeah, that’s what I was – his ex-girlfriend dumped him for some other guy, right?”

Sana nods. “Yeah, it was pretty bad, actually,” she says. “It was out of nowhere, and Sonja just admitted she’d been emotionally cheating, or something, and it was over in five minutes. The guys were really there for him, though,” she adds. “I think that’s what helped him get through the first week.”

Isak nods, as if he’s trying to understand. “So he – he didn’t do anything wrong, then.”

Sana looks at him. “Isak, Even’s a really nice guy,” she says. “Maybe far too nice for his own good, really. He’s very – hm,” Sana thinks for a second. “Open. He cares a lot about most things,” she tells him. “He’s always been there for my brother. For Yousef. For Mutta. It’s why they’d do pretty much anything for him,” she sighs. “Even if that’s getting ridiculously involved in his love life in order to help him move on from a girlfriend they never really liked in the first place.”

Isak licks his lips, then clears his throat. “Why didn’t they – why didn’t they like her?”

Sana shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t know,” she admits. “They liked her fine at first, but throughout the years I caught them having bitter conversations about her. Never knew why, though. They kept pretty hushed about it around me.”

Isak nods. “Ah.”

Sana leans against the counter as the kettle heats and crosses her arms over her chest. “Why are you suddenly so curious about Sonja?”

He’s curious about Even, if she must know, but it’s better that she thinks it’s about his ex, in order to get him off the hook a lot easier. “No, she just – I saw her at the grocery store,” he lies lamely. “Just made me wonder.”

Sana eyes him for a moment. “Did she look happy?”

Isak shrugs. “Couldn’t tell.”

“I hope she’s happy,” she says. “After what she put Even through for her sake? She’d better be.”

Isak licks his lips. “So that bad, huh?”

Sana’s expression softens. “He loved her, Isak,” she says. “I don’t know if you know what a broken heart feels like, but his was five years’ worth of it.”

Isak knows. He’s aware of what it’s like to feel like your heart’s broken in two, maybe a thousand pieces – to feel like your trust has been betrayed, like you’re never going to crawl out of the darkness again, like your life is suddenly the most intense, largest wildfire, burning down anything good and
necessary in its path, like it’s taking away everything you need to breathe, to function, leaving behind nothing but a wasteland and no matter how much you try to put it out, it just keeps spreading, and spreading, and taking, and taking, and you never catch up to it – he knows what it feels like to not be in control of when the heartbreak ends, no matter how many things you break, no matter how many tears you shed, no matter how many steps you take towards what you think is the right direction; a heartbreak does not live inside you. When it happens, you live inside it. And there’s no telling when it’ll stop – and there’s no telling if it ever will – and sure, time can help. Time heals all wounds.

But they never tell you about the scars it leaves behind.

Isak is suddenly somber – he knows. Even’s had five years’ worth of heartbreak. Isak’s had an entire lifetime.

He wonders if Even’s as good as Isak at hiding it so far inside him it’s almost like it’s not there anymore. He wonders if Even’s as good as Isak at pretending it doesn’t hurt at night, it doesn’t plague his dreams, it doesn’t drain the person he was and leave him with a whisper of him – leaves behind a broken man, someone who could have been, who had to build himself from the ground up in order to never allow himself the same pain again.

He wonders if it curls itself around Even, too, sentient and mocking, a permanent fixture in his life, perhaps the one thing he can truly count on. He wonders if it whispers in Even’s ears that he’s not good enough for people to stay, no one extraordinary, that no matter where he goes or what he does he’ll never be enough. He wonders if it hinders Even’s enthusiasm, wonders if it makes him doubt all of his decisions, wonders if he can ever silence it, wonders if he can ever hide from it, wonders if he can find a world outside of it.

Isak wonders, and he thinks if Even feels even half of what’s been plaguing Isak his entire life, then, yes. He knows.

Isak sniffs. “That sucks.” His voice is quiet and his eyes are suddenly burning – he feels weak and desperate, rooted to the place that manages to sneak up on him every single fucking time.

Sana looks worried, but distant. “Isak, your – are you okay? Do you need to sit down?”

Isak shakes his head furiously. “No, I’m going – I’m going to bed. Thanks, Sana,” he tries for a smile, but he’s sure he shows a grimace. “I’m gonna – yeah.”

He makes haste out of the kitchen and past the girls sitting on the table, making sure none of them can see him. He forgets he’s got a water bottle in his hand until he has to switch it over to the other one in order to open the door to his bedroom, and then he lets it drop onto the floor, caring little for it as he closes the door behind him.

Isak presses his back to the door, breathes deeply. Again. And again. And again.

He looks up at Orion’s Belt.Breathes again.

Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka.

He hates this. He hates it more than he’s ever hated anything before in his entire life. He hates how it’s shaped him, how it’s defined him, how he can’t control it, how he can’t put a name to it. He hates that he feels so fucking alone in it, and how it doesn’t let him feel alone, how it refuses to let Isak feel worthy enough to reach out.

This is his fight. His battle to fight alone.
A tear manages to fall. Isak wipes it away quickly. It’s the lack of sleep, he tells himself. He finds himself here when he hasn’t slept, almost every single time.

He walks towards Galileo’s tank and taps it thrice – the fish is oblivious to him, and Isak feeds him shakily. When he’s done, he strips himself of every piece of clothing save for his boxers, and he lies under his duvet, staring uselessly at the ceiling.

Isak removes his glasses and sets them on his nightstand, right beside his phone. When he’s about to bring his hand back, his phone lights up with a text notification.

He considers ignoring it. In fact, he wants to, but somehow, miraculously, he finds the energy to bring the phone towards him. Even’s contact is shining at Isak, and he unlocks it shakily. If he feels half of what Isak’s felt – then Isak is happy to mask this for him, too.

**EVEN**
So I googled this Clyde Tombaugh dude

**EVEN**
You failed to mention that he’s the reason we discovered the “Kuiper Belt” when he discovered Pluto

**EVEN**
Which is pretty damn important if you ask me, whether or not Pluto’s a planet

**EVEN**
His wife also said that first and foremost Clyde was a scientist, and were he alive now, he’d understand why Pluto had to be declassified

**EVEN**
And some other astronomer guy named Hal Levison pointed out that discovering that Belt is a hell of a lot more interesting than what was the ninth planet

**EVEN**
So would you look at that

**EVEN**
You can have more than one thing to be proud of. More than one reason to keep you loving what you love.

**EVEN**
Don’t let the fear of one setback claim what you love. Fuck that, you know? Fear doesn’t get to win all of the time. Isak Valtersen, you are a nerd with an admittedly terrible brain to mouth filter, but tbh?? I don’t think you’re a coward

**EVEN**
Infinite stars, infinite reasons to love them

**EVEN**
Just keep that in mind

**EVEN**
Oh and go to sleep

Isak reads the texts over and over and over again, and it hits him, suddenly, that Even can’t be
plagued by everything Isak is plagued by, he can’t be haunted by the same voices Isak is, because then he’d know, he’d know how wrong he is, and everything that’s wrong with Isak, and he’d see, he’d see it. He’d see right past him, and he’d take it all back. Every single word he typed. Every single keystroke he wasted on him.

And yet.

He holds the phone close to his chest, right above his heart, and inhales shakily. If he lays like this, with the words so close to him, he can pretend there is some truth to them. He can let them quell the loud fears inside him. If he lays like this, with the words so close to him, he can pretend to be the person Even thinks him to be. He can let them quell the loud truths inside him.

If he lays like this, with the words so close to him, the monster curled around him can fall into a momentary slumber.

And, laying like this, with the words so close to him, Isak falls asleep.

Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr!

y’all are wonderful and beautiful and i appreciate your lovely and encouraging comments SO MUCH. they get me through these chapters, trust me. i wouldn’t be writing this if it weren’t for y’all. i’d have given up by chapter two, lol. but you guys make me excited to write the next chapter and the next and the next, just so you can experience this story with me.

i love you ❤
Chapter Notes

one — i am now aware that in no way could these characters find mostly anything open on a sunday in norway. but since i was already way too into the narrative, i couldn’t change it without having to rewrite a lot of things, so i left it as such. but i will not make this mistake again! the more i know.

two — there are two explicit scenes in this chapter. are they any good? probably not. did you guys want me to include them anyway? i guess so. although, i should warn for “bottom!even”, since i’ve been told that’s something i should warn for! :) (although, by that logic, i should also warn for “top!even”, which also happens to be the second explicit scene in this chapter; though no one’s really given me any grief for that one.)

three — you guys are the most wonderful, beautiful, and patient readers i’ve ever had. i know a couple of you really wanted me to update, but a lot of you were so respectful of the fact that my hand was trying to kill the rest of my body slowly. it’s still not completely healed, so i did write through a little bit of pain, but it’s not as much as before, hence! this! today!

four — this is 70k of almost pure fluff. just so much fluff. it’s disgusting and i had to take breaks in between because they were being so fluffy. i had to take more breaks in between those scenes than the explicit ones, for goodness’s sake. am i also mad about the word count? you bet your butt i am. scenes that were meant to be short turned out long bc isak wanted to rant, so. sorry about this.

five — i get way too into describing how to chop an onion. if nothing else, i hope you take away this technique from the story, tbh.

six — thank you to the love of my life, summer, for looking over this and putting up with all the sadistic headcanons i sent her throughout this process. thank you to my writing soulmate cz for looking over this and not yelling at me for asking her to, even though she should have because it’s so fucking long and she was so fucking tired. and shoutout once again to my norweigan source and beautiful babe, lise, for answering all my small detail questions!

seven — this chapter was originally two parts. it has now been morphed into one powerful Boss Chapter, perhaps the hardest level in the game. anyway, all of the comments from the second part are completely gone and there were so many of them i feel bad but i want you to know if you commented i love you very much. end notes adjusted accordingly!

eight — i’m gonna shut up now. enjoy part two of leonora carrington! (that’s leonora, by the way, not dora carrington, which i noticed some of you were confusing her for — there is not, in fact, a film about leonora, though, pft — there fucking should be.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So Even likes Phil Collins.
Which is – it came out of nowhere, really, because as far as Isak knew, their music taste was pretty similar, i.e. old school hip-hop along with some contemporary rap and the like. That’s – Isak’s pretty sure he knew that even before he and Even became more acquainted, so when Even forgot to turn off his playlist when Isak came over one day, Phil Collins started blasting in the middle of Isak tugging Even’s boxers down on his knees, and that just – well, that just really killed his vibe.

“Phil Collins?” He’d asked, completely bewildered, looking up at Even.

Even looked like he was about to strangle Isak for stopping. “Can we not do this right now?”

“The guy who sang the entirety of the Tarzan soundtrack. You want me to blow you to Phil Collins.”

“Preferably sooner rather than later.”

“Even, I’m not blowing you to Against All Odds. That just goes against nature.”

“Isak—”

“I’m not doing it,” he’d said, sitting back on his legs. “You either change it or turn it off, but I’m not blowing you to this.”

“Jesus,” Even had awkwardly waddled over to his phone with his boxers pooled around his feet and switched to the next song, which was—

“Gabrielle?” Isak looked at him in horror. “Even, who the fuck are you, really?”

Isak remembers that Even couldn’t hold back his laughter then, then he’d stepped out of his boxers and pulled Isak up towards him and then the blowjob wasn’t really a problem anymore.

Isak brings this up to Mutta when they’re having lunch together one day, just to make sure. The music taste part, that is – not so much the other part. “So,” he clears his throat, picking at his fries. “Does Even – does he like Phil Collins?”

Mutta stops mid-bite to look up at Isak, perplexed, before setting his burger down and blinking at Isak for a moment. “Uhm. Yes?”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” Mutta nods. “Like, maybe actually a weird amount. He’s been a fan since high school, which we always gave him shit for, but that’s never actually deterred him. According to Elias, he still blasts the Tarzan soundtrack in his room while he’s working on some homework, or something.”

“The Tarzan soundtrack.”

“Well, other albums, too, but Elias is really stuck on the Tarzan thing.”

Yeah, Isak is, too.

He can’t believe it’s been a little over two weeks of this – newfound relationship of theirs, which sometimes involves actually learning more about each other than first was comfortable (Isak has learned that, yes, Even should definitely be a film major, because if Isak thought he was pretentious about art, it doesn’t even come close to how pretentious he is about film. Though whereas before the pretentiousness was annoying, now Isak finds it strangely endearing, especially when Even agreed to give Fight Club another chance after hearing about Jonas’s argument for it from Isak. Isak had
admitted the only reason he liked it was because of the plot twist, though, and Even had sighed forlornly, shaken his head and patted Isak’s arm in what Isak thinks might have been pity.) and Isak’s only now finding a bigger flaw than what he’d first pegged Even for, which is a fiery love for Phil Collins, and a fondness for Gabrielle.

What can he say, it really does come down to music taste sometimes.

“That’s…interesting,” Isak clears his throat and picks another fry off his plate, popping it into his mouth. “So – that’s a thing he does often, then? Just, plays Phil Collins in his room for, like – actual enjoyment?”

Mutta stares at Isak, then shakes his head, almost like he’s trying to wake himself up. “Okay, wait,” he holds up a hand. “Why are you suddenly so interested in Even’s music taste?”

“I’m not!” Isak snaps defensively, though it may have been too quick to be believable.

“How did you even know about the Phil Collins thing?” Mutta frowns. “Is it because of the weed?”

Oh, so that excuse has spread, then. Isak feigns ignorance, though, furrows his brows for good measure. “You know about that?”

“Well, yeah,” Mutta gives him a look. “It’s not like you’re keeping it a secret, or anything.”

Isak licks his lips nervously. “Do the – do the boys know?”

Mutta shakes his head. “None of us want to hurt Jonas’s feelings. You know he thinks he’s your main weed supplier.”

Isak exhales in relief, though he tries to hide it with another clear of his throat. “Yeah, it’s just, uhm, once, when I was over to – you know, for the weed, he was playing it, like, softly, not too loudly, in his room, so I wondered.”

Mutta grunts. “Even’s amazing, dude, like, amazing enough to like Phil Collins without shame. But, also – he likes Phil Collins without shame, you know what I mean?”

Oh, Isak knows, alright.

“But I mean, to each their own,” Mutta shrugs, picking his burger back up. “He’s lucky we love him so much, else I think that would be grounds to kick him out of the group.”

Isak laughs. “Really? That would do it?”

“Wouldn’t that do it for you, too?”

An interesting question, considering that, yeah, he finds it endlessly strange (and a little bit fascinating) that Even is such a big fan of Phil Collins, but he doesn’t think it’s exactly a deal breaker. But maybe that’s because he likes sleeping with Even well enough, and as long as he can ignore this simple fact during the act, he thinks he can handle it. Still, were he simply Even’s friend, he’d probably definitely give him a lot of shit for it.

Though, even if they are what they are, and they’re sleeping with each other – doesn’t mean Isak’s not going to give him shit for it, anyway.

“Maybe,” he admits, eating another one of his fries. “I think I’d give him three strikes, at most.”

Mutta hums in thought. “I can’t think of a strike two,” he admits, and Isak gapes.
“Nothing?” Isak clears his throat. “Not even, like, mindless pop artists, like – I don’t know,” Isak gestures with his hand, as if attempting to think of someone. “Gabrielle, or something?”

Mutta gasps dramatically. “How dare you say something like that about the Norwegian pop queen?” he asks, clutching at his chest. “Isak, I’m very glad you didn’t say that under the boys’ roof. You’d be kicked out in an instant.”

“No fucking way,” Isak shakes his head in disbelief. “I don’t buy it. All of you can’t be fans of her.”

“Oh, yes we can,” Mutta raises a challenging brow. “You think I’m kidding?”

“I hope you’re kidding.”

“Here,” Mutta reaches for his phone and swipes his thumb across the screen a couple of times until he finds what he’s looking for. He turns the phone around and extends it towards Isak’s face, where Isak spots his Spotify playlist, which is – full of Gabrielle songs. The playlist’s title is “Bakka Jams”.

“Oh, fuck off,” Isak laughs. “Why?” Mutta locks his phone and sets it down on the table once again. “Her music is shit!”

“Her music is not shit, it’s legendary,” Mutta sniffs. “I’m sorry if you are too pretentious to understand it’s pure genius.”

“You were literally turning your nose up at Phil Collins a minute ago.”

“Oh, but that gets a pass,” Mutta waves it off. “It’s Phil Collins.”

“I don’t see the difference,” Isak tells him. “Maybe I am pretentious, but you have to admit you’re a little pretentious, too.”

Mutta rolls his eyes. “Okay, Isak, we can both be music snobs,” he says, and Isak grins in triumph. “But don’t think for a second I’ll forget about your jab at the queen.”

“Fair enough,” Isak laughs, then picks at his burger a bit more – he’s not really hungry, but he hardly gets to hang out with Mutta one-on-one, so when he’d called Isak to see if he’d like to have lunch, he was more than inclined to agree.

His friendship with Mutta came about easier than with the rest of the boys – when Mahdi had introduced them to Yousef and Mutta, Isak had some trouble trying to accept the fact that it seemed these two boys were now going to be an unquestionable part of the group they’d built since high school; and Isak isn’t good with change, or with social interactions in general, not if he can help them, and while it took him some time to acclimate to the both of them, Mutta was the first to reach out and engage him in a conversation, effectively burying Isak’s successful demarcation up until then six feet underground.

Isak can’t really remember the specifics. He knows that Yousef and Mutta were over at Jonas’s and Magnus’s place one night, Mahdi in tow, and they were smoking and talking about whether or not Kanye West is playing a character for publicity and recognition, or if he’s just an egotistical dude, period. Isak kept to himself, mostly, letting the boys battle it out while he sat comfortably on the edge of the couch, unsure of how to make himself a part of the conversation without endangering himself into looking like a fool.

Yet in the midst of all of that, Mutta had gravitated over to the couch Isak was sitting on and plopped himself right down next to him; Isak remembers squirming a little uncomfortably at the prospect of having to talk to one of the new boys, having to find common ground with them somehow, but
Mutta almost didn’t give him time to worry – he told Isak Mahdi had told him and Yousef he’s an astronomy major, and he thought that was pretty cool; he told Isak he’d much rather talk to him about the stars than listen to one more fucking Kanye West theory, and that earned him a surprised laugh out of Isak.

Isak remembers hesitantly answering Mutta’s questions about his life, then his major, and then they settled in a comfortable repertoire about future prospects and the idea of the stars as compasses, and Mutta seemed genuinely interested – not in the way others seemed to simply humor him, nodding along and humming in disinterest whenever it was warranted after they discovered they’d made a terrible mistake by getting Isak started on any subject he was remotely passionate about.

Later, Mutta would start teasing him about his rambles when high, but he never meant it maliciously – so it was easier to connect with him than Yousef at first, but eventually he started to accept that Yousef was also a part of their group because of Mutta’s efforts, and by the time they’d introduced Elias, Isak was hardly worried about the comfortable group he had always been protective over (and, admittedly, selfish about) making room for a couple of more people.

He doesn’t regret it now. The boys are kind, enthusiastic, if a little loud – but they’re protective of Isak and the rest, opening their home whenever they need it and never refusing them a favor in their time of need.

And though Isak didn’t meet Even after about four months of knowing Mutta, Yousef and Elias, he still didn’t regret allowing them into their lives. And considering where he and Even stand now, that fact stands truer than ever.

“Question,” Mutta breaks through Isak’s train of thought, causing him to snap his gaze back up to meet his. Mutta looks contemplative. “Have you noticed something off about Yousef?”

Isak furrows his brows. “Uh, no?” he shakes his head. “But that doesn’t really mean anything. You spend more time with him than I do,” he points out.

“Yeah, but – I don’t know, dude,” Mutta sighs, a little dejectedly. “He’s lost in his own head more often than not, and he keeps dodging our questions,” he explains. “And he’s so oblivious to everything that’s happening around him, you know?”

This is actually good for Isak, considering how many times Yousef has almost caught him and Even after the act, but he knows what it feels like to be worried about one of your best friends – so he tries to sympathize, maybe offer some insight. “Maybe he has stuff going on at work?”

Mutta hums. “No, I don’t think that’s it,” he admits. “He’s been kind of dodging Elias, too.”

Isak’s eyebrows rise in surprise. “What?” he shakes his head, this time genuinely puzzled. Yousef and Elias are extremely close – and even if they’re not as close as Yousef and Even, or Mutta and Elias, their friendship still seems like more of a brotherhood, one where the other shares any insecurity, or any predicament they might have, or even any bone they’ve got to pick with each other. “Has Elias noticed?”

“Yeah,” Mutta replies. “And he’s a little worried about it, too, like. He doesn’t know if he’s done something to offend him, but even if he has, Yousef is usually very straightforward with that kind of stuff, you know?”

“Yeah,” Isak nods. “I don’t know, man, have any of you tried just asking him outright?”

“I have,” Mutta says. “But he just tells me he’s thinking about the papers he has to grade or
“And you don’t believe him.”

“No, I don’t,” Mutta sighs and leans back on his chair. “It just doesn’t make sense, you know? Or, maybe you don’t. God knows I don’t,” he purses his lips. “I just hope he’s alright.”

“Yeah, me too,” Isak responds sincerely. He knows what it’s like to feel out of the loop with your friends, worried about their well-being but never getting to find out just exactly what’s bothering them and being able to help. “Maybe give him some more time, let him come to you guys. I’m sure eventually he’ll figure out he really can’t deal with something as all-consuming as this alone.”

Mutta nods his head, but his concerned expression doesn’t waver. “I guess you’re right. There’s not much else we can do.”

Isak searches his expression, feels a little bad about not being able to help some more, but Mutta seems to get lost in his own head again – before Isak can attempt to bring him back, his text notification lights up his phone, and he reaches for it quickly.

**EVEN**

How’s lunch with Mutta

**ISAK**

Why are you such a stalker all the time

**EVEN**

Mutta told me where he was going, God

**EVEN**

Has he gotten tired of your nerd talk yet

**ISAK**

For your information, we’re talking about your unhealthy obsession with Phil Collins

**EVEN**

Oh fuck off

**ISAK**

I think this is definitely a topic we have to discuss next time

**ISAK**

It’s a little bit of a turnoff

**EVEN**

I’m sorry your mind has been poisoned by mob mentality, but Phil Collins is a genius and his name will always be remembered, whether in fame or infamy, so he’s already one step ahead of all of us

**ISAK**

Damn, do you need a moment alone right now

**EVEN**

Don’t think I don’t know about your quiet obsession with Celine Dion’s “my heart will go on”, Isak
ISAK
Fuck you, that song is a masterpiece

EVEN
Well it doesn’t matter if you’re near

EVEN
Or far

EVEN
Or wherever you are

ISAK
Shut up

EVEN
Phil Collins will always be a masterpiece, too

EVEN
Aw you ruined the chain :(

ISAK
Good

“Are you texting with Jonas?”

Isak jumps a little when Mutta’s voice breaks through his concentration, and he immediately locks his phone out of pure instinct.

“Er, what?”

“Are you texting with Jonas,” Mutta repeats, gesturing towards Isak’s phone. “You’ve got that face you make when you’re texting with Jonas.”

Isak furrows his brows. “What face is that?”

“I don’t know,” Mutta shrugs. “That amused face. Whenever you text with Jonas for that long you look like you’re having a hilarious conversation.”

Isak laughs a little, puts his phone back on the table face down. “You mean the face you make whenever you’re talking to a friend?”

“Oh, I guess,” Mutta smiles. “Do you make that face when you’re texting me?”

Isak tilts his head. “I dunno,” he confesses. “Why don’t you ask one of the boys?”

“Oh, I will,” Mutta replies. “But let me tell you, I’m going to be very offended if they say you don’t. Because I thought our friendship was special.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I think you’ll live.”

Mutta throws a fry at him.

--
On his way to work later that afternoon, around the time he’s dozing off on the tram, his text notification interrupts the music playing in his earphones – he needs to remind himself to put the damn thing on silent so this doesn’t keep happening – and he looks down, sighing loudly when he sees Magnus’s name light up his screen.

He unlocks the conversation and then raises the brightness on his phone, even though it’s hard against his glasses and the setting sun.

**MAGNUS**
Isaaaaaak

**ISAK**
Magnuuuuus

**MAGNUS**
I have a very serious question bro

**ISAK**
Ok??

**MAGNUS**
I was talking to Julian just now and he mentioned how you’d told your work that you had a boyfriend to get some creepy dude off your back

Isak’s stomach sinks.

**ISAK**
So what about it

**MAGNUS**
Well he mentioned that your pretend boyfriend’s name was……EVEN!!!

Oh, God. Out of all the people Julian could have mentioned this to, it had to be Magnus? The one most susceptible to running his mouth about it, to giving Isak grief for it? Magnus. Anyone, Julian, anyone but Magnus.

Though he supposes he can’t really blame Julian – it’s not like it’s far-fetched that he would have mentioned this to the boys, too, outside of his work force.

**ISAK**
Ugh

**MAGNUS**
So, like……why him???

**ISAK**
Why, are you offended I didn’t say your name??

**MAGNUS**
I mean tbh a little bit

**MAGNUS**
But mostly I’m confused as to why out of all the names you’d pick Even’s?????
ISAK
He’s just the one person they’d never see at work

ISAK
You guys come over more often than not and that’s too suspicious and it’d be weird to pretend and stuff

Isak watches the typing bubble appear, stomach in knots. Please don’t push this, please don’t push this.

MAGNUS
Oh well that makes sense

Isak exhales a deep sigh of relief.

MAGNUS
Now that we’ve cleared that up I have another question

ISAK
Such a curious soul you are

MAGNUS
Do you know why Mahdi’s coming over so much

ISAK
What, do you not want him to?

MAGNUS
No, of course not, he’s my bro, but the thing is he’s mostly coming over to talk to Jonas

ISAK
So you’re jealous??

MAGNUS
Dude, what the fuck, no

ISAK
Then I really don’t know what you want from me

MAGNUS
It’s just weird bc they’re always talking quietly about something

MAGNUS
And I feel so out of the loop

MAGNUS
Don’t you??

Well, yeah, now that Magnus is mentioning it he does, but he doesn’t know exactly how to approach that situation – he can’t really imagine what it is Jonas and Mahdi would talk so secretively about, but it’s irking at him now, that Jonas would keep something from him; Isak realizes it’s a bit hypocritical, considering the larger parts of his personality Isak keeps from Jonas, but superficially Isak hardly ever keeps things from him. They’ve been friends longer than any of the boys in his group, so now he’s bouncing his leg on the tram a little irritably, biting his lip in a little bit of envy.
But that’s not the point of this conversation, he doesn’t think. He’s pretty sure Magnus texted him for some sort of comfort, to hear that if it doesn’t bother Isak, then it shouldn’t bother him. And he doesn’t want to be the reason for tension in Jonas’s and Magnus’s apartment, so when he types a reply, it’s a swift and easy lie.

**ISAK**
Nah, I’m sure they have a reason and will tell us soon enough

**ISAK**
And hey, if it makes you feel any better, we can have a secret too

**MAGNUS**
Ooooh what’s that

**ISAK**
The fact that I used Even’s name when Chris asked me about my boyfriend

**MAGNUS**
HAHA

**MAGNUS**
Okay I’ll keep quiet about it

**MAGNUS**
Mostly bc it’d be nice to hold it over your head

**ISAK**
[eye roll emoji]

**ISAK**
Thanks, Mags

**MAGNUS**
No problem, bro [fist bump emoji]

Isak breathes a sigh of relief and locks his phone. Magnus might run his mouth as quickly as a wolf, but when asked to keep something quiet, he does it, no questions asked. Isak thinks it’s a strange combination of excitement and loyalty on his part – either way, Isak can’t begrudge him for it, and he can rest easy knowing he won’t tell either Jonas or Mahdi or the rest of them anything.

Especially Even. God, he hopes that never comes up ever again.

Still, this reminds Isak that maybe he should ask Julian not to mention this ever again – he’s not sure whether or not he’ll be working with Julian tonight, so he takes a chance on it, finding his contact on his phone and opening a new text conversation. The conversation is bare, but he supposes now’s a good a time as any to fill the conversation up.

While he types, he notices the arrow is green, which makes Isak snort a little bit. Yeah, Julian seems like the type to use an Android.

**ISAK**
Hey Julian, it’s Isak

The reply is so immediate Isak almost wonders if Julian already had their conversation open.
JULIAN
Hey, Isak!

JULIAN
What’s going on?

ISAK
Not much

ISAK
Hey, are you working tonight??

JULIAN
No. :( Are you?

ISAK
Yep

ISAK
I just needed to ask you a favor

JULIAN
Anything you’d like.

ISAK
Do you think maybe you could like not mention to the other guys anything about the fake boyfriend thing

ISAK
I know you didn’t mean any harm by telling Magnus ofc so like I’m not mad or anything but Jonas and Mahdi would give me SO much grief about it

ISAK
I’d never live it down

ISAK
But you know I’d super appreciate it

JULIAN
Of course. I’m sorry if I caused any trouble between you and Magnus. It was not my intention at all.

ISAK
I know!!!!

ISAK
You’re totally cool, I know you didn’t mean anything by it, I mean, lol how could you know right

ISAK
Thanks for being so chill about this Julian, you’re the best

JULIAN
He locks his phone, this time breathing a lot easier than before. Okay, this he can handle. He can put
that on the backburner for now, or, if he’s *really* lucky, forever. That never has to come up again. No
one – except maybe for Yousef, knowing him – would ever let him live this down. Especially not
Even, not if he finds out he said this to Chris *before* they talked their shit out.

Really, Isak can’t believe how many things about his past eventually come back to bite him in the
ass. He thinks maybe he should be more careful from now on about making impulsive decisions –
he’s usually very good at this, mind you, but for some reason, lately he’s been doing things before he
thinks, which is *unacceptable*. He’s usually very meticulous about everything, and it’s starting to get
on his nerves that he can’t pinpoint why it’s getting harder and harder to keep his mouth shut.

He’s still good at keeping his private life private, of course. But nowadays he runs his mouth about
his opinions maybe as much as he used to in high school, which back then was *fine*, but as an adult
Isak’s not sure it flies very well. He figures if he says the wrong thing to the wrong person
eventually, he’s going to get his ass handed to him, and he doesn’t really want that. He wasn’t much
of a fighter in high school – usually had people fight his battles for him, because what’s the point of
having a strategic mind if you can’t use it to your advantage? – and he’s definitely not much of a
fighter now.

Maybe he’d get a good punch in, who knows. Nothing to cause a lot of damage, though. Maybe
he’d stand a chance against someone shorter than him. Though it’d have to be a very angry short
person.

His head hits the back of his seat and his eyes close. Maybe he should just stop thinking.

--

The museum is warm to contrast the cold outside, as per usual, and Isak shrugs off his layers as he
walks towards the front desk. Sara’s at the reception again, looking through what Isak assumes is
nothing pressing, by the way she’s skimming through the pages of a binder in front of her, and she’s
unaware of Isak’s presence when he walks up to her.

“Anything interesting?” He asks, and Sara looks up without hurry, raises an eyebrow at Isak.

“No fly list,” she deadpans. “I’m supposed to memorize all of these. *All* of them. Do you see how
many pages there are?” She holds the binder up to Isak’s line of vision. Even when he frowns, he’s
not exactly sure if he can make out any of the names, considering the size of the font is no bigger
than an ant, maybe. “*How* do so many people manage to get banned from the museum?”

“Peeing in the stream, I’m sure,” Isak hums, walking around the desk to take a closer look at the
binder Sara’s taken back. Closing in on the names, Isak snorts, pointing at the dates beside them.
“Sara, I’m pretty sure some of these people might not be coming back here. I think they might either
be ninety years old, or dead.” He taps a finger against one of the dates.

“What?” Sara snaps, leaning in closer. “Oh, what the fuck?” She sighs loudly.

“Are you sure they didn’t ask you to *update* the list?”

“No, I—” Sara sighs. “*Maybe*, you know how I doze off when Eskild talks to me.”

“That’s exactly what you want to hear when you walk up to your employees,” Eskild hums, strolling
up to the front desk. Sara looks properly chastised, closing the binder in front of her.
“Sorry,” she mutters. “I just had a long day.”

“Right, well, if you’d like to pay attention now, my dear,” Eskild leans over the counter and taps on the computer screen. “I told you to computerize the most recent five pages of the no-fly list. So that way, when they scan their ID, the computer will memorize these people for you,” Eskild gives her a look. “We don’t live in the stone ages anymore, love, there’s no need to actually use your brain for simple tasks. We’re very advanced.”

“Not as advanced as we could be,” Isak interrupts, mostly for Sara’s sake – he smiles down at her and she smiles back up gratefully, then Isak quickly clocks in and makes his way towards the break room. “See ya, Sara.”

“Wait!” Eskild catches up to him, keeping up with Isak as he makes his way to the break room. “I have a very serious question.”

Isak eyes him suspiciously. “Okay,” Isak prolongs. “And what would that be?”

“Why are you in such a good mood all the time lately?”

Isak blinks. “What?”

“How is that an important question?”

“It’s an important question as your friend,” Eskild scoffs. “Not necessarily as your manager.”

“Well, friend to friend, I don’t see how it’s an important question, anyway.” Isak makes his way to the lockers, opening one up for himself and trying to stuff his coat and hoodie inside, struggling a bit. “Besides,” he grunts, pushing harder to get them to fit correctly. “I don’t see how being in a better mood is really a problem. I thought you’d maybe like that fact.”

Eskild rolls his eyes as he walks up to grab Isak’s hoodie from his hands. “Just use two lockers, little one,” he sighs, opening up the empty locker beside the one Isak is currently fighting with. He blushes a little bit, this time folding his coat neatly and fitting it perfectly inside the locker while Eskild does the same with his hoodie in the other locker. “And I do like that fact, Isak, but you can’t blame a man for being curious.”

“Well, that’s gonna bite you in the ass one day,” Isak tells him, closing the locker, then flinches a little. “Sorry, I don’t mean to use that language. At work, and stuff.”

“Whatever,” Eskild waves it off. “You want to make it up to me? Tell me why you’re so happy all of the time.”

“Why are you pushing this?” Isak asks in disbelief. “I really don’t understand why it’s such a big deal that I’m in a better mood. Maybe I’m doing yoga, or something.”

Eskild raises an eyebrow. “Are you?”

“No, I’m not doing yoga, Eskild.”

“You should, it’s actually very relaxing.”

Isak blinks at him, then sighs. “Yeah, sure, okay, I’ll try it. Can I go now, or are you going to force me to tell you about my better mood as a boss?” Isak raises an eyebrow, knowing Eskild won’t push
it anymore if he brings up his integrity – and just as he’d predicted, Eskild’s expression shuts down some, lips curled downward. It actually makes Isak feel kind of guilty, if he’s being completely honest with himself.

“Of course not,” Eskild tells him, and his voice doesn’t hold the same teasing edge it’d be holding before. “Go on, go work. That’s what we’re here to do.”

Eskild swirls and begins to walk out of the break room, back straight but somehow with his shoulders still slumped, and Isak throws his head back and sighs in defeat. He can’t deal with a dejected Eskild – which is ridiculous, considering he’s immune to almost everyone else in his life, but if Eskild’s pouting around the museum, it makes his shift experience that much less pleasurable, so Isak goes over his options quickly over his head – tell him what’s going on with very minimal information, or lie to him about what’s going on and just let him buy it until he drops it.

He doesn’t really know why the former sounds more tempting. “Wait,” Isak stops Eskild just as he reaches the break room door. Eskild turns around, expression suspicious. Isak rolls his eyes. “Okay, fine, I’m,” he sighs loudly again. “I’m sleeping with someone.”

Eskild’s eyes widen. “Oh, my God,” he blinks. “No, really, I didn’t expect that. You’re seeing someone?”

“No, I didn’t say that,” Isak raises a placating finger. “I said I’m sleeping with someone, which is completely different. It’s casual, and sex releases endorphins, so—”

Eskild walks quickly back up to Isak. “Okay, come on,” he’s practically bouncing where he stands. Isak has to step back a little bit so he doesn’t fall all over him. “Tell me all about it.”

“No,” Isak shakes his head resolutely. “That’s all you get. It’s enough. You don’t get to know his name or what he looks like or—”

Alright, alright,” Eskild holds up his hands in defeat. “I won’t pry too much. But – damn. My little one’s got game, after all.” He smirks, and Isak scoffs in offense.

“I’ve always had game!”

“Okay,” Eskild nods seriously. “Of course you have.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Okay, are we done?”

“One more question,” Eskild crosses his arms over his chest. “Is he any good?”

Isak laughs once, actually amused. “Would I be in such a good mood if he weren’t?”

Eskild nods once. “Perfect,” he claps his hands excitedly. “Oh, this might lead to something more, don’t you think?”

“Hell no,” Isak scoffs. “It’s just a stress reliever. For the both of us. That’s it. And!” Isak points an accusatory finger at Eskild’s chest. “Don’t go spreading this around. It’s my business, Eskild.”

“I wouldn’t even think of it,” he holds a hand over his heart. “I am sworn to secrecy. Besides,” Eskild adds. “I wouldn’t do that to poor Julian.”

Alright, why does everyone in his life bring up fucking Julian Dahl in the most irrelevant of moments? Isak furrows his brows, then sighs loudly and decides not to ask. Every time he does, everyone is vague, and doesn’t really answer any of Isak’s questions, choosing instead to wave them
off. And he’s going to try and get through this shift without questioning everybody’s motives or even his own – thankfully he’s got the space exhibit again today, which means he gets to leave his thoughts at the door, having no reason to think about anything other than the stars and space and any questions the people around him might have. He gets to put it all off for a couple of hours, which is just as well, since he needs time to reflect and think and—

His text notification goes off, and Eskild gestures towards Isak’s pants pocket. “Take that quickly and then off to work you go,” he smirks. “Just in case it’s your sex friend.”


Eskild waves at him and leaves the break room, presumably to resume his manager duties – or maybe not, Isak doesn’t really know when it comes to him anymore – and Isak then looks down at his phone. He almost laughs when he realizes it is Even, after all, and unlocks the conversation swiftly.

**EVEN**
Yep, just as I predicted

**EVEN**
Fight Club is still bad

**ISAK**
I bet you didn’t even watch it the whole way through

**EVEN**
You can tell if a movie is bad by the first fifteen minutes, and I gave it thirty

**EVEN**
Tell Jonas he needs to get better movie taste

**ISAK**
You tell him, see where that conversation leads

**EVEN**
Like, there is no way the narrative against consumerism and corporate culture holds up against the notion of toxic masculinity the movie exposes and perpetuates

**EVEN**
Not to mention the blatant sexism the film claims to reject but so aggressively rubs in your face with the one speaking female role being a metaphor of how women are what emasculate men and invade their safe space

**EVEN**
Anyway, I watched yours, now you watch mine

**ISAK**
Already did

**EVEN**
What?! And you didn’t TEXT ME

**ISAK**
It was late, you wouldn’t have answered anyway
EVEN
So you watched R+J for sure

ISAK
For sure

EVEN
And verdict??

ISAK
It’s good

ISAK
Terrible fucking ending though

ISAK
No wonder you sulk so much at parties

EVEN
It’s not a true romance unless it ends in tragedy

ISAK
Jesus, and people say I’M cynical

EVEN
Well that’s not all I like

ISAK
Ok. What else then

EVEN
Romantic comedies :) It’s time for you to watch Pretty Woman

ISAK
Uhm no lol

ISAK
Those are seriously pointless like. What do they even mean. What do they even teach you

EVEN
Shut up, they’re fun and nice and upbeat

EVEN
This is why people think you’re cynical

ISAK
I’m NOT

EVEN
Then watch the movie

ISAK
Fine, I will

**ISAK**
But you have to watch another one of my choice

**EVEN**
Ugh

**ISAK**
And all the way through this time, no cheating

**EVEN**
It's not an Adam Sandler film is it

**ISAK**
I'll get back to you on it

**ISAK**
I have to think about which one will make you suffer more

**EVEN**
You always know exactly what to say :’)

**ISAK**
Ok, bye, I’m going to work now

**EVEN**
But I’m boooored

**ISAK**
And you say I’m needy??

**ISAK**
Just jerk off

**EVEN**
I already did

**ISAK**
Watch Tarzan

**EVEN**
Har har

**EVEN**
Maybe I WILL

**ISAK**
Have fun

Even replies, but Isak has to lock his phone quickly before he sees it, lest he spends the rest of his shift in the break room texting him. It happens more often than not nowadays, considering they spend more time texting than actually seeing each other in person, since their friends and roommates have been extremely keen on spending time with their respective selves, which makes it very hard to
find a window of solitude to do what they have to do. Or, well, you can argue it’s what they want to do, but Isak thinks it’s the former, as well – relief of stress and easy on the mind. Not too much to think about, and not too much to worry about afterwards, even if they’ve gotten into the habit of maybe hanging out a little bit afterwards, usually smoking a joint and having random conversations about their respective interests.

Isak, as he usually does when high, tends to ramble on about facts and figures – the other day, as he hung halfway over Even’s bed, head near the floor, he complained to Even about an article he saw the on the internet where some idiot in an eighteen-wheeler over in America crashed into a small Prius, while he wasn’t wearing a seatbelt, and the website made a huge deal about the fact that he wasn’t. Some of the “experts” on the scene even swore up and down that the fact that he wasn’t wearing a seatbelt might have saved the man’s life, with some bullshit science, when the truth of the matter is simple physics – of course the man in the eighteen-wheeler was going to survive, seatbelt or no seatbelt.

“It starts with Newton’s third law of motion,” he’d explained. “So both vehicles experience a force of the same magnitude. Now take Newton’s second law of motion into account, right,” he’d said, and Even had hummed in acknowledgment. “So if the mass of the car is less than the mass of the eighteen-wheeler – which of fucking course it is – then the acceleration of the eighteen-wheeler is much smaller than the one of the car, so just – the motion of the eighteen-wheeler is pretty much unaffected, while the car’s motion will completely fold over, so who ends up completely wrecked?”

He’d lifted his head over to look at Even, who looked straight back at him with raised eyebrows. “… the car?”

“The car!” Isak threw his hands up in the air, letting himself fall back again. “The fucking car, dude, so seatbelt or no, the stupid driver of the eighteen-wheeler wasn’t gonna fucking die or anything, so why perpetuate the idea that maybe not wearing your seatbelt might save your fucking life?” Isak remembers shivering. “This is why I don’t drive, Even. The roads are a dangerous place and people won’t wear their seatbelts because of a stupid article and they’ll all die.”

Even humors him, for the most part, though Isak’s pretty sure he’s not really keeping up with him – mostly, he looks at Isak in amusement, and may sometimes ask him a question or two about what he’s bringing up, but otherwise his reactions to Isak’s spouts are simple hums and nods. When Isak had asked him if he was getting carried away once, Even had shrugged and said, “If you need an outlet for your nerdiness, I’m a willing ear.” Which Isak appreciates, really, because most people tend to try and back away from a conversation with him when they bring up something he’s ready to rant about, which is probably the reason why he’s become so awkward in social situations. He used to be so suave in high school. Now it’s like someone entered a cheat on The Sims and switched his traits around when he entered the young adult phase.

Even, on the other hand, tends to rant a little more contemplatively – but still about things he’s passionate about. Last week, after the Phil Collins debacle, Even had compared the control he has over making a film to the control he can have with his life – but then he pointed out that when it comes down to it, life, like film, sometimes suffers from continuity errors, whether it be because of memory lapses or the inexplicable déjà vu, and that sometimes bad editing can make or break it.

Isak had looked at him in confusion. “What does that even mean?”

“Like—” Even had put his joint out by this point, seemingly trying to find the proper words to contend his point. “Okay, you know how – the movie, the entire movie, can be filmed and acted and directed, but even when it’s finished, it’s not actually a movie yet,” he’d explained. “That all goes to post. So you have this thing that you’ve created, that you’ve directed, that you feel you have control
over, but then in editing, things are cut out or replaced or readjusted to make your movie what it is – with A shots and B shots and C shots, blended perfectly to make your viewers look where you want them to.

“But say your mind doesn’t edit this correctly. Suddenly you’re not looking where you want to. Suddenly things don’t make sense. You had this sense of control when you first shot your movie, but then in the editing room, someone fucked it up, caught you off-guard, and now you have the remnants of what could have been your movie, but instead it’s this – this distorted version you never really had control over.

“So there are people who have control over the editing room the entire time, know exactly where they want their reactions shots or how to effectively execute the Kuleshov Effect, and then you have the people whose editing room is a shit show, and when they think they’re stepping into something they have control over, when they think their movie is ready to go and ready to enjoy, suddenly they see that they truly had no control the entire time. That outside forces have come and ruined the movie they’d pictured could be, and made it this – this entirely different project that they don’t like, and that other people don’t like, and that doesn’t make sense and was really out of their hands the entire time.

“And that’s the enemy, in your head, I think,” Even had turned around to tap at Isak’s temple with his index finger in example. “There are the people who have complete control over every single aspect of their movie, of their sense of self, and then there are the people that lose themselves in post.”

Isak had watched him for a very long time afterwards, and then finally, he’d asked, “And which one are you?”

Even had huffed a mirthless laugh at the question. “I can pretend to have control of every aspect of my movie, Isak,” he’d said. “But when it comes down to it, there’s a disorder in my brain that takes over my editing, and never really lets me have it.”

Isak had thought about that for a long time afterwards. He’d gone home and looked up at Orion’s Belt and wondered whether he really has control over his editing room, even with how meticulously he plans every single step he takes, every single reaction he has, every single word he says and how much of his life he shares. He’d wondered if maybe outside forces didn’t intrude on his movie because he’s so good at closing them all off, pretending they don’t exist, not allowing them to take over his thoughts or his actions. He’d wondered if this is maybe why his life is the way it is – so prearranged, fixed, that he doesn’t allow anyone to shape it the way they’d like, or the way he feels about it.

He’d spared a thought for his mother, thought about how her editing room must feel like it’s nonexistent. He’d spared a thought for Even, thought about how frustrating it must be for him to lose control to something he can’t precipitate. Thought about how maybe Even, secretly, is just as obsessed with control as Isak is, desperately looking to shape their life the way they want it to. A perfect beginning, a perfect middle, and a happy ending. No cuts, no continuity problems, no lapses in between.

He’d wondered if outside forces maybe found their way to every single person, either way, and maybe they all only have the semblance of control, simply to find out later they never really shaped their life. That their life was shaped by things out of their control, and maybe the end result wasn’t bad enough to think it wasn’t of their own merit.

Maybe life isn’t like a film at all, and Even’s trapped in his own head trying to explain it, the same way Isak’s trapped in his own trying to forget it.
When he finally makes his way past the door to the space exhibit, his mind is filled with so many memories it’s nice to find the stars looking back at him and taking them all away. For now, Isak thinks, this is all that matters. Whether or not his life is being ruined in post, he has this, and this is constant.

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Three days later, on a Tuesday, Even texts him to come over.

It’s a curt text, which means he’s very much looking for a fuck to get over some stress he’s been battling, if Isak knows his texts at all, so Isak stops by the convenience store on his way over first to buy them some chips. It takes him approximately ten minutes to decide on what flavor of Doritos he wants for himself, having already chosen for Even, (the guy has this obsession with the original nacho cheese ones) and he finally makes up his mind on the eleventh minute. He grabs the Cool American flavor bag, then walks over to the counter to have them rung up.

The girl behind the counter keeps making eyes at him, and he always finds situations like these awkward – if it were a guy, mind you, he’d probably blush and stutter all the way through the transaction, but every time it’s a girl his back just stiffens and he can feel his expression shut down entirely; he never wants to give a girl false hope, because then there’s the issue of having to explain he’s gay – again. And he tries to limit his coming out to maybe once a week, or, if he’s lucky, not at all.

When he’s finally got the plastic bag with the chips in his hand, he ducks out right before the girl can say anything else to him – she looked like she was about to ask for his number, and all Isak can hope for is that she doesn’t pull an Eva and take his name from his credit card to stalk him on Facebook. He’ll have to make sure he’s got his profile set on private again, or hope that maybe the Spiderman meme profile picture will be enough to deter her. He would definitely stop digging if he saw that as a profile picture on some guy’s Facebook, in any case. Do as he says and not as he does, and stuff.

On the tram, he spots a young boy tugging at his father’s coat every so often to point out the window – Isak’s not really sure what the boy is pointing at, but the father will look out anyway and pretend to be interested; he’ll explain something quietly to the boy, and this will satisfy the kid enough so that he sits back and spends another minute or two in silence before pointing out something again.

The father has all the patience in the world, Isak realizes. Not once does he express annoyance, not with his tone of voice, nor with his expression. He simply humors his son and keeps looking out the window every time the boy warrants it, and carries on a conversation with him. This is a foreign concept to Isak – as it always is, when he sees this kind of occurrence at the space exhibit, when he sees it at the grocery store or the shopping mall – one that doesn’t really inspire much in him other than melancholy, and something resembling a yearning for things he’s never known.

He forces himself to look back out the window, feeling like maybe he’s intruding on a moment that doesn’t really belong to him, and as the buildings blur past him in a hurry, his text notification goes off. Isak reaches into his coat pocket to pull out his phone and unlocks Even’s conversation quickly, to see a text that reads:

**EVEN**
Door’s open, let yourself in

Isak frowns at his phone and locks it, only slightly taken aback. It’s rare that Even doesn’t come down to meet him at the door – that’s just the kind of person he is, Isak’s learned – so maybe Isak underestimated just how irritable his mood is at the moment. There’s a hint of worry behind Isak’s surprise, but he doesn’t let himself linger too much on it – if Even needs to talk about it, Isak’s sure
that he will, and if he doesn’t, Isak’s not going to push. He’s going to offer Even his Doritos while they get high and hope that that – plus the sex – might get his mind off of his stress enough so that Isak’s helped him the same way Even has helped Isak before.

The walk off the tram and to Even’s house is quiet, Isak only catching a glimpse of another person leaving their house and climbing into their car – when he reaches Even’s place, the driveway is empty, Yousef’s truck gone and the bike Elias and Even share is not locked where it usually is. Still, when Isak opens the door to the house, he doesn’t remove his shoes, just in case either of them come back to the house, and he walks up the stairs cautiously before reaching Even’s bedroom door.

He hesitates for a moment, not knowing whether or not to knock – this has literally never been an issue or a scenario before – until he finally decides to do so, just in case Even changes his mind and sends Isak on his way.

After a moment, the door opens, and Even’s standing on the other side, eyebrow raised.

Isak grins a little sheepishly. “Hi,” he says, gripping the plastic bag in his hand a little tighter. “Am I allowed to come in?”

Even rolls his eyes and waves Isak inside, walking back towards his desk. Isak steps inside and closes the door behind him, setting the plastic bag on the floor before turning back to find Even sitting back on his desk chair, staring intently down at something on top of it. Isak’s brows furrow in confusion as he walks up to Even, peeking over his shoulder to catch a glance at what he’s looking at.

There are piles and piles of pictures all over the desk, each one of them being scrutinized by Even for a moment before being thrown aside in what almost seems like irritation. Even seems to be unaware that Isak is hovering over his shoulder, watching all of this, before he clears his throat and Even blinks, turns his head over to find Isak’s dangerously close to his.

“Hi,” Even greets him, and his voice sounds a little monotonous, but there’s still something like amusement in the foreground. Isak raises an eyebrow.

“Hi,” he greets again. “Did the pictures do something to offend you?”

Even shakes his head and turns back to look at them. “I’m trying to figure out this – this project I’m working on,” he explains. “It’s not due till the end of the school year, but nothing’s – I don’t know, nothing’s working out for me.”

Isak hums and looks over some of the pictures. “Well, they’re good,” he offers, and Even snorts. “Good isn’t quite what I’m aiming for.”

Isak points at a picture of two kids on a swing, smiles caught midair. “That one’s nice.”

Even tilts his head at it. “But what does it make you feel?”

Isak frowns and glances at the side of Even’s face before turning back to look at the picture. “Uhm,” he shrugs. “I don’t know. What am I supposed to feel?”

Even huffs a laugh. “The more you know, the more you see,” he mutters to Isak, and Isak raises an eyebrow.

“And that’s supposed to mean…?”
Even looks at him. “For someone who claims to know just about everything, you’re very blind to the literal bigger picture.”

Isak scoffs. “Just because I don’t see some deeper meaning in a picture of two kids swinging at a playground?”

“You’re just looking at the surface,” Even says, picking up the picture and turning it over and over in his hand. “But you’re right,” he sighs. “It doesn’t really make me feel anything, either.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek. “What is it supposed to make you feel?” He asks again.

Even stays quiet for a moment. “Not important,” he sighs, setting the picture back down on what Isak guesses is the rejected pile. Even sinks further into his chair and brings his hand up to rub at the bridge of his nose. He looks tired, Isak realizes. Shoulders slumped and bags under his eyes, almost like he hadn’t slept at all – Isak is all too familiar with that look. Licking his lips, Isak brings his lips to kiss at Even’s jaw, then trails those kisses down to Even’s neck.

Even’s exhale is shaky, and he throws his head back slightly to rest on Isak’s shoulder. “Just like that, huh?” He’s smiling.

“Mm,” Isak hums, nipping at the skin of Even’s neck. “I assume this is why you called me over, isn’t it?” His hands slide down Even’s chest, stop at the hem of his jeans and play with them for a moment. “I don’t think it was necessarily for the professional opinion.”

Even chuckles, turns over in the chair and captures Isak’s lips with his own. Isak is quick to pull Even out of the chair by his shirt, then proceeds to tug his flannel off. Even does the same to Isak’s hoodie, pulling him closer by the neck as Isak licks his way into Even’s mouth. When they pull apart it’s only to get rid of each other’s jeans, Isak fumbling with Even’s buttons for only a moment before finally tugging them down successfully, at around the same time Even does the same for Isak. They get rid of the rest of their clothes, save for their boxers, Isak throwing his glasses on the end table, shoes discarded somewhere in the middle of the room.

Their lips meet again and Isak leads the both of them to the bed, only to push Even onto it; as Even scoots up some, Isak straddles his lap and brings his head back down to kiss him again.

He bites Even’s bottom lip before he mutters, “You want to stop thinking for a moment?”

Even laughs breathily. “A little more than that.”

Isak grins against Even’s lips. “I’ll try my hardest,” he breathes into Even’s mouth, before trailing his kisses down Even’s neck, then slowly down his chest. Pulling him out of his boxers, Isak strokes him softly with his thumb and revels in Even’s hitched breath – eventually, after teasing Even enough with his fingers and his tongue, he sinks his mouth down around him and proceeds to hold Even down by the waist as he squirms, Isak’s name leaving his lips intermittently with some groaned affirmations thrown in there for good measure.

Isak doesn’t help himself along. He’s got other plans for that.

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The end had eventually found Isak’s back pressed against the headboard, after Even had slid down his dick with barely any resistance and rocked while his head leaned forward, Isak pushing his hips up cooperatively in tandem. Even had finished first, with some help from Isak’s hand, and after another minute or two of Even rocking for Isak’s benefit, Isak had spilled into the condom, nails digging into Even’s back desperately.
They’d made out for a while afterwards, lazily, Even’s hand on Isak’s cheek and Isak’s around Even’s neck. Eventually, when they’re all cleaned up, they both end up back in their boxers, Isak lying on his back next to Even, who’s propped up against the headboard, a joint in their respective hands.

They’re quiet for a little while, until Isak turns over on his side and looks up at Even, who looks far more relaxed than he did when Isak first arrived. He’s got his joint hanging loosely between his lips, held up between his index and his middle finger. “So did it work?” Isak asks, and Even glances down at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Did what work?”

“Did it get your mind off the pictures,” Isak gestures lazily towards Even’s desk with his free hand. Even’s smile is amused.

“It did until you brought it up again,” he points out, and Isak rolls his eyes, turns over on his back once again.

Isak changes the subject instead. “I brought Doritos,” he remembers suddenly, and points over to where he’d dropped the plastic bag on the floor next to the door. He glances over at Even. “Go get them,” he near-whines.

Even rolls his eyes and lifts himself off the bed, walking over to the bag. “You’re the most demanding man I know.”

“I just fucked you,” Isak reminds him. “I think grabbing the snacks for us a couple of feet away is the least you can do.”

Even throws the Cool American Doritos straight at his face. Isak manages to catch the bag just before it hits more than his nose.

“Rude,” Isak mutters as Even walks back towards the bed, his own Doritos in hand. Isak puts out his joint in the mug Even extends to him, then Even does the same as he sits back down on the bed, back against the headboard.

Isak grabs a chip and suddenly regrets getting this flavor. He can’t believe those eleven minutes he’d wasted trying to make a decision ended with him making the wrong one.

“Do you think we should tell them?” Even asks suddenly, and Isak turns on his stomach to frown at him.

“Tell who what?”

“Our friends,” he replies. “About this.”

Isak’s eyes widen. “No!”

Even looks at him. “Not about the sex part, Isak, God.”

Isak eyes him suspiciously. “Then what?”

“About the fact that we don’t actively dislike each other anymore? It’d be a lot easier to hang out with all of our friends that way.”

Isak makes a face. “I don’t know,” he replies cautiously. “They’d ask questions.”
Even shrugs. "So let them," he says. "Who hasn’t bonded over weed?"

"That is how Mahdi and I got to be pals," he admits.

"See? If he buys it, then the rest of them will, too. It’ll just open up a lot more opportunities for us," he explains. "Besides, I can’t keep making a face every time you’re mentioned, Isak, it’s getting tiring. I’m pretty sure I’m getting wrinkles."

Isak sits up on his knees. "Let me see."

Even frowns.

"No, more."

Even scowls.

Isak traces the one single wrinkle on his forehead. "Oh, damn, you’re right," he says, bringing his hand back down. "Keep that up and I’ll have to stop sleeping with you."

Even raises an eyebrow. "How very shallow of you."

"This entire endeavor started because we’re both shallow," he points out. "It wasn’t because of our brilliant personalities. You can’t be surprised."

"In that case, I demand you don’t cut your hair again," Even proclaims.

Isak blinks. "What the fuck? Why?"

"If we’re being shallow, it’s just a lot easier to grab on to when it’s longer," he explains. "And you just look better."

Isak narrows his eyes. "But you might be the only one who thinks that. Jonas, for example, likes my short hair."

"Are you sleeping with Jonas?"

"Well, no."

"Well, there."

Isak huffs. "Fine. I will grow it out an appropriate amount. Not too short, but not too long. Just long enough for your convenience."

"Can’t ask for a better deal," Even grins.

"But," Isak holds up a finger. "If we’re making hair sacrifices, then once in a while you’re going to have to stop styling yours."

"What?"

"You know, with the little quiff you’ve always got going on."

Even frowns. "Why?"

"It just looks softer when you let it fall," Isak explains. "Besides, it’d be so much less gel. Seriously, that shit’s gross on the hands. Like, sometimes it makes your come stick to them."
“Ew.”

“Exactly.”

“Okay, tell you what,” Even shifts a bit on the bed. “You compromised, so I will, too. Not too styled, not too much gel, but just enough so that it still looks soft. Deal?”

“I can live with that.”

“I’m glad we got our shallowness out of the way,” Even says. “Any other topics we ought to discuss?”

“Hm,” Isak thinks. “What are your kinks?”

“Kinks?”

“Yeah, like,” Isak sits back on his legs a little more. “What’s something you’d want to try. I mean, we’re fucking, and we’re friendlyish.”

“Of course.”

“Of course. So we can share our kinks without fear of judgment, because we’re not in a relationship, and it shouldn’t be a deal breaker, right?”

Even seems to mull over this for a moment. “I guess not,” he finally concedes. “But I don’t think I have any?”

Isak frowns. “Are you sure?”

“I mean, sex is sex, right?” He looks at Isak for confirmation, but all Isak offers him is a shrug. “I can’t think of any specific ones. I’ll update you as I figure them out.”

“Sounds good.”

“And you?”

“Public sex,” Isak replies immediately.

“What?”

“Preferably in the bathroom.”

Even gapes. “Oh, my God, that’s amazing.”

“Listen, it’s the first gay porn movie I’ve ever watched, and – stop laughing!”

“I’m not laughing!” Even exclaims, laughing.

“Even.”

“No, I’m not laughing,” Even’s laughter dies down a bit. “Not at your kink, I promise I’m not kink shaming. I’m laughing at the fact that that’s your kink because it’s the first porn movie you ever watched.”

“I found it hot, why can’t I find that hot?”

Even sighs, amused. “Porn truly does develop young sexual minds.”
“You *really* don’t have any kinks?” Isak asks him, still a little perplexed at the fact. “None that you can think of?”

“None that I can *think* of. Although,” Even frowns, humming. “I may get turned on at random?”

“How do you mean?”

“Like,” Even shifts again, this time turning his body over to face Isak’s. “I don’t know, I can’t explain it. Weird things turn me on.”

Isak eyes him. “Not like, animals and shit, right?”

“No, Isak, Jesus.”

Isak relaxes. “Just checking.”

“I’m more talking about—” Even pauses. “You know, like the other day. You told me you’d finally watched Romeo and Juliet, right?”

“Right.”

“That turned me on.”

Isak blinks. “You’re a fucking sadist?”

Even’s expression is unamused. “How do you get that out of me being turned on by you watching a movie?”

“Because that movie was miserable!”

“No, it’s more like – you put some effort into whatever is developing here, so it turned me on.”

Isak considers this for a second, then bites the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as it settles. “Okay,” he begins slowly. “So – your kink is being corny?”

Even narrows his eyes, obviously noticing Isak’s amusement. “Maybe? What’s wrong with that?”

Isak licks his lips and snorts a little. “Are you going to get turned on every time I put some effort into this friendship?”

“Aw,” Even smirks. “We’re friends?”

“Shut up,” Isak rolls his eyes. “Are you?”

“Maybe,” Even admits. “Like, maybe if you eat something I cook even though you might not like it, I’m probably gonna get turned on.”

“You’re gonna be getting turned on so much in front of the guys, then.”

“Well, maybe not *every* time,” Even argues. “Maybe just – specific times. I don’t get turned on every time you do something nice, as rare as that is. Like, the fact that you brought Doritos over didn’t turn me on.”

“Oh, that’s weird, and a little all over the place,” Isak admits. “But I guess we’ll learn about it as we go?”
“Sounds good. Now, circling back around to your public bathroom sex, though—”

“God.”

“—so is that like – actual penetration? Like from behind?”

“I don’t know?”

“Do you want to do the fucking, or do you want to be fucked?”

Isak sighs. “As it always is between us, it’d depend on my mood. But like – maybe ride you.”

Even blinks. “How?”

“Well,” Isak tilts his head. “There’s literally a seat in there.”

Even stares at Isak in disbelief and silence for half a minute, almost. “Uhm,” he holds up a hand. “You want me to sit on a toilet while you ride me?”

“Yes?”

“That’s not sanitary.”

“I don’t think having sex in a bathroom is sanitary at all?”

“Then why do you want to do it?” Even asks.

“It’s a kink!” Isak replies, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. “Doesn’t mean we’ll ever get the chance to!”

“You know,” Even ignores this and looks thoughtful. “I for sure thought a conversation about kinks would be hotter. At least we can cross talking about kinks off my kinks list,” he points out.

Isak snorts. “Yeah, ‘cause it’s not fucking corny.”

“Why.” Even deadpans.

“You’re a sap. Literally, like, what turned you on when you were with Sonja?” he asks.

“Hm. I mean, usually nothing out of the ordinary. Well, no,” Even amends. “I mean – there’s the foreplay and stuff.”

“Stuff like?”

Even sighs in defeat. “Corny stuff.”

“Ugh,” Isak throws his arms up. “You’re disgusting.”

“Stop kink shaming me, Valtersen,” Even scowls. “You’re literally the one who wants to have sex on a toilet.”

“Oh, my God,” Isak ignores this. “Does the Tarzan soundtrack turn you on?”

“Oh, Jesus Christ.”

“Is this why you play it on loud when the boys are home?” Isak grins, scooting closer to Even with his knees. “Are you jerking off to it?”
“That’s gross,” Even pokes Isak’s chest with his finger, keeping him away. “Stop tainting my childhood this way.”

“Do you cry when You’ll Be in My Heart plays and you’ve got your dick in your—”

“Shut up. Shut up, Isak,” Even pokes at his chest again.

“When he sings the ‘look over your shoulder’ part, do you look over your shoulder, just to appease Phil?”

Even looks like he’s trying not to give Isak the satisfaction of laughing. “Fuck off.”

Isak laughs, leans away. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding,” he says, picking up his Doritos bag. As he takes another one out and into his mouth, he makes a face, swallowing it forcefully. “Ugh,” he grunts. “I don’t know why I got this flavor, they’re not good at all.”

Even hums, looking at Isak’s bag before extending his own bag towards him. “Wanna switch?”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “Really?”

Even shrugs. “Yeah, I don’t mind Cool American.”

Isak grins gratefully. “Sweet, thanks.”

They switch easily, and Isak happily digs into the Doritos.

Mouth full, he begins, “But, in all seriousness—” Before he can finish his sentence, Isak’s phone notification goes off. Frowning, he reaches over Even towards the end table, grabbing his glasses and putting them on before he slides off the bed and walks towards his coat. Digging into the pocket, he pulls it out and looks at the screen – then scoffs, throwing it unceremoniously back onto the floor.

As he’s walking back towards the bed, Even raises an eyebrow and asks, “Did it do something to offend you?”

“No,” Isak sits back down on the bed, grabbing the Doritos bag again. “It’s just my dad making a deposit into my account.”

“What?” Even frowns. “Why would that make you mad?”

“Because it’s guilt money.”

“Oh. For…?”

Isak looks at him. Even with that simple, almost unimportant detail, Isak realizes he’s said too much. “Doesn’t matter,” he replies, and Even looks understanding. “It’s guilt money, and I refuse to use it, so I just transfer it to a savings account and don’t look at it.”

Even grabs another Dorito from his bag and takes a bite out of it. Isak notices that while he takes a bite and quickly a second one to stuff the entirety of the Dorito in his mouth, Even takes his time, chews the first piece as if savoring the flavor before moving on to the second, taking his time with that one, too. It’s almost irritating, if Isak’s going to be honest – he doesn’t think the flavor’s any different depending on the time you take to chew it, and the point of food is to finish it off quickly and efficiently, if you’re hungry enough.

“What were you gonna say?” Even asks, breaking through Isak’s train of thought. He blinks, meets Even’s gaze again.
“Huh?”

“Before your phone went off,” Even reminds him. “You were gonna say something.”

Isak tries to think back, looking to the left of him aimlessly. His mind is an expert at fogging whenever his dad comes into the picture, but if he thinks hard enough—“Oh,” Isak looks back at Even. “When are we supposed to tell the rest of the guys?”

Even purses his lips, looking like he’s deep in thought. Isak shoves another Dorito in his mouth, letting him think. “Well, it can’t be random,” Even points out. “Because that’d just sound too suspicious, I think?”

“I agree,” Isak replies through a mouthful of Dorito.

“So maybe just – next time they make mass plans, we can just show up without whining about it and show them we’re cool with each other.” Even takes another slow, excruciating bite out of his Dorito. Isak narrows his eyes at it.

“Mhm.”

“Maybe by sitting next to each other or something. Or just engage in a conversation.”

Half of the Dorito still sits between Even’s fingers, the other half still being massacred slowly by his teeth. “Yup.”

Even finally swallows the first half of the chip. “Do you think we should ease them into it?”

Isak blinks and meets Even’s gaze. “Yeah, sure.”

“But then—”

“Hey, open your mouth,” Isak interrupts abruptly.

Even raises an eyebrow, surprised. “What?”

“Just open it.”

Even narrows his eyes suspiciously at Isak, but after a moment, he obeys.

Isak grabs one of the Doritos from his bag and quickly shoves all of it into Even’s mouth.

Even’s indignant squawk is muffled and surprised, mouth closing around the chip automatically. “Isak,” he protests, mouth full.

“Just eat it!” Isak orders. “All of it, in one go!”

Even looks at him as if he’s gone mad, but he begins to chew anyway, most likely because he doesn’t have any other choice now that the Dorito’s in his mouth. And still, his chews are slow, and Isak throws his head back and grunts.

“Just swallow already.”

Even shakes his head, expression extremely amused now. “You’re not even this bossy when I’m blowing you,” he says, but finally swallows. Isak preens in triumph.

“Okay,” Even blinks. “What was that about?”
“You’re a really slow eater,” Isak explains. “I just wanted to see if you were capable of hurrying up.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being a slow eater,” Even shakes his head defensively. “And also, that was a little violating. No more shoving things in my mouth.”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “At all?”

“No more shoving things in my mouth without consent.”

“Fine,” Isak rolls his eyes. “But for the record, a Dorito should not take a lifetime to swallow.”

“What the hell is your hurry?” Even asks, raising his eyebrows.

Isak sighs and drops back onto the mattress, gaze fixed on the ceiling. It’s almost foreign to him, just how bare Even’s ceiling is, after being so used to seeing Orion’s Belt every time he lies on his back this way. “You’ve got more time if you hurry,” he tells Even. “And you need all the time you can get.”

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Isak has the day off on Friday, which means he spends most of the morning lying around his room in his sweatpants and hoodie, mindlessly surfing the channels on his TV. It’s nothing new, really; Isak just can’t work up the energy to do much when he doesn’t have to, and he thinks that’s a perfectly normal state of mind, considering every other day is spent doing things and then doing more things and finishing the day off without being able to sleep. He’s already scheduled a nap in about an hour, and maybe another one in five.

There’s a knock on the door and Isak grants permission to enter with an unenthusiastic grunt – Eva opens the door and leans against the frame, arms crossed. She looks at Isak for a moment, expression somewhere between concern and wariness.

“Hey,” she greets him and Isak shifts his gaze from Family Guy to Eva.

“Hi,” he greets back. “What’s up?”

“I’m going over to Sana’s,” she tells him. “So I’m not – gonna make any lunch, or anything,” she licks her lips. “Do you want me to make you something before I go?”

Isak snorts. “You’re not my mom, Eva, I’ll be fine. I’ll order a pizza or something.”

Eva shifts her weight, looking like she wants to say something, but can’t exactly find the words. Isak sighs loudly and raises both his eyebrows at her. “What?” he urges her on.

“I just—” Eva takes a look around his room, and Isak would feel self-conscious about the mess, but he’s known Eva way too long and vice versa, so he really doesn’t care about whether or not she sees or judges the mess he has in here. He just doesn’t have the time to clean, nor the energy, so he kind of just – piles everything up. Makes it difficult to find things, sure, but at least he knows how to do laundry, which he thinks is a plus for Eva, too, who knows how to but absolutely detests it.

Eva finally looks back at Isak. “Do you want to come with me?” she asks, and Isak’s brows rise further in surprise.

“What?”

“You know, do you want to come to Sana’s with me,” she repeats. “I just – Isak, I feel bad every
time you just stay inside and sometimes – you know, sometimes you just lock yourself in here all day and I get that maybe you’re tired from the week but all you do is sleep and, you know, you say you’re going to order a pizza, but sometimes you forget to eat and—”

“Eva,” Isak interrupts her, and he sits up on his bed, back pressed against the wall. “Again, you are not my mother. I’m fine. I promise I’ll set up a reminder to order the pizza, or whatever. I’m just tired. I don’t have the energy to move, so – no, thanks for the invite, and send Sana my regards and stuff, but I’d really rather just stay here.”

Eva’s concerned expression doesn’t waver. “I could stay here with you,” she offers. “We can watch TV and—”

“Oh, my God,” Isak rolls his eyes. “Go. You have things to do. I’m staying here of my own volition, Eva. No one’s holding a gun to my head.”

Eva purses her lips. “You’ll text me if you need anything?”

“I won’t, but sure,” Isak grants her. “I’ll text you if that’s the case.”

Eva looks at him for a moment longer, then walks inside his room and sits on his bed to pull him into a tight hug. Isak grunts a little bit in surprise, but then he awkwardly manages to pat Eva on the back, caught off guard. Eva pulls back and smiles at him sweetly; Isak almost feels bad for turning down her offer now, but not bad enough to muster up the energy to take the rejection back.

“Okay,” she finally says. “But don’t think I won’t text Jonas so he can check on you.”

“He’s not my dad!”

“I get it, no one here’s your parent, but it’s not like he wouldn’t do it anyway,” she points out, which, okay, yeah. Isak will grant her that one.

“Go,” he orders. “And please close the door on the way out.”

“Uhm, no,” Eva snorts, standing up. “You need to let this room air out. I’m leaving it open. You’re alone here, anyway.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Fine.”

“I’ll see you later.”

“Bye, Eva.”

Eva walks out of his room and after a minute or two of some more shuffling outside, the front door opens and closes quietly, key locking the knob. Eva has a much easier time with the knob, Isak’s realized, which only asserts Isak’s theory that the knob just has something against him.

He grabs his phone from beside him on the mattress and unlocks it to go to the Facebook app – the television becomes background noise as he scrolls mindlessly through several people’s posts, most of them posting aesthetically pleasing pictures of just how marvelous their life is or just how sickeningly in love they are, and though Isak hates them with a passion sometimes, he has this unhealthy obsession of looking through them anyway.

The phone vibrates in his hand, a text notification from Even sliding down the top of the screen. Isak presses down on it slightly, and it takes him straight to Even’s conversation, which is now probably taking up more storage than his music, and he reads the text.
EVEN
Heads up, boys are gonna invite you to the burger place for lunch

EVEN
All of them will be there. Make sure you are too

Isak narrows his eyes and frowns, typing back a reply.

ISAK
I don’t wanna

ISAK
I’m tired

The typing bubble appears, then disappears, then appears again, then disappears one more time, until it finally reappears for good until the next message comes in.

EVEN
Hey, this might be the only time we can get them all together in a room that isn’t a party

EVEN
Only time we can be really obvious about the fact that we’re getting along

EVEN
Come on. I’ll buy you your burger

Isak huffs, amused.

ISAK
I really am tired, though

ISAK
Like nothing against the idea of telling everyone but I can barely get my ass out of bed to go to the bathroom

ISAK
Or shower

ISAK
Or get dressed

There’s a small pause in the conversation, where Isak thinks maybe Even’s finally given up, but then the typing bubble returns.

EVEN
Pleaaaaaase

EVEN
It’ll be less fun without you

Isak smiles.

ISAK
Can I show up in my sweatpants
EVEN
You can show up naked for all I care

ISAK
Oh you’d like that wouldn’t you

EVEN
And let everyone else see what I see on a regular basis? Nah

EVEN
But really. If you don’t feel like changing, don’t. I doubt anyone’ll care, and if they do, I’ll fight them

ISAK
Aw, one month into our friendship and you’re already ready to fight to defend my honor

EVEN
Eugh, nvm, stay home

ISAK
Fucker

ISAK
Alright, I’ll make an appearance

ISAK
In sweatpants

EVEN
Hot

EVEN
I’m actually a little turned on now

ISAK
Oh my God get a real kink

As the typing bubble appears, his screen is overtaken by a picture of Mahdi hanging from some playground swings, contact name above it. Isak sighs deeply, psyching himself up for another conversation with a human person, and presses down on the accept button.

“Hey,” Isak answers.

“So, okay,” Mahdi begins, and Isak is endlessly amused by the way he already sounds like he’s gearing up for a debate. “We’re all going to the usual place in about an hour,” Mahdi continues.

“Mhm,” Isak replies, feigning disinterest.

“Do you want to come along.” It’s a statement, not a question, as if he’s testing the waters.

“Sure, sounds good,” Isak replies, putting Mahdi on speaker phone and going back to his conversation with Even. Even’s reply from before had been:

EVEN
Isak snorts quietly, typing a response as Mahdi continues to talk. 

“Okay, but when I say all of us, I mean all of us,” he points out. “Like – everyone.”

“Uh huh,” Isak can’t believe how much he’s beating around the bush. The last time Mahdi had tried for this argument, it went a lot more smoothly on his part, but Isak thinks that’s because at a party, it’s easy to avoid people you don’t want to see (look at how well that turned out), but when it’s just a group hangout, well. Isak’s not surprised Mahdi probably expects a sour mood.

**ISAk**

Mahdi’s inviting me now. See you in an hour?

“That means Even, too.”

**EVEN**

See you in an hour

“And listen, I know what you’re going to say, but dude, you can’t keep acting like this is healthy for any of us, and you have to understand that—”

“That’s fine, Mahdi,” Isak interrupts, deciding to put him out of his misery. “I’ll go.”

“—see, that’s exactly the attitude that – wait, what?” Mahdi sounds genuinely taken aback.

“I said it’s cool, I’ll show up.”

There’s a long pause. “You’re saying…you’re okay with that? With Even being there, too?”

Isak rolls his eyes; Mahdi’s never been this slow to pick up on something before. “Yes, Mahdi, it’s chill,” he replies. “We’re getting along just fine, I don’t mind.”

“You’re—” There’s another pause. Isak lets Mahdi take this in, grabbing for the remote and surfing through the channels again as he does. “You’re getting along?”

Isak sighs. “Is it okay if I show up in my sweatpants?” he asks, just to get Mahdi off the topic. “I mean, no, I’m going to show up in my sweatpants anyway, but I want to pretend I’m being considerate by asking.”

“You’re getting along with Even?” Mahdi asks again, and Isak grunts.

“Yeah, we’ve been smoking together,” Isak lies easily. Or, well – it’s only half a lie, because they have, but before that they’re ass-deep in each other, usually. “Shit comes up when you’re high.”

There’s a contemplative silence. “Well, I guess that makes sense.”

“A smart man,” Isak grins, proud of himself and Even for predicting Mahdi’s easy acceptance first. “So, see you in an hour?”

“Wait, are you really going in sweatpants?”

“Bye, Mahdi.”

“Think of your street cred!”
Isak hangs up.

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So it actually takes a little more than an hour for Isak to show up, and that’s only because it took a long time to work up the energy to get out of bed. And even then, his legs felt like lead as he moved, head pounding and back a little sore, so he’s not really winning in this scenario at all.

When he finally pushes past the entrance door of the burger place, everyone’s already seated at the usual round table, and Magnus is the one to catch sight of him first.

“There’s the royal king,” Magnus proclaims, and everyone turns to look at him. “Fashionably late, as always.”

Isak flips him off as the others clap their hands for him. He notices there’s an empty seat in between Even and Jonas, which, at the moment, doesn’t really look suspicious – Jonas always saves Isak a seat beside him, so walking over and sitting down in it doesn’t raise any suspicions.

The fact that he doesn’t immediately demand Jonas switch seats with him, though, does – they all eye him and Even a little suspiciously, waiting for a reaction from either of them, but Isak merely nods towards Even and Even nods back before turning back to Mutta and picking their conversation up where it started.

The rest of the boys take a moment to let the rarity of the moment sink in, before they’re broken from the spell and cautiously go back to their own business.

“Hey, man,” Jonas greets, holding out his hand. Isak clasps his own hand against it, then brings it back to his lap. “You alright?”

“Yes,” Isak promises, now that everyone’s gone back to their respective conversation. Through his peripheral, he can see Even’s talking animatedly with Mutta beside him, while Elias and the rest of them are now in a heated discussion about something Isak can’t make out. “Just a little tired.”

Jonas eyes him for a little bit. “Hey, you know if you need to talk about anything—”

“You, too,” Isak replies firmly. Jonas looks a little taken aback. “If you need to talk about anything, you know you can talk to me, right?”

Isak waits for Jonas’s reply. He squirms a little in his seat, looking slightly guilty, and there – Isak knew there’s something he’s telling Mahdi that he’s not telling Isak. That fact bothers him more than it should, considering he and Jonas are like brothers (and Isak might have gone through a phase that maybe made that simile weird, but that’s all it was, a phase, as has been previously established, so that’s all they are now and always) and they’ve known each other far longer than either of them have known the other two.

“I’ll let you know if something comes up,” Jonas offers, and Isak feels the disappointment settle in his stomach. He’s not going to push this in front of all of the boys, but eventually he knows he’s going to break and just straight up demand an answer from Jonas. “I ordered for you, by the way,” he tells Isak, and Isak smiles slightly.

“Thanks,” he replies, and Jonas nods in acknowledgment. He then proceeds to look past Isak at Even for a moment, before his gaze flickers back.

“So, uhm,” he gestures lamely towards Even. “That’s a thing now?”
Isak’s heart constricts a bit. “What’s a thing?”

“You two just not—” Jonas shrugs. “Immediately scowling at one another?”

Isak relaxes slightly. “Yeah, well,” he shrugs back. “He’s alright, I guess.”

Jonas blinks. “And how—”

“We’ve been smoking together,” he admits, and Jonas gapes a little bit. “I didn’t tell you because—
you know, you’re usually the one who provides me with weed, but Even’s got some good stuff, and—”

“You thought you had to keep that a secret from me because of weed?” he asks, and Isak can feel his face flush in both embarrassment and shame. “Bro, you know me better than that.”

And since Isak can’t really tell Jonas the exact reason why he’d kept Even from him, he just nods once, chastised. “You’re right,” he replies. “I’m sorry. I just didn’t want things to get weird, you know, especially before we started to—uhm, get along. ‘Cause it might have just ended badly, and you don’t need that kind of stress in your life.”

Jonas’s brows furrow. “How did that not end badly?”

Isak licks his lip. Well, for one, his dick. “I don’t know,” Isak glances at Even beside him for a moment, before turning back to Jonas. Even’s knee is pressed lightly against Isak’s, almost inscrutably, as if he were offering Isak a silent support system. Isak takes this for what it is, and propels forward. “Just—you know. You talk things out. Get to know a guy.”

Jonas tilts his head. “So you finally figured out what we’ve been telling you all along, huh?” Jonas raises an eyebrow. “That he’s a nice dude?”

“Hm,” Isak shrugs lightly. “He’s okay.” His smile is very small when he feels Even’s knee press a little more firmly against Isak’s in acknowledgment. How Even can be in two conversations at once is beyond him, but he appreciates the sentiment nevertheless.

“Isak!” Isak turns around to find Elias repeating his name thrice, waving at him. Isak blinks and nods his head.

“Yeah?”

“Okay, see if you can guess this, because these guys—”

“I’m pretty sure you’re just asking it wrong!” Magnus protests, but Elias waves him off. Even and Mutta have now tuned into the conversation with interest, and Mahdi seems to want to protest too, but Elias shushes all of them.

“None of you have gotten it, and you had like, ten minutes already,” Elias points out. “Unless you or
Even know the answer, too?”

Mutta and Even stay silent, then Even turns to look at Isak. “So?” he asks, a small smirk playing on his lips. “What’s the answer?”

Isak glares at him, then at the rest of them – he doesn’t really want to point out it’s a riddle for kids, because he doesn’t want to insult any of their intelligence; besides, he’s pretty sure most of them are high right now, hindering their critical thinking. So he decides to have some fun with it, instead.

“How about I just give you the first one?” he asks, and the group groans collectively. “What?” Isak replies defensively. “It’s no fun if you guys don’t struggle to guess.”

Elias nods once. “I accept these terms,” he says, and Mahdi rolls his eyes.

“That’s because you already know the answers.”

“Silence,” Elias sniffs. “Alright, Isak, what’s the first one?”

Isak smiles. “A stove.”

Magnus parts his lip in an expression of dismissal. “Pft,” he crosses his arms over his chest. “That helps us none.”

“No, it does,” Jonas pipes up. “That probably means the other two things are related to the stove, right?”

“Jonas is right,” Yousef agrees. “Just think of it in the context of the kitchen, maybe.”

“Second one is fire,” Even suddenly says, and everyone turns to look at him in surprise. Isak, however, is only slightly surprised – mostly pleasantly, really, but not so much so that Even doesn’t realize Isak knows exactly why Even knows this answer; it’s almost nice to know Even’s been paying attention to Isak’s critical thinking rants, after all.

“Even’s right!” Elias exclaims, and Mahdi groans.

“Why are we doing this again?”

“Yes, why do we always go along with Elias’s games?” Mutta asks.

Elias looks offended. “They’re not games, they’re riddles.”

“Same difference,” Magnus replies.

Before all of them can engage in further discussion, their burgers arrive, the waitress setting down every single plate in front of exactly the right person. Isak catches a glimpse of the way she purposely brushes her chest against Even’s shoulder, and he only barely manages not to narrow his eyes at her blatant flirting. He can’t believe that people just have no shame anymore. That girl at the convenience store the other day, with her moon eyes, and then this waitress, practically shoving her breasts at Even’s face.

“Ugh,” Even interrupts his thoughts, sighing loudly.

“What?” Isak asks automatically.

Even rolls his eyes. “Nothing, I just forgot to ask for no tomatoes,” he replies, and then it’s Isak’s turn to roll his eyes.
“You’re such a baby,” he snorts. “Here, just give them to me, and you can have my onions. I hate them.”

“Yeah? Thanks,” Even replies, and after they swap their vegetables swiftly and efficiently, they both realize the rest of the boys have gone completely quiet.

Isak looks up at all of them, and then Even does, too, and the whole table’s silent for maybe half a minute more before Isak clears his throat, straightening his posture. “What?” he asks them slowly.

“Okay,” Elias holds up both of his hands, palms forward. “This is weird, right? Someone please tell me they find this weird, too.”

There’s a collective noise of agreement coming from every person on the table, save for maybe Jonas, who looks more contemplative than anything. Even rolls his eyes beside Isak.

“It’s almost as if none of you have ever heard of apologizing,” he says, taking one of his fries and popping it in his mouth.


The whole table looks at them expectantly.

Isak and Even exchange a glance.

“Tell you what,” Even finally replies, looking back at all of them. “Whoever gets married first gets to know.”

“What?” Mutta exclaims.

Magnus gapes. “What kind of bullshit is that!”

“Well, Magnus is definitely not in the running anymore,” Mahdi nods seriously, and Magnus glares at him.

“Hello, I have more of a chance than Elias!”

“Wrong,” Elias jumps in. “But whatever, we all know it’ll be Yousef, anyway, and that’s why Even’s pulling this, because he has a bias.”

“What about you, Isak?” Yousef turns to him, gaze amused. “Are you okay with this?”

“Yeah, Isak,” Jonas’s smile is crooked. “Why don’t you have a bias towards me?”

“Hey, I believe you can get married first!” He replies. “You’ve got game, you can beat Yousef.”

“Well,” Mutta grins. “Now it’s a competition.”

“Start placing your bets!” Elias clasps his hands together. “It’s between Jonas and Yousef—”

“And Mutta,” Mahdi chimes in. Mutta blinks over at him.

“Me? Why me?”

“You’re so pure and happy and smiley all the time,” Mahdi explains. “Girls like that.”

“Doesn’t mean they like it enough to put a ring on it,” Jonas points out, but Elias shakes his head.
“No, I agree, Mutta’s also in the running. So that’s Jonas, Yousef, and Mutta.”

“What does it matter who gets married first?” Magnus asks in disbelief. “Whoever gets told is going to tell the rest of us, anyway.”

“Now it’s about integrity, Magnus,” Elias replies. “Yousef is a very competitive guy—”

“Nope,” Yousef interrupts. “That would be you.”

“Okay, I’m a very competitive guy, so I would like to take all of your money.”

Mahdi narrows his eyes. “Alright, you’re on. What’s the pool?”

Elias thinks. “800 kroner.”

“That’s so fucking dramatic!” Magnus protests. “800?”

“420,” Mahdi negotiates. “Let’s just do 420.”

“Fine,” Elias rolls his eyes. “420 on Yousef.”

“Mutta,” Mahdi says, and Jonas blinks over at him.

“Et tu, Mahdi?” he asks, looking hurt.

“Sorry, Jonas,” Mahdi shrugs. “The guy’s got a smile that melts even me.”

“Aw, thanks, Mahdi,” Mutta grins.

“I’ve got you, Jonas,” Magnus joins. “Mine’s on Jonas.”

“I can’t believe I’ve seen the day where I like Magnus the most right now,” Jonas shakes his head.

“Hey, I’ll play,” Even says. “420 on Yousef.”

“See!” Elias points an accusatory finger at Even. “Bias.”

“420 on Jonas,” Isak joins in, and Elias turns the finger over towards Isak.

“Bias!”

“Can we bet on ourselves?” Yousef asks.

“Bet on someone else,” Magnus suggests.


“Jonas,” Mutta follows.

“Yousef,” Jonas finishes.

“You guys are disgustingly loyal to one another,” Elias wrinkles his nose.

“What about the girls?” Mahdi asks. “Should the girls be in on this?”

“The girls would totally keep it from us, though,” Jonas points out, but Elias ignores this very valid point.
“That’s even more fun!” Elias agrees. “Let’s get the girls in on this.”

“You just want more money, Elias,” Mutta accuses.

“Damn right I do.”

“Okay, no,” Magnus shakes his head. “Now it’s confusing, see, because if we add the girls to the competition, then I’d have to change my bet?”

Jonas looks offended. “Why?”

“I’m almost positive Vilde’s gonna get married first.”

“Why?” Mahdi follows up on Jonas’s question.

“She’s a freaking wedding planner, guys!” Magnus reminds them, waving his hands wildly.

“Assistant wedding planner,” Isak reminds him.

“Well, she’s on her way,” Magnus waves him off. “And she’s a hopeless romantic. She’d get a girl to fall for her in two seconds flat,” Magnus snaps his fingers. “We all know she would win.”

“Oh, fine,” Elias replies. “So we just let them into the betting pool.”

“Sana wouldn’t gamble, though,” Yousef points out.

“Well, let her decide, yeah?” There’s an edge to Yousef’s tone. “It’s her life, not any of yours.”

There’s an awkward pause.

“Damn, alright, chill,” Elias eyes him a little suspiciously. “She’s my sister, I think I know her a little better than you do.”

Yousef looks like he’s about to say something stupid, but thankfully, Jonas seems to pick up on this, too – so he interrupts before any of them can say anything they’ll regret in the morning. “Wait,” his voice is firm enough so that everyone looks back at him. “But what if either Isak or Even get married first?”

Isak snorts. “Oh, that’s not happening.”

“Okay, Isak, you’re right,” Magnus rolls his eyes. “But Even? He’s just as hopeless as Yousef!”

Something funny whirls in Isak’s stomach, but this goes unnoticed by everyone as Even replies, “We don’t count, we already know what happened between us.”

“Okay, shut up,” Elias demands. “I’m calling the girls.”

“Call them,” Mutta allows. “But we’re not shutting up.”

“Oh, listen—” Mahdi starts, but then Mutta interrupts once again, turning to Yousef.

“Oh, speaking of marriage, did you hear Adam got married last week?”
Yousef’s eyebrows rise. “And we weren’t invited?”

“No, because—”

“Wait, who’s Adam?” Mahdi asks, and then all of them delve into a whole other conversation Isak’s not interested in following – Elias has to stand up and move to another table to be able to speak to his sister comfortably on the phone, and suddenly everyone’s shifted their attention from Isak and Even to entirely different subjects. Isak lets himself breathe out a sigh of relief, and Even leans a little closer to him, voice quiet enough so that it only reaches Isak.

“What are the chances that we’ll feed them a bullshit story no matter what?” He mutters into Isak’s ear.

Isak smirks. “I’ve already got a couple of them in mind,” he replies, and Even’s eyebrows rise, expression impressed.

“Are they all epics?”

“Yes, but you’re the villain.”

Even looks affronted. “Excuse me? You should totally be the villain.”

“Okay, we can both be the villains.”

“Can we tell them we actually come from rivaling families and our cousins tried to marry each other and—”

“Oh, fuck you, Even,” Isak laughs quietly.

“I mean, if you’d like.”

Isak bites his lip. “Shut up.”

“Hm,” Even’s eyes scan the rest of the table – Jonas is now turned over to Mahdi, where they’re talking heatedly about something Isak can’t really hear, and Mutta, Yousef and Magnus are still talking about marriage. “Wanna feel something?”

Isak furrows his brows in confusion. “What?”

Even grabs Isak’s hand and pulls it over to his rest on his crotch – where Isak can feel the very prominent tightness of his jeans. He almost snorts.

“Oh, my God, Even,” he shakes his head in disbelief.

“You offered to take my tomatoes!”

“You realize I can’t take care of that for you,” Isak mutters, stroking him over his jeans, anyway. He feels Even shiver. “You’re gonna have to think about things that turn you off.”

Even holds his breath for a moment, and Isak decides to take pity on him and remove his hand from his crotch – Even exhales in relief, then looks contemplative. “Jeggings,” he decides, and Isak snorts.

“Jeggings?”

“They just don’t make sense, Isak,” he says, very seriously. “You’re either jeans, or you’re leggings. You can’t be both at the same time.”
“That’s not very progressive of you.”

“Well—”

“What are you guys discussing over there?” Magnus calls out, and Isak still has enough sense of mind to not break apart guiltily, lest they all figure out just exactly what was happening a second ago. Even does the same, leaning back casually, offering Magnus a lazy smile.

“The merits of jeggings,” he replies, and Magnus nods, as if he understands why they would be discussing this in a casual setting. Still, it sparks a conversation about jeggings around the table, which is pretty genius on Even’s part, to be honest, because this must really be turning him off.

Eventually, Elias comes back to the table and announces the girls would very much like to be a part of this pool, but have demanded enough time to really consider their options. Everyone admits this is probably a better idea than their impulsive decisions, but Elias refuses to let anyone take back their bet, telling them it has now been locked and no changes can be made.

The rest of their lunch isn’t very eventful – eventually, the rest of the guys just accept the fact that once in a while Isak and Even will engage in their own private conversation, usually about nothing at all, and then turn around and join another one. Maybe they were doing so on purpose, or maybe they were just happy enough to try not to ruin the situation by pointing out just how strange it is again, but whatever the reason – it’s pleasant. Isak’s still tired, and once in a while he has to take a break from talking to any of them, instead choosing to pick at his burger aimlessly, but Even’s knee is pressed lightly against his the entire time, kindly offering Isak a way to keep rooted in the moment.

When they’re finally finished, Even tells the waitress his and Isak’s check will be together – Isak tries to protest, mostly because the guys are giving them weird looks about it and he can feel his face flush, but Even doesn’t listen to him – the waitress takes his word for it (of course she does, she’s half in love with him already, Jesus) and when she takes the checks to the back, Even looks over to Isak.

“I told you I would,” he reminds him, and Isak rolls his eyes.

“I never told you you had to. I showed up in my sweatpants, that was enough.”

Even waves him off. “You’ll get over it,” he tells him, and Isak sighs loudly to convey his annoyance. Even ignores this, of course, instead slides his chair backwards and stands up. He announces to the group he’s going to take a piss, because he has no sense of boundaries (see: the fact that he literally put Isak’s hand on his dick an hour ago), and Mutta stands too and tells him he’ll come with.

“Aw, best friends can’t piss without each other,” Elias teases, and Mutta rolls his eyes.

“We’d piss with you anytime,” Even adds, and Elias rolls his eyes right back. Before they go, Even turns to Isak and tells him, “Hey, when it gets back, just give her whatever’s twenty percent for her tip, alright?”

Isak nods. “Okay.”

Even pats his shoulder in gratitude as he walks towards the bathroom, and Isak sinks further into the chair, a little put out.

Jonas seems to notice this and taps at Isak’s leg, causing him to turn and look over at him. Raising an
eyebrow, Isak asks, “What’s going on?”

“Why’d he pay for you?” Jonas asks him, and Isak shrugs.

“Some, uhm – stupid bet we had a couple of days back,” he lies, too tired to think of something better. Jonas looks at him for a moment, but Isak can’t figure out what he’s thinking – his expression is very carefully blank, almost like he’s not allowing Isak to figure out what he’s thinking, and though Isak appreciates the effort and result, considering he’s mastered the same blank expression after years of practice, it’s still obnoxious. Isak raises his eyebrows, silently asking Jonas for his input, but Jonas just shakes his head.

“Sorry,” he tells Isak. “It’s just still weird to see you guys getting along so well.”

Isak purses his lips. “It was—” Isak clears his throat. “It was kind of my fault we didn’t, so.”

This time, Jonas doesn’t seem able to hide his surprise – it’s the first time Isak’s given any indication to what happened that night, any kind of clue, and Isak feels a little uncomfortable, squirming under Jonas’s gaze. Mostly, though, he’s pretty sure Jonas is surprised Isak would ever admit fault for something, which – is unfair, because Isak is definitely capable of admitting fault for things, as long as they are his fault, and, in this situation, well – it kind of was.

It was pointless. Isak thinks they wasted a year of their lives disliking each other for the wrong reasons – or, at least, Isak had. He thinks about it at night, still, goes over every single word he remembers saying to Even, and realizes not one of those words was warranted. Even had done nothing more than stand beside him, taking Isak’s angry insults, and when he’d finally walked away – which made sense – Isak just found himself even angrier.

None of it makes sense. And sometimes, Isak wonders if he makes sense at all, or if he’s just wired to make a mess out of everything he touches.

The waitress comes back with their respective bills, and looks a tad bit disappointed at the fact that Even’s not at the table anymore – she hands the bill to Isak, barely sparing him a glance, and after she hands the rest of them over to the other guys, she thanks them for their business and makes her way to a different table.

Isak snorts quietly as she walks away, thinks about leaving only ten percent of a tip out of pure spite, but when he opens the tab he blinks at what’s written neatly in pink ink—

A phone number.

Isak narrows his eyes at it. Her name’s above the phone number, along with a smiley face, and Isak is suddenly irritated. Okay, he gets it. Even is attractive. He probably knows it more than anyone in this table, but the idea of someone being so forthright about something like this, after Even had clearly shown no interest in said person is extremely off-putting. It’s ridiculous, even.

So that’s the excuse he gives himself when he slides the guest receipt out of the tab and crumbles it inside his fist, sticking it inside the pocket of his hoodie. He grabs the pen the waitress had provided and off the top of his head figures out only fifteen percent of the bill, writes it into the tip section. He’s only a little bit sorry – it’s only five percent less of what Even had wanted to offer her, after all.

When he closes the tab again, Jonas is blinking at him a little curiously. Isak fights a blush. “What?”

Jonas glances down at his pocket, then back up at Isak, eyebrows raised. “Did that not belong to Even?”
Isak clears his throat, shrugs his shoulder as casually as he can manage. “There’s an extra one in
there,” he lies. “He can have that one, if he wants.”

Jonas looks at him for a moment longer, but then nods his head once in acceptance. He looks back at
Mahdi and Magnus, who are arguing about something having to do with music, and Isak sighs a little
in relief and leans back against his chair.

The presence of the small receipt weighs heavily in his pocket. But the burning on his knee right
where Even had rested his own the entire time is far more prominent.

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When he gets home, Eva’s still out, so he makes his way to his room and kicks off his shoes
immediately. He wants to face-plant straight onto his bed, but instead he walks over to Galileo’s
tank, taps on it thrice. As usual, Galileo is oblivious to his existence, so Isak simply proceeds to feed
him, takes his glasses off, and finally lies back down on his bed.

There’s not much going on in his head, which is rare – usually a thousand thoughts are spinning by
now, and not many of them the thoughts he wants to have, so he revels in the silence of his mind for
as long as he can. For once, he doesn’t look up at Orion’s Belt – instead, he closes his eyes and takes
as many deep breaths as he can, pretends there’s nothing curled around him ready to whisper to him
when he least expects it. His walls stand tall and unyielding around him, not a crack to be seen, so
the presence that carries with him slumbers, allowing Isak’s shoulders to relax and his breaths to find
an even rhythm.

When he was younger and had moments like these – of solitude and quiet – he used to do what his
mother had always taught him to do: pray.

Isak’s not sure if he ever believed he was praying to someone, or something. He’s not sure he ever
believed that anyone or anything was listening – but sometimes it helped, to talk things out in his
head as if he were chatting with a friend; eventually, the stars took over that job, because Isak could
at least see those were real – were he ever close enough, he’d always think, he could even pretend he
could touch them, that maybe they could whisper back all of their stories and every single thing
they’ve ever seen throughout the thousands and thousands of years of watching them.

They are much older than any religion his mother might have forced upon him, with so much history
Isak could probably have different things to say about them for all of his life, and sometimes Isak
wonders how wonderful it must be – to exist, but not exist at all, not the way some people think it
counts, and not to worry about what people see or what people do or the way someone can break
you and shape you and make you doubt everything around you. Sometimes Isak wonders if he
closes his eyes just long enough, maybe he’ll disappear, and no one would know better, and the
world will spin on, his presence nothing but a distant ghost.

He doesn’t know when he begins to drift in and out of sleep – he knows he wakes intermittently,
maybe with some footsteps from the upstairs neighbors or a loud honk out his window, but he’ll
always find himself drifting back under; eventually, Eva’s arrival to the apartment wakes him up, too,
but he can’t find the energy or the will to stand and greet her, so instead he lets his eyes shut the way
they’re begging to and turns over in his bed, finding sleep again.

Isak maybe hears her say something, but it can also be his dream, and he’ll wake up perhaps three
more times after the fact – when he opens his eyes for good, body no longer allowing him the
satisfaction, Isak turns over to look at his phone and look at the time.

It’s four in the morning, and Isak can’t remember how long he’s been asleep for.
The back of his head hits the pillow once again, and he’s finally awake enough to appreciate Orion’s Belt looking back at him – there’s a familiarity in its patterns that he likes to hold on to this late at night, and as the fog in his head is slowly lifting, probably enough to allow the intrusive thoughts he’d managed to elude all day, his phone vibrates twice, text notification pinging.

Isak blinks and turns to look at it, a little suspicious. He leans over to grab it and holds it up to his face, lowering the brightness in the process, and looks through all of his missed notifications – a lot of texts from the boys, a couple from Mutta, and some from Even – including one that’s only just come in.

Four in the morning, Isak thinks again. He knows what he’s doing awake, but what the fuck is Even doing awake?

Isak unlocks the phone and reads the messages that he’d sent while Isak was asleep:

**EVEN**
You left before I could say goodbye, asshole

**EVEN**
You didn’t even eat half of your burger

**EVEN**
Have you eaten at all???

--

**EVEN**
Are you asleep

**EVEN**
You’re probably napping aren’t you

**EVEN**
Lame

--

**EVEN**
What’s your opinion on The Fault in our Stars?? Accurate portrayal of the stars??

**EVEN**
Barring the fact that it romanticizes terminal illness

--

**EVEN**
Ok now you’re either ignoring me or you’re still asleep, and both are pretty alarming

--

**EVEN**
Eva just told me you’re asleep

**EVEN**
This is why you sleep at night, Isak

**EVEN**
I hope it’s at least satisfying

Isak huffs, notices the texts span a couple of hours, then he reads the newest one:

**EVEN**
Why do you think pigeons never forget a face?

Isak laughs quietly, sighing. He scratches aimlessly at his eyebrow, wonders if he should humor Even, or if he should try to go back to sleep. Realistically, Isak’s aware that he’s probably not going to go back to sleep tonight, body at half charge yet in low power mode – but if he humors Even, then maybe he won’t go back to sleep, and Even’s always hounding Isak about how important sleeping at night is, so why shouldn’t Isak hound him about it, too?

Eventually, the quiet thoughts threatening to make their way to the forefront in whispers decide for him – instead of texting Even back, however, he clicks on his contact and presses the call button.

There are only two rings before Even picks up. “Hi,” Even greets, sounding a little perplexed.

“I don’t know,” Isak replies to his question instead of greeting him. “But I think there are still conducting a lot of research on pigeons.”

“Hm,” Even hums. “Would you ever see yourself researching pigeons?”

“Nope,” Isak replies, amused. “But we can always conduct our own experiment. The same way those scientists did.”

“How did they do that?”

“One of them chased them away and the other one fed them,” Isak explains. “When they came back, the pigeons avoided the researcher that chased them away, even when he was wearing different clothes, and instead surrounded the researcher that fed them.”

“Outstanding,” Even replies. “But I don’t know. I wouldn’t feel good about chasing pigeons away.”

“Neither would I.”

“So we can leave that to the experts.”

Isak smiles slightly. “I agree.”

“Did you eat?” Even changes the subject abruptly.

Isak furrows his eyebrows. “Uh, no,” he admits. “I’ve been sleeping most of the day.”

Even pauses. “Did lunch with the boys tire you out that much?”

Yes, Isak thinks. Social interactions that big nowadays, while sober, tend to drain him of all his energy. Still, he doesn’t want to tell Even that – partly because he doesn’t want Even to believe it’s his fault Isak slept through the entire day, and partly because Isak feels like that would say too much about his condition altogether, whatever that might be.

“Nah,” he replies instead. “I think my body’s just catching up on all the sleep I missed throughout the week.”
Even is quiet for a moment. Isak doesn’t want to hear what he has to say to that, so instead he changes the subject this time.

“What are you doing up?” he asks.

Even hums. “Couldn’t sleep.”

Isak’s smile is crooked. “Welcome to the club.”

“Shut up,” Even grunts from the other end. There’s some shuffling. “You ever think you can’t sleep because of your mattress?”

Isak frowns. “Uh, no?”

“Because I seriously think that could be the problem.”

“My mattress is just fine, Even.”

“Listen, as someone as has been on his back on it several times—”

“Not for long.”

“Long enough,” Even dismisses him. “It is not just fine. How long have you had it?”

Isak thinks. The mattress was left by the guy who’d lived in the apartment he’d moved into when he was sixteen, who’d had it for two years, as far as Isak knows. The mattress made the move with him here, so—

“Seven years?” he asks. “At least.”

“You have to change your mattress every ten years, anyway,” Even points out. “And seven years ‘at least’ is already cutting it way too close.”

“I—” Isak grunts in frustration. “I don’t have the money for a new mattress, Even, stop.”

“Sure you do,” Even counters. “Didn’t you tell me your dad sends you guilt money you’ve just been accumulating?”

“I’m not using it,” Isak deadpans.

“Why not?” Even asks. “Listen, if he did you so wrong, then fuck him, right? Take his money. Spend it on things he probably wouldn’t approve of. That’s not to say he wouldn’t approve of a mattress — or, you know, maybe he wouldn’t, what do I know — but take his money for what it’s worth and then, if you don’t want to, don’t forgive him,” Even suggests. “So you took his money, and he still didn’t get forgiveness from you.”

Isak thinks about this. It’s not a farfetched notion — at least, he can see where Even’s coming from with this, where the small act of taking his dad’s money and never acknowledging him outside of it might be a big ‘fuck you’, but it’s still something he has to take a pause on. He wonders if that would compromise his integrity. He wonders if he has integrity at all.

He thinks about his mom, and all the wrong his father did to her, and all the wrong he made Isak do to her, and he makes his decision.

“Okay,” he agrees. “I’ll dig into it.” There’s a quiet whoop from the other end of the line. “But I would just like to reiterate the fact that this is really unnecessary and stupid.”
“My back will thank you,” Even tells him. “And so will yours, eventually.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I’ll have to find the time, though.”

“Nonsense,” Even snorts. “I’ll come with you.”

“You do not have to come with me looking for a mattress, Even.”

“On the contrary, Isak,” Even’s voice is very serious. “It’s important that I come with you to make this very important decision. Do you think choosing a mattress is simple? No, no, I’ll have to come with you,” he decides for Isak. “Besides, I’ll also be very acquainted with your mattress, so it’s only logical.”

Isak snorts a laugh. “You’re so fucking dramatic,” he tells him, but the smile on his face betrays his faux irritation. “But, fine. Whatever. You can come with.”

“Perfect,” Isak can hear Even’s smile through the phone. “How about Sunday? Are you free Sunday?”

Isak searches his mental calendar. No work, he doesn’t think. “Yeah,” he replies. “Sunday’s good.”

“Sunday it is,” Even says. “I’ll ask Yousef for his truck, we can make a day out of it.”

“Ugh,” Isak rolls his eyes. “Who knew being friends with you would be this much of a pain in my ass?”

There’s a pause. “Okay, do you already know what I’m gonna say or should I just—”

“Yes, I know, I walked right into that one,” Isak deadpans. “Doesn’t make the sentiment any less true, though.”

“Nah, you like being my friend,” Even says. “I’m a mystery, remember?”

“A nuisance,” Isak corrects. Even laughs quietly on the other line, and then they fall into a comfortable silence, the only sound on both ends of the line their quiet breathing. After a while – could be a minute or two or more – Isak clears his throat quietly, the memory of the conversation long before Isak had apologized to Even bringing long-thought questions with it.

“Hey,” Isak’s tone is a little wary.

“Hey back,” Even sounds like he’s smiling, but still like he understands Isak is going somewhere with this.

“Would you have—” he clears his throat. “This. Would it have progressed as much as it has if I hadn’t – if I didn’t know—”

“Probably not,” Even admits, and the thought of it makes Isak feel a little sad. To know he’d continue to miss out on this – on the person Even really is, which is so many things and comes with so many layers and so many complexities Isak doesn’t even know where to start picking them all apart. “I’m almost sure it’d be over by now.”

Isak agrees. “Yeah,” he replies quietly. He doesn’t think he would have gotten past his anger – the anger so misplaced, of course, anger at himself and not at Even, but he wouldn’t have known that, had the subject not come up at all, had he never lingered that day, had he stayed quiet about his stress and his fears—
The theory of probability, he reminds himself. He was very aware that the outcomes are all determined by pure chance, months ago. It could have gone many different ways, and, if Isak is being one hundred percent honest with himself, he’s glad this is the outcome that came about. If only because Even’s the kind of person Isak enjoys having in his life – funny, and honest, and perhaps the complete opposite of the person Isak is, but maybe the person he’s secretly always wanted to be. He understands now, what his friends meant when they insisted Even was nothing but a part in the sky on a cloudy day – Isak can’t think of a single day in the past month that he hasn’t smiled because of Even.

And it’s rare. He thinks that maybe only Jonas and Eva have ever managed to achieve such a feat, people he’s loved and known for years and years. And Even’s been a part of his life officially for a little over two months, a friend really for maybe three weeks out of those, and Isak can finally see why their friends thought they ought to meet; they fit, he thinks. Their friendship comes easily, despite their glaring differences, and the thought that he could have missed out on this, something as easy and enjoyable as Even’s friendship—

As always, he often wonders what would have happened had they met under different circumstances, in a different time. Isak sometimes thinks about how maybe his life might have been different had he met someone like Even in high school, before life proved Isak right by reminding him that any kind of hope for something led to nothing but disappointment and that faith in something is useless if you can’t see it. Even’s filled with so much misplaced hope and naivety, and perhaps Isak could have used someone like him back then. But maybe not, Isak thinks. He counters himself with the fact that the person he is now has saved him from a lot of heartbreak and negative emotions, so maybe being shaped by someone like Even in high school would have led only to him being far more susceptible to every emotion he avoids.

And that’s a good thing, Isak reminds himself firmly.

But having a friend like Even is a lot like having a friend like Eva – worrying about how their point of view might shape their future and being constantly afraid that someone would do them wrong. But, much like his friendship with Eva, Isak can hardly do anything but cautiously warn Even of the dangers he makes himself far more vulnerable to with his way of thinking, and watch Even smile at him and humor him, suggesting that maybe Isak could benefit from a different point of view.

The difference between Eva and Even, however, is how much they know – Eva might understand some of the things that have made Isak who he is, maybe even respects them slightly, as she’s been through similar things herself, but Even knows only of the personality Isak puts forward – which, if Isak’s being honest, is maybe the reason he clings so much to this friendship. Even is an Eva he can fool. Even doesn’t have to know just how damaged he really is, and Even never has to know of all his faults, all his misgivings, all his mistakes.

Even is a lot like a controlled variable, one in which Isak can pretend he is the person Even sees.

“But you know there’s no use in wasting time thinking about that, right?” Even breaks through his stupor, and Isak blinks at his ceiling.

“No?”

“No,” Even laughs. “Hey, you said so yourself. You need all the time you can get.”

Isak struggles to remember when he said those words, but then the memory comes forward. “But that was about a Dorito.”

“Yes, but even if I don’t agree with it, I’m going to go ahead and use it to my advantage now.”
“You don’t think you need all the time you can get?”

“Definitely not in the context you’re probably thinking,” Even tells him. “But it’s four in the morning, so I don’t think we need to get into that, either.”

“Fair enough,” Isak concedes.

“But man,” Even sounds amused. “Did we really go hard that first night, huh?”

Isak groans in embarrassment, turns over in his bed. “Stop.”

“Honestly, we just went straight for it.”

“I hadn’t fucked anyone in years.”

“To be honest,” Even begins. “I was too drunk to really think about what we were doing. Like, I think a part of me even thought I was maybe dreaming it, so I went all in.”

Isak laughs. “Literally.”

“And then that second time—”

“Ugh, Even.”

“I mean, was there any chill? Ever? At all?”

Isak licks his lips and rolls onto his back once again, still smiling. “I think we might have left it behind when we aggressively made out in the kitchen.”

“Alcohol,” Even sighs. “Never say it doesn’t do you any favors.”

“Uhm, no,” Isak scoffs. “It makes you fuck the first time around? Definitely a substance to stay away from in the presence of attractive individuals.”

“A valid point,” Even concedes. “But then without it we wouldn’t really be here, now, would we?”

Isak smiles crookedly. “Right.”

“Plus, a good lesson learned,” Even hums. “For our future hook-ups, that is.”

“No alcohol before we hook up with someone?”

“No alcohol before we hook up with someone.”

Isak laughs quietly. “Bad for your liver, anyway.”

“That’s true, too!”

There’s some more shuffling in the background, and Isak is silent while he assumes Even finds himself a more comfortable position on the bed. Once the shuffling is over, there’s still a silence between them, and for a moment, Isak thinks this is maybe where they’ll hang up.

Instead, Even’s voice is quiet when he speaks up again. “Do you know, when I was younger and I couldn’t sleep, I would wake up my mom and she would take me back to my room and tell me a story.”

Isak’s eyes close. “Oh?”
“Yep,” Even’s voice is now a mutter, but Isak hears it clear as day through the phone. “I still remember my favorite one.”

Isak pauses, weighing his options. Finally, he inquires, “Which one was that?”

“My mom’s an artist, too,” he tells Isak. Isak sinks a little further into his mattress. “So she just loved to take inspiration from a lot of feminist artists, right? She was obsessed with researching as many as she could. So, you know – you know, my grandma was bipolar,” he tells Isak.

Isak’s eyes open. “Really?”

“Yeah, so my mom – for a long time my grandmother felt like she couldn’t – I don’t know, my mom said she thought my grandmother couldn’t really accept the fact that she could do so much to change the world because of her bipolar. And she was a genius, she – actually, she reminds me a lot of you. She wanted to join the effort for cancer research, that was her lifelong dream, one she only confided to my grandfather, but before he passed, he told my mom. He never managed to convince her there was still time, so he asked my mom to keep fighting for him.

“So, my grandma, with all these insecurities that came with her bipolar, she stuck to – you know, jobs she didn’t really like, enough of them to keep all of them fed, and whatnot, so one day, my mom learned about Leonora Carrington.”

“And that is…?”

He hears Even’s smile. “She’s a surrealist painter,” he admits, and Isak snorts a little bit. “But, wait – she was – if you thought Frida Kahlo was a feminist, oh, boy, you can’t even imagine how much of one Leonora was. And her outlook on life was phenomenal, especially considering she lived in the times that she lived, and she painted women’s sexuality the way she perceived it, not the way men wanted to perceive it, and she was unapologetic for her work. She refused to explain her work to anyone, she said, fuck you, it’s all subjective, and it can mean anything to anyone.”

“Oh, I’d hate her.”

“Oh, I know,” Even laughs. “Hear me out, though – so she was born in Britain, and she fell in love with this guy, who suddenly had to leave her to flee the Nazis.”

“Fuck the Nazis.”

“Fuck them right in the ass,” Even agrees. “But people say this drove her mad. Like – to the point where her parents shoved her into an asylum, where she later claimed they abused her and other patients in there. No one knows if that’s true, mind you, ‘cause like, there’s also the ambiguity of whether or not she was actually mentally ill, but no one can dispute the fact that time in an asylum must have some bearing on a person’s mental health.”

Isak purses his lips. He wouldn’t know. He’s never really been to one. Stayed far away from them, in fact, if he could help it.

“But she ran away. And far away, let me tell you, she ran all the way to Mexico. And news reached her that the fucking love of her life had married the woman who’d helped him escape the Nazis. And you know what she did?”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Even replies. “She got over it pretty quickly, and instead wrote an entire book about her experiences in the mental asylum, which people still tell us to take with a grain of salt, but a lot of
people are positive she went through every single fucking horrible thing. And she came out on top.

“She came out on top, despite being fucking scarred mentally for life, despite being abandoned, despite being betrayed, despite being depressed for most of her life afterwards. And she went on to become one of Mexico’s most regarded national treasures. She drew for the Women’s Liberation movement there. She won a Lifetime Achievement Award at the Women’s Caucus for Art. She died in Mexico City, and people mourned her death, even though she was ninety-four years old and far past her prime.”

Isak’s smile is small. “So your mom told your grandmother she could still come out on top, huh?”

“She told her that it didn’t matter if she felt like she couldn’t change the world,” Even replies. “The fact of the matter is that she could.”

Isak thinks about how much this story must mean to Even – maybe not only from the mentally ill perspective, but to feel connected to his family that way, to his mother, to his grandmother, to know that that story has affected all of them – three whole generations – that must feel like something you can’t lose. Isak is envious, he realizes. He has nothing like that in his family. Nothing to pass down, no stories to tell, to share, no memories to hold on to that remind him that he can change the world, even if he doesn’t think he can.

And so Isak’s lived his life the way he’s always feared he would, and what’s worse – he’s become comfortable with it, grateful for it, even.

“It’s reminded me that I can, too, ever since I was diagnosed,” Even admits quietly. “And I know you think it’s stupid, to hold on to a simple story as hope, but there are very little things in life that keep me going. That remind me there is – more to life than – you know, the – the blur of my manic episodes, or the – the fog of my depressive episodes. It’s – I feel like – I don’t know,” Even sighs. “I don’t know.”

Isak remains silent for only a moment. “I don’t think it’s stupid,” he admits quietly.

“No?”

“No, I mean—” Isak clears his throat. “Hope is – my issue with hoping for something or blindly trusting in something isn’t based on fact. You hold on to hope because of something that is historically accurate. There’s no – there’s no risk of disappointment, or of finding out later that you – you put your trust into the wrong story, or whatever. So I don’t think it’s stupid that you look to fact to remind yourself that things might be okay for you. I mean, I do the same,” he reminds Even. “With Clyde Tombaugh, and Isaac Newton. Take their story and say, yeah, okay, I can be like them if I try hard enough.”

There’s a pause. “So if I looked to a person that’s close to me for hope that I might not end up in rock bottom, you’d think—”

“People are – they’re unpredictable, Even,” he argues. “People leave you, and they hurt you, and just as they have the power to bring you up, they have the same amount of power to break you down.”

“So that’s where your lack of faith comes from, huh?”

That, among many other things. Many other things that are not Even’s to know. “Sure.”

“You know my whole thing is being unpredictable, right?” Even points out, sounding a little amused.
Isak laughs once. “Yeah, but you won’t break me.”

“Oh? And how are you so sure of that?”

Isak counts the stars again. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka. “I don’t give people the power to, Even,” he tells him firmly. “That includes you, too.”

Even is silent for half a minute, at most. Then: “You think that works the other way around?”

Isak thinks on this. “Probably.” He doesn’t think he’ll end up hurting Even, at least, not purposely, because of the reasons stated before – he’s enough of Isak’s friend so that Isak is adamant on protecting him from any kind of harm, and Isak is positive he will not be that harm.

Even laughs. “Good to know,” he says. “Thanks for not breaking me, Isak Valtersen.”

“You’re welcome,” Isak replies.

From then on, Isak doesn’t really remember what they talk about – pointless things, maybe, Even tells him about film school, Isak talks about his classes, maybe things they’ve talked about before, maybe things they haven’t talked about at all. The conversation is aimless, mostly meant to fill the hours they can’t sleep.

At around six in the morning, Even stops replying – Isak calls his name out maybe three times, before he realizes the line hasn’t gone dead, and there are still even breaths sounding from the other line. Isak laughs quietly, amused. Even must have fallen asleep somewhere in between a lull in the conversation, which is great, because he probably needs it. He looks over at his shut blinds and closed curtains, and even with the forced makeshift darkness, Isak can spot a little bit of orange sunlight peeking through the edge of the window. He feels tired, but not enough to fall asleep like Even – he allows himself a couple of more minutes of listening to Even breathe on the other line, then finally exhales swiftly.

“Good night, Even,” he says quietly, if a little amused, before hanging up the phone.

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Isak spends the next couple of hours surfing through annoying infomercials and morning shows on the TV that offer him no satisfaction whatsoever, drowning out whatever noise his mind is trying to make, until it’s light enough outside for the sun to shine through his blinds and curtains even though they’re shut tightly. Turning over to grab the phone he’d set back on his end table, Isak presses the lock key to look at the time – it’s near eleven o’clock, which Isak thinks is an appropriate time to get up. He sets the phone down and with one prolonged stretch of his limbs, he finally manages to get out of bed.

It takes a moment for him to find his balance, head a little dizzy from spending so much time lying down, but when he finally does, he walks up to an awoken Galileo, swimming aimlessly in his tank. Isak taps at the glass once again, bidding the fish good morning, before making his way out of his room.

Isak hears soft music coming from the kitchen, which means Eva’s probably awake by now, but he hesitates to follow the sound just yet – if Eva did come home last night to find him asleep and then realize he wasn’t going to be waking up anytime soon, he’s going to receive an earful of worry, which is unnecessary, as he’s told her very often, so he decides to postpone that for a later hour by making his way into the bathroom and showering instead.

It takes him about half an hour to actually be productive enough in the shower to find himself clean,
and once he’s out and dressed, Eva’s sitting in the kitchen table, eyebrows raised.

“Hello,” she greets, and Isak waves a little uselessly.

“Hi,” he greets back.

Eva gestures to the stack of pancakes in front of her. “If you want some, they’re still hot,” she says, and Isak looks at them for a moment before nodding, slightly suspicious. Eva’s already set a plate and a glass of milk in front of Isak’s usual seat, which definitely means she’s been waiting for Isak to leave his bedroom after showering, so he’s still a little wary as he sits and begins to serve himself some pancakes. It’s quiet for a moment, Eva pointedly stabbing at her pancakes, and Isak is just waiting for the moment she—

“So what did you do all day yesterday?”

Isak sighs. “Eva.”

“No, I mean, it’s your life,” Eva holds up an accepting hand. “I was just curious.”

“You worry too much,” Isak sighs. “Seriously. I was just catching up on the sleep I missed all week.”

“Jonas said you showed up to lunch with them,” Eva replies. “So that’s good.”

“Yes,” Isak takes a bite out of his pancake. “Sure did.”

“And,” Eva clears her throat. “Even called me. To – ask about you.”

Isak very carefully does not allow his back to stiffen. He avoids Eva’s gaze, merely picks some more of his pancakes. “Yeah, he probably thought I was ignoring him.”

There’s a silence.

“So – you weren’t?”

Isak looks at her. “Not on purpose,” he tells her. “I was asleep, you saw.”

“But – you wouldn’t have?”

Isak shrugs. “No.”

Eva finally seems to crumble, expression turning into one of complete bewilderment. She sets her fork down and leans back against the chair. “Okay,” she shakes her head. “No, no. No. Nope. No – no.”

“No?”

“No!” Eva gapes at him. “Since when does Even call to make sure you’re okay? Since when do you just – not ignore him? Since when do you guys actually sit in the same room together, beside one another, and converse like – like nothing ever happened between you?”

Oh, so Jonas has told her way more than Isak thought. Well – this is a little hindering. He really didn’t want Eva to find out secondhand; he’s aware she deserved a firsthand explanation, or, if not that, then at least a heads-up, but now it’s all out of his hands completely, and he knows Jonas didn’t mean it that way, but maybe he could have let Isak take the reins on this one.
Although, in Jonas’s mind, he was probably sure Eva already knew – she’s usually the first to know about things like these, partly because Eva’s like his sister, and partly because they live with each other, since it’s kind of hard to escape the fact. Isak licks his lips and sighs, leaning back on the chair and momentarily abandoning his pancakes, which he’s sure now are guilt-trip pancakes.

“Eva, I’m—” he squirms a bit in his seat. “It didn’t have anything to do with you, okay? We just – we didn’t know if the friendship was real or – or a product of the weed, you know?”

Eva narrows her eyes. “You smoked together?”

“Now is not the time to bring up your vendetta against marijuana.”

“Fine,” Eva crosses her arms over her chest. “Continue.”

“I – don’t know what else to say,” Isak admits. “He’s cool. So now we’re cool. We’ve been talking a lot, about the day we met, about why we were so angry, apologies were made. Mostly—” he clears his throat. “Mostly on my part.”

“I’m not surprised,” Eva tells him, and Isak narrows his eyes.

“Thanks.”

Eva sighs. “And now that stupid bet you started with the guys—”

“Hey, that was all Elias.”

Eva looks at him. “I—” she pauses. “Don’t think I’m not happy about this, because I am,” she assures him. “I always thought the two of you would get along.” Probably because Even is so much like her, but he doesn’t point this out. “I’m just – kind of hurt, you know,” she admits, and Isak feels his stomach drop a bit. “I mean, I told you about Noora straight away, even when you’ve been judging me the entire time—”

“I stand by that,” Isak warns, raising an eyebrow, but Eva ignores him.

“So I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t tell me this was a thing that was – or at least that you thought could be developing,” Eva looks at him. “I would have liked – I mean, I don’t know,” she sighs. “I guess I don’t know what I would have liked.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek, trying to find the right words to fix this. He can’t come out and say that the only reason he hadn’t told her – or anyone, for that matter – was because they’re sleeping together, and that that’s probably also the reason they talked their shit out, because that’s far too dangerous. Isak understands that Eva would think it’s unfair that Isak is judging her about her infatuation with Noora – which, again, he still stands by – when he, too, was playing with fire. Though he’s not sure how she’d be able to jump to that conclusion, when she knows how carefully guarded he’s been for most of his life.

Still, he’s a little worried about this now – Eva’s been suspecting Isak’s been sleeping with someone, so the fact that she hasn’t made the connection by now is impressive. Isak maybe thinks that she’s chalked all of his secrecy up to his friendship with Even – either that or she’s hurt enough so that she’s not really looking to put two and two together. So that’s mostly Isak’s goal here – to throw her off the scent.

Isak reaches over to hold her hand. Eva looks up at him.

“I’m sorry,” he says firmly. “It was a stupid secret. It shouldn’t have been a secret at all, it was
literally nothing. Friendship is a stupid thing to keep a secret. And that was it. I promise. You haven’t missed out on anything important, and from now on, you’ll be the first to know if there is something important.”

Eva smiles at him. “You’re an idiot.”

“I know this.”

She rolls her eyes and takes her hand back. “Fine, finish your pancakes,” she replies. “I didn’t make them so they can get cold.”

When he gets to work, he spots Chris at the front desk, scrolling aimlessly through the computer. He almost rolls his eyes at the sight – if he’s not productive on the floor, Lord knows he won’t be productive out here – but the good news is Isak is here to take over his shift and he will not have to work with him.

As if he’s read Isak’s thoughts, Chris glances upwards and sneers at him, which Isak counters with a dirty look as he makes his way up to him.

“Hi, there,” Chris greets, leaning forward on the desk. “You’re looking particularly good today.”

Isak blinks at him. “I didn’t sleep at all last night.”

Chris extends his arms, leans back on the chair. “How do you do it,” he shakes his head in what Isak assumes is meant to be disbelief, but mostly just comes across as predatory. “You didn’t sleep at all and yet you still look like I could take you to the back and—”

“Get out of here, Chris,” Eskild is suddenly walking up to them, narrowing his eyes at the man in question. Isak almost sighs in relief – had he not shown up, Isak doesn’t know if he would have been able to resist punching Chris this time around. “And stop flirting with everything that walks on two legs, for God’s sake, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

Chris raises an eyebrow. “I don’t see how flirting is a bad thing,” he says, and it sounds like he really believes it, so it’s a little hard to fault the guy. “It’s not like I’d actually do it. Isak is spoken for, isn’t that right, Isak?”

Isak glances at Eskild, who looks back at him amused, before he looks back at Chris and rolls his eyes. “Yeah,” he replies. “Happy as a clam, sex on the regular, holding hands on the beach, dinner under the stars, uhm—” What else do couples do?

“Didn’t you tell me Even took you to a theme park the other day?” Eskild helps him along, and Isak snaps his fingers, as if he’d only just remembered the fact.

“Yes, that’s right, date at Tusenfryd, all the good things,” he looks back at Chris. “Super spoken for.”

Chris smirks. “See?” he looks back at Eskild. “I would never come between Isak and his man. Doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate what he looks like.”

“It does if you’re at the workplace,” Eskild snaps. “Now, get out. You shouldn’t be hanging around here when you don’t need to be anymore. Or flirting with someone who is in a happy, loving, healthy relationship, like Isak is with Even. They’re so in love it’s magical. You should have seen them the other day, the way they look at each other, it’s like they’re staring directly into the sun, like
they’ve found themselves on the moon, and, oh, the way Even looked at him, how do I describe it? It was as if he’d seen the stars for the first time, and—”

“Okay, Eskild,” Isak interrupts pointedly. “I think he got it. We’re super in love. Yipee.” He pauses. “And I think that maybe staring directly into the sun is probably not a good simile, considering the damage it does to your retina can leave you partially blind—”

“Oh, you know what I meant, little one.”

“No, I’m saying – even if that wasn’t the case, if I was looking directly into the sun I’d be squinting, so are you saying when we look at each other we squint or—”

“Okay, I’m leaving,” Chris holds up his hands in defeat, standing from the chair. “I check out immediately after ‘loving, healthy relationship’, no matter who it’s about. Every time.”

Both Eskild and Isak look over at Chris – Eskild a little triumphantly, Isak a little annoyed. The sun thing is going to be bothering him for the rest of his shift, don’t think it’s not. He can’t even feel as triumphant as Eskild about driving Chris away, because that’s just not a comparison you make when someone’s looking at someone they love, it’s not. Isak doesn’t think Jonas ever looked at Eva as if he was squinting back in high school, like, Isak would describe it more as if he were look at – at the ocean, with the way he smiled every time she talked, and—

“Isak,” Eskild is snapping his fingers in front of his face, and he blinks before meeting his manager’s face. “He’s gone. And as much as I appreciate your cute daydream face, I really would love it if you’d sit down and did your job?”

Isak shakes himself out of it. “No, yeah,” he nods. “Sorry, Eskild.”

Eskild’s smile is amused as Isak makes his way around the desk and he gets rid of his coat – working the front desk means he can shove his things under it instead of stuffing it in the lockers in the break room, which works well for him, because having to struggle with the lockers again just reminds him of his struggles back home with the door knob, and those are memories he’d like to avoid in the workplace.

He looks up at Eskild and raises an eyebrow. “All good?”

Eskild looks like he’s about to say something that might not be affirmation, but then his on-call phone goes off and he sighs loudly. “Let’s see who’s calling in sick today,” he says dramatically, and he waves at Isak before answering the phone with flourish, walking towards his office. Isak huffs a small laugh, shaking his head, before turning to the computer and clocking himself in.

It’s relatively quiet for about ten minutes, some people coming in, some out, and all Isak really has to do is make sure no one’s ID brings up any red flags, greet people, thank people, give people directions – and, yes, this all happens in the span of ten minutes, because it’s Saturday, and it’s busy, so when Julian walks over to the front desk, Isak’s a little too swamped to notice until he greets him.

“Hey, Isak.”

Isak looks up from the computer screen that had just allowed a woman and her kids entrance, and he offers Julian a tired smile. “Hey, Julian,” he greets right back. “Working the floor today?”

Julian clears his throat. “Yep,” he replies, leaning against the desk. “You know, ready to take on the – the pissing kids,” he clears his throat again.

Isak laughs once. “Yeah, gonna be fun for you,” he says, checking in another guest. “You’re a
trooper, Julian Dahl.”

“Thanks,” Julian’s smile is strangely large, so Isak blinks at it a little bit in confusion – have his teeth always been that white? “So, Isak,” he clears his throat again, and Isak furrows his brows, suddenly wondering if maybe he’s recovering from a cough. “I was – I was thinking – you know how – tomorrow is Sunday.”

Isak waits for him to say something else, but he’s not budging, so his eyebrows rise. “If I know my days of the week correctly, then yes, I’m aware that tomorrow is Sunday.”

Julian nods. “Yep, that’s – of course you would know,” he clears his throat again, and now Isak’s a little worried there might be something stuck in there. “So – I, uhm, I saw on the roster that you have tomorrow off.”

Isak sighs loudly. “Yeah,” he confirms. “Thought I was gonna be able to spend it in bed, but I’m being forced out into the real world.”

Julian pauses. “Oh?” His voice sounds strained.

“Yeah, my friend—” Isak pauses for a moment, letting the temporary strangeness of using the word in the context of Even sink in. Then he carries on, “My friend is taking me mattress shopping.”

Julian frowns. “There’s something wrong with your mattress?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Apparently,” he shrugs, throwing his hands up while he’s at it. “He’s – his personality is very domineering,” he admits. “I get caught up in it more often than not.”

“Yeah, no, makes sense,” Julian nods quickly. “So – is that going to be an all-day thing, or?”

Isak shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he admits. “Maybe, maybe not. It’s up in the air with him.” He frowns. “Why, did you need something tomorrow?”

Julian looks like he’s holding his breath, which is – alarming, to say the least. After about half a minute of him not responding, Isak stands up halfway from his chair, ready to help him out if he needs some assistance breathing. “Julian?” he asks slowly. “Are you alright?”

“Hmm?” Julian blinks, then finally lets out a breath. Isak sits back down, a little relieved. “Yeah, yeah, I just – so I was wondering—”

In that moment, Julian leans a little more against the desk, probably to be able to talk to Isak a little more comfortably, he doesn’t know, but it doesn’t really work out for him – he slips a little bit, catches his balance just in time before he falls, hands gripping the sharp edge of the upper counter. Isak blinks a little in surprise.

“Dude,” Isak says. “Are you alright?”

Julian’s face is now a crimson red, probably embarrassed by the whole ordeal, and he pushes himself off the counter and mutters something unintelligible before making his way past Isak and towards the break room. Isak turns over in his chair to follow his path, staring at nothing but his back, completely perplexed by the entire situation as Julian disappears, closing the door behind him.

Isak blinks at the spot for a moment longer before turning back around, trying to understand what exactly just happened. Before he can really come up with an answer, Eskild is walking back up to the front desk, looking forlornly over to where Julian disappeared.
“Oh, man,” he shakes his head sadly. “That poor, poor boy.”

Isak looks at him. “I mean, he didn’t fall,” he points out. “But he still looked pretty embarrassed.”

Eskild looks at him for a moment before sighing. “You are right, little one,” he waves it off, before leaning over the counter and trying to catch a glimpse of what’s in front of Isak. “How’s your little arrangement going?”

Isak closes his eyes and sighs. He shouldn’t have said a thing. It was a moment of weakness, one he regrets intensely, so he decides to humor Eskild as quickly as possible so he drops the subject at the exact same speed. “Fine,” he says. “It’s sex, it’s fine, no new developments.”

Eskild raises an eyebrow. “Nothing – new?” he pushes. “Are you sure? Is the ice in your heart perhaps melting…?”

Isak glares at him. “There is no ice in my heart, Eskild,” he deadpans. “But if there were, it would not be melting. It’s an arrangement. A business arrangement,” he suddenly compares. “There are rules and everything.”

Though – now that Isak thinks about it, not – well, not all of them are being followed, are they? He tries to think back to the first one they broke, but it’s been long enough for Isak to forget, so – but, does it really matter? They are friends now, so breaking a few of the rules was bound to happen. Things are different when you’re actually friends. Maybe he should try to write a revision of the rules, ones that adapt to their current situation, so that there isn’t – so that nothing gets messy, as it were. Isak thinks that’s a wonderful idea. He files it away for later, just in case he decides to go through with it.

“There always are,” Eskild nods seriously. “I believe if anyone can come out of an arrangement like this unaffected, it’s you, little one.”

Isak smiles, a little proud. “Thanks.”

Eskild stares at him. “Oh,” he waves him off. “God, that was not a compliment.”

Isak blinks as Eskild walks back towards his office, and he’s left perplexed once again by another work colleague, and a little bit offended this time.

His phone flares up, and Isak looks down at it, smiling slightly at the sight of Even’s contact. He slides the text notification, taking him to their conversation.

**EVEN**
I fell asleep on you didn’t I :(

**EVEN**
Did you fall asleep too??

**ISAK**
Nope

**ISAK**
But that’s alright, I slept enough yesterday

**EVEN**
Ugh, sorry
EVEN
Where did we leave off last night?

Isak thinks.

ISAK
Pretty woman

ISAK
Told you I was gonna watch it today

EVEN
Yessssssssss

EVEN
Rn?

ISAK
No, I’m at work rn

ISAK
But when I get home

EVEN
Promise?

ISAK
Yeah, yeah

He rolls his eyes as he locks his phone and leans back on his chair. His tiredness is catching up to him right now, but he’s distracted enough by all the people walking in and out to forget about it, and keep himself as awake as possible. And in the midst of all of that, he texts Even, who teases him about not doing his job right, but doesn’t necessarily do much to encourage him to put his phone down.

So he doesn’t.

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When he gets home, he has half a mind to have a stern talk with the door knob, who fought him today once again – they were doing better, he thought, but apparently the door knob is a tease, who enjoys getting Isak’s hopes up and then crushing them and throwing them a funeral.

But he doesn’t, because he’s too tired to, so instead he just closes the door behind him after his back hits the wall and removes his shoes, left and right, before calling out to Eva.

Silence. The lights are all off, but Isak took that to mean that maybe Eva’s in her room – when he turns on the lights and walks over to Eva’s room, he knocks on the door quietly, calling out her name again to no avail. It seems Eva’s out for the night, which makes sense, considering it’s Saturday and Isak’s a loser who has to work, so he removes his vest and walks back to the living room, throwing it on the couch. He makes his way towards the kitchen and grabs a beer from the fridge, effectively opening it up and leaving the silent kitchen, only to walk back towards the silent living room.

Isak practically throws himself onto the couch ass first, letting himself dive into it. Even’s probably
wrong about his mattress – maybe he’d be better off getting them a new couch, considering how far the couch sinks now compared to when they first got it a couple of years back, but he’ll have to bring that one up to Eva; she’s picky about these things, has never let one thing in their apartment not match the other thing, so if anyone would go shopping for it, it’d be her.

Reaching for the remote, Isak turns on the TV and connects to the Apple TV – finding his way to iTunes, he hesitates only a moment when he finds Pretty Woman on sale for only 25 kroner, but after a moment he presses down on the buy button and throws the remote to the side of him, raising his feet to rest on the coffee table.

The opening credits start, and Isak struggles for his phone inside his jean pocket; when he sets his beer down on the coffee table is when he finally manages to recover it, and he opens up his camera app and snaps a picture of the screen, hoping they’re familiar enough to Even so he understands what Isak’s doing when he sends him the image.

In less than a minute, he receives a reply:

    EVEN
    ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤ ❤

    EVEN
    Tell me who you fall in love with first

    EVEN
    When I was younger I couldn’t decide between Julia Roberts and Richard Gere

    ISAK
    I’m gonna take a wild guess and say it’s gonna be the latter for me

    EVEN
    Don’t discount the power of Julia Roberts in this movie Isak

    EVEN
    Your platonic love for her might just overshadow any romantic interest for Richard Gere

    ISAK
    I’ll let you know

    EVEN
    Please do

Isak puts the phone down for the first fifteen minutes of the movie – and that’s all he gets though, fifteen minutes, before Eva comes bursting into the apartment loudly, the rest of the girls in tow. Isak blinks back at them as they turn on the lights, babbling about indecipherable things, and Isak’s gaze narrows in on Noora, who suddenly looks comfortably a part of their group – or, at least, Chris has seemingly taken a like to her, while Vilde and Sana keep eyeing her a little suspiciously, the way Isak’s sure he’s done before.

Eva finally seems to notice Isak is sitting on the couch watching TV, and she blinks back at him before grinning. “Hi!” she greets him happily – probably drunk, Isak can’t be too sure, she usually acts this giggly around Noora nowadays. “I thought you were working late?”

Isak shakes his head. “Closed earlier today,” he explains, then tilts his head in acknowledgment towards the rest of the girls. “Girls.”
“Isak.” They all reply in unison, and it’s amusing enough for even Isak to crack a smile at the fact.

“Ooh,” Eva walks towards the living room, narrowing her eyes at the television. “What are we watching?”

Isak licks his lips and turns back to the screen, hoping none of the girls catch the flush overrunning his face. “Uhm, Pretty Woman.”

Vilde squeals, and the sound’s a little damaging to Isak’s eardrums, he’s sure, but she’s the first to run over to the living room and sit on the loveseat parallel to the couch. “Oh, oh, I love this movie,” Vilde admits, sighing dreamily. “Is this your first time watching it?”

Isak stares at her for a moment before coughing awkwardly into his fist. “Uh, yeah,” he nods. “Even – he’s making me watch it,” he explains weakly. Vilde furrows her brows at him in confusion. “Because – because I’m making him watch something else, not because – because I always watch things he recommends.”

“Whatever the case,” Chris’s voice gets closer to Isak, and she sits right next to Vilde on the loveseat. “We’re gonna watch with you.”

Isak’s eyebrows rise. “Oh?”

“It’s like a law,” Vilde adds. “Pretty Woman can’t just be playing in the same house we’re in without us watching it.”

“That’s just a crime,” Chris nods along. “Which usually happens when you break the law.”

“I actually enjoy this movie,” Noora chimes in from behind Isak, and Isak turns over to see Noora smiling at the screen while Eva smiles at Noora. His eyes narrow slightly and then flicker over to meet Sana’s gaze, who looks just as unamused with this situation as Isak is. “If you don’t mind, Isak – I mean, could we join you?”

Eva stares at Isak in a silent plea. Isak’s not sure why they’re asking when Chris and Vilde have already invited themselves, but he guesses there’s a difference in behavior when you’ve known someone long enough and when you’ve only known them for a couple of months and watched them seduce your roommate without ever promising a payoff.

“Sure,” he gestures towards the television. “Come on in.”

The rest of the girls make their way to the couch, Eva and Noora sitting to the left of Isak, while Sana sits to the right of him after handing Isak the remote he’d mindlessly thrown on the cushion. He mutters a thank you as he grabs it from her, and debates whether or not he should restart the movie for the sake of the girls. He doesn’t want to ask Noora, because he’s petty at the moment, so instead he turns over to Vilde and Chris, who already look captivated by what’s happening in the film.

“Well, he’s already missed about five minutes of the movie, considering the commotion they’ve
caused, but he’s not really going to tell them that. Instead, he sinks a little further into the couch, watching Noora and Eva through his peripheral, seeing just how close, exactly, they’re sitting next to each other.

He looks over at Sana and raises his eyebrows silently in question. Sana shakes her head very subtly, silently communicating to Isak it’s probably not a good idea to inquire just now, so Isak huffs, a little irked, before turning back to the movie. He crosses his arms over his chest, can’t really pay attention to the film because he just keeps noticing how close Noora and Eva are sitting – and just how desperate Eva looks to be closer, which is something Isak can decipher from the expression of her face and the knowledge of her for eight years.

His phone keeps buzzing with inquiries from Even, but he doesn’t really want the girls to catch a glimpse of their conversation – he’s instead trying to figure out a way to get Eva off of Noora for at least the rest of the duration of the film, so he elbows her in the gut softly to grab her attention.

Eva turns over to him and raises an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“I’m cold,” he tells her, and Eva’s lips quirk upwards.

“Seriously?”

Isak shrugs. “I am,” he replies defensively.

Eva sighs loudly and shifts her weight to the right, effectively leaning away from Noora and towards Isak. He feels victorious when Eva nestles closer to his chest, Isak wrapping an arm around her and pulling her closer, even further away from Noora.

He glances over at Sana then, who is pointedly looking at the screen with a small smirk on her face. Isak feels even more victorious now that he’s obviously pleased Sana, too, and he grabs for his phone when it vibrating one more time. They’ve kept the light on, so it’s easy to find an angle when he opens the front facing camera, leaning the camera up and away from him.

Eva looks up at the camera and raises an eyebrow. “Are you seriously taking a picture of us cuddling?” she asks.

Isak nods. “Even keeps bothering me, so he needs to know that I am currently busy,” he replies, and Eva huffs a laugh before wrinkling her nose at the camera as Isak grins brightly, snapping the picture.

Noora’s looking over at them, clearly amused, before turning back to the screen. Sana still looks smug.

Isak sends the picture as an attachment with a message.

    **ISAK**
    Won’t be able to reply for the rest of the movie, got a lapful of Eva Mohn

It takes Even about two minutes to get a reply.

    **EVEN**
    Hah. Lucky

Isak had no idea Even wanted to cuddle with Eva so badly, but then again, he might just mean Isak’s lucky to be cuddling someone at all, which almost makes Isak feel bad for him. He’ll bring up to Mutta the next time they see each other he should cuddle Even more often.
The movie goes by pretty quickly – Isak finds himself enjoying it, but mostly enjoying the girls’ reactions to every other scene; or, mostly Vilde and Chris’s running commentary, where they offer Isak and the other girls fun behind the scenes facts about almost every scene, and Isak can for once say it’s not annoying.

That might just be because he’s tired, though. He’s not looking into it, it’s pointless. He should just enjoy the fact that, for once, he’s not as irritated with Vilde as he usually is.

When it’s over, Isak refuses to acknowledge that his heart is a little full at the ending; mostly because he also thinks it’s ridiculous to depend on another person to “save you”, when the only person that can truly save you is yourself. Isak’s learned this the hard way. People aren’t wired to help other people. People are selfish creatures, whether or not they show it, even if some people are better at hiding it than others. Some people may even convince themselves they’re not selfish – but gun to their head, most people will betray everyone they know for their own sake.

So the concept is a little bit ridiculous to Isak, though no doubt romantic to Even, and maybe he thought he could get Isak to agree, but – well, he’s got another thing coming.

After another ten, fifteen minutes of the girls chatting amongst themselves, Vilde and Chris announce their leave – Vilde says she’s got a meeting with the impossible future bride of the couple with the impossible seating chart, who are now fighting over just what their wedding cake’s flavor should be for the third day in a row. They’ve had to make decisions separately now, apparently, and Vilde tells them she’s about ready to make up a flavor for them if they shut up. Isak can’t help but smile in amusement. For all the shit he gives Vilde, she’s a fucking trooper – he’ll give her that much.

Once they leave, Noora says she should probably get going, too – Eva offers to walk her down the stairs, and Isak blinks at Eva, frown as imperceptible as he can manage.

Eva notices, anyway. “I’m just walking her downstairs, Isak,” she rolls her eyes. “I’m not asking for her hand in marriage.”

At this point, Isak wouldn’t be surprised if she did ask for Noora’s hand in marriage, but he can’t do a thing as he watches Eva and Noora walk out of the apartment together, laughing at something Eva’s said.

The door closes behind them and Isak sighs loudly, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. He turns over to Sana, who’s looking at him a little contemplatively, bag over her shoulder. Isak throws his arms up in defeat.

“It’s like she’s purposely being ignorant,” Isak tells her. “She’s just – she refuses to see—” Isak grunts. “What about you?” he asks. “Did you notice anything off about her?”

Sana is silent for a moment. “She’s nice,” she begins slowly. “Definitely smart. There’s nothing inherently wrong with her, but—” Sana frowns. “There’s no doubt in my mind she’s infatuated with her boyfriend, as terribly as he treats her. There’s no way she’s thinking about Eva as anything but a friend. Maybe a confidant.”

Isak nods once. “Great,” he deadpans. “So she’s definitely gonna have her heart broken. Cool.”

Sana sighs. “Let’s just – keep an eye on her,” she offers. “I think the most we can do right now is make sure she has a support system once this blows up in her face.”

Isak scowls. “But it shouldn’t blow up in her face,” he replies irritably. “She shouldn’t be going down this path at all, Sana.”
“Don’t you think I know that?” Sana asks him calmly, raising her brows. “But Eva is – she’s full of love, Isak,” she reminds him. “You know this as well as I do. Plenty of it to go around. So she thinks she can be Noora’s friend for as long as Noora needs it,” she explains. “She thinks she can get through this without having her heart broken. She has hope she’ll get through this unscathed, even if we know she won’t.”

Isak growls. “It’s not fair.”

“I know you love her,” Sana says softly. “I do, too. And sometimes that means – letting someone make their own mistakes.”

No, Isak doesn’t agree. He has – Isak has made the mistake of assuming that, too, but it’s not right, you shouldn’t just leave someone behind, you should – love should be about doing everything in your power to help someone, even if it’s hard, even if hurts, even if it makes a villain out of you, even if they—

This is why Isak doesn’t allow himself to love anyone more than he’s willing to. No one truly loves unconditionally. Not one person. People are flawed. It’s ridiculous to think they won’t break you.

“Hey,” Sana calls to him softly. “Alright?”

“Yeah, just,” Isak shakes his head. “Tired.”

Sana looks at him for a moment longer, before nodding her head tightly. “Before I go,” she says, reaching into her bag. “I brought something for you.”

Isak watches as Sana pulls a book out of her bag, and it’s only slightly worn – she extends it towards Isak, who takes it automatically, turning it over upright to read the title. His eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Really?” he looks at her. “Parallel universes?”

Sana shrugs. “You used to love that shit in high school, if I remember correctly.”

Isak scoffs. “Yeah, in high school,” he replies. “I mean, it’s fun to think about in theory, but – it’s not real. You’ve only got this one universe, the mistakes you make are all set in stone.”

Sana watches him for a moment. “In any case,” she says, hugging her bag closer to herself. “It’s an interesting read. I thought you might like it, for those sleepless nights.”

Isak looks at her. “Eva told you?”

Sana shakes her head. “I can tell,” she smiles softly. “Take care of yourself, Isak. Don’t spend all your time worrying about other people.”

Isak scoffs. “Okay,” he laughs disbelievingly. “I don’t, but, thanks.”

Sana looks at him for a moment longer, before smirking. “Alright,” she agrees. “I’m heading out.”

Isak walks her to the door, holds it open for her. “Hey, Sana,” he calls to her when she’s a couple of steps outside. Sana turns to raise an eyebrow at him. Isak squirms a bit. “Should I – should I still text you with any developments on the Noora front?”


Isak sighs, a little bit in relief. It means Sana’s still worried about this ordeal, the same way Isak is,
which makes him feel a little bit less lonely in the endeavor. He nods dutifully, and she nods back, before turning again and making her way down the stairs.

She and Eva meet as Eva makes her way up, and they hug each other goodbye – Isak watches as Eva reaches the hallway and makes her way back to the apartment, grinning sheepishly at Isak. Isak narrows his eyes.

“What.”

“I love you,” Eva blinks innocently.

“What.”

“Okay,” she holds up her hands, walking past Isak and inside the apartment. Isak’s gaze follows her suspiciously as he follows her inside, closing the door behind them. “So, don’t kill me.”

“No promises.”

“I kind of promised Noora you would cook for us and the girls next Friday,” she grins guiltily.

Isak blinks. “Are you—” he snorts. “You’re kidding, right?”

Eva squirms. “Eva, I can’t cook!”

“Yes, well!” Eva extends her arms. “I don’t – she remembered when she told you – and I forgot about it altogether, but then I was like, ‘oh, yeah, Isak said he’d definitely do that whenever you wanted’, and she said how about next Friday, and I said yes, and—” She huffs. “I don’t – it happened.”

Isak grunts in frustration. “How do you always manage to get me into these messes?”

“You can ask Even to help you!” she suggests suddenly, a lot brighter. Isak looks at her.

“What?”

“He can cook, right? So, get him to teach you the basics, and then come back and just – cook something simple.”

Isak shakes his head. “Why can’t you teach me? You’re the one who got me into this!”

Eva grimaces. “He’s got a bigger kitchen.”

“Not a good excuse, try again.”

“I don’t have the patience for it, Isak,” she grunts. “No offense, but you’re like – you’re really smart, but you’re a frustrating student.”

Isak gapes in offense. “I am not.”

“You think you know everything after a minute of learning and then question whatever the teacher’s trying to explain to you because you think you have a grasp on it,” Eva accuses, crossing her arms over her chest. “Babe, I love you, but there is no way I can put up with that. Not when it comes to cooking, you’ll just burn something.”
Isak narrows his eyes. “Oh, okay,” he sniffs. “Good to know how you feel.”

Eva rolls her eyes. “Isak—”

“No, no,” he waves her off. “I’ll ask Even, you know why? Because he probably won’t break my heart like you just did,” he says dramatically.

“Oh, come on—”

“Goodbye, Ms. Mohn,” he replies, walking past her and towards his room.

“That’s – that’s so American of you, Isak!”

Isak walks into his bedroom and promptly shuts the door.

He picks up his phone and types a quick message to Even.

**ISAK**
So tomorrow

**EVEN**
Yes, mattress

**ISAK**
Yes

**ISAK**
Early??

**EVEN**
But why

**ISAK**
Because I have another favor to ask of you

**EVEN**
Ok……

**ISAK**
I need you to teach me how to cook. Like, anything

**EVEN**
Have you been watching MasterChef

**ISAK**
What??? What is that???

**EVEN**
Nvm

**EVEN**
I will, so long as you give me the full story tomorrow, yeah?

**ISAK**
Deal
EVEN
I’ll pick you up at 9

EVEN
Yousef’s gonna be lazy so he’s cool w me taking the truck

ISAK
Ugh. Ok

EVEN
See you tomorrow morning

EVEN
OH

EVEN
Did you like the movie???

ISAK
Unrealistic ending

ISAK
But other than that it was good

EVEN
Unrealistic ending?? It was sweet!!

ISAK
There’s no way they’re gonna last after that lol

ISAK
“saving each other” is not a thing

EVEN
You don’t like tragic endings, you don’t like happy endings

EVEN
What do you like

ISAK
Endings

EVEN
Hah

EVEN
Good night, heathen

ISAK
Night

--

Isak doesn’t actually fall asleep until maybe three in the morning – in the meantime, he walks around
his room, taps on Galileo’s fish tank as he sleeps, lies on the floor and tries some breathing exercises, does some sit-ups for the hell of it, hangs halfway over his bed and lists all the constellations that mean something to him in alphabetical order, watches porn but just keeps looking for men that look like Even, he tries reading the book Sana gifted him with but he’s a little hesitant to get past the first couple of pages so he puts it down, and it goes on and on and on until he finally manages to fall asleep on the floor, exhausted enough and successful in chasing away the intruding thoughts for the night.

He wakes up at exactly nine in the morning, and it’s only because someone’s knocking on his door; Isak squints through the light of the sun peeking in through his curtains, then sits up and stretches his sore back. He grunts a little in pain when he realizes his neck is sore, as well, so he twists it back and forth, trying to get it to a place of neutrality.

The knocks on his door continue.

“Come in, Eva,” Isak snaps. “Jesus Christ.”

The door opens behind him as he’s rubbing his neck, but he doesn’t hear anyone come in. “Not Eva,” A very deep and familiar voice says behind him. He turns around to spot Even, looking even more impossibly tall from this angle, leaning against the door frame and looking far more amused than Isak is comfortable with. “Eva’s in the kitchen making eggs.”

“Ugh,” he throws his neck back again, trying to alleviate the soreness. “Why are you here at nine o’clock sharp?”

“Why are you just waking up?” Even counters. “Follow-up question: why were you sleeping on the floor?”

Isak glares at him. “Because someone made me afraid of my own mattress,” he replies, which garters a chuckle from Even. He finally pushes himself off the door frame and extends a hand towards Isak, raising his eyebrows.

“Alright, up and at ‘em,” he says, and Isak sighs loudly before taking Even’s hand and letting him pull him up.

He arches his back in an attempt to alleviate that pain, too, and Even watches him in amusement. When he straightens up, Isak narrows his eyes at him. “What?”

“You look like a cat,” he replies, which Isak scoffs at.

“Thought you said you didn’t have a thing for animals.”

Even ruffles his hair. “Maybe if they look like you.”

Isak slaps his hand away and glares at him. “I still need to shower.”

Even smirks. “I can join you.”

“Would you—” Isak blinks at him and scowls, walking past him to check outside his door. Eva still seems to be in the kitchen, oblivious to what’s happening inside his room. He turns back to glare at Even. “Do you have no sense of self-preservation?”

“Oh, come on,” Even grins. “She can’t hear us.”

“Eva has eyes and ears everywhere,” Isak tells him. “Don’t underestimate her.”
Even rolls his eyes and walks over to his bed, sitting on it before laying back. He’s looking up at Isak’s Orion’s Belt poster when he says, “This is the last time I’ll lay in this mattress.”

Isak gives him a look. “Now is not the time to get emotional about my mattress.”

“The end of an era,” Even sighs dramatically. “It saw us naked so many times.”

“Oh, my—” Isak looks out the door again. Eva’s still in the kitchen. “I am kicking you out if you keep this up.”

“Alright, alright,” Even sits up and smiles at Isak. “I really am excited to go find you a new mattress, though. You’ll thank me later.”

“Sure,” Isak rolls his eyes. “Just—” he gestures out the door, “Go join Eva in the kitchen, make small talk, try to avoid talking about me being naked in the shower.”

Even clicks his tongue. “That might be difficult. You’ll be so close—”

“Even.”

Even stands from the bed and makes his way to Isak, and Isak can’t help the shiver that runs through him when Even’s hand finds its way under Isak’s shirt, only to brush the skin of his waist. His face is dangerously close to Isak’s, smirk prominent, and Isak wants to pull back, but God—God, Even is so fucking attractive like this, smug, confident, aloof. Isak wants to pull him in for a kiss so desperately, hell, maybe even go down on him, morning haze be damned, but he’s also hyperaware of the music playing in the kitchen, Eva softly singing along to it, just how close they’re cutting it.

“You’re playing with fire,” Isak warns him quietly, but his eyes can’t seem to leave Even’s lips. Even licks them, most likely noting this fact, and leans closer to Isak.

“Are you going to think of me in the shower?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Jesus, Even.”

“I just want to know.”

Isak refuses to give him the satisfaction. He also refuses to remind himself that most of the time, when he jerks off in the shower, he’s definitely thinking about Even—and if he has the time and energy to do so today, he’s most definitely going to be thinking about Even again.

But Even doesn’t have to know that.

“I’m going to be thinking about Richard Gere,” Isak sniffs, finally finding the will to step back from him. Even blinks at him for a moment, before breaking out into a large grin.

“Fair,” Even grants him, then waves him away. “Alright, go on, I’ll go be a perfect guest in Eva’s presence.”

Isak’s eyebrows rise. “Promise?”

Even makes the shape of an ‘X’ over his chest. “Cross my heart.”

Isak flicks his chest with his fingers. “Go,” he orders, and Even salutes him before turning around and making his way over to the kitchen. Isak stays behind, rubbing at his face tiredly, before yawning and turning over to Galileo, who is now swimming happily around his tank. He walks over to him and taps thrice on the glass, receives no reply for his troubles, and then walks out of his
bedroom and towards the bathroom. He hears Even’s soothing voice resonate from the kitchen, and he can’t help the small upwards quirk of the corner of his lips as he makes his way into the bathroom and to the shower.

When he’s finished changing in his bedroom after the shower, he grabs his glasses from his bedside table and makes his way over to the kitchen. He stops at the doorframe when he sees Even next to the stove with Eva, laughing at something she’d said, and Eva chatting animatedly to him over his laughter. Something in Isak’s heart squeezes at the sight, but he ignores it as he clears his throat.

Both Eva and Even turn to look at him, and both of them grin.

“Hi,” Eva greets him. “Even says you’re going to shop for a mattress?”

Isak sighs. “Apparently.”

Even rolls his eyes. “Isak is just having trouble admitting that his mattress is old and dying.”

“It’s fine, but Even insists I’d sleep better at night if I had a better one.”

Eva looks between them for a moment, brows furrowed, before smiling. “I mean, it’s worth a try, isn’t it?”

Even beams at Eva. “It is, Eva, thank you.”

Eva turns back to her eggs on the stove, waves lazily back at Isak. “Have fun, babe,” she tells him. “I’ll probably be gone when you get back. Jonas and I are going shopping for a present for his mom.”

Isak blinks. “Why are you going with him?”

“Jonas is hopeless when it comes to his mother,” Eva scoffs, glancing backwards. “I’ve been picking out her birthday presents for eight years.”

“And he still takes credit for it?” Even asks.

“I mean, he thinks he does,” Eva smirks at him. “But his mom totally knows. Sends me a thank you text every time.”

Isak scoffs. “That’s a whole lot of ridiculous I don’t even have time to dissect,” he shakes his head, then turns to look at Even. “Are we going?”

“Yes,” Even replies happily. “See ya, Eva.”

Bye, guys.”

Isak and Even make their way out of the kitchen and towards the front door, leaning down to grab their shoes. Isak frowns when he can only find his right one, a little irritated at the fact, when Even extends his left shoe towards him.

“Oh,” Isak smiles gratefully, taking the shoe from him. “Thanks.”

“Uh huh,” Even grabs his own shoes and puts them on as Isak puts his own on; Even doesn’t take his eyes off Isak’s feet until he finishes, and when he meets Isak’s gaze again, he looks amused.

“What?”
Even shakes his head. “Nothing,” he replies. “Ready to go?”

Isak squirms. “Promise we won’t die in a car accident?”

Even laughs, cupping Isak’s neck with his hand and leading him outside as he opens the door. “I promise,” he tells Isak as they close the door behind them, walking towards the stairs. Even’s hand is still warm on Isak’s neck, and he doesn’t do anything to dissuade the fact. “I’ll take care of you.”

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Even probably chose the largest mattress store to get them to, and it’s a little bit impressive and a little bit intimidating to Isak when they walk in. It almost looks like a warehouse, except without – the actual warehouse part, and it’s not as tall, and it’s a store, and – okay, so it might not look like a warehouse at all, but all the mattresses are sitting next to each other, enough to make it look bigger than it actually is, even though it’s probably a strategy for what Isak assumes is for the buyer’s benefit.

Isak leans a little closer to Even without thinking about it, narrows his eyes and looks around the store. “These are too many options.”

Even shakes his head. “No options are too many options.”

“These are. We’ve reached peak options territory, Even.”

Before Even can reply, a large man with a bright grin walks up to them, hands clasped together, almost in glee. “Hello!” he greets the two of them, and where Isak can only blink at him uselessly, Even offers him a much brighter grin in return.

“Hi!” He replies, then wraps an arm around Isak’s shoulders to pull him closer. Isak glares up at him, but this does not deter Even. “My friend here would like to find a mattress he can comfortably have sex on,” Even says, and Isak nearly chokes. The employee blinks back at them in surprise, smile only wavering slightly. Isak feels his face flush hot.

“No, that’s not – he’s kidding,” Isak amends lamely. “I just need – I just need a new one, I’ve had mine for too long, or – something.”

“Oh, well, of course,” The employee’s grin is back in full force. “Go ahead, peruse!”

“Yes, Isak,” Even looks at him, eyebrows raised and amused grin in place. “Let us peruse.”

Isak pushes Even away from him and glares, leads him toward the furthest end of the store he can find. There are only a handful of people here, for some God forsaken reason shopping for a mattress at an early hour like them, and Isak avoids eye contact with every single one of them. Even whistles happily behind him, following along.

Isak glares back at him. “What am I supposed to do now?” he asks. “Like – do I need to – do I just look at the prices?”

Even smiles. “Isak, don’t be dumb,” he teases. “You have to try them out, see which one feels better for you.”

Isak shakes his head. “No, no way,” he stops in his tracks and turns around to face Even completely. “That’s too much pressure. I’ll just – be thinking about the logistics the entire time, and comparing
two mattresses is fine, but comparing over a hundred, that I can’t—"

“Isak,” Even walks closer to him, putting his hands on Isak’s shoulders. He stares intensely into Isak’s eyes, and Isak is momentarily lost in blue. “Calm down, alright?” Isak swallows and nods. “We won’t even look at the ones you don’t want to try. What kind of mattress do you want?”

Isak shrugs lamely.

“We can go to the firm section,” Even points behind Isak, and he glances back to read the sign. “Though be warned – the firmer the mattress, the more pressure on the fourth and fifth spinal vertebrae, leading to disc herniation and subluxation.”

Isak blinks at him, then grins. “Wow,” he laughs slightly. “Yeah, I mean, that’s accurate,” he admits. “What, is there some sort of secret chiropractic side of you you failed to mention to me?”

“Nope,” Even grins brightly at him. “Two Weeks Notice. And you said romcoms don’t teach you anything.”

Isak stares at him in disbelief, then snorts, pushing at Even’s shoulder before turning around and walking towards the “firm” section. Even falls into step beside Isak as Isak speaks to him. “Though that’s very accurate,” he tells Even as they walk. “You have to take into consideration which way you sleep.”

“Oh?” Even looks at him. “And how do you sleep?”

“On my stomach, usually,” Isak tells him. “And stomach sleepers actually need firmer mattresses, so they don’t sink and end up hurting more than their back.”


Isak smiles up at him. “A fun fact for the both of us.”

Even grins back. “Off we go then, Valtersen,” he says, resting his hand on Isak’s lower back as he leads them towards the section they’re fast approaching. “Let’s find the perfect firm mattress for you.”

Isak ends up torn between five mattresses – he and Even lie down on each one, Even pointing out some pros and then some cons for them, and whenever one mattress has more cons than the other mattress, they scratch that one off the list of possibilities. This keeps happening until finally they’re only down to two, and they lay on one of the mattresses, looking up at the tall ceiling in thought.

Even turns his head over to look at Isak. “So,” he begins. “Too firm? Just firm enough?”


Even hums. “Does it inspire anything in you?”

Isak looks over at him, frowning. “What the hell is a mattress meant to inspire in me?”

Even shrugs as much as he can while impaired by the mattress. “Sleep?”

Isak shakes his head. “No,” he replies. “But then again, I don’t think I’d be able to sleep in a store, period.”

Even nods with purpose. “Okay,” he sits up. “To the other one again.”
He slides off the mattress, and Isak follows suit, where they walk one mattress over and sit on the other mattress in the running, unceremoniously dropping on their backs.

Isak thinks. “This one feels a little less firm,” he admits, and Even huffs.

“Yes, we have been through that,” he reminds Isak, and Isak grunts.

“I don’t know, Even,” he snaps, looking over at him. “Does this inspire something in you?”

Even looks at the ceiling thoughtfully for a moment, before turning around and looking at Isak with narrowed eyes. Isak thinks he’s going to say something stupid, but instead he does something stupid – Even leans over and grabs Isak by the shirt, turning him over to pull him closer and bringing his lips to his own.

Isak kisses back instinctively, before he realizes what they’re doing and where they’re doing it – his eyes snap open and he mumbles uselessly against Even’s lips before breaking away from him. Even looks nothing but pensive.

“Even, the fuck?”

Even waves him off. “Come here,” he replies instead, grabbing for Isak’s wrist and pulling him off the mattress. Isak is helpless, he realizes, choosing to follow Even without protest, then he lets himself be pulled back down onto the second contender. Isak sighs in defeat when Even pulls him closer again and kisses him once more, this time only for about three seconds before he pulls away. Even hums with narrowed eyes, and Isak simply stares at him, unsure about whatever gears are turning in Even’s head.

“The other one,” Even finally declares. Isak blinks at him.

“What?”

“It’s more comfortable to kiss on, don’t you think?” he asks, and Isak glances back at the other mattress for a moment, frowning. He doesn’t really remember, considering how Even had caught him off guard, but he also doesn’t want to admit this lest Even takes him back to the other mattress and kisses him again. Not that he doesn’t like it, because, well – he obviously does, but the risk of kissing in such a public place is too much of one, so he’s not going to inspire even more defiance in Even than he already has.

“I guess?”

“I’m just saying, like,” Even sits up again, so Isak does, too. “If it’s more comfortable to kiss on on our sides, and it’s comfortable on your back, then it’s the obvious choice, right?” Even looks at Isak expectantly.

He understands the logic Even is getting at, really, he does, but he’s still trying to get over the fact that Even kissed him in the middle of a mattress store, where they run the risk of being seen by anyone they know.

Even’s definitely going to get an earful about it in the car, but for now, he gives in, shoulders slumping. “Yeah,” he agrees, nodding. “I guess you’re right.”

“You sure?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I’m sure.”
It takes a long while for them to load up the mattress into the truck—the salesman keeps insisting they let the store deliver it to them, but where Isak tells Even they should consider it, Even sticks with his pride, insisting they’re able to do this themselves.

The salesman helps them out anyway, and then they’re done, the mattress wrapped in plastic looks a little awkward on the trunk, wrapped tightly around the edges. Isak blinks at it uselessly, while Even beams at it proudly.

“That’s gonna fall,” Isak deadpans, and Even looks over at him, gaping.

“It’s not,” he insists. “We did a good job, Isak.”

Isak looks at him. “I do not want to be responsible for the death of an innocent pedestrian or driver when that falls off.”

“It won’t,” Even presses once again, rolling his eyes. “It’s not going to fall off. Do you trust me?”

Isak wrinkles his nose. “Well…”

Even glares at him. “Isak, do you trust me?”

He doesn’t trust anyone, he doesn’t say, but for the sake of mattresses on trucks—“Sure,” he concedes, and Even grins. “But I reserve the right to take that back if it does fall.”

Even laughs and gives Isak a friendly pat on the back, which earns him a glare. Even takes his hand back and rolls his eyes. “You’re a drama queen, you know that?” he asks, and Isak narrows his eyes. “Has anyone ever told you that? You’re a drama queen.”

“You’re an enabler,” Isak sniffs, only slightly offended. “I wouldn’t have to be a drama queen if you weren’t so keen on dramatic shenanigans.”

“Shenanigans, huh?”

“Yes, shenanigans.”

“It’s because of me you found the perfect mattress today, might I remind you—”

“It’s also because of you that I had to get one at all—”

“You’re going to thank me in the long run, when your back wakes up like it’s gotten itself a new spine—”

“It’s never hurt before, why did I even listen to you—”

They’re interrupted by a boisterous laugh behind them, and both Isak and Even are quick to turn around. They realize only now they’ve had an audience this entire time in the shape of their nervous employee, who is now looking at them with fondness. Isak and Even exchange a glance, Isak unsure if the man wants to eat them or adopt them. Either way, he’s already thinking of an escape plan when the man speaks.

“Sorry,” he waves a hand at them. “It’s only that my wife and I have had the same spiff before. Says we didn’t need a new one, but here I am, victorious the one and only time. She begrudgingly accepted I was right.”
Even grins over at Isak. “See, Isak?” he links his arm with Isak’s for show, which earns him another glare. “Listen to this man. Your husband knows best.”

Isak’s glare intensifies. “You are not my husband.”

Even pretends to be offended. “So you’re saying I’m the wife?”

“What?” Isak blinks at him, then takes his arm back. “No, dude, I—”

“You know, I really would have guessed you were the wife,” the employee chimes in, and Isak looks over at him, ridiculously annoyed. Now this guy’s not only a fucking eavesdropper, he’s a bigot as well. “You’re shorter, got more of a temper.”

“That’s what I was saying,” Even humors him, a pained expression on his face, as if he sympathizes with the asshole. Isak gapes at him, then shakes his head furiously.

“There are no wives in gay relationships,” he sputters.

Even leans forward, pressing a hand beside his mouth as if sharing a secret with the employee. “Says the one who’s the wife, am I right?”

The employee laughs again and Isak glares daggers at Even. “We’re leaving,” he snaps, turning around and stomping towards the passenger seat of the truck.

“Anything you say, honey,” Even sings, and he waves brightly at the employee. “Until next time.”

“Goodbye!”

Even unlocks the truck and Isak immediately opens the door, climbing inside and slamming it closed behind him. Even, in contrast, whistles as he climbs inside, closing the door with nothing but grace and patience.

Isak crosses his arms over his chest and turns to face him. “Why’d you give that fucking bigot ammunition?”

Even shrugs. “You learn to pick your battles.”

Isak scowls. “So you’re just gonna let an asshole like that walk away from here, stereotyping homosexuals and their relationships like that his entire life?”

“Well,” Even laughs. “I doubt it’ll be his entire life.”

“He was—”

“Isak,” Even’s voice is smooth and reassuring, and Isak hates that it fucking works on him instantly. He turns his torso over to look Isak straight in the eye, eyebrows raised, blue gaze searching Isak’s, presumably to make sure Isak’s calmed down enough so that he doesn’t try to interrupt him again. Eventually, he seems satisfied with what he finds, and his shoulders relax.

“People are going to keep applying male and female roles to homosexual relationships for the rest of our lifetime. Okay? I think that’s the only way they know how to cope with the fact that two people of the same sex are in relationships,” he explains, and Isak feels his expression turn sour. “Does it suck? Yes. Am I going to fight every single person who does this? No,” Even shakes his head. “You pick your battles. There’s only so many bigots you can fight in your everyday life, and you have to choose the ones you think are worth your breath, the ones who might go on to do some damage.”
Isak shakes his head. “It shouldn’t fucking be like that.” Isak didn’t spend all of fucking high school trying to come to terms with his sexuality to let people stereotype him like that, to let them get away with ignorant beliefs and casual bigoted comments, as if he wasn’t a fucking person, as if he was just a statistic on a fucking graph—

“Hey,” Even breaks through his inner rant, and Isak only realizes this because his hand is suddenly on Isak’s thigh. “Alright?”

Isak’s tongue presses against his cheek for a moment. He shrugs stiltedly. “It’s fucking whatever.”

Even’s gaze softens, and his hand squeezes Isak’s knee. The gesture, which should be unwelcome and intrusive, instead serves to help Isak breathe evenly again. “I know it shouldn’t be like that,” Even smiles ruefully. “But are you going to let one asshole ruin your entire fucking day?” He asks, and Isak lowers his gaze, by now only pretending to be annoyed. “Huh?” Even’s head finds its way downward, gaze locking with Isak’s again. There’s a smile playing at his lips, which Isak wants to return immediately, but out of pride, he does not. “You just got a new mattress,” Even points out. “Your back is going to love you. My back is going to love you,” he adds, waggling his eyebrows, and Isak prolongs an exhale, but he allows himself to roll his eyes and grant Even a small smile.

Even beams, bringing his hand from Isak’s knee to his lips. He traces Isak’s bottom lip and his grin gets impossibly wider. “You’re cute when you pout.”

Isak scoffs, slapping Even’s hand away. He finally looks up. “I wasn’t fucking pouting.”

Even laughs, holds up both his hands. “Yeah, okay,” he turns forward to finally insert the keys into the ignition, turning it and starting the truck. “Whatever you say, honey bunch.”

Isak scowls, turns to put his seatbelt on. “Whenever you get an actual wife, do not ever give her any nicknames.”

Even sighs loudly. “You’ve doomed me to a boring marriage, then.”

Isak’s lips twitch. “You’ll live, I’m sure.”

“And hey, I could get a husband,” he points out. “A nonbinary partner in life. Why must I be restricted to a wife?”

Isak shrugs, staring out the windshield. “You just look like the type of guy who’s going to end up with a wife, is all.”

Even is silent for a moment, then puts the gear in drive. “And what does that mean, exactly?”

Isak sighs as Even pulls out of the loading dock. “I just mean, like,” he gestures aimlessly. “You know, you’re the domestic type. I mean, you literally get turned on by corniness and domesticity,” he points out, glancing at Even. Even is looking at the road, looking thoughtful. “And, you know, you have that tall, blonde hair, blue eyed look to you that just screams ‘I’m looking for a wife who is willing to give me two point five children and adopt a dog with me’. You know, that look.”

Even licks his lips. “And you think the only way to get all of that is by having a wife?”

Isak grunts. “I don’t know, Even, just does it even matter? I don’t even know what you like, you’re – you were with Sonja, right, and then jumped into bed with me, which you were very experienced with, by the way, for someone in a relationship for so long, and now you’re – I don’t know. I can’t pin you down.”
“Pansexual,” Even offers, and Isak pauses.

“Pansexual?”

“Attracted to a person regardless of gender,” Even explains. “Which also means I don’t have to marry a woman to have that kind of a life, don’t you think?”

Isak looks out the window. “I guess.”

There is silence for a moment. “You were just – a minute ago you were so angry at a man for assigning gender roles to a gay relationship, and now you’re limiting domesticity to something only a man and a woman can share?”

“That’s not—” Isak growls a little. “That’s not what I meant, I just mean – listen, I think marriage is stupid no matter what, because that’s a vow everyone is bound to break, so even if you married – any other gender, or whatever, the point is that you seem like the type of guy to jump into that mistake headfirst. Only the chances of you jumping into that mistake with a woman is far more likely than any other gender, taking your history into account. It’s simple mathematics, Even, it’s nothing – it’s nothing like what you’re thinking.”

Even snorts. “Why do you always have to make everything an equation?” he asks, and Isak is a little offended. “People aren’t math, Isak.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Oh?”

“Your history says a lot about your future, Even,” he explains. “The percentages don’t lie. For example, you were in a relationship for five years. How many relationships did you have before Sonja?”

Even glances at Isak. “None?”

“Right,” Isak nods. “So a hundred percent of your relationships are female-based. Percentages,” Isak sniffs. “Again, they never lie.”

“What about the people I slept with on our off periods?” he challenges Isak. “Most of them were male.”

“Okay, how many?”

“I don’t – I don’t remember, do you sit around how many people you sleep with?”

Isak narrows his eyes. “Doesn’t matter. Say you slept with five, even seven. That still gives you less than a ten percent chance at ending up with another man, let alone any other gender.”

“Less than ten percent is still a chance, isn’t it?” Even asks.

Isak shrugs. “Yeah, but not a very big one.”

“Can we round that up to ten percent?”

“I – okay, Even,” he rolls his eyes. “But that doesn’t make much of a difference. There’s still a ninety percent chance you’ll end up with a woman.”

Even hums. “See, I think all of that is bullshit,” he replies. “Because I think if you fall in love, you
fall in love. Regardless of your past. Your past most definitely does not shape your future.”

Isak snorts. “You could not be more wrong.”

“It only shapes your future if you let it.”

Isak looks at Even. He’s so fucking naïve, so hopeless, it almost hurts to know someone’s going to take advantage of that and break him, the same way Sonja did, the same way everyone breaks Eva.

Isak has seen the way his past has shaped his present, how it’s going to shape his future, regardless of how long Isak tries to prolong its effects. Even’s simply too blind to see it now.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he mumbles, and Even hums.

“Oh kay,” he agrees. “But one more thing?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “What?”

“What will you do if that ten percent ends up beating the ninety percent?” Even glances at him, raising an eyebrow. “Would that make you change your perception on mathematics when it comes to people?”

Isak snorts. “It’s unlikely,” he tells Even. “Considering it’s a ten percent chance. But it’s still a chance, like you said, so my way of thinking wouldn’t change much.”

“So you don’t think—”

“No,” Isak replies to the interrupted question. “I think you’ll end up with your ninety percent chance.”

Even’s smile is amused. “Good to know.”

Isak doesn’t say that either way, marriage is a fucking mistake, and Even would be better off guarding himself the way Isak does. While there may be a ninety/ten percent chance between Even’s gender of choice to lead this life with, there’s a hundred percent chance that it’ll all eventually come crashing down. Sure, maybe they’ll stay married – but the broken trust will be there, the angry thoughts, the resentment. An entire life stuck to a vow that makes you unhappy. Isak can’t even fathom the thought.

So this entire conversation was moot, in the end, and only served to get Isak in a bad mood, so he stares out his window pointedly and doesn’t say a word to Even that isn’t warranted.

Eventually, Even sighs loudly next to him, but Isak refuses to turn around.

“Isak,” he whines, and Isak’s eyes narrow. “Isak.”

“What, Even?” he snaps, turning back to him.

Even smiles. “Just missed your voice,” he replies casually, and Isak looks at him for a long moment before hating himself so much for deflating at his words. It’s fucking cute, it’s what it is, and he hates himself for even applying that word to Even. The only friend he’s ever deemed cute in the entirety of his life has been Eva, and that’s because she is, whereas Even is just – he’s just – this tall guy he’s sleeping with that sometimes says things that make no sense to Isak, that challenges his world view even after Isak has countlessly told him that whatever he says won’t make a difference, and that sometimes says things like just missed your voice that melt Isak’s irritation right off of him and onto
the car seat.

It’s happened twice already in the same car ride. Twice. Isak’s losing his footing, here.

“Shut up,” Isak mutters.

Even smiles over at him at a stoplight. “Are you mad at me?”

“I’m not—” Isak sighs. “I wasn’t mad at you.”

“Annoyed, then.”

Isak looks at him. “I’m just—” he doesn’t know how to articulate the fact that he’s worried about Even without it sounding like he’s being ridiculous; he’s able to tell Eva this, but he’s known Eva for years and years, whereas he’s only known Even for a couple of months, and still. Still. “You just say things, sometimes.”

Even’s eyebrows shoot up. “Like?”

Isak glances at him, before turning to look back out his window. I just want to know you’re going to be okay.

“Like you miss my voice,” Isak says instead. “When you heard it just about two, three minutes ago.”

Even laughs quietly, hitting the gas pedal again when the light turns green. “Five, actually.”

“Five, then,” Isak looks over at him and smiles slightly. “And you call me a drama queen.”

Even grins, teeth and all. “You are a drama queen,” he replies. “Doesn’t mean I’m not one, either.”

“Still wrong.”

“Besides, I don’t think it’s dramatic to miss your voice after such a long silence in an enclosed space,” he points out. “I think it’s just the right kind of matic.”

“That’s not a word.”

“It is in the Bech Næsheim Dictionary, Isak.”

“Oh, so now it’s okay to invent bullshit vocabulary?” Isak raises an eyebrow.

Even smirks. “You like to invent bullshit science and math all the time, why can’t I invent bullshit vocabulary?”

Isak gapes, then narrows his eyes. “Fuck off, Even,” he replies, but there’s no malice to his voice. He’s more amused than anything, knowing Even hardly ever believes the facts, not bullshit, he presents to him, anyway. “I’m withholding your blowjob privileges for a week.”

“Hah!” Even glances at him. “You wouldn’t even last a day.”

Well, yeah, he’s probably right. “Can we just get home before the mattress falls?”

Even laughs. “It’s not going to fall!”

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It doesn’t fall.
Which is a very impressive feat, to be honest, but Isak kind of doesn’t want to give Even the satisfaction of admitting he was right – so he just shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly, like it was never really a concern of his in the first place, but Even’s grin is so smug and knowing that at one point Isak has to flick at his nose, just out of spite.

Even’s grin only widens.

They struggle with how, exactly, they’re supposed to carry a mattress to the second floor by themselves – Isak spends the entire time they strategize complaining to Even about how they should have let the delivery guys handle it, but Even is stubborn, insisting that they can do this themselves. Isak asks him what, exactly, they’re meant to do with his old mattress, and Even says they will cross that bridge when they get to it, which, incidentally—

They get to after they struggle for about fifteen minutes with climbing up the stairs with the mattress. Isak’s panting and pretty sure he’s red in the face when they finally reach his door, and, Jesus Christ, he does not need to engage in battle with the fucking doorknob right now.

He glares at it for a moment. Even remains silent for that long, before finally speaking up. “Did you forget your keys, or…?”

“No, just,” Isak sighs, fishing his keys from his pocket. “The fucking knob hates me,” he mutters, and he finally inserts the key into it. To no one’s surprise, he ends up fighting with it for about a minute, to no avail.

“Ugh,” he grunts in frustration, uselessly pushing at the door. “I swear to God—”

“Isak, jeez,” Even walks around the mattress to get to where Isak stands in front of the door, gently moves Isak away from the knob. “Just wiggle it a little bit, like this,” Even proceeds to make some weird fucking movements with the key that Isak will not remember after this, thank you very much, but the knob accepts this approach with open arms – probably because Even’s more attractive than him or something – and opens without a single groan or complaint. It doesn’t even put up a fight when Even walks in to retrieve the key.

Isak glares at a triumphant-looking Even. “Shut up,” he walks to the other side of the mattress and grabs onto it, raising his eyebrows expectantly. “Well?” he looks at the mattress, then back at Even. “Are we going to do this or not?”

Even laughs, walks over to the other side of the mattress and holds on to it. “On the count of three,” he says, and Isak frowns.

“We could just slide it,” he points out, and Even sighs loudly.

“Do you have to logic the fun out of everything?”

“I don’t logic the fun—”

“Right, well, it’s your mattress, I guess we can do this whatever way you want to.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “It’d just fit better if we slide it.”

“Then we’ll slide it.”

It turns out to be a little more difficult to slide it than to carry it, considering the cement they’re working with outside of Isak’s apartment, but he stubbornly doesn’t switch tactics – eventually, they manage to bring the mattress inside, and close the door behind them. Isak is a little proud of this, he
won’t lie, and beams at Even, who beams right back.

“See?” Even holds up a hand towards Isak, which Isak high fives. “We did not need any help from any delivery men.”

“We still have to get rid of my old mattress,” Isak points out, and Even deflates a little. “What are we going to do with it?”

“We can donate it,” Even suggests. “It hasn’t reached the ten-year mark anyway. It’ll serve its purpose to somebody who really needs it.”

“Alright,” Isak agrees. “We should move this one out of the way, though. To make room.”

They do. And it takes them a long time to get the mattress back onto Yousef’s truck – they have to get rid of the sheets, for one, which doesn’t take too long, considering it’s just a cover and his duvet, but what really takes them a while is carrying it out of Isak’s room, down the stairs, tying it to the trunk securely once again, and finally make their way back up to Isak’s apartment to settle the new mattress into Isak’s room.

They’re both sweating after all of this, despite the cold outside, and they end up staring at the bare mattress for a good minute before saying anything.

It’s Even who breaks the silence. “It feels a little anti-climactic, doesn’t it?”

Isak nods. “It does,” he agrees, then reaches for the bottom sheet on the floor. “Help me with this stupid thing.”

It’s always a struggle figuring out which way is which with the sheet, and Even and Isak spend about two minutes bickering about which way’s the right way, but eventually they manage to fit it correctly around the mattress – Isak grabs his pillows and throws them where they’re meant to go, then lays out the duvet over it.

He steps back and finally, they’re fucking done.

Even’s pursing his lips when Isak glances at him. “What?” he asks.

Even looks over at him. “Still doesn’t feel successful, you know?” He taps his foot, looking impatient. “I mean, I thought I’d for sure get a larger sense of accomplishment.”

“You don’t think lugging two mattresses up and down stairs is enough of an accomplishment?” Isak asks, perplexed.

“I mean, it is,” Even replies. “But it doesn’t feel like it.”

Isak sighs, shakes his head. “What do you want to do, take a nap in it?” he gestures towards his bed. “Be my guest. I’ll go over to the living room and watch some TV. Let me know how it feels on your back. Maybe then you’ll feel accomplished.”

Even’s face lights up then. “You’re right,” he replies, and Isak looks at him, wondering if he’s really gonna let Even take a nap in his room. That must be crossing some sort of boundary, right? “We just need to break it in.”

“And how do you propose we do that?”

Even walks over to Isak’s bedside drawer then, opens it up. Isak’s about to protest and talk about
boundaries, but then Even pulls out the lube and a condom, and Isak understands where this is going. Is probably completely okay about where this is going.

Even walks back, grinning mischievously, and waves both items in Isak’s face. His grin turns into a smirk. “I think we should break it in, don’t you?”

Isak licks his lips and glances towards the mattress, then back at Even. He rolls his eyes, but can’t help the smirk that quirks his lips upwards, too.

Yeah, he’s going to give in. But if anyone thinks they’d resist an offer so blatant by someone that looks like Even, Isak think they’d be lying to themselves. Unless they’re not attracted to men. In which case, he’d give them a pass, but otherwise—

He walks over to Even and then brings him the rest of the way towards him by wrapping a finger around a belt loop, proceeds to kiss him underneath his ear, then his jaw, all while he unbuttons Even’s jeans. “I mean,” he mutters against Even’s neck, thrilled by his shaky exhale against Isak’s temple. “If you insist.”

Even throws the lube and the condom unceremoniously onto the bed, helping Isak with his glasses—and those he’s gentle with, folding them closed before setting them atop the bedside table—before he reaches over to try and help Isak with his jeans, too; but Isak slaps his hand away, glaring at the side of his face. “Nope,” he denies him, making sure Even is helpless, his only use removing his shirt and throwing it on Isak’s floor.

Once Isak’s gotten rid of his jeans, he removes his own shirt and moves on to Even’s, making sure to take his time with them. Even growls quietly, but Isak ignores the silent plea to hurry up, taking his time between kissing at Even’s neck and pulling his jeans down. Eventually, they do reach the floor to pool around Even’s feet, and he is quick to step out of them, wrapping his arms around Isak’s waist and pulling him closer, finally finding Isak’s lips.

Isak allows to lose himself in the kiss for a while, which starts slow and then picks up in momentum, but there’s only so much of the kissing he can keep up with patiently—he pulls away and presses a hand against Even’s chest, pushing him onto the mattress, where Even complies and sits in anticipation. Isak pulls his boxers down, letting them fall to the floor, then steps out of them in order to straddle Even’s lap and bring his lips back to Isak’s.

Even’s fingernails dig into the skin of Isak’s back, while Isak’s hands rest on either side of Even’s face as they kiss as harshly as they’re able to, not wanting to miss a second of each other’s taste—Isak begins to slowly roll his hips against Even, taking his time, which feels ridiculously good against Isak’s dick—the fabric of Even’s boxers providing a softer kind of friction, helping it get hard, but which proves to frustrate Even, if the way he bites down impatiently on Isak’s bottom lip says anything.

Isak snorts and pulls away, huffing a laugh at the way Even tries to chase his lips—he presses a hand against Even’s chest and pushes him onto his back, licking his lips.

“You wanted to break it in,” he teases. “You can be the first to try it on your back.” Isak pulls his boxers down, letting them fall to the floor

Even chuckles, brings a hand up to rub at the back of Isak’s neck, but doesn’t pull him down for a kiss. “Always so generous,” he teases, and Isak smiles.

“I pride myself on my bedside manner,” he replies. “Now move.”
Isak lifts himself up slightly to allow Even to scoot up towards the pillows, and then Isak leans down to press his lips to Even’s chest. And then further and further down, trailing his kisses until they’re right above Even’s boxers, where Isak looks up at an Even who is out of breath, eyes glued to the ceiling. Isak licks his lips and hooks his fingers around the hem of Even’s boxers, slowly pulling them down and down and down, trailing kisses down his thigh and towards his leg as he does so.

When he gets rid of the boxers completely, he throws them on the floor, then trails his kisses back up to Even’s thigh again, Isak’s knees planted firmly on the mattress.

Even’s breath is shaky when he exhales. “I can — if you come up here—”

Isak snorts. “You’re the one who was so adamant about your back and the mattress,” he reminds Even. “So, no. I think it’s your turn.”

Pressing his hands against Even’s thighs, he spreads his legs as wide as they’re willing to go and upwards; Even’s breath hitches above him, clearly knowing exactly what Isak’s about to do — Isak licks his lips and inhales slightly before leaning forward and—

Readying Even with his tongue is Isak’s favorite thing, hands down. He loves the way Even’s moans break periodically, the way he brings his hands down to cling onto Isak’s hair desperately, the way he writhes with every flick of Isak’s tongue; he especially loves the way Even gasps whenever Isak brings his fingers in to help Isak’s endeavor, the way he pushes back against Isak, tight around his tongue, and Isak knows Even’s close to his breaking point when he starts rocking back, presumably desperate by the lack of friction on his dick.

Even tugs at Isak’s hair desperately. “I’m gonna—” he grunts. “If you don’t stop, I’m—”

Isak pulls back, understanding. “You feel like—”

“Yep,” Even replies immediately. “Yep, just — please?”

Isak laughs quietly at how little they have to say to communicate exactly what they want from each other; Isak crawls up to grab the lube and the condom, readying himself above Even as he listens to him breathe erratically.

Once Isak is prepped just enough, Even asks, “Do you want me to turn around?”

Isak sighs loudly. “Even, this entire thing is literally so you can try the mattress out on your back.”

“Yes, but it would be far more helpful for my dick if—”

Isak lowers himself to shut Even up with a kiss. “Be quiet,” he smiles against his lips.

“Okay,” Even mutters.

“Besides,” Isak adds, pushing Even’s legs further apart. “I like to look at you.”

Even laughs quietly, bringing Isak back down for a kiss. Isak humors him for a moment, before breaking their lips apart again and smiling down at him. Even runs a hand through Isak’s hair as Isak slides inside him slowly, feeling the rush of the sensation immediately, especially when Even throws his head back into the mattress, biting his bottom lip.

Isak doesn’t make a show out of it — whenever he’s inside Even, he hardly thinks about anything outside of him. He places his palms firmly on the mattress on either side of Even’s head, waits it out for a second or five — Even’s breaths are as harsh as Isak’s when he brings his forehead
to press against Even’s, eyes never breaking contact.

Even licks his lips and smiles. “Okay?” he asks, and Isak huffs.

“I’m supposed to be asking you that,” he reminds Even, and Even laughs once, brings his hand to trace the curl of Isak’s hair, right beside his ear, softly with his finger.

“I trust you,” he says, and Isak exhales shakily then, and begins to move.

He only rolls his hips slowly for a couple of thrusts, just to see Even gape uselessly, and then every thrust after that is deep, hard, and fast.

Isak leans away and his arms come up to wrap around Even’s legs, and from then on all he can feel is Even, all he can see is Even, all he can hear is Even moaning his name over and over, his hands sliding down the curve of Isak’s back, and their breaths mingle with each other’s and Isak keeps gasping Even’s name whenever he can, and the deeper inside Even he gets, the easier his gasps turn into broken moans, and God, God—

Even brings a hand between them to help himself along, and Isak wishes that could be him, but he’s extremely gone right now, head full of clouds, eyes full of stars and when Even moans brokenly, finishing and throwing his head back in ecstasy, it only takes Isak maybe a couple of seconds more to spill into the condom, gasping Even’s name.

Isak doesn’t pull out right away. He thrusts maybe three more times, just to hear Even’s small, broken gasps, feel him shake underneath him, but eventually Isak’s dick is way too sore and tender for him to stay inside him any longer, so he pulls out of him slowly.

They’re breathing heavily between each other, sweat clinging to Isak’s forehead, Even’s chest rising and falling heavily — after a moment of simply looking at each other, trying to catch their breaths, Even brings a hand to wrap around the back of Isak’s neck and presses their lips together for a kiss, which Isak eagerly returns.

After about a minute of this, Even wraps his arms around Isak’s waist and rolls him over, causing Isak to laugh. “You seriously can’t stand more than ten minutes of being on your back?”

“Not when you’re right there looking this good,” Even teases. He leans back to bring a hand between them and help Isak get rid of his condom — Isak’s nose wrinkles.

“Gross, Even.”

“Nothing that hasn’t been in my mouth before,” he points out, turning around to throw the condom in the waste basket. When he wants to come back down, Isak presses a hand to his chest to stop him.

“Clean yourself up first,” he warns, and Even’s laugh is soft and exasperated when he turns around to grab the toilet paper on top of Isak’s drawer chest. It doesn’t take him too long to get rid of what he needs to, and once that’s in the waste basket as well, he’s quick to lean back down towards Isak and kiss him again, and Isak only huffs amusedly once before bringing both his hands to cradle either side of Even’s face.

Even’s lips travel to the corner of Isak’s mouth, to his jaw, to his neck. Even’s always been particularly partial to Isak’s neck, he’s noticed — his lips spend most of their time there, teeth scraping gently, sometimes nibbling, tongue licking away whatever soreness may come with the acts.

Isak simply exhales and grips the back of Even’s hair as he does, closes his eyes once in a while when Even bites down lightly on a sensitive spot.
He lets Even have his fun for maybe two more minutes — and, okay, those two minutes are entirely selfish, he’ll admit — before he tugs lightly on his hair. “We should at least put on our boxers,” he tells him. “In case Eva comes home.”

Even detaches his lips from Isak’s neck and leans his head back, raising an eyebrow at Isak. “And she’ll totally believe we’re just in our boxers for fun?”

Isak glares at him. “I mean it’s just less clothes to scramble for.”

“No, really, I want to hear what excuse you’d come up with if she saw us this way.”

“I don’t know, Even,” Isak rolls his eyes. “We were hot, or something.”

“Yeah we were,” Even waggles his eyebrows, and Isak snorts, finally pressing his hands against Even’s chest and pushing him off of him. Even rolls over on his back, complacent.

“You’re such a fucking idiot,” Isak says, but his lips are twitching upwards anyway. He swings his legs over the edge of the bed, sitting up, frowning at the floor to try and spot their boxers. “Were you wearing the blue ones?”

Even grunts. “I don’t remember.”

“Well,” Isak scoffs. “You’re gonna have to, because I don’t remember, either.”

“Why don’t you try and remember?” Even accuses.

“It’s my place, I don’t have to,” Isak snaps back in an admittedly lame argument. “Oh, hang on—” he stands up and walks around the bed, finding a gray pair of boxers on the floor. “Hah,” he proclaims, reaching down and picking them up. He straightens his back and throws the boxers at Even. “I threw them over here before I ate you out.”

“Nice,” Even replies, lifting his waist as he wriggles them back on. Isak walks back around the bed to pick up the blue boxers, stepping back inside them. Once they’re on and secured, Isak sits back down on the bed, where he immediately hears Even sigh loudly and in disdain.

Isak turns over to look at him, where he’s still lying on his back, head on the pillow. “What?”

Even grunts. “I don’t remember.”

“Well,” Isak scoffs. “You’re gonna have to, because I don’t remember, either.”

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Isak turns over to look at him, where he’s still lying on his back, head on the pillow. “What?”

Even grunts. “I think I liked your old mattress better.”

Isak takes a pillow, turning over completely and starts hitting him over and over, and even can barely get his “I’m kidding, I’m kidding!”’s out through his laughter.

Even manages to finally take the pillow out of Isak’s hands and throw it over the bed, then rolls over to press Isak’s back onto the mattress, pressing his elbows on either side of him. He glares up at Even, who’s just grinning down at him cheekily.

“I’m kidding,” he mutters, pressing his lips against Isak’s. Isak presses his lips tightly together petulantly, and Even laughs. “I’m kidding,” he reassures again, and Isak is helpless against Even’s next kiss, so he finally returns it, slowly.

And that’s what they do — Isak loses track of time, but all they do is kiss, and kiss, and kiss, Even eventually half-lying on the mattress and half-lying on Isak’s chest, and there’s no tongue, no teeth, it’s just their lips moving against each other’s softly, Isak’s fingers running through Even’s hair recurrently, Even’s thumb mindlessly stroking Isak’s cheek.
It’s nice. It’s always nice. Kissing Even is nice. Isak’s always liked kissing — it’s probably the only thing his friends know he does the most, but it’s never been — kissing Even is probably the best experience with kissing he’s had in a while. Whenever he finds some random guy to make out with at a party, the goal is concise and the same: make out until their lips are swollen, their tongues are tired, and their teeth cannot take any more knocking. Afterwards, it’s a pat on the shoulder and a goodbye, and Isak presumes his mysterious make out partner goes off to find someone who will actually put out.

To Isak, kissing’s never been a *chore*, but always a means to an end — if he couldn’t go all the way, which he was never eager to, then at least he could get the best part of it, which was the eager, consensual kissing part.

It’s only until he started sleeping with Even, though, that he remembered kissing is definitely not the *best* part of the experience, but — it certainly is nice. Nicer than most times, anyway.

Maybe it’s just because Even’s a good kisser. He’s got the lips for it, amongst other things, and he can figure out when Isak wants something more intense or wants something more casual, without ever having to ask. Or maybe it’s just because he knows that there’s more to it than kissing, and he can have this without fear of repercussion. Whatever it is, kissing Even is always far more enjoyable than most of his other menial everyday tasks, even sometimes counting charts and constellations, and so he doesn’t ever begrudge their time doing this.

Inevitably, Isak has to eventually sigh against Even’s lips and push him away a little bit. “My lips are dry,” Isak tells him, and Even laughs, rolls off of him.

“Just as well,” Even replies. “I should get going before Eva shows up.”

Isak sits up on his forearms, watching Even practically bounce off his bed and start collecting his clothes from the floor. He’s humming an aimless tune as he does this, which Isak finds fucking ridiculous, and it’s only when Isak finally sits up completely that Even looks over at him.

“Same time next week?” he jokes, grinning widely.

Isak rolls his eyes as Even finishes shrugging on his shirt, which is incidentally his last piece of clothing. “You still need to teach me how to cook,” he points out, and Even hums thoughtfully. He walks over to the bedside table to look at Isak’s phone, presumably to look at the time.

“I think the boys are in the house for another three hours,” he finally replies. “So I’ll go grocery shopping. I’ll text you when they’re gone, okay?”

Isak nods. “Sounds good.”

Even smiles, walking backwards towards Isak’s bedroom door. He stops right below the threshold. “But you’re happy with the new mattress, right?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Goodbye, Even.”

Even grins. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

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Isak spends the next three hours doing not much of anything — he gets dressed, for one, puts his glasses back on, lies on his new mattress and turns on the television. He’ll admit that he can definitely feel the difference between this mattress and his old one, probably because this one’s less unforgiving on his ass, which probably means it’ll have the same impact on both his back and his
stomach.

Plus, Isak definitely plans on spending a lot of time on his back whenever Even’s over. Eating Even out might be his favorite thing when it’s Isak who’s topping, but he doesn’t think anything beats out Even fucking him senseless, speechless.

He never tells him this, though. He’s absolutely happy to take turns – there are absolutely a lot of upsides to fucking Even, and sometimes it’s what Even needs; it’s why they started this arrangement in the first place, after all, to be able to give each other what they need when they need it, and somewhere along the line, it’s just turned into something they both want, too.

Which makes sense – there can’t be a need for something if there isn’t at least a small sense of want underneath it, it’s only that now it’s far more prominent for the both of them; where before they only sought out each other when they were stressed, or angry, or upset, now the seek each other out just because they feel like it. Isak supposes it’s one of the perks of actually being friends with your friend with benefits; and maybe that’s always meant to be the case. He doesn’t think the arrangement was ever meant to be between two people that dislike each other, but for some reason Isak and Even thought that it would work, and though it was nice while it lasted – the anger, and the aggression – he thinks it’s far more satisfying and most certainly a lot more fun when they can actually stand each other.

Eventually, Isak gets tired of staring unseeingly at the television, so he swings his legs over the mattress, standing up and walking over his drawers, where the fish food sits beside the television. He takes the flask, enclosing it against his palm, then walks over to Galileo’s tank, whom Isak would worry about having mentally scarred for life, except for the fact that he’s one) a fish and two) probably never fucking looking at Isak, anyway.

He taps thrice on the glass and watches Galileo swim aimlessly as if he hasn’t heard a sound, then sighs as he slides open the top. He sprinkles the food into the water and that definitely catches Galileo’s attention – he swims upward and chomps on every piece, faster than Isak can actually close the top of the tank again. He huffs a laugh as Galileo continues to swim, as if he hadn’t just been fed, and Isak bites the inside of his cheek as he watches him.

Galileo brings about a lot of good memories. But he’s also brought about a lot of bad memories, considering he was a part of his past, before he left, before he ended up here. Sometimes Isak can’t look at him, afraid the memories will break through his shield. Sometimes Isak can’t stop looking at him, being grateful for the company he’s kept Isak, for letting Isak feel attachment to one living thing and one living thing only, reminding him that there’s a part of him behind his walls that’s still human.

So the fish can ignore Isak all he wants, be unaware of his existence, even, but just as Isak sometimes wonders about his presence in his life, there’s a larger portion of his time spent being grateful for his presence in his life.

Just as he’s putting the fish food back where it belongs, he hears the apartment door open, and this time two voices fill the apartment – one is unmistakably Eva’s, and the other is unmistakably Jonas’s. Isak might be unaware of a lot of things happening around him if he tries hard enough, but he doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to not recognize his best friends’ voices.

He makes sure his hair doesn’t look like too much of a mess before walking out of his room and into the living room, where Eva is throwing her coat over the couch and Jonas is still taking off his shoes at the entrance. Isak raises an eyebrow as the both of them catch sight of him, and Eva grins.

“Hey,” she greets. “Find a mattress?”
“Yep,” Isak nods. “Currently in my room.”

“Comfortable?”

“Very.”

Eva waggles her eyebrows. “Can I go try it out?”

Isak huffs a laugh. “Be my guest,” he gestures towards his room, and she prances past Isak to try out the mattress. He shakes his head and turns to look at Jonas, who’s looking past Isak a little pensively. Isak looks over his shoulder again, where Eva’s disappeared, and then back at his best friend.

“Everything alright?” he asks, and Jonas blinks, turning his gaze back towards Isak.

“Yeah,” he nods, smiling crookedly. “Just thinking about how weird it must be for you to have Even in your room after banning him for so long from your apartment altogether.”

Isak concentrates very hard on not blushing. It’s almost as if when Jonas was looking towards his room, he was receiving snapshots of what had just happened in there, a couple of hours ago. Jonas doesn’t sound particularly suspicious, or anything, just generally curious, and his gaze has always been sort of intense, but there’s something especially piercing about it now that makes Isak squirm a little in place.

“It was weird for a while,” he admits. “But now it just kinda – feels normal, you know?”

“Hm,” Jonas nods. “It makes sense, I think.”

Isak’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh?”

“I mean, I was a little freaked out about it at first,” he admits. “Didn’t really buy your excuse. But – we’ve always known you two would get along,” he tells Isak. “I guess it was only a matter of time before you two realized it, too.”

This makes Isak feel a little guilty – Jonas suddenly genuinely sounds like he means it, like he now buys Isak’s excuse of “bonding over weed”, and that’s so fucked up; he wants to tell Jonas, or, at least a small part of him does, doesn’t want to exclude him from the narrative he and Even have built for themselves. He knows that if anyone would be understanding of the situation, it’d be Jonas, even if he would warn Isak about things possibly getting messy – he’d told Isak before if “you do it right”, things don’t have to get complicated, but now Isak’s not so sure he is doing it right, at least, not to Jonas’s standards, so he can see his best friend talking him out of this entire arrangement.

And that’s the part that wins, he thinks. The part that’s afraid Jonas will convince him sleeping with Even is a bad idea, and having to give up sleeping with Even altogether.

Not for emotional reasons, because he’s not emotionally involved – Isak knows how to keep that part separate, knows how to differentiate the dopamine an orgasm releases to the actual relationship they have outside said orgasm, and always takes into consideration that technically the lust, romantic love and attachment brain systems don’t often go together, anyway – but because he likes the sex. Doesn’t think he’ll have a chance to have so much of it after Even moves on to someone else, considering it’s hard to find someone who’ll tolerate Isak’s extensive rants after sex the same way Even does, something he’s realized he likes to do after sex, just have a conversation, though maybe that’d be for the best.

Maybe finding another fuck buddy who does the job and leaves right after would actually be better for Isak in the long run, save he ends up making friends with that one, too.
Though, to be fair, he doesn’t think he’d find another friend like the kind of friend Even is, which is saying a lot, so maybe it wouldn’t be a risk at all.

Either way, he’s resolved himself to not telling Jonas, letting this run its course, and when it’s over, mutually decided so, he’ll come clean. He’ll explain to Jonas why he couldn’t tell him, and then present to him with the evidence that nothing got messy, nothing got complicated, and he and Even could absolutely remain friends after this. It might make meeting Even’s future love interest a little awkward, sure, but that’s probably nothing they can’t work around.

“He’s—” Isak clears his throat, trying to do the same to his mind. “Yeah, I just – he’s so fucking – different from me, you know?” He laughs once. “I don’t know how you guys thought we’d get along, because there’s so much we don’t agree on.”

“But you do get along, don’t you?” Jonas points out, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, sure, but that could be a fluke.”

Jonas shakes his head. “It’s not,” he assures Isak. “Maybe you don’t see why it works, but there’s a reason it does. But does it really matter?” he looks at Isak, a little curiously. “Dude, who cares why it works? It works, and you guys like each other, and that should be that. Stop looking for a reason in everything.”

Isak glares. “I don’t look for reason in everything,” he replies defensively.

“You tried to find meaning in the teletubbies, Isak.”

“Those—” Isak holds up a finger. “I just wanted to know if they were animatronics ahead of their time or if people were manning the suit. So not meaning, just – general, scientific curiosity.”

“And?”

“There were people in the suit,” Isak admits, a little put out at the memory. “I really thought the British were a lot more technologically advanced than us.”

All of this aside, however, Isak actually does know why he and Even work – maybe not explicitly, but he’s already accepted that they fit, and maybe it’s their biological components that have separated them into categories that allow them to get along with each other so effortlessly. He doesn’t believe there’s not a scientific reason for the fact, in any case, and that eases most of his worry in regard to that matter.

“I can hear your dream being crushed from here,” Jonas grins, and Isak flips him off.

“I approve of this new mattress,” Eva announces from behind Isak, and Isak turns to look at her. “Very comfortable. Less firm than your old one. It hugged my ass brilliantly, almost like a lover caressing its beloved.”

Isak snorts. “Please don’t refer to my mattress as your ass’s lover.”

“Isak, don’t be stupid, it’s already too late for that,” Eva stops right beside Isak, then smirks. “Besides, I think it worked very well for you, too, hm?”

Isak blinks at her. “What?”

Eva waggles her eyebrows. “All that toilet paper in your trash can,” she points out melodically, and Isak’s heart sinks to his stomach. “Don’t tell me you weren’t breaking it in with some porn on your
Jonas wrinkles his nose. “Eva, Jesus, I don’t need to know when my best friend jacks off.”

“It’s a normal thing every normal person does!” Eva replies defensively, but Isak’s stuck on the idea Eva might have also seen the condom, and maybe have jumped to an entirely different conclusion. The evidence can’t point to anyone else – she’d either think Isak was jerking off with a condom on for convenience, or her mind would go straight to the only person she knows was in the apartment alone with Isak, if at least for an hour.

But she doesn’t seem suspicious – he figures the toilet paper Even cleaned himself up with was enough to hide the dirty condom from view, and it’s not like Eva would go rummaging in the waste basket if she assumed the toilet paper was full of his come, so—

He wills his heart to stop racing so quickly. He’s just going to have to make sure to take out the trash afterwards every single time. It shouldn’t be so hard. He’ll even tell Even to throw it out on the way out, problem solved.

It’s Isak’s luck that she didn’t see the condom and press further, really. And there’s not a lot of it, so this has definitely left a dent in whatever luck he has left in life.

“Why are you looking in my trash can?” he asks instead, hoping he looks embarrassed about being caught masturbating and not nearly being caught fucking Even. “Is that some sort of fetish I don’t know about?”

“She was very keen on making out behind the dumpster in high school,” Jonas jumps in, smirking at Eva. Isak is so, so grateful for Jonas in his life. He almost wants to grab his face and kiss his forehead. “So, Eva? Verdict?”

Eva rolls her eyes. “No fetish for trash, alright? Jeez,” Eva gestures towards the kitchen. “Anyway, I’m sure you worked up an appetite, what with all the jerking off you did, and Jonas – I’m sure you did, too, what with all the shopping you did—”

“I didn’t jerk off!” “Are you implying I’d be sexist enough to think of shopping as—”

“Shut up, both of you,” Eva interrupts. “I was literally just gonna offer to cook something for you.”


Isak shifts his weight. “I’m actually going over to Even’s,” he says, and both Jonas and Eva look at him. Licking his lips, he shrugs innocently. “He’s going to teach me how to cook.”

Eva grins, and Jonas furrows his brows. “What? Why?”

“Because Eva promised Noora I would cook for all of them,” he glares at the culprit, who’s grin turns sheepish. “And since she’s so fucking smitten—”

“Stop it,” Eva interrupts. “I didn’t mean—”

“Oh, I’m sure you didn’t. Not like you can’t say no to her because you’re ignoring all my warnings—”

“Anyway,” Eva glares at him, then turns back to Jonas. “You guys are invited, too, if you want to watch Isak make a fool out of himself,” she smirks.
Jonas looks a little pained. Presumably because the thought of eating anything that Isak cooks might make him sick. “Why aren’t you teaching him to cook?” he asks instead of replying.

“She says I’m a terrible student,” Isak replies, and Jonas scoffs, as if the comment had been made about him.

“That’s rude.”

“I know!”

“Anyway,” Jonas shakes his head. “I don’t know if I can. I think I’m busy that day.”

Isak and Eva stare at him. Jonas frowns, looking a little defensive.

“What?” he asks.

Isak and Eva exchange a glance, then turn back to him. “We haven’t told you when yet,” Eva points out, and Jonas looks a little guilty of the fact.

“I thought you’d – said tomorrow,” he mutters lamely.

“Hey, dude, if you don’t want to come, I get it,” Isak replies. “But, you know – I’d really appreciate it if you all showed up. I don’t want to be ambushed by all of the girls.”

Jonas looks like he’d rather be hit in the face with a football than come to the dinner Isak will be cooking, but, as any good best friend should do, he puts aside his obvious apprehension and says, “Okay, we’ll show.”

“Thank you,” Isak grins.

“It’s on Friday,” Eva replies then. “I’ll text you the time.”

“That’s fine.”

Isak gestures lamely towards his room. “Alright, well,” he clears his throat. “I’m gonna go grab my shit and head to Even’s.” Even though Even hasn’t actually texted him to tell him the coast is clear, but – he’d rather leave than sit in the kitchen watching Eva cook something he won’t be able to eat. That’s just masochistic.

Eva nods. “Be careful, yeah?” she smiles, and Isak nods.

“Yes, mom,” he teases, and Eva rolls her eyes, but her smile widens.

“Have fun setting Even’s kitchen on fire.”

“Oy!” Isak glares at her. “I will come out of that kitchen a regular Julia Child.”

“I believe in you, buddy,” Jonas pats his shoulder in solidarity. Isak nods at him.

“Thank you, Jonas.”

“I do, too,” Eva laughs. Isak offers her a disbelieving look. “No, I really do. If anyone has the patience to teach you, it’s Even.”

Yeah, well, he’s not patient when Isak’s gonna fuck him, but that’s not something he can very well bring up, can he?
Instead, he coughs, rolls his eyes for good measure, and makes his way to his bedroom. “I’ll see you guys later,” he calls out as he walks through his door. “Don’t have too much fun without me.”

The lack of a reply isn’t surprising. They must be already walking towards the kitchen, engulfed in their own conversation. Isak then just rushes over to his bedside table, grabs his phone, keys, and wallet, turns off the television, taps once more on Galileo’s glass, and exits his room, closing the door behind him.

He hears Jonas and Eva laugh in the kitchen, which he ignores, and finally makes his way outside. He doesn’t lock the door.

--

Isak texts Even on the tram ride there.

**ISAK**
Had to leave the apartment sooner than expected

**ISAK**
So I’m on my way to yours

**ISAK**
Oops?

**EVEN**
It’s cool

**EVEN**
Yousef’s about to leave, Elias is gone

**EVEN**
By the time you get here it’ll just be me

**ISAK**
Cool

**ISAK**
What am I making?

**EVEN**
Well, since you’re cooking for a group, I thought your best bet would be some pasta

**EVEN**
So you’re going full Italian

**ISAK**
Like, instant pasta? Can I do that and just pretend I cooked it

**EVEN**
You’ll only be fooling yourself, Isak

**ISAK**
Ok, what type of pasta then
EVEN
Shrimp Scampi with Linguini

ISAK
Sounds fancy

EVEN
More like easy enough that you can get through it, but difficult enough so that the girls are impressed

EVEN
I got your back, Valtersen

ISAK
Never doubted it, Bech Næsheim

The driveway of Even’s house is empty by the time Isak walks up to it, which makes Isak’s shoulders sag in relief – it’s not that showing up at Even’s house now would be strange, at least, maybe not after a while, but Isak knows both he and Even are aware it’d be best if Yousef and Elias weren’t there to watch them cook, lest they catch on to the fact that their friendship isn’t quite as typical – Isak thinks they should ease the boys into it, maybe with a lazy day playing video games in the living room, or something.

Either way, Isak’s happy that they don’t have to worry about that right now, so when he knocks on the door, it’s with a sigh of relief that he greets Even with when he opens the door to let Isak in.

“How was the tram ride over?” Even asks Isak as he’s shrugging off his coat and taking off his shoes.

“Crowded,” he replies. “Especially for a fucking Sunday.”

“Bad luck, I guess,” Even teases, and Isak rolls his eyes and flicks at his shoulder. “This is when owning a car would benefit you, you know.”

“I already told you, I don’t drive,” Isak replies as they make their way towards the kitchen. “It’s dangerous and people die.”

“I’ve been thinking about getting one,” Even admits as they walk inside. There are several grocery bags scattered atop the island. “Would make my moving around easier.”

“It’s your death sentence,” Isak tells him, and Even laughs.

“Drama queen,” he sings, and Isak glares at him.

“Can you just explain all of this to me?” He gestures towards the grocery bags, and Even nods his head enthusiastically.

“Yep, okay, so,” Even reaches into the bags and starts fishing ingredients out of them. There are an intimidating number of them, though Even proceeds to assure Isak they’re not going to use all of them.

“Then why the hell did you buy so much?”
“Jeez, Isak,” Even rolls his eyes. “Not everything’s about you. We also need groceries in this house, you know.”

Isak doesn’t let himself blush. He supposes it was a bit presumptuous of him to jump to the conclusion that most of the groceries were for his endeavor – still, he doesn’t reply to the quip, instead walks over to stand parallel to Even beside the island, watching him as he starts putting away the groceries that Isak assumes won’t assist them at all today. Isak leans against the top of the Island with his forearms as Even walks back and forth.

“So you just buy groceries for everyone?” Isak asks, and Even shakes his head.

“We take turns,” he explains. “We’re sure to have a select list of items we all have to buy so we spend roughly the same amount of money when it’s our turn,” he shoves some paper plates into the cupboard. “And, you know, sometimes we buy shit that’s not on the list, but that’s our prerogative, you know? We make it as fair as we can.”

Isak’s about to ridicule this system – jokingly, of course – when he realizes he never really buys the groceries. Eva’s never once chastised him for never contributing to the kitchen stock, and suddenly his stomach whirls guiltily. It’d never occurred to him. Isak will sometimes buy some Fanta, maybe some junk food, but never anything to contribute to the meals Eva makes, which Isak assumes is far more expensive. Isak wonders why Eva’s let him get away with this for so long – resigns himself to bring this up next time he’s able to.

When Even’s finished putting what’s necessary away, he’s left with a couple of ingredients on the table – the linguini, some butter, some oil, some vegetables, pre-cooked frozen shrimp, some other crap, and—

“Is that wine?” Isak asks, and Even nods.

“Dry white wine,” he explains. “We could have foregone this, honestly, and you can do the same on – when are you doing this again?”

“Friday.”

“Friday, then, you can skip it, or replace it with chicken broth, which would be more convenient, actually, but I wanted to give you the full experience today.”

Isak snorts. “Okay.”

“C’mere,” Even waves him over, and Isak walks around the island and over to him. “So most of this we’re doing on the stove,” he explains, and Isak nods. “Which means it’d be easier to chop our veggies on the counter, but for the sake of space and teaching, we’re gonna go ahead and do that on the island.” Even reaches into a drawer, fishing out a large cutting board. He walks back to the island and sets it down before walking back to Isak and fishing out some pots and pans. “Do you have a skillet in your apartment?”

Isak blinks. “A what?”

Even grabs one of the pans and waves it in the air. “This.”

Isak looks at it. “That’s just a pan.”

Even sighs. “Yes, but do you have a skillet or a sauté pan?”

Isak shakes his head. “Does it matter?”
Even stares at him for a moment, then sighs loudly. “Never mind, I’ll ask Eva later,” he replies, setting the pan down beside the pot. “Okay, so the first thing you do is boil the water. You know how to boil water, right?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Yes, Even, I know how to boil water.”

Even grins and hands Isak the pot. “Okay, go for it.”

Isak walks over to the sink, looks at it for a moment. “There hasn’t been any warning about the tap water lately, has there?”

Even laughs. “No, Isak, there hasn’t.”

“Alright,” he replies, turning the knob forward and letting the pot fill. “When do I stop?”

“Hm,” Even walks over to stand next to Isak as he watches Isak fill the pot with water. When it’s near the top, Even reaches over to turn that knob off. “That should be good,” he replies, then gestures with his head over to the stove. “Come on.”

Isak struggles slightly with the heaviness of the pot, but eventually manages to set it down over the burner Even’s pointing towards. Even reaches over to turn the burner’s knob on high, then grabs the pot’s cover and places it gently above it.

“Okay, we’ll give that a while,” Even replies. Isak gestures Isak over to the island. “We’re gonna start chopping our veggies while it’s at it.”

Isak looks at all the vegetables sitting on the island, brows furrowed. “Those are onions,” he deadpans, and Even laughs.

“Very astute observation, Isak,” he teases. “Technically they’re shallots, but—”

“Ugh,” Isak grunts. “I’m gonna cry. My eyes are gonna burn and deteriorate.”

“Shut up.”

“God damn syn-propanethial—”

“Nope,” Even shakes his head and walks around Isak, reaching for the bread bin. He opens it up and cuts a slice, tearing it in half as he walks over to Isak. He tears one half into another half, and hands that one to Isak. “Here.”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “What.”

“Hold it in your mouth while you chop the onions. Just kind of—” Even demonstrates, placing the piece of bread between his teeth, halfway in his mouth, halfway past his lips. “Like this,” he replies, voice muffled.

Isak blinks at him. “Uh, why?”

Even shrugs, takes the piece of bread out of his mouth. “It works,” he replies. “I don’t know why, but it’ll stop your eyes from stinging.”

“Can’t my glasses protect me?”

“No they cannot.”
Isak looks at Even incredulously. “Are you just saying this to make me look stupid?”

Even laughs. “I literally just did it for your benefit!” he points out. “Come on, seriously. Here,” he reaches for one of the onions, peeling the outer skin from it. When he’s done, he sets it down on the cutting board and reaches for a large knife in the drawer, then holds the onion down. “Look, here,” he puts the bread back in his mouth, then raises his brows at Isak, presumably waiting for him to do the same.

Isak sighs loudly, but obliges, placing the bread in his mouth. Even’s smile is strained through the bread, but Isak can see it. Even turns back around to the onion, then removes the piece of bread from his mouth.

“Oh, okay, see, everyone’s gonna tell you to chop off the root, right?” Even holds up the onion and points at the root. “Don’t do that. You’ll cry quicker, even with the bread. So,” he drops the bread aside, and Isak grunts in affront, which Even laughs at. “I’m fine, I’m used to it, you’re not,” he points out. Isak narrows his eyes, but doesn’t make a move the piece of bread from his lips. “So you’re gonna chop it vertically straight through the root.” Even grabs one half of the onion and demonstrates. “Fingers on top of the onion, close enough so that they can guide your knife but far enough so that you, y’know, don’t cut them off,” he grins.

“So like this,” Even says, then places three of his fingers on top of the onion, the two other directly behind those, and he starts chopping very thin layers. “Don’t cut through the root, again, but cut as close as you can to it,” he brings his forearm to wipe at his eyes, but Isak’s not feeling any of the sting. “Really thin, like this.” When Even reaches the halfway point, he offers Isak the knife, which Isak takes instinctively. “Okay, you try,” he offers, and he switches places with Isak.

Isak narrows his eyes at the onion, currently his enemy, then places his fingers on the onion the same way Even had and starts chopping as thinly as he can. He’s not as fast as Even – he’s more concentrating on not fucking up, after all – and his slices are a little bit thicker than Even’s, but when he finishes, he doesn’t think he did that bad of a job.

Even agrees. “Look at you, ready to move to Italy,” he teases, and Isak rolls his eyes. “Okay, turn it horizontally,” he instructs. “But be sure to hold it together so it doesn’t fall apart.” Isak does as he says, mouth watering obnoxiously around the piece of breath sitting between his teeth. “Now cut through it,” he tells Isak, and Isak looks at him, perplexed. “Like – tilt the knife,” he explains, and Isak does. “Now cut through the middle, just until you get halfway.” Isak does so, and Even nods. “Now again, but this time at the top.” Isak does this, too. Even grins. “Perfect! Now all you have to do is slice it.”

Isak gets through two slices, but it’s obvious he’s failing – they’re too thick, and the onion keeps wanting to fall apart. He growls, frustrated, and Even’s laugh is quiet, though not condescending. “Here,” he offers, making his way behind Isak and pressing his chest to Isak’s back. The contact is not unwelcome – in fact, it feels normal, since they’ve had different parts of their bodies all over each other, anyway – so it feels natural enough so that Isak doesn’t flinch at the abruptness of the gesture.

Even brings his arms forward to overlap Isak’s own, then places his hands above Isak’s, gripping them lightly. “Like this,” he says into Isak’s ear, and he starts guiding Isak through the slicing, slowly, but this time the slices are thinner than what Isak was doing on his own. When it’s done, Even guides Isak’s hands to grab what’s left of the root, and slices as much of the onion left around it as he can. It’s over, then, and Isak can feel Even’s grin against the side of his face before he pulls away. “See?” he says, bringing his hand to grab the dry part of piece of bread from Isak’s mouth. Isak swallows the saliva that’d been accumulating, and Even throws the piece of bread into the trashcan beside the island. “Not that hard, right?”
Isak sighs. “Not when you’re doing it,” he says, and Even shakes his head.

“It gets easier that way,” he promises. “Your hand eventually starts knowing how to chop automatically.”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “So is that it for the onions?”

Even laughs. “Isak, you have the other half and then an entire other one to chop,” he points out, and Isak throws his head back dramatically with a groan.

“It’s too much chopping,” he whines. “I don’t wanna.”

He hears Even chuckle and approach him, and suddenly his lips are attached to Isak’s neck, which, oh. Isak closes his eyes at the sensation. “Listen, the sooner you finish this, the sooner I can take you upstairs and fuck you,” Even points out, which causes Isak to lowers his head, and glare at Even’s retreating gaze.

“Are you using sex as an incentive?”

“Absolutely I am.”

Isak hums. “I guess that’s the one thing Eva doesn’t have in her favor,” he grins, and Even shakes his head, amused. Even steps close to Isak again, kisses at his jaw. Isak huffs a disbelieving laugh.

“Are you – are you turned on right now?”

“I’m a little bit turned on right now.”

“I can’t believe you’re turned on right now.”

“Okay, to be fair,” Even pulls away and holds up his index finger. “My dick was just pressed against your ass there for a moment.”

“We were chopping onions.”

“Maybe I like progress.”

“Progress?”

“Yeah, you know, you were making progress with the onion chopping, so—”

Isak laughs, shakes his head. “You’re such an idiot,” he says, but pulls Even in for a kiss anyway, because maybe he can prolong chopping any more onions this way – and also, maybe be able to coerce Even to do the rest of the chopping.

They get a little carried away – Even grabs either side of Isak’s waist and walks him over and away from the island to the counter, where Isak takes the hint and slides himself on top of it. Even’s hands come up to the side of Isak’s face and Isak’s hands are tangled in Even’s hair as he wraps his legs around Even, pulling him closer. Even’s hands slide down to grip Isak’s thighs, pulling Isak even further towards him, enough so that they’re near-grinding, both half-hard in their jeans. Isak wraps his arms around Even’s neck, lets the kiss become a little vigorous, tongues licking their way into each other’s mouths and teeth biting down on lips periodically.

Eventually, Isak pulls away, flushed and out of breath. “We’re gonna burn the water,” he points out through uneven breaths.

Even laughs. “You can’t burn water,” he replies, and Isak’s eyebrows rise.
“Do you even know me?” he asks. “That water will find a way to burn with my presence alone.”

Even groans and drops his forehead on Isak’s shoulder. Isak rubs his back soothingly. “Okay,” he agrees. “But you’re gonna have to stay away from me for a little while.”

Isak laughs, presses a kiss to Even’s temple. “Come on, horn dog,” he teases as he pats Even’s back, and Even pulls away to let Isak slide off the counter. “Teach me how to be the next Julia Child.”

Even chuckles. “Whatever you say, Isak.”

The rest of the chopping gets a little bit easier for Isak, which is a good thing – he has to chop a couple of more things before they start making the sauce, and Even shows him how to cook the pasta – he tells Isak one day he’ll teach him how to make pasta from scratch, but time will be of the essence on Friday, so pre-packaged pasta is going to have to do.

It shouldn’t take as long as it does – at least, Isak doesn’t think it should – but they’ll stop to banter and throw quips at each other; at one point Even spreads butter along Isak’s cheek, which Isak gets him back by squeezing one of the lemon’s juice on his hair, which Even retaliates by chasing Isak around the island to sprinkle black pepper over his hair; at one point Even insults his pride by pointing out a child could drizzle olive oil better than Isak, and he huffs, stomping over to the kitchen’s exit.

“I don’t have to put up with this!” Isak throws his hands up in contempt, and Even’s laugh is bright behind him.

“Isak!” he laughs. “I’m kidding, you drizzle olive oil incredibly well.”

“Goodbye, Even!”

Before he can make it past the opening, he feels Even’s arms wrap around his stomach from behind and lift him off the ground. Isak squawks, but doesn’t fight as Even marches him over right back to the island and sets him down in front of the cutting board. His arms remain wrapped around Isak. “I am not letting you make a fool out of yourself on Friday,” he says.

Isak crosses his arms over his chest and glances back at Even. “There are YouTube tutorials.”

“Pft,” Isak can see Even roll his eyes. “They’re not as good as the real thing. Much like porn.”

Isak elbows him lightly on the stomach, and Even heaves out an oof slightly.

“Rude.”

“Besides, I’ll have you there,” Isak points out. “So it’s not like I have to know every step perfectly.”

There’s silence for a moment. “You want me there?”

Isak blinks, then frowns. He turns over in Even’s arms to find a confused-looking Even staring back at him. Isak had thought – had he not invited him in an official capacity?

That’s strange. It’s like – like he’d simply assumed Even would be there, as he’s always been nowadays.

“I mean,” Isak clears his throat. “Yeah, like. You. And the guys,” he adds. “You guys are invited, I just assumed – you know, since you knew, it’d be a dick move not to have you there, right? So – yeah, you should be there.”
Even contemplates him for a moment, expression more curious than anything, before he grins. “Okay,” he nods. “Then you’re gonna need to learn how to cook for a lot more portions.”

When they’re finished, Isak has a vague idea of what he’s supposed to do. Even laid off a little after Isak pointed out he’d be there to help him, but taught him enough so that Isak won’t look totally clueless on Friday.

After Even plates the dish – “Though don’t think you’ll be able to plate it this fancy when everyone’s around,” – he curls his fork around some of the pasta, stabs one of the shrimp, and holds it up to Isak, hand hovering underneath the fork. “Taste your brilliance,” he teases, and Isak leans forward to wrap his mouth around the fork, tasting the dish.

It’s really fucking good. And he’s not sure if it’s because they made it together, or because Even’s a genius, but he’s not looking a gift horse in the mouth – it’s just really fucking good.

Even grins, as if all he needs to know is made known to him by Isak’s expression, then he takes a bite out of the dish as well. He hums, obviously delighted, and when they’re both through with their bites, they grin at each other. Even holds up his hand for a high five, which Isak grants him.

They eventually sit down at the table and start eating the rest of the pasta – they made enough for maybe four, which meant they could leave some for Yousef and Elias, but that’s really up in the air at the moment – when Isak points out how good Even is at cooking.

“Thanks,” he smiles, and Isak finishes swallowing his bite.

“How’d you learn?” he asks as Even’s curling his fork in the pasta.

“I taught myself,” he replies. “My mom was never really good at it, and after she and my dad divorced, I just decided to start cooking for her,” he shrugs. “Made her feel better on her shittier days.”

Isak tilts his head. “Your parents are divorced?”

Even brings the pasta up to his mouth, and nods.

Isak plays with the food in front of him for a moment. So Even’s parents are divorced – Even saw the way it affected his mother, and still, still, he thinks a marriage would work out? When he lived a real-life statistic?

Isak purses his lips, keeping these thoughts to himself. “So how old were you when you started?”


“I was just making friends by thirteen.”

“It’s when my dad left,” he points out. “Besides, it’s a nice relaxation technique, you know? After I was diagnosed, when the inspiration to draw or film or do anything of the sort wouldn’t come to me because – well, you know, sometimes it kills inspiration,” he explains. “Cooking’s my only outlet then. I like it. It’s relaxing.”

Isak snorts. “Not very relaxing today.”

Even laughs. “No, but fun,” he counters, and Isak smiles at him.
“Okay, fun, I’ll grant you that.” Isak looks at him for a beat longer. “Where’s your dad now?” he asks, a little cautiously.

Even doesn’t seem bothered by the question, though. “London,” he replies. “We talk once in a while, you know, wants me to come down for the holidays sometimes, but other than that we’re not very close,” he takes another bite out of the pasta. “I don’t think we’re not close on purpose, I just think distance is – I mean, it’s not always the enemy in a relationship, I think if you’re adamant enough, it doesn’t put a strain in it, so I just feel like we both weren’t adamant enough.”

“How do you mean?” Isak asks.

“We’re not very alike,” he explains. “He’s a good guy, you know, hard-working, and I admire his spirit – he’s very happy – but apart from that, we have nothing in common. I could always find conversations with my mom easier than with my dad, and I actually think my mom would say the same about me.”

No, he doesn’t know. He’s never had a relationship with his dad to begin with, let alone a long enough conversation to figure out whether or not those would come easier than the ones with his mom.

Isak presses his tongue against the inside of his cheek, quieting for a moment. “And you think—” he clears his throat. “You think, then, still think, anyway, that you should put your trust in someone? That they won’t break you?”

Even looks at him curiously. “Yes,” he replies easily, and Isak sighs.

“You’re just—” Isak huffs. Life and predictions can hit Even over and over in the head, and yet he still refuses to be blinded by this frustrating hope that things can turn out alright, anyway. That not everything about love can bring about pain. “I don’t know.”

“I don’t think it had anything to do with love, Isak,” he tells him. “I think – they still loved each other, but I think their love was keeping them from being who they truly were, you know? And that’s not how it should be. I don’t think you should lose yourself in it. Love works when you can find a balance, between who you are and who they are.”

“I just think that that’s not what it is,” Isak argues. “I think that love is the issue in every marriage, whether or not it’s about losing yourself in it, or falling out of it. Even outside of a marriage. It’s the common denominator. It’s literally the bridge to the pain you’re going feel afterwards. Because you’re going to feel it,” Isak insists. “One way or another. You’re going to feel it.”

Even stays quiet for a moment. “You’re very peculiar, Isak Valtersen,” he finally says, and Isak scowls.

“What?”

“You say one thing, and you believe in it wholeheartedly, but then you do another,” he taps his foot against the floor. “You talk about love as if it’s foreign to you, but you very obviously love your friends. It’s not romantic love, but it’s love either way, and doesn’t that mean there’s a bridge to pain there, too?”

Isak shakes his head. “I already told you,” he replies. “I care about them, but I don’t give them the power to break me.”

“How?” Even challenges.
Isak doesn’t have the time to explain the complexities of his inner workings. Besides, it’ll probably make him look like a lunatic, which he’s not exactly gunning for at the moment, so instead he replies, “I just do.”

Even frowns. “Love’s a terrible thing to hate.”

“I don’t hate it,” he defends himself, though maybe that is very close to the truth. “I just have no use for it.”

Even clicks his tongue thoughtfully for a moment, before apparently deciding the subject must be dropped. “In any case, if you’re finished,” he gestures towards Isak’s plate. “Unless you want seconds?”

It takes Isak a moment to recover from the sudden whiplash, but he comes back, and gratefully, even. “Nah,” he shakes his head. “Filled to the brim.”

“Perfect,” Even stands from the table and proceeds to put everything that needs to be washed in the sink, moves on to packaging the leftover pasta inside a plastic container. Isak looks at the dirty sink in the dishes.

“Do you want me to wash those?” he offers, but Even shakes his head.

“Nah,” he replies. “Since we left enough for the boys, they know they’ve gotta wash,” Even finishes snapping the top on the container, then turns around to waggle his eyebrows at Isak. “Perks to being the one who cooked this time.”

“Aren’t you the only one who cooks?” Isak points out.

Even shakes his head again. “Nope,” he replies, walking over to the fridge to place the pasta inside. “Yousef cooks, too. And really well, as it were. So we take turns.”

Isak’s impressed. He had no idea Yousef cooked, too – though, to be fair, he doesn’t really talk to Yousef about what he does outside of his work, and lately it’s not like he’s been at the top of the list of people Isak’s been interacting with, so it shouldn’t come as much of a surprise.

Even comes over to grab both of their empty plates and utensils, then drops those in the sink, too. He turns back around to look at Isak and smiles. “Upstairs we go,” he gestures towards the exit of the kitchen, and he walks out, Even not far behind him.

“You realize we won’t actually be able to have sex yet, right?” Isak asks as they reach the bottom of the stairs, turning around to look at Even. Even blinks at him, obviously disillusioned.

“What?”

Isak shrugs. “We’ve gotta wait at least an hour.”

“We didn’t go swimming.”

“We have to wait!” Isak crosses his arms over his chest. “Especially after all the carbs we just ate. It’ll lower the risk of, y’know, sudden grossness during the sex.”

Even sighs loudly. “Isak, why didn’t you tell me this before we ate?”

“Because I was more hungry than horny.”

Even laughs. “Okay, fine, then we’ll go up to my room and just make out to Phil Collins.”
Isak gapes. “That’s not funny.”

“To the entire No Jacket Required album.”

“Even, I swear to God—”

Even grins impishly, before quickly grabbing Isak by the back of his thighs and hoisting him upwards, wrapping his legs around Even’s waist. Isak yelps, but is quick to wrap his arms around Even’s neck, finding his balance.

“You are not going to take me up the stairs like this,” he warns.

“Watch me.”

“You’re gonna fall.”

“I’m not gonna fall.”

“You’re gonna fall!”

“Did the mattress fall?” Even asks, eyebrows raised.

“It doesn’t matter, this time if you fall you take me down with you,” he scowls.

“You let me try this and I promise I won’t mention Phil Collins for the rest of your visit.”

Isak pauses, searching Even’s expression. “That’s not fair.”

Even smirks. “The choice is yours, Valtersen.”

Isak sighs loudly and in disdain, but he tightens both his legs’ and his arms’ grip around Even. “If you fall—” he warns.

“I won’t fall,” Even replies. “I promise.”

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He doesn’t fall.

And they only get to the thirty-minute mark of Notting Hill before Isak’s sinking down on Even, riding him and letting him whisper soft, encouraging words into Isak’s ear as he does.

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The days leading up to Friday aren’t spent agonizing over the dinner – in fact, Isak finds himself so busy he hardly has time to see Eva in their apartment, let alone be able to agonize over a dinner, and worse – to hold much of a conversation with Even, even through text.

Even still sends him random memes at different hours in the day, and Isak supposes he’s accepted the fact that he’s not going to receive a reply – Isak had merely been able to reply “I’m busy, sorry” to one of his texts maybe on Tuesday and from then on he’s only been able to reply with what he’s deemed appropriate emojis.

It’s not only work – the winter holidays are approaching here, but they’ve come to fruition in different countries, so they’ve got foreigners excitedly frequenting the museum – but it’s school, too; the workload’s gotten far more intense than it’s been before – whereas before Isak could get things
done maybe a day before deadline, now he has to sit down and work on all the homework he has for every single class in one night, which is just as well, since he hasn’t been able to sleep at all since Monday.

So he works on his homework, and he tries to work on his paper on molecular clouds and star formations – which his professor has been putting a lot of emphasis on this past week, reminding them they only have a couple of months left to complete it – but nothing comes to him. He pours through the data and his research and he can’t, for the life of him, know where to start, know where to go, know where to end. Every time he thinks he’s about to write a useful sentence, he deflates, realizing it doesn’t make as much sense as he’d initially thought.

Every night leading up to Friday is spent like this. Working on homework, agonizing over his paper, willing himself not to doze off in the middle of his classes – there’s far more repressed thoughts than there usually are, but these are ones that are only temporarily repressed, he tells himself, and prone to coming back this weekend, he’s sure. He just doesn’t have time to think about anything other than what needs to get done, even if “anything” consists of seeing Eva, talking to Even, smoking with his friends, and, hell, even talking to Eskild during his shifts.

There are a couple of sobering moments, though. For example, on Wednesday, Eva stops him on his way out of the apartment and gestures him over with a curl of her finger. Isak sighs irritably but makes his way over, asking her what she needs, he’s late.

Eva studies him for a couple of seconds in silence, enough so that Isak feels a little uncomfortable now, and then she’s tracing something on his neck with her cold fingers. Isak blinks.

“Are those—” Eva blinks, finally meets Isak’s gaze as she pulls her hand away. “Are those hickeys?”

Oh. Oh, fuck, yeah, they most probably are.

He’s such an idiot. He knows they’ve been reckless lately – but, to be fair, they’re not really thinking about much of anything other than how good it feels when they’re having sex, or making out, or, you know, the like.

Besides, Even’s lips and teeth on his neck just feel so fucking good. So Isak’s pretty sure subconsciously he knew this could and probably would be an issue, but he didn’t really do much to stop it, did he?

Isak licks his lips – he knows he can make up a ridiculous excuse right here and now and have Eva just become a lot more suspicious than she already is, so Isak decides to run with it – “Yeah,” he nods, doing his best to look sheepish, rubbing at his neck. “I was just stressed, okay? Made out with some guy from my class, no big deal.”

Eva blinks at him, as if she’s surprised Isak would be this honest with her, but she has no reason not to believe Isak – everyone in their friend group knows by now Isak’s M.O. is making out with complete strangers. Granted, this is mostly when they’re out and drunk, but there’s no reason why that can’t translate into every-day sober life, right?

Well, Eva seems to think so, anyway, because she just smirks at him. “At least you’re not jerking off anymore,” she teases, and Isak rolls his eyes. He leaves, and makes a mental note to talk to Even, and warn him there are no longer to be any marks on his neck.

(As far as marks anywhere else that’s out of sight – well.)

And on Thursday, there’s this kid in his chemistry class that approaches him before the lecture
looking for some quick cash – tells Isak he’s got some debts to settle, and he’ll take anything he has in exchange for half of a rabarbrakake. Isak points out he doesn’t really know this guy, and the cake could be poisoned, so the kid tears some of the cake and eats it for himself. The lecture lasts two hours, and he says if by the end of the lecture he hasn’t died yet, will Isak consider it?

Isak’s not an idiot. But for rabarbrakake, he’ll consider stupider things.

In the end, nothing happens to the kid, so Isak gives him as much as he has on hand and takes the half of the cake, plus a million thank yous from the guy. Isak hopes he can fix whatever the hell he’s so panicked about.

When he gets home that day, right before he has to change for work, Isak stuffs the cake in the back of the fridge. He’s going to save it for the weekend, to celebrate the end of this fucking terrible week.

When Friday finally comes around, Isak has no more classes, no more homework for the rest of the weekend – save for his stupid paper, the one he’s not going to think about all day today – and no more energy to do anything than feed Galileo and stare up at Orion’s Belt. Alnitak, Alnilam and Mintaka. Alnitak, Alnilam and Mintaka. It’s been so long since he’s been able to breathe in time with the stars, and he does this for a good fifteen, twenty minutes, until Eva finds him like this.

Isak looks up at her. “Hi,” he greets her, and Eva’s smile is amused.

“Hey,” she replies. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit’s older and wiser grandparent,” he replies, turning back to look at the ceiling. He sighs deeply. “When is everyone coming over?”

“You have a couple of hours,” she replies. “They’ll be here at around five.”

Isak reaches for his phone, presses the lock button. It’s ten o’clock now.

He nods. “Okay,” he replies. “I’m just gonna lie here for a while, if that’s okay.”

“Of course that’s okay,” Eva laughs. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in years.”

Isak raises his head. “Wanna lay here with me?”

Eva grins. “Okay.”

She walks over to Isak’s bed as he scoots to the other end, and she lies back beside him after sitting down. Her hands lace together at their resting place on her stomach, and she blinks curiously up at Isak’s poster.

“That’s Orion, right?” she asks. Isak hums and shakes his head.

“Orion’s Belt,” he corrects, and Eva looks over at him.

“What’s the difference?”

“Mm,” Isak shifts a little bit. “It’s not a constellation. It’s an asterism. It’s a pattern within a constellation, except aligned, and smaller. So, when you’re looking for Orion in the sky, you’re most likely to find it by finding the belt,” he explains. “So by finding those three stars up there. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka.”

Eva is silent. “I will not remember those.”
Isak laughs. “You can call them Zeta, Epsilon, and Delta, respectively. If that’d be easier.”

Eva shrugs. “I’ll try.” She looks over at Isak. “So – there are more stars?”

Isak nods. “Seven major ones,” he replies.

“So why aren’t those three the same as the others?” Eva asks, pointing towards the ceiling.

“Well, a lot factors into that,” Isak explains. “Distance, mostly. Size. Age. But you could say the same for the rest of them. Mostly it’s because they’re almost perfectly aligned,” he says.

“So why the belt and not just Orion?”

Isak licks his lips. “They’re supergiants,” he teases. “So it makes me feel bigger.”

Eva snorts. “Seriously.”

Isak shrugs as much as he can against the mattress. “Really, though,” he replies. “These stars are like, far more massive than the sun. But—” Isak pauses. “Truthfully, it’s probably because it’s one of the only asterisms that you can see all around the planet, wherever you are.”

Eva’s eyebrows rise, which Isak catches through his peripheral. “Really?”

Isak nods. “I think there’s something really cool about that.”

“For sure there is.”

“That means the entirety of Orion too, by the way, but the belt’s the first thing you see to find it, so. I don’t know.” Isak sighs, then turns to look at Eva again. “Did you know that in a lot of cultures, people believed we came from the stars?”

“Seriously?” Eva laughs. “Shit, that’d be awesome.”

“You’re fucking telling me,” he replies, and Eva laughs again. “So all of them would, like – study them so closely and build huge structures to correlate with the constellations, so like, there are the pyramids of Giza, that line up perfectly with Orion’s Belt.”

Eva smiles. “That’s really cool.”

Isak shrugs. “It’s just a theory, though.”

“I definitely think you think it’s not.”

Isak purses his lips. “It’s too much of a coincidence, you know?” he looks back up at the poster. “Besides, that’s so fucking cool, if it’s true. Just reminds me that we’re basically connected to people from tens of thousands of years ago, too.”

There’s silence between them for a moment – it’s not uncomfortable, it never is, it’s just silence. Isak lets the stories settle within him – he knows they’re bullshit, he knows, he knows that lore comes with everything surrounding them, lore that is now extinct as science progresses to explain what these phenomena are, but there’s a part of him that enjoys them, anyway; a small part. A part that looks and sounds so much like the person he used to be, shorter, younger, far more naïve.

Sometimes Isak wonders how deep that person is buried within him. Wonders if he’ll ever successfully rid of him.
Eva turns on her side, then, hands buried underneath her cheek. “So that paper you’re so worried about, is it on Orion?”

Isak shakes his head. “No, Cepheus.”

“That’s – another constellation?”

“Yep.”

“So are you working on its history or something?” Eva asks.

Isak shakes his head again. “No, the relation between it and OB3. That’s a molecular cloud. My observations over the years. I had to search for it, map the line of carbon monoxide, size it, you know. The like.”

“I don’t know the like.”

“I can explain it to you,” Isak teases, and Eva scoffs.

“Please don’t.”

Isak laughs as Eva turns on her back again. “You know, I forget sometimes how book smart you are.”

“Hm?”

“Yeah, like, I especially forgot in high school, with all those snapbacks and Adidas jackets you wore.”

“Those looked cool as fuck, don’t come into my house and lie to me.”

“Anyway,” Eva interrupts loudly. “I really appreciate how passionate you are about the stars. And you know a lot about basically everything else. But when it comes to other matters—”

Isak groans. “Eva, not this again,” he pleads. “I just wanna lie here.”

Eva’s silent for a moment. “Okay,” she agrees, and Isak exhales in relief.

“Thank you.”

“But you know I’m always right here, right?” Eva asks quietly. Isak looks some more at Orion’s Belt.

Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka.

“Yeah,” he lies. “I know.”

--

They lay there for maybe another two hours, Eva talking about her own classes, her job at the grocery store – Isak notices how she pointedly doesn’t mention Noora, probably because she knows Isak will just make a face and then try to remind her Noora’s straight and in love with a weirdo – but at the end, Eva’s phone rings, and she fishes it out of her pocket, struggling minimally.

She raises the phone to her face and sighs. “It’s Vilde,” she says, sitting up on Isak’s bed. “She probably wants to rant about the wedding. You cool if I leave you here?”
Isak waves her off. “Go deal with your best friend’s woes.”

Eva laughs. “I’ll be back.”

Probably not, Isak thinks. Vilde can talk Eva’s ears off for hours on end. But he nods his assent anyway, and Eva presses the accept button and brings her phone up to her ear. “Hello?”

She walks out before Isak can catch any more of the conversation, leaving him alone with his fish and his poster once again.

He thinks he might be able to doze off. He’s sleep deprived, and that might not be a good idea when he’s going to be manning a stove for so long, but before he can weigh the pros and cons of this, his text notification goes off, phone vibrating loudly on the bedside table. Isak rolls over then to reach for his phone, brings it up to his face.

It’s Even.

Isak wonders if it says anything about him that his first reaction to seeing his contact name on his phone is to smile.

He unlocks Even’s conversation, falters a little bit at seeing how many more grey messages there are than blue, but revels in the fact that that’s finally gonna change after today, hopefully.

**EVEN**
Alive yet?

**ISAK**
Barely

**ISAK**
Hi

**EVEN**
Hi

**EVEN**
Did I catch you at a bad time again

**ISAK**
Nope

**ISAK**
I’m free of hell for the weekend

**EVEN**
Nice

**EVEN**
You ready for tonight?

**ISAK**
A little
Can you come over a little earlier than the rest? You know

**ISAK**
Just to like

**ISAK**
Prepare and stuff

**EVEN**
Of course

**EVEN**
Do you need me to bring anything

**ISAK**
Nah I’ve got most of the shit already

**ISAK**
Bought them in the small downtime windows I had this week

**EVEN**
White wine too?

**ISAK**
Chicken broth

**EVEN**
Ugh, no, I’m bringing white wine

**ISAK**
You said it was the same!

**EVEN**
I lied

**ISAK**
You’re annoying

**EVEN**
Aw, thank you!

**EVEN**
How much earlier do you want me to be there?

**ISAK**
Say an hour and a half?

**EVEN**
Sure thing

**EVEN**
See you then :)

**ISAK**
See you then

When he locks the phone, his stomach swirls. He sighs and stands from his bed, walking towards the bathroom. He really, really needs to eat something, at least for now. He doesn’t remember the last time he ate.

He makes a note to rummage through the cupboard after he pisses.

--

Even arrives exactly a half an hour before, true to his word, right as Isak’s finished dressing himself after his shower. Eva still hasn’t hopped in there – because she really loves cutting things as close as Isak does, when he has the time – so she’s the one to answer the door as Isak’s walking towards the living room, toweling his hair.

“Even!” Eva exclaims, grinning. “Why are you here so early?”

Even holds up the wine. “I’m here strictly to fulfill my sous chef duties.”

Eva laughs, steps aside to let him in. Even steps inside and begins taking his shoes off. Eva looks over at Isak, who’s throwing the towel on the couch, too lazy to go back into the bathroom and throw it into the hamper. “You didn’t tell me you were gonna cheat tonight.”

“Hey,” Isak holds up an accusatory finger. “You’re the one who lied about me being able to cook. Do you want your precious Noora to find out you lied to her, too?” Eva sighs dejectedly, and Isak smirks. “I thought so.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Even grins. “This is all to impress a lady?”

“Not just a lady,” Eva corrects, looking a little affronted. “The lady.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “You don’t want to hear this story, Even,” he warns. “It’s long and it’s delusional and Eva should have so much more fucking self-preservation.”

Eva flips him off.

“Besides,” Isak continues as if he hadn’t been insulted via a middle finger. “Eva hasn’t showered or dressed to impress, so that’s probably something she should be getting a move on with?”

Eva grunts. “I hate it when you’re right,” she sighs, then looks back at Even. “Thanks for helping out,” she tells him, sounding sincere. “You’re a true pal.”

Even salutes her. “Anytime.”

Eva walks towards the bathroom, taking Isak’s towel as she walks by the couch, making sure to glare at Isak for the offense. Isak smiles at her a little sheepishly, but once Eva’s inside the bathroom, Isak gestures Even over towards the kitchen.

Even follows him inside. “I think I bought like, enough for everyone, but if not, I think we have enough time to go buy some more things,” he tells Even, grabbing things from the pantry and setting them down on the counter. “Eva told me we do have a skillet, so that’ll make you happy, I’m sure, though I still don’t see the difference,” he rolls his eyes and walks towards the fridge. “Oh, do you want some beer?” he asks, looking back at Even, who’s standing at the threshold, looking a little wary, wine bottle still in hand.

Even walks towards the kitchen counter and sets the wine bottle down. “So everything’s okay?” he asks, searching Isak’s expression.

“Yeah?” Isak exhales sharply through his nose. “I really have been busy, Even. I wasn’t trying to, y’know, ice you out or anything. I know we haven’t—”

“Isak, I know that,” Even holds up his hands to stop him. “I mean is everything okay with you. With your workload, your sleep?”

Isak clears his throat and waves him off. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

There’s silence, then Isak turns over to find Even standing where he’d left him, so he sighs, throws his hands up. “What now?”

Even shakes his head, a small smile playing at his lips. “Nothing,” he replies. “Just missed you.”

Isak blinks at him.

Even shrugs. “Just kind of — felt like before, you know?” he shakes his head. “Before all of this. I didn't really like it.”

And for the first time all week, Isak lets himself settle in what he’s been feeling, too, had been avoiding in case it distracted him from the bigger picture, but here, now, hearing Even articulate the intensity of what Isak’s common sense had been shutting down, so deep, where not the single shred of light could touch it — he’s swallowed whole by the painful realization that he’s missed Even, too, fiercely, even, and he almost feels the bricks of his walls fumble, worn by the lack of upkeep.

Isak isn’t sure of how much power he has in this situation. For a second he wonders if he has any at all, but there’s granted amnesty for the prisoner he’s been behind his walls, so he finds enough of it to do what he does best, to do what settles his fumbling bricks.

He deflects.

“You missed my dick,” he jokes lamely, and Even rolls his eyes.

“No, I mean it,” he pushes. “I missed you.”

Isak doesn’t understand. He doesn’t. He knows they’re friends, so this is something they can say to each other, but his body keeps rejecting it as if it were toxic. It keeps trying to remind him of how this started, where they truly stand, and it’s what propels him towards the open-door frame to peek his head out.

He can hear the shower water running, and Eva singing loudly inside it.

Isak turns around and walks towards Even, cups the back of his neck and pulls him forward for a kiss.

Even reacts immediately — arms around Isak’s waist, pulling him closer, tilting his head — but Isak only allows him about five seconds of this before he breaks them apart, Even chasing his lips but Isak pressing his hand against his chest, keeping him away.

“See?” he whispers quietly, and he’s sure his smile is a smirk. “Just missed my dick.”

“That was not your dick.”
“It was inferred,” he narrows his eyes at Even, who only rolls his eyes and laughs. Before Isak can take his hands back and pull away completely, however, Even brings him back for another kiss, and Isak hates the fact that he melts into the touch – he’s definitely been deprived of sexual stimulation, because his body is responding so quickly, craving far more than a kiss, hands fisting at Even’s shirt where they’d been before against his chest, heart racing with desire. Even’s hands are sliding up Isak’s back, resting just between his shoulders and pulling him closer; Isak shivers, finally lets his hands travel to grip onto Even’s hair, tilting his head and licking into his mouth and Jesus Christ—

Even walks him backwards, lips never wavering, and presses him harshly against the wall – they pull away for a second to catch their breaths and then they’re back at it, desperately, obviously starved after nearly a week without physical contact; Isak’s still half-listening for the running water from the shower, but most of his head is hazy with desire, and he has half a mind to just take Even to his room and make up an excuse later for Eva, but the other half of his mind knows that’s a ridiculous idea propelled by the pressure traveling to his groin, so—

Isak pushes Even away slightly. “Not a good idea,” he mutters quietly, and Even huffs a laugh against Isak’s lips.

“Nothing about this is a good idea,” he whispers back, pressing his forehead against Isak’s. Isak’s not really sure what he means – deduces he’s just reiterating Isak’s point – but he brings his hands to cradle Even’s face anyway.

He wants to say it. He wants to tell Even he missed him, too. But there’s a knot in his throat every time he tries, so instead, he kisses him softly one more time, and says, “See?” He manages to make his smirk steady, genuine. “Missed my dick.”

Even laughs. “Okay, so maybe I missed your dick a little bit.”

“It’s okay, I would miss my dick, too.”

“Oh, I know you would.”

Even pulls away, finally, and something in Isak’s chest lifts – he concentrates on steadying his exhale, pushes himself off the wall. It takes him a moment to realize the shower’s no longer running, so he fixes his hair quickly and walks over to smooth Even’s shirt out. Even raises an eyebrow at him.

“Eva’s out of the shower,” he explains, and Even’s face clears in understanding. “We should at least pretend we were doing something.”

Even laughs, walks over to the cupboards. “Pans?”

Isak points to the appropriate cupboard. Even opens it up and starts grabbing the pot and the pan. Isak walks over to the fridge in the meantime, opens it up, then recalls his first request. “Oh,” he says. “Beer?”

Even shakes his head. “I’m taking it easy on the alcohol this weekend.”

“Oh?” Isak’s eyebrows rise. “Work?”

Even nods. “And it’s a little bit of a trigger,” he adds. “So that’s even more of a risk.”

“Ah.” Isak turns back to the fridge and starts fishing out everything’s he’s bought. He’s careful to navigate around the beer, not keen on opening one up when Even’s not having any. Instead, when he’s finished with the fridge and putting the ingredients on the counter, he walks over to grab two
cups from one of the cupboards. “Water, then?”

Even smiles at him. “Yeah, thanks.”

Isak nods and walks over to the sink, turns the knob and fills both of the glasses with water.

Even’s set the utensils down and has found where the rest of the dry ingredients are, setting then all down. “You really got a lot,” Even grins. “I think you’ll have more than enough.”

“Good,” he replies, handing one of the glasses to Even. “Because I really didn’t feel like going out.”

Even grins at him. “Okay,” he nods. “Let’s get to work, then.”

--

They talk more than work, so it actually takes them a little while to get chopping and the like, but eventually they get there – Even offers to chop the onions for Isak, which Isak teases him about, calling him chivalrous, but Even takes it in stride. Eva walks in twice to talk to them for a little while before going back out to the living room and watching some TV.

The girls are the first to arrive, around five, and they arrive only a couple of minutes before Noora – Even and Isak hear the commotion outside, and Even wonders if he should go out there and greet them, now sitting on top of the counter beside Isak, finished with the onions, but Isak glares at him and tells him to stay put. Even obliges.

Besides, Isak’s sure that if any of the girls want to come and say hello, they will.

It turns out he’s right, as per usual. Though Vilde and Chris are the only two who walk into the kitchen, greeting Even and Isak enthusiastically. Isak doesn’t turn around, keeps giving his back to them, but he greets them with a hello anyway.

They both sit at the kitchen table as Isak chops the parsley leaves. Even’s legs are swinging where he sits on the counter.

“What have you girls been up to?” Even asks. “I feel like I never see you.”

“That’s because you don’t,” Chris points out, and Even laughs. “Not to worry, though, we don’t see much of the other boys, either.”

“Neither does Eva, though,” Vilde points out. “Unless it’s Jonas. And Isak, of course. So it’s okay. We don’t take offense.”

Isak snorts. “I think I see a lot more of you than I should, to be honest.”

Chris gasps lightly in offense. “Isak.”

“Sorry, Chris,” Isak apologizes. “That was rude.”

Even grins over at Isak. “Is that all she has to do?” he asks, gesturing towards Chris. “Can she tame you just like that?”

Isak blushes. “Shut up.”

“He’s always been nice to me because I used to want to bone him in high school,” Chris explains, and Even bursts out laughing.
“Oh, my God.”

“So he’s been trying to make up for the fact that he couldn’t bone me because he’s gay ever since.”

“I’m not—” Isak glances back at her and glares. “That is not what I’m doing.”

Chris grins. “I know.”

Isak huffs and turns back to his chopping.

“Where’s Sana?” Even asks, and there’s silence for a moment.

“She’s in the living room with Eva and Noora,” Vilde finally replies. “She’s not really — talking to them, though. She’s been doing this thing where she just stares at them.”

“I don’t know why,” Chris admits. “Noora’s really cool.”

Isak slices a little bit too harshly. When he glances back, he sees Vilde squirm in her chair, expression a little shut down. He raises an eyebrow.

“And you, Vilde?” he asks, and Vilde raises her gaze to look at Isak. “Do you like Noora?”

Vilde licks her lips, then shrugs slightly. “I think she’s very pretty,” she replies, and Isak laughs, turning back to the cutting board.

“Not actually an answer.”

“I don’t know,” Vilde replies, voice soft. “I don’t think she likes me very much.”

Isak is suddenly extremely annoyed. Noora’s not allowed to dislike Vilde. Sure, Isak may be annoyed with her once in a while, considering her voice is loud and her personality is very domineering, but she’s still his friend — and God, he must have really been starving for company, if he’s considering Vilde a friend now — and he’s known her for years, so he’s allowed to be annoyed with her once in a while.

Noora has probably known her for a month now, since she was introduced to the girls a couple of weeks after her friendship with Eva blossomed. She knows very little of Vilde to dislike her, and he has half a mind to confront Eva about it. Vilde’s her best friend, after all, her first friend after the issue with her ex-friends at Nissen, and she’s always been a little problematic, but she’s grown out of it, is far more willing to learn now. She still has a tendency to speak before she thinks, but there’s at least culpability after the fact, and growth.

So, no. Noora does not get to dislike Vilde. Vilde’s gone through too much shit in high school to end up right back where she started.

Before Isak can reply, though, Chris pipes up.

“Come on, Vilde, that’s not true.” But when Even exchanges a glance with Isak, he can tell that there is definitely some semblance of truth in that statement.

“I mean — I think she tolerates me, most of the time,” Vilde explains. “But there’s always this — air to her, when she talks to me. I don’t know. Maybe she’s a lesbophobe,” she offers, and Isak scowls. It would be just Eva’s luck.

“No, she’s not,” Chris amends. “She’s talked very extensively about gay rights and its ties to feminism and stuff.”
“Then I don’t know,” Vilde sounds defeated. “She seems to like Sana a lot, though. But I don’t think Sana’s giving much back.”

Of course she’s not, Isak doesn’t say. She sees the same thing I do.

And if Sana’s noticing even the slightest hint of animosity from Noora towards Vilde, too, Isak’s willing to bet she’s not her biggest fan, either.

“I don’t know what there isn’t to like about you, Vilde,” Even finally says, and Isak has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling. Fucking hero. Isak doesn’t know where so much fucking niceness comes from this guy. “So, you know, maybe she’s just getting used to you.”

“Maybe,” Vilde mutters, though she doesn’t sound very sure.

Isak takes a deep breath, bites his tongue, before sighing and putting the knife down. He walks over to the fridge and opens it, pushing past the milk and the soda to reach for what he’s been saving for Sunday, as a celebration to the end of this hell week.

He closes the fridge and instead turns around, sets it in front of Vilde. Vilde blinks down at it.

“Is this rabarbrakake?” she asks, looking up at Isak.

Isak shrugs and walks back to the butting board, giving Vilde his back. “Yeah, I had some leftover,” he lies. “If you want it.”

It’s the entire half he paid for, actually, and he hasn’t had a single taste of it, but — maybe Vilde needs it more than he does right now.

He practically feels Vilde’s beam on his back. “Thank you, Isak,” and she sounds a lot happier, maybe even touched.

Isak coughs, continues slicing, but he feels Even’s foot lightly bump against his thigh. Isak glances at him, and Even looks fond, so Isak scowls at him and turns back to his work.

“How can I have some, too?” Chris suddenly asks, and Isak laughs.

“You can both have it.”

Vilde hums. “We’ll spoil our dinner, though.”

“Vilde, you can always make enough room for cake so that you have leftover room for other things, okay?”

Vilde laughs. “Alright, Chris.”

Even slides off the counter, presumably to approach the girls. “Mind if I take a piece for myself?”

“Of course not!” Vilde replies, and Even fishes out a knife from the drawer beside Isak. He walks back out of Isak’s vision, and Isak pushes some of the chopped leaves over to the left of the cutting board and grabs some others. He hears Even walk back to the part of the counter he’d been sitting on before, placing the piece of the cake on a napkin beside him. He doesn’t dig into it.

“We should take some of this out to Sana,” Chris suggests, and Vilde hums in agreement.

“Yes,” she replies, and Isak hears the scratching of their retreating chairs. “Thanks again, Isak,” she says, and Isak glances at her, offers her a small smile.
“Yeah,” he nods. “No problem.”

Vilde’s smile is bright, and she and Chris retreat then, cake in hand.

Isak sighs loudly and chops at the leaves at a quicker pace than before.

He feels Even’s intense glare on the side of his face, and he ignores it for as long as he can, until he can’t ignore it anymore. He turns to meet his gaze, and raises his eyebrows challengingly when Even smiles at him.

“What?” Isak snaps.

Even keeps smiling. “That was very nice of you.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “It wasn’t nice, I just had leftovers, I didn’t want them to go to waste.”

“See, I don’t think that’s true. I think you saw your friend was hurting, and you gave her your cake to make her feel better. I think you were nice.”

“It’s Vilde.”

“Yes, it is,” Even tilts his head, a little curiously. “And yet here we are.”

Isak huffs irritably. “You don’t make any sense ever.”

Even hums, then cuts a piece of the cake with a fork he fishes out of the dry rack in the sink. He stabs at it, then holds it up beside Isak’s face. “Here.”

Isak sighs, resigned, turns his head to wrap his mouth around the cake, pulling it away from the fork. Isak moans a little bit, regretting having given it away at all — it’s so fucking good, the guy in his class wasn’t lying. “Jesus.”

Even smiles, and sets the fork down beside him. He jumps off the counter again, then walks to where he’s standing behind Isak, chest pressed to his back. Isak shivers slightly when Even brings his lips to Isak’s neck, kissing it softly. Isak bites his lip, is about to warn Even about all the fucking company outside the kitchen, but then Even’s hand comes around Isak’s waist and is suddenly palming him over his jeans.

Isak’s exhales is shaky. “Even—” he’s really attempting to chastise him here, but it’s just so hard when his touch feels so good, his kisses electrifying, and his body shouts at Isak with anger over missing this for an entire week. He closes his eyes and drops the back of his head onto Even’s shoulder, his hand gripping tighter around the knife’s tang, shaking.

“I think you have a big heart, Isak Valtersen,” Even mutters quietly against his skin, privately. “I think that’s the most attractive thing about you.”

“Not my ass?” Isak jokes lamely, and Even breathes a laugh against his neck that sends shivers down his spine.

“Nope,” Even replies. Isak bites his bottom lip where Even squeezes him, finally drops the knife onto the cutting board as holds back a gasp. Even begins to nibble on Isak’s neck, but Isak shakes his head urgently.

“Eva — noticed the marks earlier this week,” he breathes, and Even nods in understanding. So instead, he brings his lips to kiss Isak’s cheeks, then his lips demand Isak’s turn around to meet them,
The kiss isn’t anything to write home about, slow and soft, presumably so that no one hears them if they’re approaching; eventually Isak feels himself starting to get completely hard, so he pulls away from Even’s lips. “Nope—” he shakes his head. “Someone’s gonna—”

“Fanta, right?”

Isak jumps and Even immediately removes his hand and breaks apart from Isak, walking casually towards the fridge. Isak shakily grabs the knife again, pretending he wasn’t probably very close to blowing a load courtesy of Even’s hand, starts slicing to the best of his ability.

He hears Eva walk into the kitchen, sniffing dramatically.

“Wow,” she says, and Isak can hear her grin. “That actually smells really good.”

Isak exhales, pretending to be offended, but mostly concentrating on hiding the fact that he’s half-hard. He can only pray that Eva doesn’t see this when she walks over to the fridge.

Even’s taking up most of the space there, humming casually. “Well, he did learn from the best,” Even points out, and Eva scoffs.

“Listen, it would have smelled even better if I had taught him.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Honestly, I love him, but how did you find the patience?”

There’s a moment of silence, where he’s sure both he and Even are recalling their tongues shoved down each other’s throats during their teaching session, but then Even alleviates the situation by saying, “I used to babysit.”

Isak scoffs. “I’m not a child.”

“No, you’re not.”

“He’s a child for some things,” Eva chimes in. “But very mature for others, hm, Isak?” He can hear her smirk from here.

Isak, however, isn’t sure what she means. “What?” he asks, turning to look over at her in confusion.

Eva looks over at Even. “Did he tell you he found time to make out with a classmate even with all the work he’s been doing?” Isak freezes, and he see Even do the same, only for a second. “Oh?”

“Yep. Apparently jerking off only gets him so far.”

“It wasn’t—” Isak clears his throat. “It wasn’t even for that long.”

“Long enough,” Eva sings, but Even doesn’t react at all. His expression is a little stoic, which Isak assumes is to not give anything away, so Isak turns back and slices a little bit quicker.

He hears Even keep rummaging through the fridge, and Eva finally sighs loudly impatiently.

“I don’t know what you’re looking for in there,” Eva teases. “But could you hand me the Fanta
while you’re in there?”

“Sure thing,” Even replies, reaches inside for the bottle before handing it over to where Eva stands in the entrance. Isak is watching all of this through his peripheral, working on his breathing exercises.

“Thanks, babe,” Eva replies. “Keep up the good work, Issy.”

“That’s—” Isak glances back to narrow his eyes at her. “No.”

Eva cackles as she walks away.

“Issy?” Even grins over at him, hand still on the fridge door.

“No,” Isak repeats monotonously.

“Alright,” Even replies, then finally retreats from the fridge, with a carrot in hand. He closes the door and walks back to where he’d been sitting on the counter before, sliding on top of it. Isak glances at him.

“A carrot?”

“You should be a detective, Isak,” Even teases, then takes a loud bite of the carrot. Isak rolls his eyes, the loud chewing harsh on his ears. Isak glares at him.

“That was really close,” he warns. “Maybe don’t feel me up in my kitchen anymore.”

“Okay,” Even agrees through a mouthful of carrot. “Got it.” He’s quiet for a second, studying the carrot as Isak slices in silence.

“So,” he finally speaks up, but he’s still not looking at Isak. “Found one of your nerd friends to make out with?”

Isak blinks over at him. “What?”

“Yeah,” Even nods over to the kitchen entrance. “You know, the classmate you made out with.” Isak is still blinking uselessly, unsure if Even’s kidding or not. “Was he hot? Or, cute, at least?”

Oh. Isak doesn’t think he’s kidding. “Even, Jesus,” he shakes his head. “There was no classmate, oh my God. I had to feed her a story to explain the hickeys.”

Even’s posture suddenly straightens, his eyes brighter. “Oh, right,” he takes another cheerful bite out of his carrot. “That makes sense.”

Isak snorts. “Should have made sense before.”

Even’s quiet for a moment, before he extends the carrot towards Isak. “Want some?”

Isak sighs and turns around to take a large bite out of the carrot. As he chews, he says, “That’s what I’m doing to your dick next time I blow you.”

Even’s laugh could power the city for decades.

The boys arrive as Isak starts making the sauce, and the rest of them by the time Isak’s mixing it all in. It’s extremely hot in the kitchen, but Even doesn’t leave him in here alone, which Isak is
incredibly grateful for – at least he won’t be the only one sweating when he walks back out there.

There’s an incredible amount of noise outside, as there usually is whenever all of his friends get together, but it’s different this time – even though these moments of complete unity are very rare in their friend group, a lot of them unable to find the exact right time to be in one place at once, it’s always fun, open. But they haven’t had something like this for months, which means—

The last time this happened, Isak and Even pointedly stood at opposite ends of the room, ignoring each other.

The last time this happened, Sonja was beside Even, with his arm around her waist.

So two things have changed since then. Drastically.

Even pokes Isak at his side. “Hey,” he says, and Isak looks up at him. “What are you thinking?”

Isak shakes his head. “It’s weird, right?” he asks, and Even frowns.

“What is?”

“Just – last time we were all in the same place at the same time, we couldn’t even stand to be five feet from each other,” he replies, and Even’s expression turns understanding. “And now we’ve been in the kitchen together for hours.”

“No piss breaks, either,” Even adds, grinning.

Isak snorts. “No piss breaks, yeah.”


Isak shakes his head. “No, not bad,” he agrees. “I mean, this is better, right?” He looks at Even for confirmation. “We’re better?”

Even’s smile is soft and reassuring. “I think we’re both better for knowing one another, and a hell of a lot less sexually frustrated.”

Isak barks a laugh. “Okay, you’re right.”

“Always am.” Even reaches over to remove Isak’s glasses from his face, and he hadn’t realized just how visually impaired he’d been with them on this time. Even lowers them to clean the steam off of the lenses with his shirt, laughing slightly. “How have you known what you’ve been doing this entire time?”

“Olfactory senses,” he replies. “A little bit of auditory, too.”

Even hands Isak’s glasses back. Instead of putting them on, he slips them into his shirt pocket. Even smiles at him.

“What?” Isak asks.

Even shakes his head. “Nothing,” he replies. “Are you ready to unveil your creation to the world?”

Isak squirms. “Does it look okay?”

Even laughs. “It looks great, Isak.”
“And you’re sure – Sana’ll be able to eat this?” he asks. “There’s no restrictions here, right?”

“None.”

“Okay,” Isak nods once. “Then I’m ready.”

--

It’s self-serve, which Isak has to repeatedly tell Magnus, because he keeps insisting Isak serve him a plate, which he’s not going to do, Magnus, you can stand up and serve yourself.

(Isak ends up making him a plate.)

He gets a lot of compliments, which eases his worries, and Eva kisses his cheek and tells him she’s proud of him. Isak blushes, but mutters a ‘whatever’, walks over to where Magnus is sitting on the couch to offer him his plate.

Even and Isak have been separated for the first time all night, Mutta demanding his attention as they eat, so Isak sits down next to Magnus, his own plate in his hands. Jonas and Mahdi are sitting on the loveseat beside them, talking about something or the other, and the rest of the crowd are either hovering in the foyer, or seated at the kitchen table.

Eva brought out the two extra chairs from the smaller table, plus hers and Isak’s computer chairs.

Magnus moans a little grossly as he tastes the pasta. “Dude,” he replies as he chews. “What the fuck. Where did you learn?”

Isak snorts. “Even taught me,” he replies. “And helped me.”

“Makes sense,” Magnus nods. “Kudos to you, my friend. This is delicious.”

Isak rolls his eyes, but preens slightly at Magnus’s words. “Thanks, Mags.”

“Oh, have you heard—”

Before Magnus can finish his sentence, Vilde’s prancing over with her own plate, sitting herself down on the coffee table across from Isak and Magnus.

“Hi,” Vilde grins at them, and Magnus smiles brightly back.

“Hey, Vilde,” he greets.

Vilde looks over at Isak. “Isak, this is really good,” she tells him, and Isak mumbles a thank you. “Thank you for making this for us.”

Isak shrugs. “Yeah, you’re welcome, or whatever.”

“What brings you over?” Magnus asks.

Vilde fishes out her phone and unlocks it, hands it to Magnus. “Look.”

Magnus takes it and reads something, then whistles, long and impressed. “She wants you to do all of this?”

“All of it,” Vilde rolls her eyes. “She’s making me do all the work and taking all the credit.”
“You need to venture out soon,” Magnus offers, and Vilde nods.

“Hopefully Mari will recommend me to someone,” she replies. “Since I’ve been spending most of my time with her.”

“Oh!” Magnus turns to Isak, who up until now has been watching the conversation with mild interest. “Did you hear about Vilde’s story about the husband she’s working with?”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “No?”

“Husband to be,” Vilde corrects. She turns to look at Isak. “His name is Alex,” she tells him. “He is a nightmare.”

“I thought both of them were,” Isak reminds her. “The ones with the seating chart, right?”

Vilde shakes her head. “I now know who’s the actual groomzilla,” she frowns. “You should hear the way he talks to Mari,” Vilde shakes her head. Mari, Isak assumes, is the bride. “Like, I thought she was terrible, but she’s actually one of the nicest people ever when we’re alone! I think Alex brings the worst out in her.”

“From what you’ve told me, though,” Magnus cuts in. “It just sounds like she’s trying to defend herself.”

“You’re right,” Vilde nods. “She probably is.”

“Has he been physical with her?” Isak asks, slightly alarmed.

Vilde shakes her head. “Not that I’ve seen,” she replies. “He’s mostly very — degrading, or something. Condescending might be the right word. It just makes me so angry. No one should go through something like that. Doesn’t matter if you claim you love them.”

Isak doesn’t point out how hard it actually is to leave something like that when you’re in love, mostly because Vilde seems genuinely disgruntled. “I’m very careful not to say anything, because it’s not my place to, but sometimes it drives me crazy, the way he treats her.”

Isak nods. He remembers something about some asshole guy leading Vilde on for most of high school – before she figured out her sexuality, that is – and the way he treated her. The way she felt afterwards. He remembers Eva talking to him about this at length, worried for her best friend and her well-being. Isak was always so bad at giving her advice – mostly just patted her shoulder and listened to her.

“It just makes me sad,” Vilde sighs. “Your days leading up to the wedding should be magical, you know? Not so angry and tense.”

“Yeah,” Magnus agrees, nodding. “But I guess everyone knows what they’re doing, right?” Magnus smiles encouragingly at her. “You can’t fix everyone’s problems, Vilde.”

Vilde glares at him. “Is that a challenge?”

Magnus laughs. “No, please don’t take it as one, I have no doubt you’ll try.”

Vilde takes a bite out of her pasta, before glancing over at the kitchen table. “Oh,” Vilde waves. “Chris is calling me over.” She hesitates for a moment, and Isak turns to see why – Noora’s sitting right beside Chris, talking to Eva, which Isak thinks is part of her scruple. Isak turns back and eyes Vilde.
“Go,” he encourages, and Vilde turns to look at him, something like sadness in her eyes. “They’re your friends,” he reminds her. “Nothing’s changed on that front, right?”

Vilde shakes her head. Isak smiles as sincerely as he can, and Vilde nods.

“Okay,” she stands up. “I’ll talk to you guys later.”

She leaves then, and both he and Magnus watch her go.

“Man,” Magnus says, and Isak turns to look at him. “I hope Noora eases up on Vilde.”

Isak grunts in assent. “What’s up with that, anyway?”

Magnus shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he admits. “Vilde’s very vague about it with me, probably because she doesn’t want me to feel sorry for her, but I think Vilde’s scared Noora’s trying to steal Eva away from her,” he explains to Isak. Isak scowls. “She still has Sana, though. She hasn’t left Vilde’s side since Noora came into the picture, so.”

“Has Eva—” he clears his throat. “Has she been spending less time with Vilde?”

Magnus shrugs. “Hard to tell,” he replies. “But maybe. She really likes spending time with Noora nowadays.”

Yeah, no shit.

“I just hope Vilde doesn’t go through another mean girls scenario, shit.”

Isak nods. “Yeah, didn’t she go through all that shit with Ingrid and Sara in high school? Some exposing shit.”

Magnus shakes his head. “Yeah, it was fucking brutal. They really exposed some terrible shit about her background.”

Isak furrows his brows. “Like what?”

“She—” Magnus peeks over at the rest of the crowd, making sure they’re not being overheard. “Her home life was fucked, like,” he sighs. “Her mom was really depressed, like, to the point where she would hardly ever get out of bed,” he tells Isak, and Isak’s stomach sinks slightly. “So she was fired from her job and shit, and her meds weren’t working, so Vilde had to take care of all the bills and the cleaning and shit and at one point she’d like – steal clothes, because she couldn’t afford anything outside of the essentials.”

Isak turns to look over at Vilde, smiling brightly as she talks to Chris. “Oh.”

“She was totally brave, dude. Like. I know a lot of people who would have given up in that situation, but she kept fighting for her and for her mom. Eventually me and Chris convinced her to take her mom to the psychiatrist again,” he says. “We went with them. They kept adjusting her meds and eventually, I think they got it right. Took a shit ton of time, though. Like, I think her mom just got a job two years ago or something.”

“But she’s better?”

“Yeah, getting there,” Magnus replies. “I don’t know. I’ll take care of her however long she lets me, you know? I love her. Like a friend and all, because that’s what she was to me in high school, outside of a girlfriend. My best friend.”
Isak plays with the pasta on his plate. He suddenly doesn’t feel as hungry as before.

He’d called Vilde a trooper before. He didn’t know just how tame a term that was for her. Vilde is strong – and what’s more, Vilde is braver than Isak will ever be, ever was.

Vilde is more proof of the fact Isak has to hide who he really is, because she’s the proof there was something he could have done. There was something he should have done. She’s the proof there’s something wrong with Isak, that he breaks everything he touches.

Isak raises his gaze once again, but this time he catches Even’s eye by mistake – Even’s already looking at him, funnily enough, Sana quietly speaking beside him, where they both are obviously having a tense conversation, if their postures are anything to go by. Isak frowns, tilts his head as if to silently ask if everything’s okay.

Even’s smile is small and he offers Isak a tight nod, one that’s almost imperceptible, before turning back to Sana, expression blank.

Isak looks at the side of Even’s face for another beat before he feels Magnus’s arm bump into his.

Isak startles slightly and turns to look at Magnus, who’s smirking.

Isak scowls. “What?”

“He’s hot, right?”

Isak can feel his face start to heat. He stops it with all the willpower he can muster. “What? Who?” he asks, feigning ignorance.

Magnus rolls his eyes. “Even,” he nods over to where Isak had been looking. “You were literally just staring at him.”

Isak huffs, slightly panicked. “That’s not – he just looks a little—”

“I wonder if Sana’s scolding him,” Magnus interrupts him, looking over to where they stand. “Though their conversation looks a little, uhm, tense from both ends.”

Isak shrugs, curls his fork around the pasta. “I'm sure they’re fine.”

Magnus turns back to him. “Dude, I’ve tried to make out with him like, a hundred times,” he tells Isak. “Granted, I was plastered outta my mind for most of them, so he never took me up on the offer, but his lips look like they could kill with a kiss, am I right?”

Yes, they can, and Isak knows from experience. “They’re okay.”

“Oh, shut up, don’t lie to yourself,” Magnus laughs. “You can admit he’s hot without having to jump his bones!”

Can Magnus stop writing his biography for a second? “Yeah, objectively, he’s good looking.”

“Yes he is,” Magnus nods. “I bet he’ll make beautiful babies.”

Isak stabs at a shrimp a little too hard. “Yep.”

“Do you think he’ll get back together with Sonja?”

Isak’s head snaps up. “What?”
“Yeah, their whole thing was always on period, off period. I just think you never know with those two.”

Isak looks back at Even, who’s moved on to a conversation with Yousef, Sana having gravitated towards Chris and Vilde. “But didn’t she really fuck it up this time?”

“I don’t think we’re getting the full story. I think the guys might have exaggerated it a little bit. And Even wasn’t always very straightforward about it, you know? So. Never say never.”

Isak is silent.

“They would make beautiful babies, though.”

Isak’s jaw clenches. Yep. There’s a ninety percent chance they will, even.

“I think they’re meant to end up together,” Magnus babbles on, ignorant to Isak’s inner bitterness. “You can’t date someone for that long and not have any feelings for them, right? Like, didn’t you say that was part of the brain or something?”

“No, I – not with enough—” Isak licks his lips. “Distance. And time.”

“What’s it been, like, three months?”

And a half.

“Maybe that’s enough. If he’s finished with that rebound we keep hearing about, that is.”

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” Isak declares abruptly, setting his plate down harshly on the coffee table. He removes himself from the conversation quickly enough so that he doesn’t hear Magnus’s reply, and he stomps past the rest of the group to push open the bathroom door aggressively.

He finds Jonas washing his hands, and Isak startles a little.

Jonas looks over at him, eyebrow raised. “Dude,” he says. “You have this many people over and you don’t think to knock?”

Isak shakes his head, pulling himself together. “Shit, sorry, I’m just so used to—”

“Are you alright?”

Isak meets Jonas’s gaze. It’s intense, calculating. Isak doesn’t like it, because out of the two people who can peek slightly past Isak’s walls, Jonas is one of them, and he’s surely going to find something there. Though what, Isak doesn’t know. He doesn’t know what there is to find, because his head doesn’t allow Isak to feel it.

It just kind of feels like he really needs to take a piss, and Isak tells Jonas as much.

Jonas hovers for a second. “You know,” he begins, and his voice has that quiet, supportive edge to it, like he’s talking to a child. Isak hates it. “I’m always here to listen,” he tells Isak. Isak shifts his weight where he stands. “Even if it’s just to listen to your silence.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek. “I mean, you’re free to listen to me piss,” he offers, and Jonas rolls his eyes. He steps out of the bathroom, but before he walks past Isak, he squeezes his arm.

“Okay?”
Isak sighs. “Okay.”

When Jonas leaves, Isak quickly makes his way into the bathroom and shuts the door – he takes a deep breath and literally forces himself to take a piss, before washing his hands and exiting the bathroom. Mostly everyone’s navigated over to the living room, some of them bringing their chairs over to sit with them. Isak licks his lips and walks over to them, taking his place next to Magnus again, Even sitting on the arm chair diagonal to him.

They’re all discussing something that takes Isak a second to catch on to.

“It’s literally new,” Mahdi’s saying, and the guys all speak at once. Jonas holds up a quieting hand, and everyone complies.

“The point is we’re inviting all of you tomorrow,” Jonas says, voice at a normal volume now that everyone’s quieted long enough. “You can show or you cannot, but trust me when I say this place is gonna be lit.”

“Man,” Elias pushes at Mutta’s shoulder. “Come on, just call in sick to work tomorrow.”

Mutta sighs loudly. “Okay, listen, I’ll consider it—”

“Well I’m already in,” Eva pipes up, and Chris and Vilde agree. Eva looks over at Noora, raising an eyebrow. “You interested?”

Noora shrugs. “I’m not really into the whole club scene,” she replies. “But – it would be nice not to spend another Saturday night holed up.”

“Wait, you’re going to a club?” Isak asks, and they all turn to look at him.

“Where have you been?” Mahdi asks.

“I was pissing, God.”

“Jonas was telling us about this new club that just opened up,” Yousef catches him up without judgment, as is his personality. “He wants to go as a group, because the larger the group, the easier it is to get in.”

“More money,” Jonas explains. “Also, having the girls would work in our favor, as fucked as that is.”

Jesus, he wanted to spend his Saturday sleeping. “Yeah, well,” Isak shakes his head. “I’m not in.”

“What?” Magnus gapes at him. “No, Isak, you have to go.”

“Yeah, dude, it’s imperative,” Jonas presses.

Isak blinks at them. “Why the fuck is it so important if I go?”

Mahdi, Jonas, and Magnus exchange looks. Mutta’s eyebrows rise, and the girls are staring at them with interest. Isak is pointedly not looking at Even, which means he misses Elias’s and Yousef’s reaction to this coercion.

“We invited Julian,” Mahdi finally replies, and Isak’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Oh?” Isak blinks at them. “And?”
Mutta laughs across from him. “Isak, seriously?”

“From the lore we have heard about Julian Dahl—” Elias begins, but Eva cuts in.

“Jonas, is that the guy—”

Jonas nods, grinning. “That’s the one.”

“Okay.” Even finally pipes up, and everyone turns to look at him. “Am I the only one here who doesn’t know who the fuck Julian is?”

Vilde shakes her head. “I have no idea, either.”

Chris raises her hand. “Ditto on that sentiment.”

“For the ignorant!” Mahdi holds up his beer. “Julian Dahl – the man, the myth, the legend – is Isak’s very favorite coworker.”

Isak makes a noise. “I think that might be a little—”

“Julian Dahl, for the past year and then some, has been smitten with Isak Valtersen.”

Everyone erupts in chants and wolf whistles, which irritates Isak to no end. Sana’s looking over at him, a smirk on her face, and Isak gives her a look – like, tame these assholes – but Sana is unwilling to aid Isak.

“Okay,” Isak yells over them, holding up his hands. No one shuts up. “Okay,” Isak yells louder, and the chatter dies down after a second or two. “That is wrong,” Isak declares. “Julian’s a friend, and he’s not interested in me past such—”

“Isak, Isak Isak Isak,” Elias interrupts him. “No, no. Isak. From what we’ve heard, and we have heard a lot—”

“Mahdi loves to talk to us about this,” Yousef explains, and Isak narrows his eyes at Mahdi, who looks guiltless.

“Yes, he does,” Mutta agrees. “So from what we’ve heard, that dude has been trying to climb you like a damn tree this entire time,” he finishes for Elias, and the guys laugh hysterically, though Isak decidedly does not find this funny.

“Okay, but like,” Vilde pipes in over the noise. “How would you know?”

“We’re all friends with him outside of Isak’s work,” Magnus explains to her. “Well, all as in me, Jonas and Mahdi.”

“Dude’s fucking cool,” Mahdi adds. “And rich.”

“He’s not—” Isak grunts. “He’s not rich, Mahdi, he’s working for—”

“There’s an entire story behind that,” Magnus interrupts. “If you would just spend more than five minutes talking to him, you’d know.”

“Isak, you have to marry him,” Elias decides for him. “Think of the money.”

“I don’t care about money.”
“Think of your friends, then,” Elias points at himself. “I care about the money.”

“And we’ve heard he’s not bad-looking at all,” Mutta adds. “In fact, Mahdi called him a – a – shit, Mahdi, what’d you call him?”


“Yes, that.”

Isak’s face heats. He hasn’t noticed, because it’s not like that.

“Well,” Even finally chimes in again. His back is pressed against the back of the arm chair, glass of water in hand. “If Isak doesn’t want to go, then you shouldn’t make him go.”

“Yes, Even, thank you,” Isak says, and everyone groans, save for Yousef and the girls.

“Even,” Elias looks at him very seriously. “I know your friendship with Isak is very new. Congratulations on that, by the way,” Elias looks up. “Are we all happy?”

There’s a collective cheer of assent.

Elias looks back at Even. “Now, as his totally new and shiny friend, do you not want him to get laid?”

Isak is quick to look down at his lap, suddenly very interested in it, in order to hide the blush he’s sure is about to fill his face and calm his racing heart. Jesus, can everyone stop fucking hitting the nail on the head without knowing they have? Isak would really fucking appreciate it.

Even’s quick to recover, though. “Isak can find his own ways to get laid.”

“Yeah, he just made out with a classmate this Wednesday,” Eva points out, and Isak glances up just in time to see Even nod at Eva.

“Yes, there is that.”

“Okay, but, hook-up.” Mutta lowers a hand towards the floor. “Actual real relationship with regular sex,” Mutta raises his other hand, closer to the ceiling. “Are you feeling me right now?”

“I’m with Even,” Yousef adds his two cents, and Isak almost breathes a loud sigh of relief. “You can’t force Isak to like someone. A connection should be – it should be real, you know, not pushed. It should be natural. That’s the best part about finding a partner.”

Elias and Mutta groan.

“You and Even should just get married.”

Even looks over at Yousef, waggles his eyebrows. “Wanna marry me?”

Yousef sniffs indignantly, reaching over to the armchair and lacing his fingers with Even’s. “Yes, I do.”

“Can I plan the wedding?” Vilde asks, and both Even and Yousef grin over at her.

“Absolutely you can,” Even agrees, and Vilde claps her hands enthusiastically.

“Congrats to the happy couple,” Mahdi holds up his beer again, and everyone follows suit. “But it’s
two against – where do you all stand?” he points at the girls.

Eva shrugs. “I love Isak,” she says, and there’s some scattered ‘aw’s. “But I do think he could benefit from a boyfriend.”

Isak glares at her. She knows he doesn’t want a boyfriend. She knows he doesn’t even really believe in boyfriends anymore. But she’s so up his ass about opening up and finding love again that she’s probably really, really rooting for it. More than she’s letting on, even.

“I agree with the fiancés,” Vilde gestures towards Yousef and Even. “I think Isak should find someone he naturally connects with. That’s the best part about love.”

I mean, that’s bullshit, Isak thinks, but he’ll take it.

“Okay, that’s three against,” Mahdi keeps count, and Isak gapes at him.

“No!” Isak shakes his head. “No, no. We are not – that is not something we’re doing, alright? We’re not taking a vote on my livelihood,” he snaps, and everyone looks at him, expressions varying. “It’s my decision. You guys are so – dictatorial all the time,” Isak glares at them. “And I appreciate you guys, I do. All of you,” he’s sure to gesture towards the girls, being careful not to look at Noora.

“But this is not something we can put up to a vote like everything else. This is my decision, alright?”

There’s silence.

Then everyone deflate a little, and they start muttering apologies.

Elias is the first to speak louder. “Yeah, dude, sorry,” he apologizes. “You know how we get carried away.”

Isak sinks a little further into the couch. “Thank you,” he replies, and Magnus pats his thigh.

“Oh, it’s your decision, for sures, dude,” Magnus nods. “Right guys?” He’s looking at Jonas and Mahdi.

They both nod. “It’s chill,” Mahdi replies.

Jonas offers Isak a crooked smile. “Love you.”

Isak rolls his eyes, and Mutta comes over behind the couch to squeeze at his shoulder. “We give you too much shit,” he admits.

“Yes, you do.”

Everyone turns to look over at Sana, who’s spoken up for the first time during this spectacle. Her presence looms over every single one of them, enough so that it quiets them completely – Isak’s sure that if he tried dropping a pin right now, they’d hear it in high definition.

“Here’s the way you ask someone to come out for the night,” Sana looks over at Isak. “Hey, Isak, do you want to go to a club to hang out with your friends and distract yourself a little? It’s up to you, but we’d really enjoy having you there. And no,” Sana glares at Mahdi for a second, who sinks into the loveseat a little further. “We won’t try to set you up with anyone, because we respect your boundaries enough to know that’s a shitty thing to do when you’ve explicitly stated before that you’re not interested in a relationship.”

There’s silence for an entire minute, probably, and then:
“Yeah, but that’s kind of a mouthful,” Elias tells his sister with a cheeky grin, and Sana glares at him.

“Shut up, Elias.”

“Listen, hey,” Jonas leans towards Isak. “You don’t have to come, okay? Julian will be there, with or without your presence, and we’ll hang out with him. If you need to stay in—” Jonas holds up a hand. “Then stay in.”

Isak squirms in his seat.

“Thank you,” he finally replies. “I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

The tension then seems to dissipate, just like that, and everyone goes back to their respective conversations.

Mahdi, Magnus and Jonas are talking around him, about something he’s not really paying attention to – instead, Isak meets Even’s gaze diagonally from the coffee table, and his expression is a little curious, a little intense; Isak doesn’t know what to do with it, so he just bites his lip a little nervously, a movement that Even follows with his eyes. Isak can tell Even’s gripping the glass a little more tightly before setting it down on the coffee table, fishing for his phone.

Isak knows what he’s about to do, so Isak pulls out his own. He makes sure his back is pressed further back on the couch, phone screen out of view as Magnus leans forward, elbows on his legs.

EVEN
You should go

Isak frowns.

ISAK
You literally just told everyone I shouldn’t

EVEN
I’m probably going to be dragged there too

EVEN
And it’d be infinitely more fun if I stuck with you all night

EVEN
So I’m not forcing you

EVEN
But just take it into account when making your decision, ok?

Isak looks up at Even, who’s smiling over at him, and something in Isak’s stomach decides to travel down to his feet.

It’s stupid, Isak thinks, for him to believe there’s truly a decision to make here anymore.

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The boys are extremely psyched to hear Isak’s decided to show up at the club last night. He called it “making an appearance”, as he usually does, and Eva, too, was very excited.

“You know, even if you don’t like Julian that way,” she’d told him. “I think it’d be nice to get to
know him, right?"

Isak didn’t point out Julian doesn’t like him that way either, but he sticks with the ‘get to know him’ part, anyway, because Julian’s always been far too kind and open with him for Isak not to offer anything back.

Getting ready is a nightmare, mostly because Eva keeps judging his outfit choices, until finally Isak glares at her and tells her she’s going to be late for her pregame with the girls. She sighs loudly and warns him not to wear the red shirt, that his eyes get lost in it, and Isak huffs and considers wearing it just to spite her.

He wears the blue button up instead, though.

Isak thinks he’s going to forgo the glasses tonight. Clubs get steamy and hot and just hurt his vision with or without the glasses, anyway, and he thinks they’re less prone to breaking if he keeps them here. So this is what he does, then after a while, he makes his way over to Jonas’s for the pregame he’s hosting for just Mahdi, Magnus, and him.

It’s nothing eventful. They drink a little bit, Magnus tells them stories of his adventures as a barista, and then they leave. Pregames are hardly ever eventful for Isak, especially ones that happen before going to a club he didn’t really want to go to in the first place.

Isak arrives at the club with the boys – Even and the rest of them are meant to meet them there, even if Even kept texting Isak about showing up together. When Isak had demanded to know why he was so about adamant this, Even had simply texted back:

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EVEN
¯\_(ツ)_/¯
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So Isak had petulantly ignored him.

They get in without a problem, which makes Isak think Jonas was lying about the “big group” thing just to get all of them there, but even if Isak wanted to point this out to him, once they enter the club the music is way too loud to say much without hurting their throats. Jonas looks back at him and Magnus, Mahdi already making his way to the bar, and he shouts, “I’m gonna go find the other boys.”

Magnus and Isak nod at him as he leaves, and Isak wonders for a second if they should follow. Before he can decide, though, Magnus tugs at his sleeve to grab his attention, then points towards the bar. “There’s Julian,” he shouts over the music. “Should we go say hi?”

Magnus doesn’t sound like he’s trying to set them up. He sounds like he genuinely thinks they should say hello, out of decency, so Isak nods and agrees with the sentiment. They push past the crowd to make way to the less-crowded bar area, where Julian’s chatting animatedly with a blonde girl who keeps blinking a little too quickly at Julian.

“Julian!” Magnus shouts, and Julian turn around at the sound of his name. He grins when he sees Magnus, then even wider when he sees Isak directly behind him, and greets the both of them, blonde girl completely forgotten. Isak watches her pout and make her exit, and he feels a little sorry for her.

“Hey, guys,” he greets. “I see you’ve finally made it.”
Magnus grins. “Mahdi went a little too hard at the pregame,” he jokes, and Julian laughs dutifully. He turns to look over at Isak, though Isak can’t really make out his expression from here without his glasses, vision currently impaired. “It’s nice to see you, Isak.”

Isak smiles. “You too, Julian.”

Magnus looks over Julian’s shoulder. “Oh, shit, I just saw Vilde,” he says. He looks back at Isak. “You wanna come with?”

Isak hesitates, glances over at Julian. That’d be really fucking rude, wouldn’t it? “Uh, no,” Isak shakes his head. “I’ll stay here and talk to Julian.”

Magnus nods, a small smirk playing on his lips. “Have fun.”

And he leaves, and oh, that fucking bastard probably did want this all along.

Still, it’s not like he can take it back now, so he walks over to stand beside Julian at the bar and smiles at him. “I like your hair,” he tells him, gesturing towards it. “You did something different with it tonight, right?”


Isak snorts. “Sometimes you should, okay.”

Julian shifts his weight, leaning a little closer. “No glasses tonight, huh?” Julian grins at him, and Isak laughs.

“No, sometimes it’s better if I don’t see what’s happening around me, you know?”

Julian laughs along with him. “I can only imagine what you’ve seen, Isak.”

“No, you cannot,” Isak smiles at him. Julian licks his lips, looking like he wants to say something, but then seems to change his mind at the last minute.

“Do you — do you want me to buy you a drink?”

Isak pauses, then furrows his brows. “What? No, I don’t want you to do that,” he laughs. “You think that little of me?”

Julian coughs into his fist. “I meant—” he looks like he’s rethinking all of his life choices. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Isak doesn’t really know why Julian looks so nervous — then again, this is the first time they’ve seen each other outside of work, so it makes sense that he’s trying not to make things awkward between them. Isak supposes he can extend him the same courtesy — he’s not planning on drinking too much tonight, but one drink wouldn’t kill him, and he doesn’t want to seem like an ungrateful dick, or whatever.

So Isak smiles at him and nods once. “Sure.”

Julian looks relieved, then waves the bartender down. Surprisingly, Julian knows exactly what to order for Isak — nothing but a draft beer, and when he turns back around to meet Isak’s gaze again, Isak’s looking at him, a little confused. Julian blinks, shies his gaze away. “Yeah?”

“You just — knew my drink order,” Isak laughs. “Just like that?”
“I—” Isak hears him clear his throat, even over the loud music. “You’ve just mentioned it a couple of times before.”

Maybe, like, twice, in the entire year they’ve worked together, but Isak supposes some people just have better memories than others.

“Great memory, then,” Isak laughs, and Julian grins at him, a little sheepishly.

“Is that weird?”

Isak shrugs. “Trust me, these past couple of months have taught me weird isn’t always bad,” he shouts over the music, and something sparkles in Julian’s eyes.

“You know—” Julian clears his throat again. “You look — I mean, you look really good tonight,” he tells Isak, and suddenly Isak is frowning, wondering. “I just mean — it’s a nice change, from the vest, and the khakis.”

Isak nods. “No one can make that look good.”

“You can,” Julian blurts, and Isak shifts his weight a little shyly, laughs a little brokenly. Okay, if he didn’t know any better — it almost seems like Julian’s flirting with him, and Isak — Isak literally has no idea what to do with that. The last time he tried to flirt with an attractive man—

He ended up angry with him for an entire year and is now currently sleeping with him, so maybe that’s not a very good idea. Isak doesn’t think it’d be polite to turn him down right now, though, and not only because it’s kind of nice to know someone might be interested in him outside of sex, but also because he’s not really the person Julian is interested in, is he? That’s — that’s probably leading him on a little bit.

Though — maybe that’s really what he’s doing with everyone else, isn’t he?

Isak licks his lips. Julian might be flirting with him, but he doesn’t look like he’s ready to take Isak home and have sex with him — so this is probably one of those actual flirting moments, like, for real. Like he wants something out of Isak, something Isak can’t really give him.

“Thanks,” Isak finally replies, laughing brokenly once again. “You make it work, too.”

Their drinks come around, and Julian hands Isak his — Isak is really trying to down it in one go, trying to figure out what the fuck is going on all of a sudden. When he puts his drink down, Julian is looking at him, a little impressed, before laughing. He says something Isak can’t hear over the music, so Isak shouts at him to repeat it — he does so again, but he can’t hear him again, so Isak shakes his head and tells him so.

Finally, Julian leans in, lips beside Isak’s ear, and says, “Is the reason you’re not wearing your glasses tonight because you don’t want to see people dance?”

Isak grins, speaks back into Julian’s ear. “Why, am I missing out on something?”

“No, you really probably are better off not seeing it.”

“I’m glad to know I made the right choice,” Isak huffs a laugh, then realizes they’re standing way too close together, the sides of their faces merely inches apart, and Isak should probably move away before this gets awkward, but before he can—

“Hey,” he hears someone shout from behind him, and Isak jumps, a little surprised. Julian leans back
and catches sight of whoever’s behind Isak, looking a little puzzled, so Isak turns around and finds Even standing close behind him, smile lazy as he looks at Julian, then glances back at Isak.

“Friend of yours?” he asks, and Isak nods, gesturing towards Julian.

“Even, this is Julian,” he shouts over the music. “Julian, this is Even.”

Julian frowns, looks at Even. “Sorry, I didn’t hear—”

Even presses his chest against Isak’s back as he extends his hand around him and towards Julian. “Even,” he repeats, and Julian nods, understanding, shaking Even’s hand. Julian glances at Isak, raising his eyebrows.

“Even as in—”

“Uh,” Isak shakes his head. “Nope, no, not as in.”

Julian purses his lips, holding back a laugh. “Hey, no, you’re right. Not as in.”

Isak licks his lips, thankful Julian got the hint. Isak still feels Even’s chest pressed against his back, and sees him turn to look at Isak confusedly through his peripheral.

“As in—”

“Just,” Isak glances up at him. “Some stupid thing at work, you wouldn’t—”

“Inside joke,” Julian volunteers helpfully.

Isak nods. “Yeah, that.”

Even hums against Isak’s ear, glancing between him and Julian. Finally, he rests a hand casually on Isak’s waist, making Isak shiver involuntarily, and leans forward, presumably so that Julian hears him. “You mind if I borrow him for a second?” he asks, and Julian’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Uh—”

“I just need to talk to him about something,” Even explains, and Isak frowns. “It’ll be quick.”

“So, sure,” Julian smiles at Isak. “Yeah, go for it. Take your time.”

Isak shrugs his shoulders helplessly. “I’ll be back, I guess.”

Julian smiles at him. “I’ll be here.”

Before Isak can get another word in, Even shouts, “Thanks, Julio,” and grabs Isak’s wrist, navigating the sweaty crowd for the both of them. Isak’s frowning at the back of Even’s head, completely perplexed, and he wonders if any one of their friends are seeing this — if they are, this one’s all on Even, and he’ll make sure to say this to him if he ever brings it up.

Finally, they reach the bathrooms’ door, which Even pushes open and leads them into. The music reverberates around the walls, then quiets when the door slams shut behind them. Even lets go of his wrist, folds himself over to look under a stall.

“His name is Julian,” Isak corrects belatedly, and Even looks up at him.

“What?”
“You called him Julio,” he replies. “But his name is Julian.”

Even rolls his eyes, walks over to look down that next stall. “Okay.”

“Did you think he was Spanish?”

“I didn’t really think anything.”

Even straightens back up, looking thoughtful.

Isak blinks. “Well, you know that was—” he pauses. “What are you doing?” Isak asks as Even begins to slam open all of the stall doors. “Okay, I — what did you need to talk to me about?”

When Even’s at the last stall, he turns back to look at Isak in disbelief. He laughs once, quietly, before walking up to Isak and placing both hands on either side of his face. “You’re such an idiot,” he mutters, and then he’s kissing Isak and pushing him into one of the stalls and oh.

Oh, okay, this he can get behind.

It’s a little ridiculous (and a whole lot embarrassing) how quickly his dick responds to the situation, but to be fair, Even immediately slides his leg between Isak’s thighs, and the friction is more than enough to get him going. And also, it’s been six whole days without this. So he gets a pass, he thinks.

Isak is clinging desperately to Even’s hair, losing himself in the curve of his tongue, but he has to break apart to look over at the stall door. “It’s not—” Even begins to kiss down his neck and Isak throws his head back against the wall desperately. “Even, it’s not locked.”

Even grunts and manages to impressively slam the stall door shut and lock it in one quick movement of his arm, not once detaching his lips from Isak’s skin. Isak’s nails dig into Even’s shoulders when Even bites down on his neck, feeling the sensation of it tenfold in the thrill of living this out, and then Even is cupping him over his jeans and Isak is really, really over waiting.

“You are not riding me on the toilet,” Even warns against Isak’s skin, and Isak exhales a laugh.

“Fine,” he breathes. “Just do something.”

“With pleasure,” Even breathes back, and then starts unbuttoning Isak’s jeans. When he pulls them and his boxers down in one swift movement, stopping just above Isak’s knees, Isak’s expecting Even to drop to the floor and make this quick and painless — which he can totally get behind, considering the fact that they’re doing this at all is enough for Isak — but then, after one more slow and heavy kiss, Even smirks against his lips and then turns Isak over, pressing him against the stall wall, and he only hears the clinking of Even’s belt as he removes it.

“God,” Isak breathes. “God, you didn’t have to—”

“Are you seriously thinking that I don’t want this right now,” Even deadpans, and Isak suddenly feels his hands on his ass, the touch of which Isak instinctively leans into.

“I mean, I hope you do,” Isak admits, and Even laughs quietly as he presses small kisses on the back of Isak’s neck, teeth scraping lightly once in a while as his hands spread Isak’s ass cheeks apart. Isak writhes slightly, knowing exactly what’s to come and yet still being completely taken aback when he feels one of Even’s fingers curl inside him.

Isak’s hands find the edge of the top of the stall and clings to it so harshly he feels his palms sting. He
chases the sensation by arching his back, but Even’s free hand presses against Isak’s back and pushes him against the wall again. “I don’t need your help,” Even teases, whispering into Isak’s ear, and Isak shakes his head in disbelief.

“That is definitely not what I was doing,” he tells him, and Even chuckles.

“I know,” he replies, biting down on Isak’s neck just as Isak feels a second finger slide inside him. Isak whimpers, his dick so hard it’s almost painful, hands clutching the edge of the stall tighter, forehead pressed desperately against its wall.

His breathing is heavy and quick, Even’s fingers slow and precise as they stretch, and Isak has to bite his lip so that his moan isn’t too loud. He can feel the bass of the music outside thump against the stall, the vibration almost helpful in the moment; Even’s head comes to the side of his neck again to keep nipping and kissing, and the back of Isak’s head automatically falls on Even’s shoulder.

“That’s enough,” Isak insists, impatient. Even hums against his skin.

“Doesn’t feel like it,” he mutters. “Be patient.”

Isak squirms. “Even, please,” he pleads. He’s not even sure how many fingers Even is using on him anymore — all he knows is that he’s desperate for it, and that he probably looks pathetic, like he’s throwing a tantrum.

“Say it again,” Even whispers firmly as his fingers draw out of Isak. Isak hears the tearing of foil behind him even over the distant music, and he releases a shaky breath, heart beating erratically.

“What?”

“My name,” Even replies, and Isak hears him readying himself behind him. “Say it again.”

And Isak will say it however many times he fucking wants, as long as he gets a move on, so Isak breathes it out quietly, then moans it out a little brokenly, then he feels Even’s hands and so he groans it, and then Even slides inside him slowly, familiarly, his body making room for him and it’s always like this when Even fucks him — it’s slow, and excruciatingly so, but the press of him all the way inside is always the same, always welcome. His body responds immediately, because Isak knows Even by now, in his mouth, in his hands, everywhere, he knows him everywhere—

Even’s hands rise to overlap Isak’s own where they cling to the top of the stall, and they squeeze so hard Isak will be surprised if Even doesn’t have knuckle marks on his palm by the time this is over.

It’s slow at first. Even likes it that way — he likes to build Isak up and leave him begging, he loves it, in fact, Isak’s noticed that maybe that’s a kink Even hasn’t picked up on, but then again — Isak has no problem with begging.

The way Even rolls his hips every time leaves Isak feeling like he is deeper inside him than he actually is, makes his knees want to buckle when he finds all the right places, every single one, as if he has Isak mapped out precisely, knows him by memory. It’s a thrust, and then another, and Even eventually finds a comfortable rhythm, where they’re both panting through it, the occasional groan and choked affirmation making their way past their lips.

He doesn’t know how long this lasts — doesn’t really know how long he’ll last, at that — but before he moans Even’s name one more time, he hears the groan of the bathroom door open, momentarily allowing the music inside full-blast. Both he and Even freeze for a second, before Even removes his hands from on top of Isak’s and Isak’s slide down from the edge to the stall’s wall, where they’re pressed there nervously, now out of sight.
Even’s head is the one that peeks out slightly over the side of the stall, so he’s sure to duck slightly out of view, the side of his face against Isak’s temple. Isak takes a couple of deep, quiet breaths. He feels Even do the same onto his neck, which only serves to make Isak shiver, want Even to start moving again.

But then—

“Dude,” Isak hears the very familiar voice of Magnus outside of the stall, and he almost loses his momentum right here and now. “Where the fuck did Isak run off to?”

Isak glances at Even, almost as if making sure he knows to stop, but then he sees Even’s smirk through his peripheral and—

As Even’s hands find either of Isak’s waist, he starts thrusting inside Isak again, slowly, just like he’d started, and Isak almost whispers, hands turning into fists against the wall.

He hears someone else grunt outside of their bubble. “I don’t know,” It’s Mahdi, Isak realizes, and Jesus Christ, did they come as a pair? “You think he found some hot guy to make out with?”

Even’s thrust this time around finds a particularly sensitive spot, and Isak has to bite his lip in order to keep from moaning, nails digging into his palm. Even is still working at such a passive rhythm, most likely to not raise suspicion, but it’s driving Isak insane — both the slow thrusts, and the fact that his friends are right outside, prone to catching them if they make the wrong move, can’t hold back the wrong sound.

Isak hears the distant sound of a stream. “Damn, that would really suck,” Jonas says this time, and oh, okay, so they can’t go to the bathrooms by themselves, now? “I mean, good for him, right, he deserves to make out with as many people as he likes”—Even’s thrust finds that spot again—“but I feel kinda bad for Julian.”

Isak is far too busy biting the inside of his cheek to keep from gasping and moaning as much as he’d like to really let the boys’ conversation settle, instead choosing to press his forehead against the stall wall and stare at his feet as Even thrusts. His dick is literally soaking wet by this point, it’s fucking ridiculous, and there’s no doubt in his mind that he’s going to really, really have to hold his climax back until the guys are gone.

“All right, let’s just assume it’s a dude and head for the bathrooms,” Even says, and Isak arches away from the wall to make sure it doesn’t make any more noise than it has to, but that only helps Even’s endeavor to fuck Isak out of a brain, so the aborted sound he makes with the back of his throat is kind of his own fault, really.

Isak holds his breath and waits for one of the boys to realize there’s someone at the end of the stalls either fucking or masturbating, but they’re oblivious — they continue their conversation, one Isak has definitely stopped tuning into because of how hard he’s concentrating on not bringing his hand down to help himself come, and if Even’s stuttered thrusts are anything to go by, he’s definitely trying to pull it together, too.

By some miracle, the guys manage to leave before they finish their conversation — the door opens and the music fills the bathroom again before muffling itself when Isak hears the door slam shut, and then it’s quick from there—
Isak extends a hand to grab onto Even’s ass, willing him in deeper and faster, and Even wraps a hand around Isak, stroking quickly and faltering and their movements are inconsistent, but Isak doesn’t take long — he finishes first, a long, loud, and broken groan escaping where it’d been waiting in the back of his throat. He presses his head against the stall wall and bites his lip as Even continues to thrust inside him, firing up every single one of his senses to complement the thrill of his climax, and then it’s not long before Even’s moaning brokenly, too, finishing into the condom.

As he’s coming down he’s muttering Isak’s name over and over, and it’s so fucking fiery that Isak brings a hand up to backwardly grab onto Even’s hair and clumsily kiss him to swallow his words, Even turning his head to meet his lips eagerly.

It’s uncomfortable to kiss at this angle, though, Even’s chest still pressed against Isak’s back (and Isak feeling the running pulse of his heart against it, even over the fabric of their shirts), so he breaks away and, through heavy breaths, nods at Even — a clear indicator that Isak wants to turn around now, so Even pulls out of him slowly; he takes the initiative to clean the both of them up after Isak turns around, starts with the condom while peppering lazy kisses along Isak’s jaw as he does so. Isak is limp and useless, back pressed against the stall’s wall, fingernails softly running up and down where they sneaked under Even’s shirt to find the bare skin of his sides.

“You have remarkable aim,” Even laughs as he pulls away, throwing some of the toilet paper in into the trash can. “I for sure thought some of this would end up on your shirt.”

“Hah!” Isak exhaled. “I would tell you to tell Eva that, but then she’d ask how you know, and that’s probably not a conversation you should have.”

“To be fair, I think it had more to do with my hand bracing most of the impact than your aim,” but—”

“Stick to your first theory,” Isak grins, and Even rolls his eyes, finishes cleaning them up.

When they do, they both pull up their jeans to zip and button them up. Isak runs a hand through his hair, trying to dry off the sweat, and Even meets his gaze.

“So,” he grins. “Was that as good as you thought it’d be?”

Isak nods uselessly. “Better,” he admits, and Even’s eyebrows rise as he smiles.

“Better?” he teases, leaning in to press his lips against Isak’s. Isak kisses him back, maybe out of instinct, maybe because he wants to. “How much better?” Even mutters against his lips, and Isak laughs against them, wrapping his arms around Even’s neck.

“A lot better,” he mumbles, and then they’re kissing and kissing and kissing, Even’s arms around Isak’s waist, chests pressed together like they hadn’t been completely intertwined just a minute ago. “Thank you,” he breathes against Even’s lips, and he means it.

He means it, because Even didn’t have to do this, not at all, not if he didn’t want to, or didn’t like it, but he did — and that’s so indicative of the person that he is, of the person Isak’s missed out on for a year, and there’s something so sweet and genuine about Even Bech Næsheim that Isak craves, doesn’t understand, wants desperately to protect.

Even shakes his head. “Don’t,” he whispers. “This did just as much for me as it did for you.”

“But you didn’t know that it would,” Isak points out as they break apart.

“I figured it would.”
“Don’t think that last part wasn’t stupid, though,” Isak warns him. “They could have caught us at any fucking minute.”

“I thought you’d enjoy the thrill!”

“There is no thrill in the thought of Magnus seeing what we’re up to,” he replies. “That would be such a fucking turnoff.”

Even laughs and holds up two placating hands. “Alright, got it, no more fucking in public places, then.”

“Well I didn’t say that.”

“Make up your mind, Valtersen.”

“No more fucking in public places where our friends can easily find us,” he rectifies, holding up an accusatory finger. “And definitely no being little shits about it and testing my dick’s patience.”

“Which was impressive, by the way.”

Isak sniffs. “Thank you.”

“Though you’ve got very prominent teeth marks on your chin.”

Isak flips him off.

Even laughs and runs a hand through his hair the same way Isak did, presumably to do the same as Isak had wanted to do. Isak catches his breath for another beat, before exhaling deeply. “Okay,” he nods. “We should — we should really get back out there. But I mean,” Isak thinks. “One after the other, right? So it doesn’t look suspicious.”

Even raises an eyebrow. “It would look more suspicious if we walked out one after the other when people know we know each other,” he points out. “Everyone knows what that means.”

“Ugh,” Isak shakes his head. “Fine, we should walk out together.”

“I’ll buy you a drink,” Even suggests, but Isak shakes his head.

“No drinking for me,” he says. He raises his eyebrows. “And there shouldn’t be any drinking for you, either,” he pokes Even’s chest accusingly, only to watch Even roll his eyes.

“You’re not my babysitter.”

Isak narrows his eyes. “Mhm.”

“Besides,” Even tilts his head to the side. “Weren’t you drinking with your friend?”

Isak shrugs. “Yeah, but that’s Julian.”

Even’s expression is blank. “And that means I’m — not?”

“No, what I mean is,” Isak sighs. “I don’t know him that well, at least, not outside of work, so it would have been rude to turn him down when he offered me a drink,” he replies. “Guy just probably wants to get to know me, you know? And that’s fine. I should get to know him, too. The guys are always raving about him.”
Even licks his lips. “Because they think he’s got a thing for you.”

Isak clears his throat. “He doesn’t,” he blushes, unsure if the reassurance is true or not. Even searches Isak’s expression. “They just — uhm, they’re always looking to hook me up with anything that breathes at this point. Even though they know it won’t go anywhere,” he points out. “Julian’s just — a nice guy, you know? It wouldn’t kill me to have a drink with him, talk to him.”

Even looks thoughtful. “So you’re going back to him.”

“Well, yeah,” Isak replies. “I left him in the middle of a conversation,” Isak points out. “To have sex, at that. That was pretty rude.”

Even considers him for a moment, before huffing a laugh. “You could go back,” he nods, then takes a step forward to press his forehead against Isak’s. Isak blinks. “Or we could go back to yours,” he suggests in a mutter, hands finding either side of Isak’s waist. Despite the fact that he is plenty fucked out, Isak still shivers. “We both know Eva won’t be home anytime soon,” he points out, eyes so close to Isak’s he feels like he can count different shades of blue in them. “We have plenty of time to recharge and do some more.”

Isak licks his lips, heart beating rapidly in his chest. “I think — Even, I should—” What was his argument again?

Even brings a hand up to stroke Isak’s hair. “I kind of want to eat you out,” he admits, and Isak whines a little.

“That’s not fair.”

“It’s not?” Even’s eyebrows rise.

“I was — there is something out there I have to — you can’t just—” No, seriously, what the fuck was his argument.

God, he’s so pathetic. All Even has to do is smirk and mutter a few choice words and Isak is putty in his hands. He can’t even catch up with his thoughts from before, as they’re quickly running towards the back of his head, where all thoughts go to die, and several new ones are making their way to the forefront. All of them definitely involving heavy imagery of Even. And his tongue.

“They’ll notice we left,” Isak argues lamely, quietly, eyes glued to Even’s lips. Even leans closer and nuzzles Isak’s nose, and Isak almost melts right on the spot.

“So we make up an excuse,” he suggests. “We went to McDonald’s. Music was too loud. One of us got sick.” Even only leans forward to capture Isak’s bottom lip between his teeth, pull it closer to his own lips and swipe his tongue teasingly along it. “Say goodbye to your friend,” Even urges, kisses Isak once softly. “Come with me, instead.” Another soft kiss.

At this point, it’s not really a choice, is it? Isak made a decision quite a while back, the second Even suggested a round two in his apartment. Maybe even the second Even slid inside him. He brings his hands up to grip at the back of Even’s hair and pulls him in for another kiss, this time far heavier, more tongue and teeth that lips, and Even pulls Isak closer by the waist.

Eventually, Even breathes quietly into the kiss—“Please,” and it sounds like such a desperate plea, private and honest. “Come with me.”

And Isak — Isak is helpless, and he nods uselessly, and when Even pulls back, he exhales — and it almost sounds like relief, which would make sense, considering Even sounds desperate for a round
two, and then he kisses Isak again, this time once. His smile is bright, and Isak blinks at it uselessly, momentarily blinded.

“Go say goodbye to — what was his name again?”

Isak blinks. “Uh,” he shakes himself out of it. “Julian.”

Even smirks. “Right.” Even cleans something off the corner of Isak’s lips with his thumb, though Isak’s pretty sure there’s nothing there. “Julian. I’ll meet you outside?”

Isak nods. “Okay,” he clears his throat. “Yeah, I’ll—” his brain is finally catching up to his mouth, and he suddenly scoffs, shaking his head in disbelief. “You’re a fucking cheater,” he accuses, and Even’s laugh is boisterous as he steps back.

“It’s not my fault you want me just as badly as I want you.”

“It’s not fair that you ask me these things when you’re all—” Isak gestures at Even uselessly. “You.”

“When I’m all me?”

“You know what I mean,” Isak crosses his arms over his chest, rolling his eyes. “You know exactly what you do.”

“And you don’t do the same?”

“Not yet.”

“I look forward to you trying, then,” Even waggles his eyebrows. “But — I mean, if you think you didn’t make the right decision—”

There’s something undecipherable to Isak behind Even’s surfaced gaze, but he shakes his head and pushes him lightly on the shoulder. “You know I fucking did,” he mutters, and Even’s smile softens.

“Seriously, though,” Even sounds emphatic. “Now that you’re thinking with the right head, you can stay. If you want.”

And that’s the thing. He doesn’t want to. He should, he knows he should, because all of his friends are out there and he can spend time he doesn’t spend with them as much as he’d like to just tonight, and he could get to know Julian a bit more outside of work, and maybe find Magnus a hot guy to make out with, and all of that might have sounded appealing, to a certain extent, some time before this, but now it doesn’t.

What does sound appealing is leaving with Even, and even if they don’t end up finding enough energy for another round, he feels like they could just lay in bed and watch one of Even’s pretentious films and Isak can listen to him rant about it and he’d be fine. That’s the kind of night he wants. That’s the kind of night he’s always wanted, really, one that doesn’t involve so many fucking people with such loud music that just tires him out and—

Even would be fine with that, too. Isak knows it. Watching TV in Isak’s room, doing not much of anything at all, maybe making themselves a snack; he’d be fine with it. And Isak finds himself craving that, just a night in, with Even, and Isak realizes here and now that Even’s suddenly become this — this permanent fixture in Isak’s life, such a solid constant, an actual friend, one like Jonas or Magnus or Mahdi or Mutta or Eva — just a friend he wants to spend time with. A friend he can occasionally make out with, which, really, is a plus, and that just makes him feel—
He looks at Even. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know, but it doesn’t feel bad, and it doesn’t feel good, it just kind of — feels.

Isak’s hardly the kind of person to allow himself to realize that there’s suddenly one more person in his life he has to lie to, one more person in his life he has to front for, because then it’s real, it reminds him he’s nothing but a fraud, and that here stands another person who can potentially figure that out, all his misgivings, just what kind of a fucking terrible person he is, another person Isak has to reinforce his walls for. But then, here stands another person he can fool into liking him well enough, another person he can cling to that makes him feel normal, like maybe his past is not what it is, like maybe his mind is not what it is, like maybe he doesn’t hear whispers at night that hate him.

“Do you think—” Isak clears his throat, licking his lips nervously. “I kind of just—”

Even tilts his head. “Yeah?” he encourages, not demanding anything of Isak.

“I’m tired,” Isak admits, and something like understanding flashes in Even’s eyes. Isak doesn’t want to know what it is he understands. “Do you think we can just — I don’t know, chill?”

Even smiles softly, brings a hand up to strokes Isak’s hair softly. “Let’s stop for some McDonald’s,” he suggests, and Isak meets his gaze. “Then we can go back to yours and just — do what you want, yeah? You want to watch a movie?”

Isak nods.

“Okay,” Even nods along with him. “We can watch a movie. We can do whatever you want, alright?”

Isak’s exhale is shaky. “I’m just — it’s not that I don’t want—”

“Isak,” Even states firmly. “You never have to explain yourself to me, okay? That’s what this is, right? Something we do only when we want it. If you don’t want it, then we’re not doing it. If you’re tired, then we’ll chill. Okay?”

Isak looks at him for what could maybe be a minute, but must be less, because Even looks unbothered. Isak shifts his weight for a moment, before finally nodding, a little stiltedly. “Okay,” he agrees, and Even’s smile is big.

“Okay,” he repeats, then reaches to squeeze Isak’s shoulder gently. “Shall we make our exit?”

Isak nods, and as they leave the stall, a couple of drunk strangers walk into the bathroom. Isak bites his lip, hopes his face doesn’t look as flushed as he feels it is – but then again, the strangers’ faces are just as flushed, and they’re far too drunk to even give Isak and Even a second look.

Before they go, Even takes a moment to wash his hands thoroughly. Two of the strangers are pressed against one of the closed stall doors, where the other stranger has ventured into. They’re talking loudly to him from outside, and it takes Isak a second to realize they’re talking their friend through taking a dump, encouraging him.

Isak blinks at them, then turns to meet Even’s gaze through the mirror – Even grins at him, amused, and Isak can’t help the way his lips twitch in amusement, too. He walks to the sink next to Even as he’s finishing, washes his own hands.

Even finishes all of the paper towels on purpose, the asshole. He smirks at Isak when he glares at him, and after Even throws the last of the paper towels in the trash, he walks over to Isak and grabs his hands to dry them with his shirt. Isak rolls his eyes.
“Smooth,” one of the strangers outside the stall grins at them. Isak looks at his feet immediately, but Even laughs.

“Thanks.”

“Or stupid,” the other stranger pipes up. “Now your shirt’s gonna be all wet, dude. You could have done the same thing with a paper towel.”

There’s silence.

Even sighs loudly. “Shit, he’s right.”

Isak bursts out into a laugh. Even glares at him, but grabs Isak by the wrist and pulls him towards the door. He waves at the strangers. “Good luck with the dump,” Even calls to the stranger in the stall.

“Thanks!” They hear, and then they pull open the door, stepping out into the large crowd again, music loud, bass pumping through their veins.

“Meet me outside when you’re ready,” Even shouts into his ear over the music, and Isak does nothing but nod at him. Even grins at him one more time, squeezing his wrist, and then he disappears into the crowd, taking with him Isak’s only source of tranquility.

He hates navigating such large crowds on his own, but that’s not something Even knows, right, and it’s not something he actually broadcasts to the public, because it’s a stupid thing to dislike, so he takes a deep breath and takes a moment to gather his wits about him, then steps towards the crowd, pushing past sweaty bodies and people grinding against each other.

Isak manages to escape the worst of it when he finds himself closer to the bar, looking for Julian. He doesn’t immediately see him, so he’s about to walk a little further down the bar to look for him some more, but he bumps into someone’s chest a little hardly, and he loses his balance for a moment.

“Whoa,” Elias steadies him with his hands on either of Isak’s shoulders. “You okay, buddy?”

Isak huffs, a little embarrassed. “Yeah, sorry, I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

He spots Yousef right beside Elias, looking a little concerned, anyway, and Isak sighs loudly. “Do I have something on my face?” he asks, and Elias and Yousef exchange a glance.

“You just look a little put out,” Yousef replies over the music. “Everything okay?”

He just really needs to get the fuck out of here, is what he needs to do. Isak shakes his head. “I’m feeling a little sick,” he replies to them over the music. “Even’s helping me home.”

Yousef looks alarmed. “Do you need something?”

Elias gestures towards the DJ booth. “My pal’s up there, I’m pretty sure he’s got some painkillers for when his head blasts from the music, I can go up there and ask him for some—”

Isak shakes his head, smiling. Sometimes the guys are something else, and then sometimes – they’re this.

“No, it’s fine, seriously,” he tells them, making sure to be loud enough to be heard. “I’m just letting Even take me home.”

“Here,” Yousef shouts, reaching into his coat pocket. “Take my truck,” he hands Isak the keys, which Isak just blinks at.
“No,” Isak shakes his head. “I’m not taking your truck.”

Elias waves him off. “He’ll just catch a ride with me and Mutta,” he tells Isak. “It’s a better alternative than you passing out on the street, man.”

Isak hesitates for only a moment before taking the keys from Yousef. “Thanks,” he tells him, and Yousef smiles at him.

“Just make sure Even doesn’t crash it.”

Isak looks at him, alarmed.

Elias and Yousef laugh.

“He won’t,” Yousef assures him. “You’ve been in the truck with him before.”

Isak shifts his weight a little bit, then nods. “Okay,” he replies. “Uhm. Thanks again, guys.”

Elias pats his shoulder, then squeezes it. “Hope you feel better, Isak.” He brings his hand from Isak’s shoulder to ruffle at his hair, then walks past him. Yousef looks over Isak’s shoulder, staring at Elias’s retreating back, looking thoughtful.

Isak squirms a little bit, unsure if he should leave or wait for Yousef to snap out of whatever’s going on in his head.

Yousef’s expression looks a little dejected after a moment, but he finally looks down to meet Isak’s gaze. “Take care of yourself,” Yousef offers him, and after another smile, Yousef disappears into the crowd, too.

Isak stares over to where both Elias and Yousef disappeared, half fond, half wondering what the hell is going on there.

When he turns back to the bar, he spots Julian only just walking up to it, trying to catch the bartender’s attention. Isak makes his way quickly towards him, before he misses him altogether, crowd dispersing from the bar, thankfully.

“Julian,” he shouts over the music when he reaches him. Julian turns over to look at Isak, and grins brightly.

“Hey!” he replies. “Thought I’d lost you for good.”

Isak licks his lips, feeling a little guilty. Julian looks really happy that Isak’s come back at all, so Isak considers – just for a second – maybe texting Even that he’s staying after all, just so that Julian doesn’t feel like Isak’s giving him the cold shoulder.

Which he’s not, it’s just – Isak doesn’t know. He doesn’t know, there are too many things happening at once in this place and maybe – yeah, no. He should go. He needs to go.

Isak leans in so that Julian can hear him better. “Hey, sorry, but I’m gonna head out,” he says, and Julian looks at him, frowning.

“Oh?”

Isak clears his throat, hoping Julian can’t hear that. “Yeah, I’m feeling a little sick, so I’m gonna go home before I throw up on someone.”
Julian’s expression clears of the frown, turning instead into one of concern. “Oh,” he leans back a little bit. “Do you want me to give you a ride?”

Thank God the lighting is dark enough to hide Isak’s blush. “Uh, no,” he shakes his head. “It’s okay, my friend lent me his truck, so.”

Julian eyes him. “Are you sure you’re good to drive?”

Isak shakes his head. “No, Even’s driving me home,” he explains, and Julian nods.

He brings a hand to squeeze Isak’s arm. “Feel better, alright?” he says, and Isak nods lamely. “We should do this more often, yeah?”

Isak supposes. “Yeah,” he nods. “Yeah, sounds good.”

Julian’s smile is kind. “Bye, Isak.”

Isak makes a noise. “Bye, Julian.”

And then he’s leaving, pushing past some more people, head spinning, whirling with far too many thoughts, too many anxieties, and there are so many people here, for fuck’s sake—

His heart's still racing when he finally manages to make his way outside, even if the night air is cool on his heated face. He tries to catch his breath, or at least steady it, hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, fingernails digging into his palms. Keeps him rooted to the spot.

“Isak!”

He turns to his left and there – Even’s walking up to him, looking a little concerned, and suddenly something in Isak lifts, breath rushing back into him all at once, and his hands aren’t shaking as much as before; he thinks his body finally knows it’s getting out of this place for good, and is so, very grateful for it.

Isak walks down the small steps and towards Even, who meets him halfway. Even frowns down at him, holding his knuckles against Isak’s forehead.

“Are you sure you’re not actually sick?”

Isak shakes his head. “No, just—” he clears his throat. “It’s hot in there.”

Even considers him for a moment, before asking, “Are you okay?”

Isak ignores the urge in him that wants to tell Even the truth. “Fine,” he replies, then holds up Yousef’s truck’s keys, right in front of Even’s face. “Yousef offered us his truck.”

Even huffs, taking the keys from Isak. “Of course he did,” he gestures towards the parking lot. “Alright, come on, let’s find it.”

“You don’t remember where you guys parked?”

“Of course not,” Even looks at him, eyebrows furrowed. “Does anyone ever remember?”

Isak wouldn’t know, he’s never driven.

So he shrugs instead, falls into step beside Even. After a moment of silence, Even looks over at him. “Did you have fun?”
Isak looks at him. “I was in there for like, an hour, maybe less,” he points out. “And most of that was spent with your dick up my ass, so.”

Even laughs. “So you had a lot of fun.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Yeah,” he replies. “Lots of it.”

“At least you know for sure now your kink’s totally valid,” Even offers him. “And not something better off in porn.”

“True,” Isak allows him. “But – I have also discovered two of your kinks tonight.”

Even hums. “Have you?”

“Yes,” Isak nods. “You like to hear me beg, for one.”

Even looks thoughtful, then he shrugs. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

Isak smirks. “Least it’s better than your corny kink.”

Even laughs brightly and wraps an arm around Isak’s neck, pulling him closer to his side. “Shut up, Valtersen.”

“And,” Isak continues, ignoring that command. “You really like to hear me say your name.”

“Oh?”

“You ask me to do that, like, all the time.”

Even tilts his head, still looking ahead. His arm squeezes a little tighter around Isak’s neck, making it a little difficult to walk beside each other, but they manage. “You do say it rather nicely.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah, like—” Even glances down at Isak. “Say it right now.”

Isak thinks about for a moment, but then gives in. “Even.”

Even grins. “Again.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Jesus, Even—”

“Hah!” Even waggles his eyebrows. “You didn’t even realize, did you?”

Isak laughs quietly. “I don’t see what’s so special about it.”

Even shrugs as much as he can with his arm around Isak’s neck. “You make it sound nice.”

“It’s your name.”

“Yeah, but like,” Even looks like he’s trying to find his next words. “When you say it, it actually feels like my name, you know?”

Isak frowns. “No, I don’t know.”

Even exhales a quiet laugh. “No, I guess you don’t.”
“Do you know?”

Even hums. “Yeah, but doesn’t seem like I can articulate it, so.”

Even’s looking around the parking lot, eyes narrowed. Isak is looking at Even. “So,” Isak says, and Even glances at him. “Should I just keep saying it, then?”

Even smiles, nuzzles his nose against Isak’s hair, arm tightening around his neck a little more. “One more time?”

Isak sighs, but he finds himself smothering a smile. “Even.”

“Yep,” Isak feels Even’s lips brush his temple. Isak subconsciously turns his head slightly, leaning into the touch. “Definitely like that.”

--

They spend all night doing nothing other than talk and watch movies.

Isak finds out that Even prefers softer fries to crunchy ones, and he keeps giving Even shit about it all night – still, this difference works out in their favor in the end, because every time Isak pulls a soft fry from his carton container, he offers it to Even, and every time Even pulls out a crunchier fry from his carton container, he offers it to Isak.

At one point Even insists on feeding Isak the fry – mostly because Even loves to embarrass him – but Isak turns that idea on him real quick, being sure to wrap his lips around Even’s finger as he takes the fry. Victorious, Isak sits back, smirking. Even whimpered dramatically beside him, but Isak doesn’t give him the satisfaction of following up on the action.

(Okay. Maybe they make out a little bit after that. But nothing else.)

Other than that, though, they really do just spend time laying in the bed beside each other, propped up against the wall, legs stretched out in front of them. Every time Even chooses the movie, he’ll offer Isak a running commentary, which Isak points out makes him appreciate the movie less, but Even waves the point off, says Isak would learn more about it from him than the actual narrative, anyway.

It’s not exclusive to his movies, though. He also offers a running commentary on whatever movie Isak picks, and that’s more humorous than anything – he keeps judging the entire thing, from the camera angles, to the lighting, to the shitty script, and all Isak will do is hum noncommittally for Even’s benefit and once in a while interrupt him by shushing him, announcing that “this is one of his favorite parts.” When it’s over, he’ll allow Even to continue, which he does – happily.

The side of their legs are pressed lightly against each other, the contact minimal but the warmth it spreads through Isak to contrast the cold in his room impactful enough so that he doesn’t move his leg away. Even never does, either.

It’s nice. During lulls in a movie’s narrative, Even will ask Isak questions about his classes, and Isak will ask Even questions about his film experience. Even learns that Isak’s taking a chemistry class just for the hell of it (“Jesus Christ, Valtersen, love yourself!”) and Isak learns that Even once submitted a short film to a student festival and took home second prize (“It was about a traveling rubber duck. They found it very inspirational.”). Eventually their talking outlasts the movies, and they don’t really put another one on – Isak lies back after maybe a half hour of just talking, head on his pillow, while Even remains propped up against the wall.
They’ll talk like this for maybe another hour. About everything, about nothing at all. Even will bring up his mom a lot – Isak is careful not to bring up his. Even loves his mother more than he loves probably anyone else in this world, takes care of her as such, and it always makes Isak’s insides feel wretched and his heart constrict tightly. They’ll talk about their friends, how they met, how they stuck together. At one point Even begins to mindlessly trace Isak’s eyebrows, which feels nice enough so that Isak’s eyes close as he does so.

They talk like this for maybe half an hour more, and Isak thinks he checks out around the time Even’s talking about his first pet.

Tonight, his sleep is effortless and welcoming, and Isak thinks he feels fingers run through his hair before he’s taken completely under. That might just be half a dream, though. The kind that feels real enough so that touch is possible, but not real enough so that Isak awakens in a sweat.

Isak stirs at one point, hearing the apartment door open and close rather loudly, but he’s quick to fall asleep again. He wraps whatever’s suddenly around him tighter to himself, and even with its warmth enveloping him, Isak’s side somehow still feels cold.

He doesn’t dream.

--

When his eyes flutter open, they do so slowly, a little begrudgingly. Isak hasn’t had a sleep this peaceful and comfortable in a very long time, so he’s a little peeved it had to end at all. He knows that tonight he’s going to go back to fitful dreams, if he gets to sleep at all, so he stays wrapped around the blanket draped over him for a minute longer, pretending he doesn’t have to get up.

And then he realizes he’s under the blanket that’s usually in the living room, resting over the back of the couch. His brows furrow in confusion, and he raises his torso just enough to make sure that’s the case, then finally sits up, confused.

He blinks a couple of more times, trying to work himself out of his sleep-muddled state, and then trying to remember when – and how – he ended up asleep last night.

Isak remembers Even, suddenly, and he turns to look over to where Even had last been sitting – he’s gone, very obviously, but where the duvet lies beneath Isak, a folded piece of paper lies on top of it. Scratching at his ear, Isak reaches for the paper with his free hand, frowns at the front of it – it’s a drawing of a toilet, with a speech bubble above it that reads: “please don’t make even sit on me while you ride him.”

Isak closes his eyes and tries his best to swallow back the laughter that this stupid sketch absolutely does not warrant, but he fails miserably when a laugh bubbles past his lips, followed by a couple of more.

He sighs, resigned, then folds open the paper to find another drawing – this time of what Isak thinks is meant to be him, fast asleep on his bed, and this time instead of a speech bubble above him, there’s a thought bubble: a picture of McDonald’s fries inside it.

Underneath all of this, it reads: “You snore. You should get that checked out! I’ll talk to you tomorrow (today?). Hope your dreams really were about crunchy fries. x”

Isak purses his lips, denying them the smile that they so desperately want to meet, but when he licks his lips they still manage to curve upwards slightly.

He looks over at Even’s side again. His pillow is still dented from where the small of Even’s back
pressed against it all night last night. Isak reaches out and traces the dent for a moment, before
smoothing the pillow out.

He turns back to the note and strokes it one last time before turning over to open his bedside drawer
and gently drop the note inside. As he closes the drawer, his phone vibrates loudly, and Isak sighs at
around the same volume when he grabs for it and unlocks it.

R
Payment didn’t come through friday. Everything okay?

Isak frowns. No, fuck, he has those payments set on automatic. Huffing irritably, Isak exits the
conversation and finds his bank app, logging in quickly and looking at his account balance. When he
realizes he didn’t have enough money for the payment to go through this time, Isak scowls. He
doesn’t know how he’d spent his money so recklessly this week. He tries to figure out what could
have pushed his balance over the edge – then he remembers Friday, and all of the groceries he’d
bought, and suddenly it makes sense.

Shit, shit, shit. He doesn’t get another paycheck until Thursday, and that’s too long a time to wait.

Licking his lips, he eyes the savings account right below the checking account – his father’s stupid
 guilt money sits there, taunting, still enough of it after all the years collecting dust, and Isak doesn’t
fucking want to. He’d convinced himself the mattress was an exception, a one-time thing, but now
here he is, desperate for money he doesn’t currently have.

It’d feel so fucking ironic to take from this account for this. He fucking hates that he’s probably
going to do it.

He clicks out of the bank app and back to his messages, where the conversation opens automatically.
Isak types:

ISAK
Yes, sorry, will get to you asap, no stress

R
Thanks Isak

ISAK
Np

ISAK
Thank you

Isak sets his phone down and rubs at his forehead, put out. He exhales loudly, looking up at Orion’s
Belt. It looks the same as always – no difference – but Isak can’t bring himself to count the stars.
Instead, he looks at it for a second longer, then turns back down to look at his knees. It’s too early in
the morning to be this annoyed, this angry, this dejected – and he knows, logically, it’s probably
really fucking unhealthy, but this is what happens any time he thinks about his father, and he doesn’t
think that’s ever going to change.

(Sometimes he fools himself into thinking it will, though. A pipe dream.)
He doesn’t hear any noise outside of his room, which means Eva’s still dead to the world, which makes sense if she drank way too much yesterday – he checks his phone again, sees the time is nearing eleven o’clock, and he debates going back to sleep for exactly one second – after which he realizes there’s no way his body wants to go back to sleep, anyway.

Pushing the blanket off of him, Isak folds his legs over the edge of the bed and rubs at his face tiredly. He stares at the floor afterwards, for as long as he’s able to, just until his neck gets sore enough so that it complains to Isak.

He straightens up and walks towards his drawers, reaching for the fish food and walking towards Galileo. He’s swimming – aimlessly, as always – and Isak sprinkles enough food and then some, before closing the top again. He taps on the glass thrice. Galileo ignores him.

Isak puts the fish food right back where it belongs, then looks down at himself. He’s still in last night’s clothes, which are now wrinkled and a little sweated on, and he’s pretty sure that’s a ketchup stain near the hem of his button-down. Sighing loudly, he starts unbuttoning his shirt, and once he’s ready to move on to his jeans, his phone rings.

Isak looks back at it suspiciously. He doesn’t want to deal with this problem on the phone, but he doesn’t think it’d be right to ignore it; so he walks towards the phone and sighs a large sigh of relief when it’s Jonas’s contact that fills the screen.

Isak picks up immediately.

“How are you awake right now?” Isak asks, sitting on his bed. “I for sure thought you’d be as hungover as the rest of them.”


Jonas grunts. “Wasn’t feeling the scene.”

“You literally invited all of us. You set all of this up.”

There’s silence on the other end. “Yeah, but,” there’s a long sigh. “I didn’t—” Another sigh. “You feel like coming over?” Jonas switches tactics.

Isak frowns. “Right now?”

“Yeah, you know, before Mags gets home.”

“He’s not there?”

“She texted to let me know he was gonna crash at Mahdi’s,” he replies. “My guess is he’s not coming home for another while.”

Isak licks his lips. “Everything okay?”

Silence. “Mostly.”

“Okay,” Isak replies, needing no more time to make his decision. “I’ll be right over.”

“See ya, bro.”

“Bye, Jonas.”
They hang up.

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It doesn’t take long for Isak to get there afterwards. He doesn’t shower – doubts Jonas will care, anyway – just changes into different clothes, faces the tram once more until he reaches the boys’ apartment. For some reason, climbing the stairs enunciates how sore his legs are; he must have slept wrong, or something.

When he reaches the door, he knocks only twice before Jonas is opening the door. He gestures with his head, inviting Isak to come in. Isak takes his shoes off at the entrance, closes the door behind him. He follows Jonas quietly towards the living room, plops down next to him on the couch. Jonas offers him a blunt – Isak looks at the clock on the wall.

“This early?”

Jonas shrugs. “Stoners do it.”

Isak eyes him a little suspiciously, but accepts the weed anyway, leaning back on the couch, shoulder pressed against Jonas’s. And they stay like this – silent, for maybe half an hour, doing nothing but looking at the ceiling, smoking. Isak doesn’t want to push this – he knows Jonas will eventually say something, especially when he’s already hinted at the fact that he wanted to, so Isak waits it out, smoke fogging up his glasses enough so that he finally, for once, takes them off while smoking.

Finally, Jonas says, “It’s Noora.”

Isak blinks, then looks over at Jonas, surprised. “What?” he asks, and Jonas stays quiet. “Fuck, you like her, too?” What is the big deal? “That’s just—”

“No, Isak,” Jonas rolls his eyes. “Noora’s the problem because Eva’s obsessed with her.”

Isak blinks. “Okay, start again?”

Jonas glances at him. “Noora’s the problem because Eva’s obsessed with her. Noora’s the problem because Eva hasn’t been this obsessed with someone since high school. Noora’s the problem because I’m sure if Eva plays it right, she actually has a chance.”

Isak shakes his head. He doesn’t think so, but Jonas ignores him.

“Noora’s the problem because every time I’m in the same room with her and Eva, Eva’s looking at her, and all I want her to do is look at me.”

Isak stays silent for a moment.

Oh.

“Jonas,” his voice is quiet, apologetic.

Jonas shakes his head. “I don’t want your pity, alright?” he asks. “I’ve just – I know you’ve been wondering. Mahdi’s been – a good support system. Kind of like a buffer. Came over when I was really close to admitting to Eva there’s never been – that – not much has changed.” His voice is very quiet. “Not for me, anyway. Not since high school.”

Isak exhales in surprise. “Six years, Jonas?”

Jonas smiles bitterly. “I’m a fucking mess, right?” he shakes his head. “I guess I had this stupid hope
that we’d find our way back to each other, eventually.”

“Why didn’t you—” Okay, he knows what he’s going to ask next is petty, but—“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jonas looks at him. “I didn’t tell anyone until Mahdi, maybe a year ago,” he replies. “Just because – it was getting harder and harder, seeing her – every time, seeing her so – so—”

“Broken,” Isak finishes for Jonas quietly.

“And I never wanted – like, I didn’t want to move in during one of those periods, you know? That’d be so fucked up. So I finally had to just – have someone stop me.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek. “And that someone wasn’t me because…?”

Jonas laughs once. “You’re a terrible liar, Isak.”

“You – I – I am a great liar!”

Jonas looks at him. “You’re lying right now about lying and it’s so fucking obvious.”

Isak scowls. “I wouldn’t have told her anything.”

“I know,” Jonas’s smile is rueful. “I know, Isak, but Eva’s like your sister. And I know you want her to be happy. And—” Jonas holds up a hand before Isak interrupts. “I know you want me to be happy, too. I’ve seen the way you glare at Noora, and I already see the gears in your head turning.”

“There aren’t—”

“She doesn’t feel that way about me anymore, okay?” Jonas’s gaze is intense against Isak’s. “She doesn’t. And I’m not here to make her.”

“And what?” Isak asks. “You’re just – gonna leave me with that information, and do nothing about it?” He can barely hear his voice. It’s turned quiet, because this fucking sucks. It fucking sucks for both of his best friends.

Jonas purses his lips. “Guess so.”

“So you just — you see yourself being friends with her?” Isak asks tentatively, and Jonas continues to look ahead. “You can see yourself doing that. Despite the fact that you have feelings for her. That it’ll hurt.”

Jonas shrugs. “Yeah.”

Isak shakes his head. “Do you think there will ever come a time when you don’t have feelings for her?”

Isak knows the answer. But Jonas gives it to him anyway: “Maybe not,” he admits. “But maybe it’ll get easier with time.”

It won’t, Isak doesn’t say.

Love is a science. But so is a broken heart. It comes with the territory — which is why Isak wonders why people will willingly fall in love. Isak may believe in it, but that doesn’t mean he’ll ever want to be in it, because that’d just make him susceptible to pain, to sorrow, to irrationality.
Heartbreak brings about activity in the brain region associated with romantic love, so that means instead of forgetting about the person you love — instead of moving on immediately, finding a way out of the prison you’ve created for yourself — you just love them harder. And to think, to think, that maybe this is where science lets Isak down, this is when Isak wishes there was no science involved, wishes that the pain could dissipate as soon as you want it to; it’s the science that makes the most sense, that has perhaps been researched far too extensively, when maybe it should have been kept a mystery.

There’s no way out of it — if you love, then you love, and when your heart is broken, there’s no pretending it’s not. It’s science. And if the heart isn’t broken, if the pain isn’t real, then you never truly loved at all.

And Jonas most definitely loved. Far too much, if what he’s telling Isak right now is true. And when you love this much, for this long, your heartbreak may very well last just as long. So, no. He doesn’t see Jonas ever getting over Eva, ever looking at her and not feeling his heart break over again. Not unless he distances himself, allows himself to fall out of love with her.

But something tells Isak he doesn’t want to, and that’s the most curious and frustrating thing of all: when a person will accept the pain in their everyday life, will allow their heart to break every single day — if it means they get to keep loving.

Isak considers his best friend for a long moment.

“Well,” Isak clears his throat. “Is it any consolation if I point out Noora’s kind of the female version of you?”

Jonas looks at him. “What?”

Isak shrugs. “There’s a lot the two of you have in common. Intelligent, resolute, dry humor. You both care about the same issues, as far as I’ve heard. There’s the obvious difference in genitalia,” Isak adds. “But there’s also one more glaring difference.”

Jonas raises an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

Isak smiles. “I like you way better.”

Jonas snorts, pushing Isak’s shoulder with his lightly. “You’re so fucking sappy sometimes, dude.”

Isak gapes. “Look who’s talking, mister ‘I’m always here to listen, even if it’s just to listen to your silence’.”

“That was a genius line.”

“You’ve probably used that line on girls.”

Jonas sniffs. “My greatest lines are reserved for you and you only.”

“Aw, Jonas,” Isak grins. “Do you love me?”

“Do you love me?”

Isak snorts. “That train has left the station, buddy. You’re too late.”

Jonas laughs. “And it left right on time, right?” he meets Isak’s gaze. “That’s around the time you announced to all of us love was the root of all the world’s problems and you were renouncing it.”
“I was a little dramatic then.”

“Then?”

Isak glares at him. “Shut up.”

“Besides,” Jonas ignores him. “You still believe that, don’t you?”

Isak knocks his ankles together thoughtlessly. “Yeah,” he replies. “Though – maybe that’s not a good subject to get into right now.”

Jonas’s smile is soft. “Thanks.”

“Pft.”

“I know it’s taking a lot out of you to not yell at me about how stupid I am to let myself feel this.”

He’s not wrong. “Sometimes I wish I could—” Extend his walls, far and wide enough so that his friends could also stand behind them, ready for impact when it’s about to hit. It’d spare them so much pain. “Shut up,” Isak finishes instead, lamely.

Jonas laughs quietly. “Nah,” he shakes his head. “You wouldn’t be you if you shut up.”

“True.”

“Eva used to say that,” Jonas recalls quietly. “In high school. When you weren’t around. She’d say, wow, he does not shut up, but I guess we wouldn’t want him if he did, huh?”

Isak exhales through his nose sharply and amused. “I’m sorry.”

Jonas shakes his head. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“I’m sorry it’s hurting you.”

“That’s all on me,” Jonas points out. “I’m not going anywhere, am I?”

No, he’s not. Isak doesn’t know how people don’t fold the moment the world deals them a bad hand. The moment their heart breaks, for one reason, or for another. He doesn’t know how they keep at it, keep moving.

He either think it’s naïve—

Or he’s envious of those people.

(Courage is a concept that’s foreign to him. But courage always threatened to hurt him, and hate him, and make a fool out of him. It was never inviting, rather, scathing.)

Bravery loves you or leaves you. In the way Isak is acquainted with it, it does nothing but deceive you. Lures you into a false sense of security, in with false promises of a better heart, a better life, though it’s purpose is always the same, Isak thinks:

It helps love with the broken heart.

“She’s pretty, isn’t she?” Jonas asks suddenly.

“Conventionally.”
“I can see why Eva likes her,” he admits. “I can’t even begrudge her for it.”

There’s a pause. “Eva’s prettier,” Isak adds, slightly jokingly.

Jonas smiles. “Eva’s beautiful,” he replies quietly. “She’s beautiful.”

Isak suddenly hears fifteen-year-old Jonas in the background, smitten with his girlfriend, the girl he chose to love even when it was wrong, even when everything could have gone to shit. He hears fifteen-year-old Jonas, in love, naively so, and he realizes there’s really no difference between fifteen-year-old Jonas then, and the Jonas sitting here now.

And here he is. Fighting.

Isak’s phone vibrates in his pocket, and he reaches for it and unlocks it. There’s a message from Even, and his head whispers more about bravery, about fighting. His thumb hovers over his notification, considering. Read it now, or read it later.

Read it now, or read it later.

His thumb presses down lightly on the screen, but it does nothing.

Another moment passes. Read it now, or read it later. What’s the difference? Read it now, or read it later.

A beat.

He locks his phone.

Chapter End Notes

follow me on tumblr! i know a lot of you have questions about the fic, theories you'd like to share, etc. so shoot me an ask if you'd like, and go through the fic tag if you want to read the answers to some questions and really cool theories for the future!

*navi voice* HEY, LISTEN: i am aware people don't often tip in norway (or europe in general) but trip advisor said that they sometimes do, so i ran with it. i've also had a couple of norwegians/europeans telling me not to sweat it, so i will not, because i love them. in any case, no one but even tipped, and this is bc even is a nice guy who tips. (and, lbr, i needed an excuse for isak to be petty.) (poor waitress probably thinks even's definitely gonna call, though.)

and on another note, i am now aware that many stores - including a mattress store - are not open on sundays in norway. a wonderful oslo native told me through tumblr that the fix for this is IKEA! which happens to be open on sundays, where no others are. so that is where the babes were buying the mattress.

mari in the story is the same mari in the show!

a lot of the questions/concerns you guys have in the comments are answered on my tumblr's fic tag, which i encourage you guys to go peruse, even if you don’t want to follow me! that’s fine! you can even ask your own questions, if you’d like! (so long as the ask box isn't closed, which happens often, while i'm trying to keep up with asks.)
i love you guys so much, and your response to this story has just been — incredible. you
give me so much will to push forward. kudos and comments, as always, are appreciated,
but never enforced! lots of loves, babes, see you next chapter!
first off, a huge thank you to the love of my life summer for sticking with me through this month and through the times i literally sat there and cried to her re: issues in my personal life and the toll it was taking on my ability to write. also for reading through an 82k chapter and still managing to beta it in its entirety, like, what? and also still managing to offer me commentary as she did? idk how she does it. she’s like, the biggest and bestest trooper. i love you so much ok.

another thank you to my love cz, because even though she couldn’t beta the fic this time around, she was still encouraging and lovely and understanding when my messages lapsed between the morning and like, ten o’clock at night. ily lots babe.

a big, big thank you to every single person on tumblr that’s sent me instant messages, and on twitter with replies, asking me if i was okay, sending me good vibes, and offering me words of encouragement and love. i don’t know if i could keep writing this without you guys. knowing this story means something to you and is getting you through something makes me want to push through. so thank you.

another large thank you to my beautiful friend marta and the rest of the crew at the skamfamfiction discord chat — though i haven’t had the time to be a part of it, marta speaks volumes about what it means, and has sent me all the encouraging messages she can, paired along with your well-wishes, even if i couldn’t answer. i cannot thank each and every one of you enough. i just can’t. just know all of you in there are near and dear to my heart, and are also part of the reason i keep pushing through.

some of you have expressed concern about where chapter six has gone. simple: before, chapter six was actually part two of chapter five, and now that chapter six is finally finished in its entirety, chapter five has now been combined into one monster chapter. all of the chapter is still there, babes, don’t fret!

you also may have noticed the rating has upped a level: from “mature” to “explicit”. does this mean there will be more smut scenes? i have no idea. there are like, two very vague ones in here, and they are probably not any good, at that, but i have no idea what my muse is gonna want to do in the future, so better safe than sorry, right?

Lastly, i’m sorry this took me so long. i could bore you with my personal and health issues, but i’m not going to. i’m just going to thank you for being so patient and still looking forward to the story. i’m sending you lots of love and affection.

this is 82k. the chapters will only keep getting longer, apparently. in any case, enjoy chapter six! hopefully all of the evak in this chapter makes up for the torturous three and a half chapters that barely fed you. love you!

EDIT: idk why i’m telling y’all it’s an edit. i’m literally editing this before i post. but. okay. lmao.

ao3 just informed me that this chapter is too long to be uploaded. i should have seen this coming, i cannot have nice things ever.
it has been split in two again. this time it’s staying that way, and i am so sad. the rest of the chapters will probably follow suit. i’m sad. but they are both uploaded now, so —
love you?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The next three weeks see Isak’s life take a little bit of a detour.

That’s not to say much of his end goal changes in any way, it’s only – well. Things have shifted, in almost every one of his relationships, and he’s not sure how he’s supposed to feel about it. Usually, Isak is very good at compartmentalizing, sifting through the feelings and the conversations and the level at which every person in his life stands, making it easier to know which line is the one that should not be crossed and which line is the one he must stay ahead of at all times, as to not arouse suspicion.

It’s worked his entire life. Eva is like his sister, but cannot know his greatest fault. Jonas is like his brother, but he cannot know more than he already does. Magnus and Mahdi are two of his best friends, but they cannot see past the persona Isak puts forward when he agrees to hang out. Even is his friend, and his fuck buddy, but he cannot push past that boundary and discover things Isak has spent years hiding. Julian is his coworker, maybe his friend, if Isak pushes it a little, but he can never be anything more than that.

Every person in his life is like a file in Isak’s head, manila folders stuffed inside a cabinet, opened only when he’s in the presence of said file. And so this is how he’s always been so careful, able to be one person and not the other, able to adapt accordingly to any situation or in the presence of any company. He is This Isak, or That Isak, or Their Isak. No one’s ever known the truth, no one’s ever seen him in one piece, and that’s the way things are meant to stay. This is why there are two lines – one that should not be crossed, and one he must stay ahead of at all times.

But now there’s – this.

Maybe it’s a bigger deal in his head than it is outwardly. It wouldn’t be the first time Isak’s embellished a situation or a flaw or whatever – at least, that’s what he’s been told – but it certainly feels like a big deal. Whereas before Isak could mold his personality for the sake of one person or a group of people, now they seem to be molding theirs, and it’s setting Isak’s alarm bells off, and it’s keeping him unbalanced, and he’s not sure what’s happening.

And he hates it. He hates not knowing.

Take, for example, his relationship with Julian: whereas before it was simple to call him a coworker and chat with him politely during work, maybe exchange a laugh or two, now Julian extends their conversations by at least ten minutes, and he keeps bringing up the night outside of work they spent with each other – which, last time Isak checked, wasn’t even that long of one, considering he almost immediately terminated their conversation to have Even fuck him silly in a bathroom and then take him home to watch shitty movies – and hinting at maybe doing it again sometime. And then hinting that maybe they should do it alone.

Isak’s not sure if Julian’s been flirting with him always, but ever since that night, he’s a lot – smoother about it. Obvious, anyway. It leaves Isak flustered more often than not, and not because he’s enjoying it, but because he literally has no idea how to respond in situations such as these – attractive man shows explicit interest in him, attractive man flirts with him in an attempt to win a date with him, attractive man then proceeds to date Isak and then blame him for breaking attractive man’s
heart because Isak couldn’t give him what he wanted, even though Isak was explicit about it from the very beginning.

And that’s Isak’s pattern, that’s just where that road leads, it’s an automatic set-up in his head. There are no hacks or shortcuts or reboots, it’s the default setting you annoyingly can’t alter and even if Isak wanted to let someone down easily, if they’re so eager to have their heart broken or their illusions shattered – Isak can’t really do anything about it. There was a warning. If they chose to ignore it, that’s of their own volition, and, consequently, their own fault.

But Julian really seems to think he’s getting somewhere. Isak thinks it has to do with his blushing. His complexion is very favorable to reddening palpably. It’s his greatest flaw and will one day be his downfall, he’s sure.

So there’s Julian. That – he’s gotta figure out. Eventually. It’s imperative he does, else this might be heading a direction no one wants to follow.

And then there’s Even. And that’s – that’s even more confusing.

That’s – something else.

And then there’s Jonas, who, ever since he told Isak he still has feelings for Eva, Isak can’t help but notice it. In every turn. In every word Eva speaks that Jonas hangs on to, in every smile Eva gives him that Jonas blinks at uselessly, in every frown Eva tries to hide that Jonas tries to wipe – it’s so obvious, it’s right there, and Isak wonders how he never noticed.

Jonas is smitten, he’s in love, and Isak doesn’t see a future where he won’t be, and it worries him. Every time he’s with Jonas now, he has to walk on eggshells, be sure not to bring up the fact that all of this is going to lead to heartbreak – because he’s done it before, a week after their talk, and Jonas snapped at him very quietly, reminding Isak he already knows. He’s walking into this willingly. And Isak’s better off saving his breath, because he won’t do much to change his decision.

A life filled with heartbreak if it means getting to love her for the rest of it. Isak thinks Jonas is mad.

At least he can exchange worried glances with Mahdi now, if nothing else.

With that in mind, he thinks to Eva, who’s been far more subdued these past few weeks. Not outwardly, no, she still manages to smile and laugh and joke with everyone outside of the apartment, but when it’s just the two of them, Isak finds her lost in thought more often than not. When Isak brought it up to her last week, she’d blinked at him, nonplussed, as if she had no idea anyone would notice. Then, after a minute or two trying to regain her composure – which made for an awkward staring battle, Isak will admit – she’d smiled at him minutely and told him she’s thinking about her mom, so close to the holidays.

Isak knows it’s not true. But he didn’t push it, because Eva’s mom is as much of a touchy subject as Isak’s is.

It’s been a confusing couple of weeks. That, plus the pile of homework he needs to get through before the winter holidays, leaves Isak exhausted most nights, but never exhausted enough to sleep – which is the only reason that he’s picked up the book Sana gifted him with. It’s curiosity, he tells himself – he reminds himself he’s reading a theory, almost like it’s fiction, but it’s still written endearingly enough so that it captures Isak’s attention. That, at least, has the power not to make his sleepless night feel frustrating and angering. He feels like he’s accomplished something by morning, even if that something isn’t of much use.
He’s taking his time with the book, though. A couple of pages each night. He’s started making
annotations in the margins, just to find the inconsistencies between chapters and/or theories – but
sometimes, even to find connections between them.

It’s a hobby now. Something he doesn’t feel obligated to do. If he can’t look at the stars without
remembering that he can’t find the words to describe them on paper anymore, then at least he has the
multiverse theory, and the several different directions the theory pulls towards.

It’s why he finds himself here, sitting in his living room with his legs tucked underneath him, reading
the next chapter slowly. It’s hard to concentrate on the book, considering Eva and Even sit on the
loveseat adjacent to the couch, both of them enthralled in their own business. The television is on in
front of them, but no one’s watching it, letting whatever show is playing out entertain itself.

It’s almost a habit now, Isak and Even hanging out in their respective places with their roommates
around. With the first week of December coming to a close, it’s hard to find a time where no one’s
around, so they’ve settled for simple drop-ins – sometimes Even will join Isak and Eva for dinner,
other times Isak will join Even and Yousef in watching a romantic comedy in their living room,
sometimes Yousef will be cooking instead and Isak lies on the couch, feet on Even’s lap, drifting off
as Even reads something intensely on his phone, which Isak is pretty sure is fanfiction of some sort,
if the last time he caught a peek offered him a correct deduction.

A couple of times, these new habits of theirs will make one of their friends stop in their tracks – Elias
is a prime example, one day walking out of his room and blinking at the way Isak’s back was
pressed against the loveseat’s arm, feet tucked underneath Even’s lap – because that house is cold
sometimes, okay, those assholes have no sense of self-preservation and Isak’s surprised none of them
have gotten sick yet – and raising an eyebrow. He’d cleared his throat, and both Isak and Even had
looked up from their phones, blinking right back at him.

“Are you two gonna spend the day here?” He’d asked slowly, and Isak and Even had exchanged a
look.

“We might order some pizza later,” Even had told him. “If you wanna hang here with us.”

Elias had looked perplexed for only a second longer – as if he’d suddenly been transported to an
alternate reality for that second – before he nodded and decided to join them, plopping his entire
body across the empty couch, reaching for the remote and turning on the TV.

These habits, Isak thinks, are nothing out of the ordinary for either of them – Even’s always been an
affectionate guy, and Isak’s never shied away from cuddling Eva or tucking his feet under Jonas’s
lap when the situation warrants it – which is maybe why their friends aren’t shocked about the
habits, but rather that they’re practicing them with each other.

It’s been a while, though. Isak thinks their friends are settling into this newfound friendship far easier
than Isak had, anyway.

In any case, it’s old news now, and no one’s really caught on to the – other habits they’ve been
practicing with each other, so Isak thinks they’re in the clear until they decide to end their
arrangement.

But the only reason it’s hard to concentrate now, as he glares at his book, is because Even keeps
stretching, and his shirt keeps riding up a bit, and Isak’s not sure if he’s doing this subconsciously or
on purpose, but it’s driving Isak insane, and causing him to shift his weight over and over. Eva’s
looked over at him a couple of times, her expression curious, but Isak has merely smiled at her, trying
to convey that he’s just restless.
It’s quiet for maybe another five minutes, save for the television, when the silence is finally broken by a curious Even.

“So,” he looks up from his phone, and Isak notices his legs are folded underneath him, back resting against the love seat’s arm and he’s now facing Eva directly. “What are you guys doing for Christmas this year?”

“We’re spending it here,” Eva replies, and Isak simply nods his agreement.

Even pauses. “With each other?”

Isak and Eva exchange a glance.

“…yes?” Eva turns back to Even. “That’s what was implied by spending it here, Even. Who else lives here?”

Even tilts his head curiously. “I just thought you’d have people over. Your families, maybe.”

Isak and Eva exchange another glance, only this time, it’s amused. Even seems to notice this, eyes flickering back and forth between him and Eva. When they finally look back at him, Even’s eyebrows rise.

“What?”

“Our parents aren’t exactly — uhm,” Isak purses his lips.

“They aren’t really into the whole Christmas thing,” Eva lies easily for him, for which Isak is eternally grateful. “So instead we just spend it with each other. It’s nice,” Eva adds. “We make hot chocolate and we watch Christmas movies and I force Isak into a reindeer onesie.”

“What?”

“It’s—” Isak rolls his eyes. “It’s not an actual reindeer, before you get — stop smiling like that,” he snaps, but Even doesn’t listen. “There are just reindeers on it!”

“With snowflakes and Christmas trees,” Eva adds. “It’s adorable and we match.”

“And you let this happen?” Even asks, amused.

Isak huffs. “She makes dinner,” he points out. “It’d be kind of shit of me to not give her at least that satisfaction.”

Eva beams, and Even shakes his head — but instead of amused, he now looks fond, which irritates Isak more than it would have had he been amused.

“It’s whatever,” he mutters, burying his face back into the book. By this point, he’s just pretending to be reading — he’s been stuck on the same paragraph for about half an hour now, head somewhere in between the clouds and the sun, thinking about things he usually puts off until a couple of days before Christmas, but now he wonders if maybe he should get it over with, lest he has another money debacle like a couple of weeks back.

“I mean, hey,” Even smiles at them both. “If you guys want to take a break from cooking and reindeer jumpsuits, you’re welcome to spend it with me and my mom,” he offers. “And my aunts and uncles and cousins. I — there are a lot of people in my family,” he explains. “But they’d all be very welcoming.”
Isak’s lips twitch, but he doesn’t look up from the book. Jesus. Even would give the shirt off his back to anyone who beseeched it of him pathetically, with no actual explanation as to why. Isak hates that about him and finds it frustratingly wonderful all at once. He’s too kind for his own good, as Isak’s always insisted, and he seriously wishes he would stop, for his own sake — or, if anything, for the sake of Isak’s sanity.

“That’s really nice of you, Even,” Eva replies. “But seriously. We like spending Christmas together. It’s really chill.”

Isak nods, finally looking up. Even looks apprehensive. “It’s not that pathetic, Even,” he smirks. “We’re not alone if we have each other.”

“What?” Even shakes his head urgently. “I didn’t — I wasn’t implying—”

Both he and Eva break out into laughter. Even narrows his eyes at both of them.

“Oh, nice.”

“Aw,” Eva scoots closer to Even and lays her head on his shoulder, blinking up at him innocently. “Did we embarrass you?”

Isak licks his lips and lowers his gaze, staring pointedly back down at his book. It shouldn’t — it’s not like it bothers him, to see Eva so — so freely just — touching Even like that, just — cuddling him like it’s no big deal, because it doesn’t, he just finds it a little irritating that his roommate suddenly has such a close relationship with his fuck buddy. That’s it.

So he’s a little irked at the thought of Even taking Eva away. Big whoop, what’s new. Isak’s always worried someone will come along and take Eva from him and she’ll finally realize Isak isn’t really worth her time or affection and she’ll leave him. Isak knows it’s only a matter of time, mind you, but he’d like to prolong that as much as possible. So it’s not a big deal. It’s not.

God, but it’s really bothering him this time, what the fuck.

“You know, I’ve never experienced the wrath of the two of you teaming up,” Even sniffs. “I’m not sure I like it.”

Through his peripheral, Isak sees Eva pat Even’s chest affectionately. Something ugly churns in his stomach. “You’ll be fine, babe,” she says, and then she’s leaning away from Even and back to the other end of the love seat, prompting a soft sigh of relief from Isak he can’t really stop. He freezes for a moment, hoping neither of them caught that — and it seems that they didn’t, because Even carries the conversation on as if Isak hadn’t made a sound.

“Listen, I also asked for my sake,” Even adds. “It’s going to be weird showing up this year solo.”

Isak’s brows furrow, and he looks up again. “Why this year?”

Even blinks at him. “I usually show up with Sonja,” he explains, and, oh. Right. That makes sense.

Isak licks his lips and nods once in understanding. “Ah,” he plays with the corner of the book page a little nervously, avoiding Even’s gaze. “I mean, why don’t you ask her anyway?” He bites the inside of his cheek before continuing. “Since, you know. There’s always the possibility,” he clears his throat. “Of you guys — you know. Anyway.”

Even is frowning at him. “What?”
Eva is frowning at him, too. “Yeah, what?”

Isak grunts in frustration, momentarily lowering the book. “You know, you guys are — on and off, anyway, maybe she wouldn’t mind going to Christmas with you. You know. Work the Christmas magic, maybe — you know, get back on, and stuff.”

An uncomfortable silence settles around the room. Isak is fiercely avoiding both Eva and Even’s gazes, wondering if what he’d said was incredibly stupid.

“That’s incredibly stupid,” Eva says, and Isak’s head snaps up to glare at her.

“Why?”

“Because you don’t invite exes to your Christmas get-together, even if you *are* on and off. That’s weird.”

“You and Jonas spent a shitload of Christmases together after your break up,” he points out. “And if I recall correctly, hooked up in two of them.”

“Yeah, but we were still friends,” she points out. “Sonja and Even aren’t still friends. Right, Even?”

Isak turns to look at Even at the same time as Eva, and Even sits here, a little stiff, expression pained.

They wait.

Even clears his throat. “I mean,” he clears his throat again. “We’ve been *texting.*”

Oh.

It’s without permission that Magnus’s words from a couple of weeks back infiltrate his train of thought, but the two standouts happen to be “back together” and “rebound”. It doesn’t — it *shouldn’t* bother him as much as it does, because he’s always been aware that he’s a rebound, or, he had been, or — maybe he still is, he doesn’t know, he hasn’t *asked* —

(and that’s mostly because he’s afraid of the answer, but that’s also a thought that does not belong in the forefront, so he shoves it back and back and back until it joins the others in purgatory)

—but either way, it’s a wakeup call of sorts, to hear Even say that. A reminder to Isak — know your place, know your place.

(That doesn’t do anything to alleviate the pressure in his heart, though. It’s unwelcome and unruly and obnoxious and it needs to fucking go.)

“Really?” Eva’s eyebrows rise in surprise. Isak’s gaze is glued to the book, which has now been set on his lap. “Wow. I wasn’t — do the boys know?” she asks. “No one’s mentioned anything.”

“No, I mean,” Even pauses. “No one knows. At least — not until *now,*” he points out. “And I’d appreciate it if it stayed that way,” he adds, and there’s a pleading undertone to his request. Isak sees Eva nod her assent, then turn to looks at Isak expectantly.

Isak clears his throat and forces a smile to curve his lips upwards, finally meets Even’s gaze with what he hopes is resilience. “Yeah, no, won’t say a fucking word,” he says, and shit, did that sound bitter?

Even’s gaze is intense, and Isak feels it in the root of his stomach.
“So what does that mean?” Eva asks, which makes Even’s gaze snap away from Isak’s. Isak’s chest lifts. “You’re staying friends?”

Even’s shrug is light. “I don’t know what it means,” he admits. “She’s still dating someone else,” he adds. “Which is great. I mean, she’s happy. So asking her to spend Christmas with me is still out of the question,” he laughs, and Isak hates the way the sound runs a thrill down his spine. “But. I don’t know. We’re friendlyish?”


Isak blinks a little harshly. “I don’t know?"

“It’s – it’s whatever, Eva, don’t worry about it,” Even smiles at her in the reassuring way he knows how to, but Eva looks like she won’t stop worrying about it. Isak wonders why she’s so intent on pushing this, considering she was never really there for Even and Sonja’s relationship, and then Isak chalks it up to the universe playing a sick joke on him, because that’s his life now. “Should any interesting developments actually happen, I’ll let you know, yeah?”

Eva looks thoughtful. “But do you think you’d actually get back together with her?”

Oh, my God, Eva. Shut the fuck up.

He takes that back immediately. Even if it was in his head, that’s a shitty thing to not-say to his best friend. He’s just so irritated. And he has no reason to be, so that only makes him even more irritated.

“Is something on your mind, Eva?” Even raises an eyebrow, but don’t think Isak doesn’t notice the way he dodged her question. “You seem to really be taking this to heart.”

Eva blushes visibly, and suddenly Isak feels less irritable and more worried. He wonders if this has anything to do with why she’s been so subdued the past couple of weeks. He wonders if Even will be the one to crack her, and he wonders how he’s going to feel about that if he is.

Predictably, however, Eva simply shakes her head and smiles. “Nah,” she shrugs, casual as anything. “I’m just a nosy bitch.”

Even barks a laugh, but Isak eyes her suspiciously. Eva avoids his gaze, no doubt knowing exactly what Isak’s thinking.

She slaps her hands on her lap before standing from the couch. “Anyway, boys,” she announces. Both Isak and Even look up at her. “I’ve got to leave for work. Those groceries are not gonna ring themselves up,” she tells them, smiling. She grabs the remote from the couch and turns off the television, most likely because she’s realized no one’s been watching it. She reaches over to ruffle Even’s hair then walks over to press a loud kiss on Isak’s head.

“Eva,” he groans, wiping at his head. Eva cackles victoriously, walking over to the kitchen table to grab her purse and her coat. One the way back to the entrance to retrieve her shoes, she says, “Don’t have too much fun without me, okay? It’d be a blow to my ego.”

Isak bites his lip and says nothing, but Even humors her with a laugh. “Promise we won’t,” he tells her, and with one last hum, Eva is out the door.

It’s immediately tense. Isak won’t lie and say it’s probably not because of him, considering he’s almost certain it is because of him – he refuses to look at Even, instead opens his book back up and continues to read the same fucking paragraph over and over, not really grasping what it’s trying to
tell Isak. Again. And again. And again. Until finally, Even breaks the silence.

“You know I’m not inviting her to Christmas, right?”

Isak can feel his back stiffen. His jaw clenches. “Okay,” he deadpans. “I don’t know why you think I’d care, but.”

Isak can feel Even’s gaze heavy on him. “There’s nothing happening there,” Even continues, and Isak can feel his teeth grind uncomfortably together. “It really is just casual texting.”

“Alright.” His voice is still devoid of any emotion that could give his ridiculousness away. “I still don’t know why you think I’d care.”

Even’s gaze is now boring a hole in the side of Isak’s face. “Isak.”

“Do you want to order a pizza?” he asks suddenly, trying to detour the conversation and let it all fucking go. He doesn’t want this – why can’t Even just pick up on the fact that he doesn’t want to have this conversation? “I think we can order pizza.”

“Isak.”

“What, Even?” He finally snaps, finally looks over at him. “It’s none of my business. Your relationship with her is yours to know and not mine. She’s—” Isak struggles to find words that don’t sound bitter. “I don’t know anything about it and that’s fine and I shouldn’t, so. Just. That’s separate from whatever this is,” he puts his book down to gesture between him and Even. “You know that, right? You’re allowed to try and pursue her again, or, whatever.”

Even simply stares at him.

Isak shakes his head in frustration. “What?”

Even puts his phone down and stands from the loveseat, making his way over to where Isak sits at the edge of the couch. “I’m not going to try and pursue her, Isak.”

Isak looks away and plays with the cover of the book. “It’s none of my business.”

Even kisses the corner of his mouth. “I’m not.”

Isak swallows harshly, hating the way the sensation of Even’s lips against his skin has an immediate gratifying effect on him. “Okay, fine,” he replies, but he can feel his voice quiver. “I don’t care.”

Even kisses the other corner of his mouth. “I’m not.”


“I’m not,” Even mutters against Isak’s skin. “I’m not.”

Isak can’t hear it anymore. He can’t. He doesn’t want to, he doesn’t want to feel what his heart is trying to feel, so instead he throws the book to the floor and grips Even’s hair and presses his lips to his desperately, and Even’s response is immediate – he presses Isak’s back onto the couch and then he hovers over him, both of his hands holding himself up as Isak’s back leans upward to meet him halfway. Isak’s clinging to him helplessly, and he doesn’t know what to do other than kiss him. And kiss him. And kiss him.

He doesn’t know how to deal with it. So without breaking the their lips apart, Isak fumbles uselessly with Even’s belt, trying to get it off of him.
Even pulls away slightly. “You don’t want to,” he says quietly, and Isak shakes his head, finally manages to slide the belt off.

“You don’t know what I want,” he replies, unbuttoning Even’s jeans. “I want you.”

Even’s exhale is shaky. “Whether we do this or not, it’s not changing the fact that I’m not—”

“Stop talking about her,” he snaps. “I don’t want to hear about her anymore.”

Even searches Isak’s gaze.

Isak pulls whatever he can of Even’s jeans down, and his hand starts palming Even over his boxers. “I don’t care about her,” he says, nipping at Even’s jaw. “I don’t fucking care about her.”

Even nods, stance wavering. “Okay.”

“You can do whatever you want,” he can hear how angry his voice sounds. Isak’s not sure whether he’s actually angry or not, he just knows he sounds it. “But right now, you’re with me, and I want you to fuck me.”

Even’s arm wraps under Isak’s waist and lifts him slightly, only to move him further up the couch, and then his lips are attached hungrily to Isak’s again, and he can feel it. He can feel her slip away. And he feels triumphant, like this is what he wanted, like this is what the yearning in his chest was rooting for, and Isak can’t help it when his hand comes back up to grip at Even’s hair, lips far too distracting for Isak to do much else of substance.

“Jeans,” Even orders against his lips, and Isak grunts as he lowers his hands back down to unbutton his own jeans, zipping them down and doing his best to push them as far as they’re willing to go. It’s not enough, and Even can feel it’s not enough, but this doesn’t deter him.

They don’t have a condom. It’s in the back of Isak’s mind, and it must be in the back of Even’s too, because he makes no move to remove their boxers. Instead, he leans downward slightly, pressing them against each other, and then he’s rolling his hips against the fabric of his boxers and God. He forgot how much he liked this. It’s quick and it’s dirty and he really, really loves this.

Isak arches his hips, searching for more friction, and he finds it with another roll of Even’s hips, and it’s amazing, the way he can feel them both getting hard at the same time, and it drives him crazy, and the way Even half gasps half kisses on Isak’s mouth and the way he groans his name, his name —

His back is still halfway off the couch, hands digging their fingernails into Even’s back. Their lips are parted wide open against each other, Isak grinding upwards, Even rolling his hips downward.

Even groans his name again. Isak thinks it’s fucking beautiful.

His hand comes up to grab at Even’s hair. Fuck Sonja, fuck her, fuck her, she doesn’t get to have this anymore, this is his now, this is his, and she let him fucking go and so Even’s his now, and Isak makes sure to groan and moan and gasp Even’s name as much as he can, just so he remembers who he’s with, just so that he knows.

It won’t take them long. Not at the pace they’re going, anyway.

Isak slides his hands downward to grab at Even’s ass, pushing him closer, guiding the roll of his hips. He pleads into Even’s ear, quietly, the way Even likes it — there’s a mix of please and come on and don’t stop and then his name over and over, and Even starts grinding faster and harder against
him, and Isak suddenly can’t find any more words, can’t do anything but gasp.

His hands find their way to Even’s back again, clinging to it desperately, nose buried in Even’s neck, teeth biting down harshly on his bottom lip. Isak can hear both of their uneven breaths mingle, and it’s that, plus the sound of cotton grating together that’s all Isak can hear, and they’re like fucking teenagers right now, but Isak — Jesus, Isak wants Even so much, like, so fucking much, he’s trying to hold off on his climax so he can have this for longer.

“What?” Isak half-sobs into Even’s neck, and that’s a clear indicator that Even’s trying to do the same as Isak, so he digs his nails deeper into Even’s back through his shirt.

“Just a little longer,” he pleads. “Even, just—”

Even nods quickly, but Isak can feel the quiver of his back as he stops for a moment, letting them both take a breath. Letting them both try and prolong this.

They’re breathing into each other’s necks. Isak’s fingernails are still digging into Even’s back.

Isak kisses the skin underneath Even’s ear, then his jaw, then his chin, then they bring their lips back together for a kiss – it’s softer this time, mostly because they both probably know that if the kiss is any more than this they’ll just start over again, finish quicker.

Isak thinks they get a little too lost in the kiss – or, at least he does, because he forgets momentarily they’re on a couch, so when he attempts to roll Even over—

“Holy crap,” Even groans in pain, and Isak nearly gasps when he realizes they’ve landed on the floor, in between the couch and the coffee table. Isak thinks he got the better end of the deal, here, obviously, considering – well, Even bared impact on both his back and certainly his chest, if his groaning and gasping for breath is anything to go by.

To be fair, though, Isak’s boner really took a little bit of the beating, too.

But, still. Really. Isak doesn’t mean to laugh, but Even’s face is so – funny.

Isak stifles it, however, for the sake of, you know. Sympathy. “I’m so sorry,” he apologizes, a slight chuckle able to escape his lips. “Even, oh my God,” he leans back and upwards, where he’s now straddling Even’s lap, and rubs at his chest in a moot attempt to alleviate Even’s pain. He’s pretty sure most of the pain is in the back, the lack of oxygen in the front, but he’s useless, and also – the laughing thing.

Even groans again, and Isak laughs once, leaning forward to run a hand through his hair. “Are you okay?” he asks, adjusting his glasses, which were threatening to slip from his nose.

Even meets Isak’s gaze and narrows his eyes. After a moment – which presumably serves to catch his breath – he says, “You did it on purpose.”

“I didn’t!” Isak laughs, slightly offended at the implication, but mostly amused. “I promise I didn’t.”

“Oh huh,” Even’s eyes remain narrowed. “I’m on to you, Valtersen.”

“Well, I’m on you, Bech Næsheim.”

“Oh,” Even groans, shaking his head. “Oh, no.”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “Was that bad?”
“That was so bad.”
Isak slaps his chest lightly. “I tried my best!”

Even grins. “A for effort, then.”

Isak waggles his eyebrows. “A for asshole.”

“No!” Even laughs. “You’re still going!”

Isak grins. “I’m very proud of these, okay. Look at me, I can be a Creative, too.”

“A Creative?” Even raises an eyebrow, emphasizing the word the same way Isak had.

Isak nods once. “Yes.”

Even smiles. “Okay,” he cups the back of Isak’s neck and brings him down for a kiss, thumb stroking his cheek, and Isak tilts his head, letting Even take the reins on this one. He follows Even’s movements. Where he turns, Isak turns elsewhere, where his mouth parts, Isak’s does, too.

They break apart for the smallest of moments, then Even kisses him again. “Is your boner still good?” he mutters against Isak’s lips, and Isak laughs stupidly against Even’s.

“Think so,” he mutters right back. “Yours?”

Even kisses him one more time, then pulls away slightly, as if to think. “I think it’s still working.”

Isak kisses the side of his face, then his jaw. “Then we should take care of them,” he suggests, smiling against Even’s skin.

Even brings his hand to grip at Isak’s back. “I agree.”

They bring their lips together again, this time with far more intensity than before, Isak pressing both of his hands on the floor of either side of Even’s head, Even leaning upwards to meet his lips halfway.

They indulge in this kiss for a while, until finally, Isak rolls his hips against Even’s slowly, eliciting a gasp from him. He can feel Even’s fingernails dig into his back far more intensely, egging Isak on, and so Isak’s pace quickens and he feels Even cooperate beneath him. Isak whimpers pathetically into Even’s mouth, his arms wavering. He presses his forehead against Even’s, moaning his name over and over.

Even shakes his head. “Isak—” his voice is strained, so Isak brings his hands to cradle Even’s face between them. He strokes Even’s cheeks with his thumbs harshly, his thrusts stilted now.

He nods against Even’s forehead. “You can,” he encourages. “I want you to.”

Even groans as Isak’s movements fragment further. “You first.”

Isak breathes out a laugh. “Fuck off.”

Even kisses him, rubbing at the back of Isak’s neck with his hand. Stubbornly, he stops cooperating with Isak’s movements, a loss of which Isak can very much feel. Isak groans.

“I hate you,” he gasps as Even runs a hand through his hair. He feels the pressure build in his stomach, movements stilted, obviously ready to let go. He bites down on Even’s lip out of pure spite,
which Even seems to realize, because he simply breathes out a laugh to mingle with Isak’s uneven breaths.

“I won’t be that far behind you,” Even grunts. “Trust me.”

Isak almost wants to stop and hold out a little longer, but that’s not an option anymore – he’s pushed over the edge by just one more thrust upward of Even’s hips, and he moans loudly as he does – he can feel it all over, all over, curling his toes and arching his back and shit, fuck, he doesn’t care that it immediately makes him uncomfortable in his boxers, he’s still shivering with the pleasure of it.

Even comes not long after, as promised, lips attached to Isak’s neck as he gasps against it, and Isak feels him shivering underneath him, sending another small wave of pleasure through Isak, on top of the aftermath of his orgasm.

When they’re both coming down from it, gasping for air, faces buried in each other’s necks, Isak manages to press a lazy kiss to Even’s jaw before pulling back to look at him, just enough so that the tip of their noses touch. Even searches Isak’s expression with surprising gentleness, then he proceeds to trace the outline of Isak’s nose just the same. “Hi,” he says softly, smile small.

Isak’s smile feels crooked. “Hi,” he replies just as quietly. “Is your back okay?”

“Hm,” Even thinks. “I think it’ll live.”

“Good,” Isak grins. “I can’t have you without a back now, can I?”

Even sighs dramatically. “I’m just a human dildo to you, aren’t I?”

Isak kisses him once, laughing. “That’s exactly what you are.”

Even laughs softly and runs a hand through Isak’s hair, eyes following his trail and then flickering back down to meet Isak’s gaze. Isak’s doing nothing but tracing the three freckles aligned down Even’s neck, up and down, up and down, and sometimes Even will shiver slightly, when Isak’s fingernails scrape a little too harshly.

Even brings his face closer to Isak’s and nuzzles his nose. Isak brings his hand to tangle in Even’s hair. “I like the color of your eyes,” Even says suddenly, and Isak furrows his brows.

“What?”

“Your eyes,” Even laughs. “I like the color of them.”

Isak thinks for a moment, then scoffs. “Of course you do,” he rolls his eyes. “They’re the color of your curtains.”

Even blinks. “What?”

“My eyes. The color of your curtains.”

“No—” Even laughs. “No they’re not.”

“They are, look again.”

“No, Isak, they are not. Yours are brighter, lighter,” Even’s finger traces the curve of Isak’s eyebrow, right below it. “Don’t get me wrong, the glasses are cute,” he teases, and Isak wrinkles his nose. “But whenever you take them off, I can see the color of your eyes more clearly, and I like them.”
Isak licks his lips, then brings his hand up to his glasses. He tugs at them a little bit, enough so that Even gets the hint and moves his head back slightly, and Isak takes them off and throws them on the coffee table. He smiles. “Better?”

Even shakes his head. “Just different,” he replies, nose nuzzling Isak’s again, and then Isak’s closing the small distance between their lips and kissing Even again, savoring the taste of his lips. And this is — this is good. It’s good. It’s nice. It’s always nice.

And so maybe he got a little carried away there. There’s no — he has no claim to Even, of course, and that was most certainly the adrenaline talking, but for some reason, there’s still a small part of him — the smallest, really, almost nothing — that’s enjoying this. The fact that Sonja’s presence is gone. The fact that she’s not going to Even’s for Christmas.

The fact that he’s here, kissing Isak, muttering to him about the color of his eyes, and that’s probably still the aftermath talking to him, the dopamine he’d released, and he’s allowing himself to come down quietly, softly, with Even’s lips attached to his own.

When they finally break apart, Even grins at Isak, and Isak grins back helplessly. Even then proceeds to sigh.

“This human dildo needs to change his boxers,” he points out, and Isak is suddenly aware of the discomfort in his own boxers. “I think I’m more uncomfortable with that than the pain in my back.”

Isak wrinkles his nose and nods in agreement. “Why do we keep insisting on doing this when we know the consequences?” he asks, and it’s mostly rhetorical, but Even answers anyway; as he usually does, the idiot.

“Because we’re stupid.”

Isak narrows his eyes, but then concedes with a smile. “Yeah. We’re stupid.”

Even offers Isak one more kiss before patting his arms. “Alright, off,” he instructs, and Isak follows orders. He stands from where he’d been straddling Even and offers him a hand, which Even takes. Isak pulls him up helpfully and watches Even wrinkle his nose.

“Ugh. I hate this.”

Isak laughs as he pulls up his jeans. “You can have my good boxers this time.”

“I think I deserve them,” Even sniffs, pulling up his own jeans.

Isak snorts.

“Do you have the good toilet paper in your room or your bathroom?” Even asks, and Isak shifts his weight nervously. Even seems to notice this instantly — but to be fair, Isak’s not really hiding it very well. He’s aware of this. “What?”

Isak licks his lips and shrugs, avoiding Even’s gaze. “Or, you know,” he clears his throat. “We can – just jump in the shower?”

There’s a pause that feels infinite, and Isak deduces that this was a stupid suggestion. A stupid idea. He gets it – it’s probably – this is probably not something friends with benefits do, right? Taking showers together is a step too far, but, see, he doesn’t want to clean up with toilet paper, not when it’s so gross down there, and – he’d feel kind of like an asshole if he left Even outside waiting for him while he cleaned up with toilet paper, but, no, yes, Even’s silence is right—
“Never mind, that’s—”

“A shower, huh?” Isak looks up to find Even smiling cheekily at him. Isak feels his eyes narrow instinctively. “That’s a big step in the friends with benefits line. That’s like, Level Two FWB right there. Are you sure you’re ready to level up there, Isak?”

Isak scoffs and rolls his eyes, turning around to walk towards his room. “Forget it, you asshole.”

Even laughs and catches up to him, turning Isak over. Isak makes sure to keep his expression unimpressed. “Stop, alright,” Even grins brightly at him. “I’m kidding. There are no levels. You know this is totally normal, right?” Even raises an eyebrow. Isak hesitates. No, he doesn’t. He doesn’t know if it’s normal, and he doesn’t know why he wants to, and he doesn’t think he wants to know.

What he does know, though, is that he’s uncomfortable in his boxers and a shower sounds good enough to get rid of the discomfort.

“Is it?” Isak asks, and he hates how quiet and insecure his voice sounds. That’s not an option, Isak. You don’t get to show weakness, here.

Still, Even’s soft smile is enough to quell Isak’s concerns for a moment. “Yes,” he reassures Isak. “I’ve taken plenty of showers with my hookups back in the day. There’s nothing weird about it. Or, at least,” he smirks. “Not if you do it right.”

Isak snorts. “God, you’re fucking corny.”

Even waggles his eyebrows. “Come on, Creative,” he grabs Isak’s wrists and starts pulling him towards the bathroom. “I’ve gotta show you the right way to shower with a fuck buddy.”

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Turns out the right way to take a shower with a fuck buddy involves Even on his knees with his mouth doing interesting things to Isak. Further explanation, he thinks, is not necessary.

When they’re done, Even insists on drying Isak’s hair, because “he wants to make sure it’s still at the appropriate length”, which Isak points out is bullshit because Even constantly runs a hand through his hair and must be absolutely sure it’s the “appropriate length”, but Even expertly ignores this and continues drying Isak’s hair with a towel. Isak glares (not pouts, thanks, Even) the entire time.

When he’s satisfied, Even begins towel-drying his own hair, and Isak walks over to his chest and starts digging through his boxers. The room is relatively quiet save for the sound of a towel rubbing against Even’s scalp and the quiet hum of Galileo’s fish tank, so when Even breaks the silence, Isak almost jumps.

“So,” he starts, and Isak blinks a little before finding the right pair of boxers he’d offered Even. He pulls them out and throws them at him, which Even catches expertly. “I have a question.”

Isak rolls his eyes as he pulls out a pair of boxers for himself. “Alright.”

“And you have to promise not to freak out about it.”

Isak stiffens, then turns slowly to look over at Even, who’s already looking a little guilty. Isak narrows his eyes as he closes his drawer, then turns to face Even, arms crossed over his chest. “I’m not promising anything.”
“I knew that was a longshot,” Even admits, unfolding his towel from around his waist and stepping into the boxers provided by Isak. “So—” he pauses when he finishes pulling the boxers up, which fit him a little too big, but not big enough so that they fall. “Can I buy you a Christmas present?”

Isak freezes. The alarm bells in his head sound off. It’s a no. It’s a huge no. It’s a no the size of Big Ben, a no heard around the world, a no that shakes the very foundation of the walls around him. There’s the line, his mind tells him. Don’t touch that line. Keep away from the line.

“No,” Isak snaps, and he realizes his voice is probably more hostile than it needs to be. “Absolutely not. No way.”

Even sighs. “Isak—”

“No,” Isak throws the towel that was wrapped around his waist onto his bed, quickly stepping into his boxers and pulling them up as he speaks. “We said no gifts, Even. It’s in the rules.”

Even gives him a look. “Really?” he raises an eyebrow. “So, the lingering after sex, the texting, all fine, but gifts is where you draw the line?”

Isak pushes past Even to grab the shirt draped over his computer chair. “Those two are inevitable. Once you become friends, you’re going to talk more, and text more, and that’s fine, those can be adjusted, but we still have control over the gifts—”

“I think being friends constitutes being able to give each other gifts—”

“No gifts, Even,” he snaps, turning to look over at him with his t-shirt clutched tightly in his hands. “Not while we’re still fucking.”

Even searches his expression, which Isak keeps perfectly blank but determined, and after another moment of this, he sighs, resigned. “Fine,” he holds up both of his hands. “I won’t get you anything.”

Isak relaxes. “Okay. Good.” He puts his shirt on while Even walks over to grab his own, which bared no impact during their tryst – or, fuck, no, whatever, their dry humping session, Jesus – and as Even’s putting that on, he talks again.

“Does a blowjob count as a gift, though?”

Isak blinks at him, then he feels the tension around the room dissipate immediately. His shoulders slump with relief. “Shut up,” he rolls his eyes, walking over to grab some jeans.

“Are you saying you don’t want a blowjob?”

Isak throws a pair of jeans at Even’s face.

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Three days later, Isak comes home with a headache only to battle once more with the door knob.

It’s strange. Somedays it opens quickly and happily for him, and other days it’s as if Isak has wronged it somehow, and is trying to teach him a lesson. Isak knows it’s ridiculous to think this way, of course, because the knob is an inanimate object and can’t really technically hate Isak, or begrudge him for anything, or like him, at that, but – you know. Sometimes stupid theories make the mind feel better. Coping mechanisms, and all of that.
He supposes he’s just more irritable than usual. Today, Julian talked to him for fifteen straight minutes, hinting heavily at maybe catching a drink after their shift, and Isak has absolutely no idea how to turn him down anymore. He mostly just hums and shifts his weight and blushes and it seems to egg Julian on further – totally his fault, because it’s not as is Isak’s doing much to dissuade him, either.

But here’s the thing: Isak can handle people disliking him. In fact, he relates to the people who dislike him. That’s never been a problem, not now, not then, not ever, he supposes. But people who like him? Or – rather, people who think they like him, but only like the person he’s expertly shaped himself into around them – those people, he can’t handle. Because then there’s the fact that he’s lying, and though it’s nice, sometimes, to get the kind of attention Julian’s been giving him for weeks – attention that doesn’t sound like it wants to lead anywhere sexual or the like, like it always does with Even – there’s a part of Isak that wants to spare Julian. He really, really wants to spare him.

Julian is attractive. Isak would be a liar and far more of a fraud than he already is if he denied it. Though Isak’s never really looked or noticed or given it a second thought, now every time they’re near each other it’s almost all Isak can notice – his jaw structure, his dark, warm eyes, the stupid way his hair is so effortlessly tousled (which Isak is more envious than anything, to be honest), his broad shoulders and fit arms that his shirt only serves to accentuate – and it bothers him. It bothers him, because, yes, Julian’s probably someone Isak would choose to make out with in a drunken haze and then leave him to second-guess whether or not Isak ever wanted him in the first place.

He’s not Isak’s type, but he can appreciate a good-looking man, especially when he flirts with Isak incessantly. It’s kind of hard to avoid noticing now.

And he thinks that maybe it’s this fact that is keeping him from finding a smart way of turning him down. Because a small part of Isak likes the attention from Julian, and an even smaller part of him wonders. But every time that part comes to light it almost feels – wrong. Dirty, and not in a good way. It’s like his subconscious acknowledges it, but dutifully rejects it. Though, dutifully – that’s interesting. Because Isak doesn’t know why his subconscious thinks that Isak doesn’t want to think about potential romantic prospects; it’s always known that it’s not a good idea, period, but it’s never been this adamant on rejecting it. Whereas before his subconscious yelled: no, because love is a waste of time, now it yells: no, because it’s not what you want.

Which is so – fucking – frustrating—

The door opens unceremoniously after a rather harsh push from Isak, which causes him to stumble gracelessly inside the apartment. As he tries to regain his balance, he glances upward to find Eva and Noora breaking apart hastily, both of their hands pulling back with them. Isak blinks at them uselessly, heart suddenly pounding in his chest, mouth agape.

None of them say anything for about half a minute.

Eva’s the first to regain her composure. “Hey, Isak,” she smiles easily at him, but Isak’s known her for far too long to know that the smile is both strained and guilty. “I didn’t – I thought you’d be back later.”

Isak looks at the clock on the wall. “This is usually the time I get home by,” he makes sure his voice sounds as unamused as it can possibly sound. “Hello, Noora.”

Noora’s red in the face. “Hi, Isak.”
They all stand there in silence for another half a minute.

“Uhm,” Noora shifts her weight on the couch, then after a second of obvious deliberation, she stands up. “I’m gonna—” she gestures lamely towards the still-open door, Isak’s key still stuck in the knob. “I should get going.”

Eva looks pained. “Yeah, uhm,” she stands up with Noora. “I’ll walk you out.”

“There’s no need,” Isak beams at them, sure he looks like a lunatic. “I’m right here. Ready to lead her away.”

There’s another round of silence before Noora coughs and grabs the coat draped over the same couch she’d been sitting on. “Yes, okay,” she nods, then looks at Eva – then looks away again. “Uhm,” she clears her throat. “Okay, so, I’ll see you—?”

“Yeah,” Eva nods hurriedly. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Cool,” Noora nods, makes her way around the couch and towards the entrance, where she proceeds to put on her shoes. Isak stands still beside the door, arms crossed over his chest. He eyes Noora’s every single move until she’s finally ready to go, and locks eyes with her before she makes a move outside.

“Bye, Noora,” Isak deadpans.

Noora nods. “Bye, Isak.”

She leaves, and Isak almost forgets to fight the door knob over his key in his anger. He does, though, and it’s like the door knob knows he doesn’t have time for games this time – it retreats easily, sparing Isak’s back a trip to the wall, and he closes the door behind him.

Eva stands in the living room, looking both annoyed and guilty.

Isak’s anger suddenly dissipates, and in its place lies concern. Just pure, terrified concern. “Eva,” he sighs quietly. “Eva, what are you doing?”

Eva looks at him. “We were just watching TV—”

Isak gestures towards the television. “It’s not on, Eva,” he points out, and Eva turns back as if to make sure Isak’s not lying. After a moment, she turns back to look at Isak, her expression blank.

“Why are you—”

“Isak,” she holds up a hand. “Do I ask you about your affairs?”

Isak blinks. “All the fucking time.”

Eva blushes. “Right, but you never tell me anything,” she points out, and, well, yes, to this point Isak can concede. “It’s – we were just talking, Jesus, stop looking like a disappointed father, for God’s sake.”

Isak looks at her like a disappointed father. “Tell me this isn’t breaking you.” It’s not a question. It’s not a demand. It’s a plea. “Eva, tell me this isn’t breaking you.”

Eva looks away from Isak. She doesn’t say anything for a moment, and dread fills Isak’s every nerve. Is this why she’s been so subdued the past few weeks? Has she started something with Noora, something she knows is wrong? Or are they only at the beginnings of something? Isak wants
to grab Eva by the shoulders and shake her and yell at her that this is a bad idea, it’s a bad idea, you
don’t fall for a straight girl, even if the straight girl thinks she might fall right back.

They never actually do.

“I know what I’m doing,” Eva finally replies, and it’s quiet, and it’s wavering.

Isak sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “No, Eva,” he scoffs. “You don’t.”

Eva meets his gaze, which is suddenly angry. “You’re one to fucking talk.”

Isak blinks at her. “What are you on about?”

“You think I don’t know you’ve been seeing someone?” she snaps, and Isak suddenly freezes where
he stands. “You leave at random hours of the day, come home looking like you’ve been fucked out
of a brain, I catch you staring pathetically at your phone like you’re waiting for someone to call or
text or ask you over – and still, still you insist to me that you don’t care about anyone?”

Isak licks his lips, heart beating in his chest so loudly he can hear it. “That’s not true.”

“You don’t tell me anything, Isak,” Eva accuses. “I don’t know who you’re seeing, and I guess you
have your reasons for not telling me, but you have to respect, then, that so do I.” She looks at him.
“Figure your own shit out, Isak. Because from where I’m standing, I think we’re both standing in a
pretty deep pile of it.”

Something in Isak’s heart shifts – not breaks, no, because that’s not allowed of it anymore, but
simply shifts enough for it to hurt. He licks his lips. He knows he has shit. He knows he has
baggage. And Eva’s probably the only person who’s tried to gently pry these things out of him,
ever pushing, always patient. And it’s annoyed Isak for so long, annoyed him that she’s been this
patient, this understanding, stepping back when Isak asks her to, simply lying next to him when she
thinks Isak needs her to, and – it’s annoyed him because he’s so fucking grateful for it, every single
day, grateful for her continued presence in his life and her friendship and the fact that even though
she’s going to leave him one day, it’s not today. Or the next. Or the next. Or any day in the
foreseeable future.

And now – now it suddenly feels like it is. She’s standing here, finally upset, finally realizing that
Isak’s no one special, no one to talk, maybe a waste of time. She’s right. He needs to figure his own
shit out. He’s never going to, mind you, that’s not a luxury in which he can partake, but he’s aware
that he’s got a lot of it, and has always believed – thought – Eva and Jonas are the only two people
who know. Maybe they’re the only two people who might stay the longest.

But here Isak is. He’s staying behind the appropriate line, but it seems like he’s starting to step out of
the one he’s meant to stay ahead of.

Isak clears his throat, quieting his heart. “Okay,” he nods once. “I’ll just—” he kicks off his shoes
and removes his coat. “Be in my room.”

He starts walking past the living room, ready to lie down in his bed for the rest of the night and think
about nothing, but he hears Eva’s deep sigh from the living room.

“Isak, wait.”

Isak considers not stopping for a moment, but it’s almost instinctive, stopping anytime Eva asks him
to. He turns around, meets her gaze blankly.
She looks tired. She looks sad. “I’m sorry,” she tells him. “I didn’t mean to push, it’s just—”

“Everything I say,” Isak interrupts her, and then he hesitates. “Everything I tell you, Eva, or ask you, or ask of you – I know it’s annoying. I get it. I get that it comes off as aggressive, and I’m sorry,” he apologizes profusely, attempting to get her to understand. “But I hope you know everything I say and ask and do is because I worry about you. It all comes from—” he swallows. “It comes from a place of – a place of love, and it’s – I know I’m not the easiest person to live with, or, even be friends with—”

“Isak—”

“I get it, I have shit, and I’m a hypocrite, and I hate everything about myself and you get to hate everything about me, too—”

“I don’t—”

“But I just want you to know that even if you do end up – end up not liking me, hating me for this, I want you to know that I’m just doing this for you.” He pauses. “There are terrible people out there, Eva. People who climb into your heart just to break it, and you’ve been down that road so many times, and I’m worried that one of these days it’s going to be the last straw, and you’ll—” End up like me, he doesn’t say.

There are things Isak thinks are ridiculous. Eva being so trusting and naïve and open is one of them. But these are also the things that make her someone loving, and positive, and hopeful, and these are the things Isak can never have.

And it’s a lonely life, sometimes. A lonely life to keep out a miserable one, at that, but it’s still lonely. And Eva doesn’t deserve to live in a lonely place. Eva doesn’t deserve to lay awake at night and wonder what it would be like if she just didn’t exist at all.

So Isak’s always thought it was stupid. He’s always thought it was pointless. He’s always thought it was blind.

But Eva Mohn is not Isak Valtersen, and that’s what makes her such a beautiful person.

“I’m sorry,” he finally finishes. “Just – yeah. I’m sorry. I’ll stay out of your hair, if you want, but I hope you know I’m not going to stop caring about you, and I’m not going to stop worrying.”

They’re both silent for what feels like an eternity – when Isak can’t stand standing this way anymore, he nods tersely and turns around, about to walk back to his room, but then he hears the scuffling of socks over the floor behind him and he turns around just in time to welcome an armful of Eva, his arms automatically finding their way around her waist where hers have found home around his neck.

“I’m never, ever, ever going to hate you, asshole,” she mutters into his neck, and Isak doesn’t want to feel it, but he does – the instant relief that comes with hearing hopeful lies, the way his shoulders sag in relief. Isak hears her sob a little bit into his neck, and Isak laughs quietly. “I love you. Get that through your thick, stinking, genius skull. I love you, and I worry about you, too, and I promise,” she pulls back just enough to meet Isak’s gaze. “I promise I’ll be careful. For you.”

Isak’s smile is small. “Okay.”

Eva raises an eyebrow. “But you have to promise you’ll be careful for me, too.”

Isak sighs through his nose. “There’s nothing to worry about in my end.”
Eva rolls her eyes. “You’re such a fucking terrible liar.”

“Oi!” Isak glares at her. Why does everyone keep insisting he’s a bad liar? “I am an amazing liar.”

“Promise you’ll be careful,” Eva repeats. “But not in the same way I’m being careful, yeah?”

Isak furrows his brows. “What do you mean?”

Eva sighs deeply, then presses a small kiss to Isak’s cheek. “Figure it out, smart guy.”

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He and Eva spend about an hour out in the living room, watching television and pretending the previous conversation hadn’t happened. They’re both very good at that.

Afterwards, they bid each other goodnight, and Isak makes his way back to his room, shoulders slumped and completely exhausted. As usual, however, his tiredness will most likely not allow him to actually sleep, so instead he feeds Galileo again, taps thrice on the glass as softly as he can, is ignored for his troubles once again, and then he grabs Sana’s book and lies on his bed.

He opens the book.

He can’t concentrate.

After about ten minutes of trying to get through the same page, Isak closes the book irritably and throws it back on his bedside table. He rubs the bridge of his nose, disturbing the position of his glasses – he takes them off and lets the back of his head hit the wall harshly, allowing the temporary pain to spread along it for a moment. He thinks of what Eva’s told him. Then he thinks about the way she and Noora were sitting so close together, as if sharing a very intimate moment. Then he thinks about the fact that Eva’s caught on to maybe “seeing someone”, which is off the mark, but only slightly.

He wonders if anyone else has noticed. Though it’s doubtful, because Even has two roommates that come and go as much as he does, and Isak only has the one, who’s accustomed to him spending his days locked away in his room whenever he has time off.

Isak exhales deeply. His leg shakes restlessly on the bed and his eyes look up at Orion’s Belt – Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka – and he repeats this to himself over and over for what feels like an eternity, but in actuality is only five minutes, according to his phone.

Damn it.

He’s thinking both about his own shortcomings and about Eva’s. He can’t figure out which of the two are more pressing – though, if he really allows himself to think about it, it’s not as if Isak’s going to do much to address his own, so if anything, he should start figuring out how he’s going to address Eva’s.

Eva loves him. That much is certain now more than ever. But Isak’s also exhausted his warnings, now that they’ve talked, so he can’t bring it up again without stepping back from the line he’s meant to stay ahead of – which is catastrophic, and something Isak doesn’t think he can handle right now. So the only thing he can think of doing is to handle this quietly and discreetly, and absolutely not directly.

He thinks. Then he remembers.
He grabs his phone from the bedside table and immediately unlocks it, finding Sana’s text conversation. He shoots her a text asking if she’s awake, and then locks his phone again, not expecting a response until maybe a couple of minutes or tomorrow.

Instead, however, his phone starts ringing about a minute later, Sana’s contact filling his screen. He blinks at it, perplexed – he was almost positive Sana would be asleep – but before his phone can stop ringing, he presses down on the answer button and brings the phone to his ear.

“Uh, hello?”

Sana skips the greeting. “Alright, what is it this time?”

“How do you know you know what I’m going to say to you?” Isak challenges.

“Please, Isak,” Sana snorts. “Lately you’ve only been contacting me if it relates to Eva.”

Isak opens his mouth, then closes it again, feeling a little guilty. She’s not wrong – and it’s not fair, considering Sana is one of his closest friends – or as close of a friend as one could be to the Isak he puts forward – but time and distance haven’t allowed them to communicate as much as they used to. They tried! They certainly tried. But Sana’s course load is probably larger than Isak’s, so it’s not like they have all the time in the world to try over and over.

Sana sighs at the other end of the line. “I feel the guilt seeping through my speakers,” she tells him. “Stop it. Phones work both ways, you know. It’s not like I’m doing much myself.”

“Are we gonna fix that?”

“We’ll get to it.” Sana replies dismissively. “What’s up with Eva now?”

“Uhm,” Isak swings his legs over the edge of the mattress, as if he could make sure Eva wasn’t eavesdropping that way. “I came home today and I caught them – uhm, sitting really close to each other?”

There’s a pause. “And?”

Isak sighs irritably. “Sana, it was as if they’d been kissing or something. Or, I mean, at least about to. I don’t know. But it definitely wasn’t innocent, not if their reactions are anything to go by.”

“Hmm,” Sana hums thoughtfully.

“I don’t know what to say to her anymore,” he finally tells her, feeling defeated. “I don’t know how to get through to her enough so that she takes a step back, at least.”

“No,” Sana agrees. “I don’t know either. But – it’s unfair that I’ve left it up to you to try,” she admits. “I’m going to go ahead and give it a go.”

“You said she wouldn’t take you seriously.”

“She might not, but isn’t it worth the try?”

Isak thinks. “What about Vilde?”

“What about her?”

“Well,” Isak shifts his weight on the bed. “She’s Eva’s best friend, and has proved to be very blunt in the past. Maybe it’d be less of a blow coming from her, since Eva would most likely just think it’s
Vilde being Vilde.”

“But then would she take it seriously?”

“Yeah?” Isak snorts. “Vilde can be brash, but Eva takes all of her words into consideration.”


“Does she know?”

“I don’t think so,” Sana says. “Maybe. She might have an inkling, but she’s keeping her distance from Noora for now, so maybe she doesn’t know the full extent on this.”

Isak purses his lips. “Do you think it’ll be – you know,” he gestures lamely at nothing, considering Sana’s not actually here. “A problem?”

Sana huffs. “They’re way over that, Isak,” she tells them. “It was for like two months in high school.”

Isak’s not sure. Eva’s kind of an easy person to fall in love with, and, if Jonas is anything to go by, difficult to fall out of love with. Still, Vilde’s never given any indication that her feelings for Eva have been anything but platonic for a long time – then again, he thought the same thing about Jonas, and now they’re here.

Though Sana’s right. It was only two months, and Vilde and Eva had both agreed friendship is what suited them best. When Eva broke this to him and Jonas, Isak had told her that of course it wasn’t going to work – that would be like Isak dating Jonas, something that could work on paper but in practice would blow up in flames.

“Stop doing that,” Sana suddenly breaks him out of his train of thought, and Isak blinks uselessly.

“Doing what?”

“Thinking so hard. It’s exhausting.” Isak hears some rustling in the background of Sana’s end. “I have to go. I have to be up early tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Isak replies, a little envious. “You’ll talk to Vilde?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Isak nods. “Goodnight, Sana.”

“Goodnight, Isak.”

As usual, Isak doesn’t sleep.

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Isak hates dragging his feet anytime he comes into work, but it’s inevitable this time around – he’s sure he looks like a swamp monster, hair tousled and sweaty and the bags under his eyes masks the entirety of his face – so he might as well play the part by dragging his feet around today.

It’s extra cold outside, so the warmth inside the museum isn’t as comforting as it usually is, which only serves to irritate Isak more. It’s only when he reaches the front desk that Isak realizes Julian’s the one behind him, already looking at Isak with an easy smile. Jesus, Isak misses the days when
Julian would stumble over his words around him – made it so much easier to retreat, because Julian obviously wanted him to. Now, he’s staring at Isak with bright eyes, smile friendly and inviting, broad shoulders relaxed. Isak refuses to let his eyes trail them.

“Hey, Isak,” Julian greets, and Isak feels his smile is small and tired.

“Hi,” he replies, wondering if there was a way he could clock in from in front of the desk. He stands there awkwardly, trying to come up with a game plan, but Julian seems to take this as an indicator to keep talking to him, which only serves to make Isak even more nervous.

“Are you okay?” Julian furrows his brows. “You look a little tired.”

I didn’t fucking sleep, Julian, Isak doesn’t say. “Uh, yeah,” Isak shrugs. “Rough night.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Julian grimaces sympathetically. Can he stop being such a nice guy for like, a second? “I could switch sections with you, if you’d like? You’d have a much easier time here, I think.”

Isak’s about to take him up on his offer, but then wonders if doing so would egg Julian on further. But then he wonders what his excuse for turning it down would be, since he’s sure he looks like he’s about to be swallowed whole by the dirt, who confused Isak for its long-lost son. “Uhm,” he begins intelligently. “Well—”

“Hey, Isak.”

A quiet voice interrupts the conversation and Isak wants to thank every single constellation above for this distraction – both he and Julian turn to the left to find Linn walking up to them, looking a little worse for wear. Isak frowns – it’s unusual for Isak to work when Linn’s manager-on-duty, for some reason or the other, but Isak guesses it was bound to happen. Maybe two times out of ten, if anything.

Isak tilts his head to the side. “Hi, Linn,” he greets her. “What’s up?”

Linn’s smile is small and tired. It’s like Isak’s looking in a mirror. “Eskild told me to remind you about the employee Christmas party next week,” she tells him. “He told me to remind you about ten times now.”

Isak scoffs a laugh. “No, I believe you.”

“He also encouraged me to encourage you to show up,” she continues. “After he told me I was forced to show up, too. So I’m not forcing you,” Linn adds. “I think one of us should make the decision of our own will.”

Isak smiles. Linn’s quiet, and sometimes she looks very withdrawn, but she’s a good manager – doesn’t ask too many questions, makes sure everything in tact without bothering or interrupting your work, will only speak through the radio if there is an emergency. So it’s rare that she makes conversation with any of the employees – at least, not as much as Eskild does – so it’s a little surprising to Isak to find out she has a sense of humor. The kind thing, well – he deduced that one on his own.

“Thanks, Linn,” Isak makes sure his voice sounds as sincere as he feels. “I’ll think about it.”

Linn nods. “I’m gonna go check on Christoffer,” she sighs. “Some of the mothers have expressed concern about his attitude towards them.”
“The flirting?” Julian guesses.

“I suppose,” Linn sighs forlornly once again. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Linn walks towards the exhibitions, leaving Julian and Isak alone in the front desk again. Isak’s heart is suddenly racing, realizing he’s back in this situation on his own.

Thankfully, Julian seems to have forgotten about the switching offer. “Do you think you’re gonna go?”

“Hm?” Isak’s brows rise. “Go where?”


“Oh,” Isak shifts his weight. “Uhm, I don’t know. I’m not a big Christmas person.”

Julian nods. “Neither am I,” he admits. “But it could be fun. I’ll be there, in any case,” he smiles easily at Isak, and – is he assuming that will have some bearing on Isak’s decision of whether or not he shows up?

Why is he looking at Isak like that?

Did they finally turn up the heat in here?

“Uhm,” Isak clears his throat. “Yeah, well. I’d, uhm – have to – consult – my schedule.”

“Yeah, of course,” Julian laughs easily. “But if this helps any, I know for a fact Chris won’t be there.”

Isak laughs weakly. “That’s always a plus.”

They both stay silent for a moment. Isak clears his throat before the silence gets too uncomfortable.

“Anyway, I’m gonna go – work.”


“Yep.”

Isak starts scurrying towards the main floor, ready to take position in his assigned section, when Julian stops him once again on the way, calling out his name. Isak freezes for only a second, eyes shutting (in despair? Nervousness? Why can’t Isak figure it out) for a second before they open again, prompting Isak to finally turn around and meet Julian’s gaze again. His smile feels off-center.

“Yes?”

Julian searches his expression curiously for a moment, before he breaks out into a wide grin. Isak blinks stupidly at his teeth. “Be careful with Chris in there,” he tells Isak. “The second he sees you he won’t be a problem for the mothers anymore.”

Isak laughs weakly. “Okay,” he offers Julian a lame thumbs-up. “See ya.”

Isak turns around once again and hurries away towards the main floor, heart somewhere in his stomach, unsure of what just happened. He’s so shaken, in fact, that he even waves back at Chris when he greets Isak, which might have surprised Chris more than it did Isak – he blinked stupidly at Isak for a second, looked at his own hand as if to make sure he had waved, then he turned around
and carried on with his shift.

Isak may try this more often, actually.

Right. So, Julian is definitely hinting at going on a date with Isak, that’s for sure. He’s got that. As he idly cleans whatever exhibit is closest to him, he wonders if he should even consider the pros and cons of this situation. It’s not – there’s no rule against dating outside of his and Even’s arrangement, this much they’re both aware of, but it’s also a little – it’d be a little unorthodox, wouldn’t it? Not that Isak wants to go on a date with Julian, but if he did, he just doesn’t think it’d be fair to do it while he’s sleeping with Even. The playing field wouldn’t be even, in any case, because Isak thinks that the person who’s sticking their dick in Isak’s ass probably has the upper hand in any situation.

And even then, as his mind entertains the idea of actually showing up at the Christmas party, there’s still that part of him.

(He wonders if that part of him says more about the person Isak is or the person Isak wants to be. He wonders if that’s something he wants to know, anyway.)

About thirty minutes into his shift, Isak’s mind is still wandering to Julian and the Christmas Party, weighing options to and fro, and not even the child screaming at her brother while red in the face can do anything to faze him or help him out of the endless and dreadful cycle of thought until—

A text notification goes off, and Isak is so enthralled by his own dilemmas he almost jumps a foot into the air. When he realizes the text notification came from the phone inside of pocket, he feels warmth rush to his cheeks and he hides his face, quickly reaching for the phone. He clears his throat and casts a look around, making sure no one saw him jump, blush, or check his phone, then looks back at the screen. A small smile makes way past his lips when he sees Even’s contact name coupled with the notification, and he unlocks his phone quickly to open the conversation.

**EVEN**
Look at this

**EVEN**
[Image attachment]

Isak blinks down at his phone, baffled. He looks over the picture again, and then again, trying to figure out if there’s some inside joke he’s missing here, but at the end of his perusal it just seems like another one of Even’s ridiculous antics, and he hates that he’s still amused by it, hates that he feels so fond of it.

**ISAK**
That is a bird

**EVEN**
Correct

**ISAK**
Why are you sending me a picture of a bird

**EVEN**
He looks like you!!!!

**ISAK**
He does not look like me
But he doesn’t. Isak knows he doesn’t, and when Even texts him back to tell him as such, he has no counter argument for him. He simply accepts the fact that no, he doesn’t hate Even, not anymore, and he doesn’t want to hate him again, and for the rest of his shift his mind is on the conversation he’s having with Even where he sits at home and Isak stands at work, and there’s nothing else. There are no dilemmas, no confusion, no wondering – there’s a conversation about nothing, and Isak can breathe.

About an hour after he’s home, Isak’s lying on the couch and staring at the ceiling, which is void of Orion’s Belt – he’d been too lazy to walk all the way to his room, though, so instead decided to set camp in the living room, television playing on mute in front of him – and thinking about the Christmas party again. This time in a different context – rather than the party in context of Julian, it’s in context of Eskild, and how much it would mean to him if Isak did show up to the party. He’d been so busy engrossed in his own shitty predicament that he hadn’t stopped to consider the fact that Linn had only relayed the message to Isak because Eskild had been adamant about it.

Truth of the matter is, Eskild’s been far more than a boss to Isak for the past year and a half. He’s a mentor, he’s a friend. He’s the first person Isak’s told he’s sleeping with someone casually, which Isak thinks speaks volumes to the kind of influence the older man has on him – he’s always so unapologetically himself, and it both mesmerizes and confuses Isak. He thinks that maybe Eskild’s influence shouldn’t be this great on him, but then he thinks how those words would affect Eskild, and he feels guilty for even thinking it.

So he combines both his curiosity towards whatever the fuck is happening with Julian and Eskild’s enthusiastic insistence that Isak show up to the Christmas party, and he decides that maybe he’ll go, if only for an hour or two.

The thought of going at it alone still makes his anxious, though, so when Eva gets home from her own shift at the store, Isak immediately sits up on the couch and looks at her.

“What are you doing next Friday?” he asks, and Eva pauses in the middle of removing her shoes and raises an eyebrow at Isak.
“Hello to you, too,” she replies. Finally removing her shoes, she shrugs off her coat and hums thoughtfully. “Oh, we’re all banding together to help Vilde and that bride of hers with some wedding stuff. She’s actually surprisingly really nice?” Eva throws her coat over Isak’s face, and he squawks indignantly as he scrambles to remove it. When he can see again, Eva’s lying on the loveseat, absentmindedly scratching at her stomach. “Like, you’d think she’d be pissy about the fact that Vilde’s asking for outside help from non-professionals, but she’s totally cool with it. It’s like her laid-back attitude balances out Vilde’s, uhm. Sometimes high-strung one.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “So you’re busy,” he summarizes for her. Eva grunts.

“Yep.”

“Ugh,” Isak slumps back into the couch. “I hate this.”

“Explain.”

“The company Christmas party is next Friday,” he explains, and Eva’s face clears in understanding. “But I don’t want to go alone because people will attack me.”

“I thought you liked your coworkers?”

“I like a total of four of them,” Isak corrects. “I hardly know any of the others, and they’re a lot, Eva. And I’m pretty sure most of them hate me?”

Eva scoffs. “They don’t hate you.”

“They glare at me sometimes,” Isak admits. It’s strange, and Isak’s become somewhat of an expert in ignoring this, but a lot of his coworkers – and, strangely enough, most of them are women – spend the entirety of their shift together glaring at him almost resentfully, as if Isak’s done something to personally offend them and their families’ honor. “I don’t wave anymore.”

“Maybe that’s why they don’t like you,” Eva suggests. “No one likes someone who doesn’t wave.”

“Eva,” he whines. “Please come with me.”

Eva laughs. “Isak, I can’t,” she repeats. “I would if I could, you know I would, but Vilde would stop talking to me for months. She’s already been kinda pissed at me lately,” she admits, and Isak raises an eyebrow.

“What for?”

Eva avoids Isak’s gaze as she plays with the hem of her shirt. “Hm,” she shrugs as best as she’s able to against the loveseat’s armrest. “I’ve cancelled our plans like, once or twice.”

Isak blinks. Once or twice? Vilde might be a little ridiculous, but Isak knows for a fact she’s extremely understanding of people needing to reschedule for important reasons. As far as he knows, Vilde’s cancelled on Eva countless of times, mostly due to work commitments, and whenever Eva cancels on Vilde it’s mostly for the same reason – that, or school shit, so it’s never been so much of a problem that Vilde’s pissed at Eva for doing it once or twice.

In fact, Isak’s sure that one time Eva admitted to Vilde she just didn’t feel like it, and Vilde was perfectly fine that that too, so—

“Why don’t you ask Jonas?” Eva cuts through his train of thought, and Isak blinks at her. “I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.”
“Yeah,” Isak hums. “Maybe.”

He does. Jonas, however, tells Isak he can’t do anything at all that weekend, seeing as he’s going to be spending it with his mom and his sister – he extends the invitation to Mahdi in the same phone call, but he tells Isak he’s going to be working; Isak toys with the idea of inviting Even for about two point five seconds, then shakes himself out of the idiocy – of course he can’t invite Even. That’s weird. It’s weird, right? You don’t invite a guy you’re sleeping with as a plus one to a party where they don’t know anyone, that would feel suspiciously like a—

Anyway. Even is out of the question, and Isak tells himself this as he sits in bed that night, tapping on his phone screen aimlessly. He considers asking Mutta, but he knows Mutta’s always working way too much during the holidays, and though Isak has no doubt that he’d probably find a way to ditch work for Isak, Isak knows he only works so much because he needs the money.

So he’s got one more option left, lest he wants to invite one of the girls and hear a bunch of more rejections that way. It takes him about two days to finally accept his fate, and when he asks Magnus if he’d like to join him for the party, it takes him about two seconds to whoop in excitement and agree to accompany Isak.

When it’s all said and done, Isak hangs up the phone and leaves it on his bedside table, staring at it for a long moment.

Isak is sure inviting Magnus wasn’t a mistake.

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Isak is sure inviting Magnus was a mistake as soon as they step inside the museum and Magnus makes a beeline towards Julian.

There’s no reason why Isak shouldn’t follow, of course, it’s only he thought he’d have a little bit more time before he faces that dilemma headfirst. He’s been working up to this, knowing that he’s partly here out of wonder and he’s absolutely sure he’s going to be making a fool out of himself as soon as Julian smiles at him. It’s strange. It was so much easier when Isak didn’t notice. He’s almost bitter towards his friends for pushing this, because now he knows, and every time he sees Julian he knows again, and as Isak watches Julian smile brightly at Magnus in greeting from afar, he can’t help but once again notice how he cleans up well, and then that strange wave of something settles uncomfortably in his stomach again, too.

Isak hates not knowing things, even if they’re about himself – or, rather, the surface of himself – and this, more than anything, makes him stand awkwardly at the entrance for about a minute or two more.

He looks around as he does, bouncing nervously on his feet, realizing he absolutely does not know any of these people’s names – the population is mostly female, which, great, girl power and all of that, but whenever any of them seems to catch his eye, they seem to sneer a little before whispering to each other. Isak lamely waves at a dark-skinned brunette who’s blinking strangely at him, but then immediately regrets doing so, because she takes that as an invitation to walk over to him. Isak’s eyes scan the room to find every possible exit, and by the time the girl’s reached him, he’s found about four strategic ways to remove himself from a conversation that hasn’t even begun.

“Hey, Isak,” the girl says, and shit, she knows his name, and now he’s standing here uselessly not knowing her name.

Isak clears his throat and tries for a smile, though he’s sure it comes out as more of a grimace. “Er,
hi,” he clears his throat again. “What’s up?”

The brunette looks young, and she’s pretty, and Isak guesses she’s alright, because she’s currently the only female employee not looking at him like she’s trying to figure out the best way to lead him to a secluded place and stab him to death. She’s eyeing him calculatingly, almost as if she knows his life story by simply looking into his eyes, and though Isak’s completely aware that psychics are fucking bullshit, there’s a sense of unease at the way she tracks his nervous movements, enough so that Isak forces himself to stop bouncing so ridiculously and stuffs his hands into his jean pockets.

“You don’t know my name, do you?” she asks him, though she doesn’t look offended – mostly just amused, which Isak is both relieved about and a little offended himself over.

“I just – have a bad memory, it’s not – I mean, I don’t know any of – the names are just not a – like, I would, but I just—”

“Laila,” she introduces herself, tilting her head. “We actually have Astrophysics together.”

Isak blinks. “What?”

“The class?” Laila’s eyebrows shoot up. “We have it together.”

Isak thinks. And thinks. And thinks. And comes up blank. Does he know anyone in that class? Isak doesn’t think he’s paid enough attention to know. He’s almost positive he’s never even seen this girl before, which is infuriating, because now he’s aware that he pays attention to nothing and no one if he can help it, even if they’re a part of both his school and his work life. He doesn’t feel ashamed, even though he’s aware he probably should, but more irked at himself than anything, and he seems to be so enthralled in silently scolding himself Laila seems to assume he’s still trying to piece things together.

“Sara’s girlfriend,” she finally offers, and Isak’s eyes widen of their own accord.

“Sara’s gay?” Isak blurts, and a little too loudly, if the glares shot at him by nearby employees is anything to go by. He tries to cower as much as he can, but he towers over nearly everyone here, so it’s a little hard to make himself small enough to ignore. Before he can follow that question up with something like, I’m an idiot and I’m sorry, Laila replies, seemingly amused.

“Gay enough for me,” she raises an eyebrow. “Why do you think she’s one of the only ones who doesn’t actively resent you?”

Oh. So he’s not imagining that. He’s a little surprised Laila’s blunt enough to admit to it, though she seems to be one of the ones who doesn’t actively “resent” him, either, though it might be because of Sara’s same reason – of course. Obviously.

“Uhm,” Isak replies intelligently.

“You seem caught off guard,” Laila grins. “Sorry. Just didn’t think it was much of a secret.”


“They don’t dislike anything about your personality, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Laila assures him, and Isak looks at her.

“I mean, I wouldn’t really care, but – I am curious,” he admits. “Did I insult one of them? I feel like I might have insulted one of them. I’ve recently found out I have a tendency to insult people without thinking or apologizing, which has resulted in me missing out on one of the be—” he catches himself
before he continues, not allowing the thought to finish. He forces it back. The pushing is hard and intense, but it makes it back, and Isak ignores the slight shaking of his hands. “Anyway, should I apologize to someone?”

Laila laughs. “God, that’d be way easier, wouldn’t it?” she shakes her head. “Nah, dude, sorry. They kind of hate you because Julian seems to only be interested in you, and they’ve been trying to get his attention since he started working here.”

Isak freezes. He feels like he should say something, anything, but he’s a little too dumbstruck to even move, let alone try and spit something out.

It’s – it’s been over a year, holy shit, and how, how, how in the world has Isak been so blind? There are certain things about himself Isak understands are lacking, and maybe they’re a little bit of a nuisance, but he never thought obliviousness would be one of them, considering he’s always prided himself in analyzing situations closely and carefully, trying to pick up on context clues provided to him in every single situation, and in the span of a month he’s realized he has no fucking idea about anything ever.

Jonas, Julian, Sana, Eva. What in the hell else is he missing? And if he is missing something, how the fuck is he even supposed to know?

How do people pick up on these things so easily?

“That’s—” Laila blinks. “You did know about that, right?”

Isak feels his face flush furiously.

Laila’s blinking becomes far more intense. “Oh, my God,” she laughs once. “Sara wasn’t kidding. You didn’t.”

Isak continues to blush silently.

“I feel like I just fucked up,” Laila admits, a little sheepishly. “I just thought you were friend-zoning him and he kind of just, kept trying. I’m – sorry if I’ve gone and made things – weird now.”

“Not weird,” Isak’s voice is a little strained, but he pushes forward. “I’ve, uh. Recently had a, uhm – suspicion.”

Laila purses her lips. “So you just don’t like him.”

“It’s not that.”

And, well. There’s that.

It’s easy to like Julian. He’s a nice guy, and he’s handsome, and once in awhile he’s funny, even though Isak can’t be sure if he’s been funny on purpose anymore, or if he’s just been hopeless and Isak’s taken his antics as attempts at humor. So it’s not that Isak doesn’t like him, it’s just that he’s not sure he likes him as anything more, even if he is curious, and the fact of the matter is that, you know, sometimes Isak does think about what kissing Julian would be like, whenever it’s way too late to be up and he can chalk it up to temporary insanity, and sometimes he enjoys the thought, but most of the times—

Most of the times, he ends up thinking about kissing Even instead, and the way his lips feel against Isak’s own, and then the way they feel attached to his neck, and then his shoulders, and then his chest and the way they travel down softly like they’ve always belonged on every single inch of his
Now he feels even more flushed.

“I feel like I should leave you alone,” Laila says suddenly, and Isak meets her gaze. He feels like he’s panicking, but he’s not sure whether his expression is conveying this or not — this girl has the impressive talent of not giving away anything through her expression ever, apparently, not if she doesn’t want to, because now it only seems like she’s regarding Isak with polite interest rather than disappointment and pity. “I’m gonna go ahead and leave you alone.”

“Oh, but—” Isak pauses. “Sara. Is she here?”

Laila shakes her head. “Not yet. She’s running late, but you know,” she rolls her eyes. “She always is.”

Isak laughs lamely. He doesn’t know, in fact, but he supposes he owes Laila the courtesy of humoring her. She doesn’t look convinced, however, but she offers him a small smile either way.

“I’ll see you in Astrophysics,” she grins. “Next year, that is.”

“Yep,” Isak nods lamely. “I’ll see ya then.”

Laila waves goodbye at him with the hand that isn’t holding a wine glass, then she makes her way back to a small group of young women, who seem to be ignoring Isak, but not the same way everyone else is ignoring Isak — pointedly and bitterly. They just seem like they couldn’t give less of a shit about Isak, which he absolutely respects, and he wishes them all the best in their future endeavors.

So now he’s left alone and dumbstruck and in disbelief, mostly because he’s not sure what happened actually just happened. Isak’s used to forthright people — half of the people in his life are brutally honest, so the trait isn’t exactly a surprise — but having someone he doesn’t know waltz up to him and call him out on things he’s only just started to piece together isn’t exactly a common occurrence, and so he’s left with the remnants of what he was feeling in the moment and what he’s feeling now.

The fact that he’s standing alone and frozen near the entrance isn’t doing him any favors re: the women who apparently dislike him because a man they’re interested in is interested in him instead — Isak’s not sure this has ever been a problem for him before. He’s had people dislike him in the past, of course, that much isn’t new to him, but he’s almost positive they’ve never actually disliked him because of another man, and he has half a mind to go up to every single one of them to assure them they’re all very beautiful girls, it just seems that Julian has more of an inclination towards men, maybe.

He doesn’t know. Julian could be bi or pan, for all he knows, but for some reason he’s chosen to set his sights on Isak, and he’s having difficulty placing why. He’s only just starting to become aware that for over a year — maybe a year and a half — he’s been somewhat of an idiot, and he’s never really given Julian reason to believe he’s keen on him, has he? Isak thinks he’s been perfectly cordial, and, yeah, maybe they’ve chatted a bit during work, but they’d never actually hung out outside of work until that night at the club, and he’d ditched Julian, so—

Maybe it was evident he was starting to realize something in the club. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t even know if he should go up to Julian and Magnus now, because he’s only going to receive more glares from people he doesn’t know, and it’ll all be moot, because he’ll only a) make a fool out of himself again and b) be subjected to Magnus’s less than subtle match-making attempts.
Still, he thinks approaching them is probably the polite thing to do, and it’s better to standing pathetically alone, so after he takes a deep breath, he drags his feet over to where Julian and Magnus stand beside each other, having a seemingly hilarious conversation, if Magnus’s loud laugh and Julian’s large smile has anything to do with it.

See? That’s something Isak’s pretty sure he’s never been able to offer Julian. So why the insistence on Isak?

He adjusts his glasses awkwardly as he reaches them, close enough to have a conversation, and Julian spots him first. He blinds Isak with a smile again, and Isak has to force himself to remember the acceptable social cue would be to smile back.

“Hi,” Julian says, and Magnus turns to grin at Isak, as well. “I’m glad you decided to show, after all.”

“Yeah,” Isak clears his throat as he shifts his weight. “I thought I owed Eskild as much.”

Julian nods, but Isak notices the way his smile falters a bit. Okay, fuck. What was he supposed to say there? Why is he so bad at this? “Yeah, of course,” he nods. “He’s gonna be really happy you’re here.”

Isak coughs into his fist. “Yeah, hope so.” He has the urge to look around the crowd again to see if he can spot Eskild, but then he remembers people are probably giving him dirty looks, so he refrains. He’ll just ask later. “How’s the food?”

“Terrible,” Julian admits. “But it’s food, and it’s the only one here, so I’m making do.”

Isak nods. “Guess I’ll avoid it, then.”

Julian smiles. “Maybe we can grab a bite to eat after this? Just so we don’t go completely hungry.”

Isak glances at Magnus, who’s waggling his eyebrows at Isak. Isak narrows his eyes at Magnus in what he hopes is a subtle way, then turns back to look at Julian. “I mean—”

“You should do it, Isak!” Magnus encourages loudly, and Isak wants to strangle him. He should have just fucking come alone, oh my God. “I’d join you two, but I’ve gotta head to — another thing, after this.”

“What other thing?” Isak pushes, crossing his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow. “Is it an important thing?”

Magnus glares at him, as if he’s trying to convey Isak should shut up and just go it solo with Julian. And Isak is very aware that that’s what he’s trying to convey, but he’s annoyed, and also he doesn’t think Julian would understand that if they do head out of there alone to go eat, he would realize Isak’s simply being friendly — and, alright, maybe a little curious — and then things would get even more awkward at work, and he just wants to avoid that altogether. In fact, if he could just avoid this entire debacle altogether, that’d be great. He misses his blissful ignorance, where it was so much easier to make decisions regarding Julian, and he didn’t have to worry about whether or not Julian might take something the wrong way.

Well, it would probably still be a possibility, but at least then Isak could absolve himself of fault and the like. Now he’s far too aware that the endgame here is almost entirely in his hands, and that’s too much responsibility. Responsibility he did not sign up for, thank you very much.

“It’s a super important thing,” Magnus rolls his eyes. “It’s not like I don’t want to hang out with you
two.”

“Well, either way,” Isak clears his throat. “Uhm, I don’t know. It just depends on — the weather.”

Both Magnus and Julian stare at him. Isak wonders how much stronger he’s gotta be to kick a hole in the ground and jump into it.

“Oh, uh,” Julian blinks. “Well, as far as I know, it’s still gonna be — cold?”

“Ah, yes,” Isak nods, perhaps a little too eagerly. “Yeah, yeah, cold. That makes sense. Because it’s the middle of December, and it’s been cold all winter, and, you know, no, yeah, that makes sense. Wow, is it gonna be cold? Hm. That — brings up a lot of, uhm — you know, coldness can be an issue. Kind of. Do you think — how cold do you reckon—”

“Isak,” Julian huffs, sounding amused. “You don’t have to come with me if you don’t want to.”

“No!” Oh, my God, he’s such a fucking idiot, that was his out, and he still—“It’s not that I don’t want to, because I’m sure real, actual food coupled with your company would be — super swell,” he pauses, because he’s an idiot and he needs to let that settle around the group. “It’s just — I just—”

“Isak!”

Eskild’s voice has never sounded more miraculous to Isak’s ears, and he’s pretty sure the sigh of relief Isak was trying not to make too obvious is extremely obvious.

“Eskild!” His grin feels a little maniacal, but there’s not much he can do to control that, so he rolls with it. “I was just asking about you.”

“As you should always be,” Eskild winks, then turns to look at Julian. “You didn’t come up and say hi, for which I am endlessly offended for.”

Julian laughs. “Sorry, Eskild. I was sort of ambushed by Magnus here.”

“Ah, yes,” he nods, raising an eyebrow at Magnus. “Isak’s friend, correct?”

Magnus snorts. “You’ve met me more times than even I can count!”

Eskild waves him off. “A little bruising to your ego will do you just fine, I think,” he looks at Isak and raises an eyebrow. “Did Linn force you to come? I was very specific in my instructions.”

“No, she didn’t,” Isak glares. “Because she’s an actual human being who understands the concept of free will. But,” he holds up a finger before Eskild can interrupt. “She did relay the urgency of your message, which was a large factor in my decision to come.”

Eskild sighs dramatically. “I suppose that’s all I can really ask for,” he shrugs. “Linn is far too nice for her own good. I’ve been trying to teach her how to branch out, be a little mean.”

“I’m sure she’s plenty mean on her own time,” Isak allows. Eskild rolls his eyes.

“I want to steal you away for a moment,” he says, and Isak could almost kiss him. He turns to look at Julian and Magnus as he reaches for Isak’s arm. “Do you mind if I do? I have to ask him a couple of important questions. They’re so important they’re top secret, and I would tell you, I would, but — oh, you know the English saying, I’d have to kill you and all of that.”

Both Julian and Magnus look a little confused, but whereas Magnus looks like he’s about to protest profusely, Julian nods, smile sincere.
“Yeah, go for it,” Julian looks back at Isak. “The offer still stands.”

Oh, Isak’s sure it does. “Thanks,” he nods towards Eskild. “Gotta go see what the boss wants.”

Eskild whisks him away quickly, and Isak feels the tension bleed from his shoulders. When Eskild secures them a position at the other end of the room, near a corner, he turns to look at Isak with a large grin.

“Now be honest with me,” Eskild’s expression suddenly turns serious. “Were they pressuring you to try crack cocaine?”

Isak sputters. “What?”

“You looked like someone was peer pressuring you into drugs. Just say no, Isak. Hugs not drugs.”

Isak squirms. “Julian invited me to grab something to eat after this.”

Eskild’s face clears. “Ah,” he nods. “I have noticed he’s been tripping less around you. I assume you’ve finally clued into his hopeless crush on you?”

“Did everyone know?” Isak asks irritably.

“Oh, of course, dear,” Eskild examines his nails. “And I assume you’re simply not interested?”

Isak squirms some more. “It’s just—” he huffs. “He’s good-looking, and he’s nice, right, funny. But — he seems to want — serious things. And I’m — not good at serious things.”

“Oh, I know that, too,” Eskild grimaces in sympathy. “Are you having a hard time rejecting him? I would, too, if he smiled at me like that all the time,” he glances at Julian. “It’d be like kicking a puppy and then crushing all its hopes and dreams. An extremely handsome puppy. On an unrelated note, how often do you think he works out?”

Isak waves a hand in front of Eskild’s face until he finally meets his gaze again. “It doesn’t matter, Eskild. What matters is that now I’m a mess in front of him all the time and I don’t think any of my words are immediately available to me then, either, so I’m stuck here.”

Eskild raises an eyebrow. “You’re sure you don’t like him?”

Isak throws his head back dramatically. No, he’s not sure. But he’s sure that he’s not looking for what Julian’s looking for, and that should be enough.

When he doesn’t reply, Eskild hums. “Is it your casual sex friend?” he asks, and Isak’s head snaps back down to meet Eskild’s gaze in alarm. “Do you feel like you’d be — cheating on him?”

“No!” Isak snaps, a little too quickly. “No, we’re — we’re allowed to sleep with other people. Date other people. It wouldn’t be cheating. And anyway, it’s not about him, none of this is about him, why would you insinuate—”

“Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

Isak purses his lips. “It’s not.”

“Hm,” Eskild seems lost in thought for a minute. “Do you think if your casual sex friend asked you to dinner, just the two of you, you’d say yes?”

Isak looks at him. “We’re friends,” he points out. “We’ve done it before.”
Eskild stares at him.

Isak blushes. “But it’s not like that.”

“I’m sure it isn’t, little one,” Eskild smiles and nods. “But the mind doesn’t make sense, sometimes. I can see how he’d be a factor in you not wanting to try anything with Julian. Have you considered talking to him about Julian?”

Isak blinks. No, absolutely not. Those two things — they have to remain separate. Much like his food, they’re not really allowed to touch, because — maybe it’s inexplicable, but he feels like the second they do, really do, not the way they did at the club, but in actual sufficient context, things aren’t exactly going to turn out right, and though Isak doesn’t know what those things are, it doesn’t feel — he feels like — it wouldn’t make sense. Those two things don’t make sense together, and Isak likes sense.

So, no. Isak’s not going to bring up Julian to Even again, not if he can help it.

“Listen—” Isak’s about to attempt to explain this to Eskild, but, almost as if he’d been summoned, Isak feels his phone vibrate in his pocket with a text from Even. He blinks down at the screen, then back up at Eskild. “Uhm.”

Eskild smirks. “Someone special?”

Isak feels his face heat. “Shut up,” he mutters, unlocking his phone and opening Even’s text conversation.

**EVEN**

Hey

**EVEN**

Are you busy?

Isak licks his lips. He taps his fingers against the back of his phone nervously, unsure if he should be honest or not — his instinct, however, wins out here, and he types back quickly.

**ISAK**

Not particularly

**ISAK**

What’s up?

Even’s reply is immediate.

**EVEN**

Come over?

**EVEN**

Not for that, I’m just

**EVEN**

In a mood, I guess

**EVEN**

And I’m alone, and I don’t like being in a mood alone
EVEN
That’s not like an incentive or anything like you don’t have to

EVEN
I’ll be fine by tomorrow but I could use the company

Isak knows he’s going to say yes. Where there’s any indication Even might be hurting, Isak’s going to be there, because Even doesn’t deserve to be hurting, and if Even thinks Isak could possibly somehow help with nothing but his company, then it’s the least he can do. It’s a no-brainer, really, and he doesn’t pause to think it over, simply types out a quick “I’ll be there” in response, then locks his phone and looks back up at Eskild. Before he can say anything, though, he notices Eskild is looking at him with a knowing smirk, which makes Isak cower back some.

“I, uhm,” Isak clears his throat. “Something’s just — come up.”

Eskild hums. “Booty call?”

Isak shakes his head. “He’s just not feeling well.”

Eskild’s expression morphs into something Isak doesn’t understand, but he nods sympathetically. “Go, little one,” he gestures towards the exit. “Go on and be a hero.”

Isak huffs. “Sorry I couldn’t stay longer,” he apologizes. “It’s only—”

Eskild holds up a placating hand. “Isak, I will not begrudge you for wanting to help out a friend,” he replies seriously. “I hope he feels better. And be careful.”

Isak smiles. “Thanks, Eskild. See ya.”

“Goodbye, little one.”

Isak turns around and makes his way over to where Magnus and Julian still stand, chatting. It’s with a little more confidence that he reaches them, which means he’s able to clear his throat and smile sheepishly at Julian, trying for regretful.

“Hey,” he greets him again. “Sorry, but I have to go.”

“Oh?” Julian’s eyebrows rise. “Is everything okay?”

Isak can feel Magnus’s heavy and curious gaze burn a hole through the side of his face. As he usually does where Magnus is concerned, he ignores this as pointedly as he can. “Yeah, it’s just — a friend of mine isn’t feeling well, and — I should be there for him.”

Julian is about to reply, but Magnus cuts in instead – which irritates Isak some, yes, but he understands why Magnus is interrupting. All of Isak’s friends are Magnus’s friends, and if he knows Magnus at all, he’s going to ask—

“Do you want me to come and help?”

Right.

Isak shakes his head and offers Magnus what he hopes is an exasperatedly fond look. “You’re fine,” he promises. “But – I can help you home, if you want.”

Magnus shakes his head. “Don’t worry about it,” he promises, glancing at Julian. “You can give me
Julian doesn’t even hesitate before nodding. “Yeah, it’s no problem,” he smiles at Isak, almost as if the fact that he’s cutting this short so abruptly is making him even more adept to finding Isak attractive, which he absolutely does not need right now. “I’ll see you soon, though?”

Sure. They work together. “Yeah,” he nods at Julian, then at Magnus. “Bye, guys.”

They both say their goodbyes, but Isak barely hears them – it’s not until he’s outside that he realizes he hadn’t even removed his coat when he’d walked inside, almost as if his subconscious already knew he wasn’t going to be there much longer than a half an hour. It’s almost like he didn’t want to be there that long, even, and Isak wonders if he has time to mull this over. He wonders what it means that there are certain places he wants to leave as fast as he can, and others he wants to get to just as quickly.

Even’s text notification lights his phone screen.

    EVEN
    The door’s open

    EVEN
    Thanks, Isak

Always, Isak doesn’t text back.

And, yeah.

There’s also that.

--

By the time Isak gets to Even’s place, the sun’s only just setting – it paints the sky in orange hues and provides the last bit of warmth with which Isak reaches the front door. He raises his hand, fully intending to knock as he usually does, but he catches himself before his knuckles rattle against the door. Instead, he reaches towards the knob and opens the door carefully, peeking his head inside first. He spots Even immediately – sitting on the couch, alone, and quiet. He’s scrolling through his phone with a blank expression on his face, and it makes Isak’s heart squeeze with worry.

He hurries inside, then, closing the door gently behind him, and it’s not until both of his shoes are off that Even looks up long enough to notice Isak’s finally here. His expression turns from an inscrutable one to a relieved one, almost as if he’d been doing nothing but waiting for Isak to arrive, and anything in between was simply a pastime.

“Hey,” Isak greets him quietly, shrugging off his coat as he walks towards the couch. He gently drapes it over the arm of the couch before seating himself beside Even, who hasn’t broken eye contact.

“Hi,” Even greets softly, then he takes a moment to look Isak over. When he finally meets his eyes again, Even raises an eyebrow curiously. “You look nice,” he tells him, and Isak bites his lip to fight back his blush. “Were you at a party?”

Isak shakes his head. “Nah,” he replies. “Just, uhm. Felt like dressing up tonight.”

Even stares at him. Isak squirms uncomfortably under the scrutinizing gaze.
“Okay,” Isak snaps. “It was just some dumb Christmas party thing at work. Nothing I had to be at, alright?”

Even is silent for a moment, eyes still on Isak’s face, but glazed over enough so that Isak’s sure Even’s not looking anymore. He gives Even whatever time he needs to try to gather his thoughts, and then finally, Isak watches as he blinks himself back to his place beside Isak, meeting his gaze. “Work,” he finally replies, and Isak nods once. “Was, uh, your friend there?”

Isak furrows his brows. “You knew I took Magnus?”


Isak shrugs. “I mean, he’s been called worse.”

Even looks at Isak in disbelief for a moment, before laughing. His smile brings relief that Isak didn’t know he was waiting for until it’s relaxing his shoulders and alleviating the tightness in his chest. “I meant the one at the club,” he explains further, and Isak’s back suddenly stiffens. “The one that’s not Spanish.”

“Julian,” Isak offers.

“Yes, him. Was he there?”

Isak shrugs stiltedly and looks down at his lap to play with his own hands. “He’s part of the work crew, so, yeah,” he clears his throat. “He was there.”

There’s another moment of silence, and then: “Okay.” And that’s where Even leaves the conversation, because Isak sees him pick up his phone again through his peripheral, a universal sign that someone’s exhausted the subject.

Which is strange, because Even asked exactly one question about Julian, and it was only was he there? Isak’s trying to figure out what the importance of Julian’s presence at the party would look like in Even’s mind, but sometimes – sometimes Isak doesn’t get him. There are times where Isak learns as much as he can, finds himself a sponge around Even and takes and takes and takes and then there are other times in which Isak thinks there are rough edges he simply cannot get at all. But he’s close, Isak thinks. He might be close.

Isak takes in Even’s profile for a minute as he scrolls through his phone, and when he thinks the silence has served its purpose, he pipes up.

“What’s wrong, Even?” He makes sure his voice is quiet and not demanding – it doesn’t even sound curious. Just concerned.

Even stops scrolling through his phone and stares at the screen for a beat longer, before sighing and locking the phone. He sets it aside and looks at Isak, and suddenly Isak’s aware of the bags hanging heavy under Even’s eyes. He makes a surprised sound he doesn’t mean to make, but he reaches out to trace the bags under Even’s eyes with both his thumbs in concern anyway.

“Are you sleeping?” he asks him, and Even shrugs.

“Nah,” he replies, and Isak furrows his brows as he takes his hands back.

“Why?”

Even shrugs again. “Too much on my mind, I think,” he explains, and Isak waits for him to
elaborate. “It’s – everything, really, I think. Elias and Yousef aren’t talking to each other,” he tells Isak, and Isak bites the inside of his cheek. That’s been an issue for over a month, hasn’t it? “And it’s exhausting to navigate this house as if it’s a war zone.”

Isak looks around the living room aimlessly. “Are they here?”

Even shakes his head. “Elias is staying over at a coworker’s,” he tells Isak. “And Yousef’s spending the weekend with his family. It’s funny,” Even snorts, but there’s no humor behind the gesture. “They both decided to spend the night elsewhere to avoid each other, but instead they just managed to leave me here alone on a Friday night, so.”

Isak’s fingers reach out from where they rest on the couch’s cushion to stroke Even’s softly. Even looks down at their hands in wonder. “Not alone,” Isak reminds him, and then Even looks back up at him, eyes brighter than before.

“Right,” Even affirms quietly, and his thumb starts stroking at Isak’s knuckles, too. “There’s you.”

Isak smiles and lets Even’s fingers lace with his own. This is what he needs, Isak tells himself. If Isak can offer a hand to hold, then Even can have it.

“It’s wearing on you,” Isak says. “Their fight.”

“Is it a fight?” Even huffs. “I have no idea what the deal is. Neither of them will tell me. And I feel like I have to choose sides whenever both of them are here and it fucking sucks,” he says. “Because it’s like we’re in grade school again. Elias takes all his toys and goes, and Yousef takes the toy box and walks the other direction.”

“I’m sorry,” Isak tells him quietly, and he means it. He’s extremely sorry this is a situation for Elias and Yousef, first of all, but that it’s also a situation for Even, who doesn’t deserve to be caught in the middle of something like this. Isak wants peace for both sides, and he hopes whatever is bothering the other two finds a solution soon, but his reason for being here is Even, and Even is the one who’s quietly asking for his help, and so it’s Even Isak’s worried about right now. He squeezes Even’s hand in an attempt to comfort him.

“It’s not your fault,” Even replies, and Isak rolls his eyes.

“I’m sorry anyway,” he counters. “And you know you don’t have to deal with this alone. I mean. Not if you don’t want to,” he amends, and Even continues to search his expression over and over and Isak wonders if he’s going to find what he’s looking for soon, and whether or not Isak will know what it is.

“Thank you for being here,” Even says quietly, and Isak merely shrugs. “You’re—” Even pauses, seemingly trying to find the right words. Finally, “You’re far more than what you give yourself credit for, Valtersen,” he finishes.

Isak doesn’t respond – he’s afraid of what Even will say when he elaborates, because Isak knows he will, if he’s given the chance. So he steers the conversation away from himself and right back to Even. “There’s more, isn’t there?” he asks, and Even’s fingers tear themselves away from Isak’s, leaving them cold. “It’s not just that.”

Even looks forward, nods once. “There’s more.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Isak asks him, and Even thinks about it for a moment.

“No,” he replies quietly. “I kind of just want to get my mind off of it, you know?”
Isak nods. “I know.”

They’re quiet for another beat, and suddenly Isak realizes Even’s going to say something else — probably try and coerce Isak into a conversation about a meaningless subject in an attempt to lighten the mood — so he stops him.

He leans in and kisses Even. And Even’s still only for a moment before his lips part against Isak’s invitingly, and this encourages Isak’s kiss to pick up momentum, and before he knows it they’re both out of breath already, breaking apart for two seconds at a time in order to catch whatever they can of it before diving back in.

Even wants to get his mind off the bad things. Isak knows exactly the way to do so.

They’ve always known.

Isak swings a leg over Even’s lap suddenly, straddling him, and the sudden change in position causes Even to grunt against Isak’s lips in question. Isak ignores the inquiry, choosing instead to keep kissing Even as much as is humanly possible, and then his hands are sneaking under Even’s shirt and trailing up his chest, the skin of it warm against Isak’s cold fingers.

Even breaks apart, panting, eyeing Isak in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“Shh,” Isak whispers between kisses, hands now sliding down Even’s chest and resting at the hem of his jeans. “Just stop thinking.”

Isak unbuttons Even’s jeans slowly, unzips them, palms Even over his boxers. Even’s breath hitches.

“Isak—”

Isak reaches into Even’s boxers and pulls him out, squeezing softly. “I just wanna make you feel good,” he murmurs, kissing Even’s collarbone softly.

“You don’t have to.”

Isak snorts, begins with steady movements, easing his way into it, enjoying the way Even thrusts up into his hand almost instinctively, the way he begins to harden underneath him almost immediately.

“Trust me, this is not a chore to me.”

Even’s lips part and the back of his head falls unceremoniously on the couch, where he moans brokenly as Isak picks up his pace slightly. Isak takes the opportunity to bite down on his chin softly, then press a soft kiss there. Even wraps his hands around Isak, fisting them around his shirt, like he’s making sure Isak’s real, that he’s staying in place.

And it’s soft like this — it’s beautiful. He’s beautiful. The way his head is thrown back and exposes his neck to Isak’s kisses and the way his breaths come uneven and his fingernails dig into Isak’s back and he loves it, Jesus, he loves it when Even moans his name like this, quietly, like a prayer, and Isak —

—Isak can’t believe that this is his, for a time — Even’s quiet groans and his head leaning forward to have his forehead pressed against Isak’s and the way he’s looking at his lips, like he’s craving them; what’s his is Even’s arms pulling him closer and the way he throbs under the grip of Isak’s hand and the way he gasps against Isak’s lips and the clear desperation in his eyes, the pleasure, the wonder—

—Isak sees Even, sees him clear as day, he’s as real as he wants to be, clear as the pictures Even
paints and the photos he takes and the crinkle in his eyes when he laughs and so he works faster, now, and so are Even’s breaths, and he says Isak’s name over and over and over and Isak wants this so badly, craves it so, so much, so he leans in and kisses Even, bites his bottom lip roughly and lets him gasp into his mouth desperately and Isak can barely breathe at the sight of Even, completely at his mercy, and his free hand comes up to wrap around the hair at the back of his head and grasps it tightly, pulling Even’s head back against the back of the couch roughly to expose his neck again and allow Isak to pepper kisses up his jaw and to his ear and Isak can feel his jeans tightening, so he ruts himself against what he can reach of Even’s thigh as his hand works faster, rougher, and he can tell Even is close, so close, and Isak thinks with a couple of more practiced hand movements he can—

So he doesn’t realize someone opened the front door until it slams shut, and Even’s breath hitches in surprise at around the same time Isak pulls his hand back from around Even, and when they both turn to look at the door, there’s Yousef, eyes almost comically wide, lips parted, staring at them in shock.

This is the position they adopt for about five seconds, before all three of them unfreeze. Isak is quick to climb out of Even’s lap and Even is tucking himself in and zipping himself up, as difficult as that seems to be, and Isak is running a hand through his hair when Yousef starts pacing around the living room.

“Oh, my God,” he yelps. Before either Isak or Even can get a word in, he continues—“Oh, my God, this is why you two have been getting along so well, oh my God.”

Isak is currently panicking because what is he supposed to say and can Yousef tell, can he tell just how mesmerized he was by Even just a moment ago, with his breaths and the way he moaned Isak’s name and the longer he thinks about it, the warmer his face feels, and Jesus fucking Christ, Isak should have known better than to try and get Even off in the living room like a horny fucking teenager, so this is on him, really.

Which is why he thinks it’s a little unfair that his mouth goes dry and refuses to cooperate, so an explanation falls entirely on Even’s shoulders. “Yousef,” he starts, and his voice is so steady and fucking calm for someone who was just getting a fucking hand job a minute ago, what the fuck—“This isn’t what it looks like.”

Yousef’s eyebrows rise incredulously. “Oh, really? ‘Cause it pretty much looked like Isak straddling your lap with his hand on your dick.”

Even pauses. “Okay, so maybe it is what it looks like,” he concedes, and Isak makes an aborted noise with the back of his throat. “But it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“If you don’t mind,” Yousef holds up his hands. “I’d rather not think about it at all anymore, thanks.”

“You were supposed to be at your mom’s house for the night.” Even’s voice sounds accusatory, which Isak wants to tell him is not fair, considering this is Yousef’s house and he can come back anytime he’d like, and it’s not like Even gets to be angry at him for—

“I forgot something!” Yousef exclaims, arms flailing wildly. “People forget things! That’s something that happens!”

“Well, yes,” Even nods calmly. “You’ve got me there.”

Yousef whimpers some, and Isak has to look away from him. “We sit on that couch, man!”
“Well, technically, that's all I was doing—”

“My mom's sat on that!”

“I’m aware that our family members have all been seated on this couch, yes.”

“Your nephew!”

“Oh, Yousef, come on—”

“If you guys are going to be *dating*, you could at least limit it to the—”

“It’s just sex,” Isak blurts out, voice a little strained. This time he has to intervene. He needs – he needs to clear that particular bit of misinformation up. “It’s just — it’s sex, you know, it’s easy, it’s not complicated, and we — there’s no stress, you know? It’s not — dating. We’re not dating.”

Yousef looks miserable. “Okay, yeah, alright, but, really, this is none of my business.”

Before Isak can come up with another stupid reply, Even interjects. “You’re right,” he nods. “But, uhm—” he pauses. “Could you not tell anyone else?” He asks. “This is — this is between me and Isak, you know? And, well,” Even smirks. “You, now.”

Yousef groans. “Even, for fuck’s sake, *please* don’t do this to me.”

“Yousef,” he warns. “Yousef, as my best friend—”

“Don’t you dare pull that card on me,” Yousef warns right back, reminiscent of what Isak says to Jonas almost every other day. “I just walked in on Isak giving you a hand job, I think I deserve some leeway.”

Isak near-whimpers. Even looks like he wants to reach out to him and console him, but he seems to catch himself when Isak throws him a warning glance. Yousef does not to see more than what concerns him — not that their *sex life* concerns him at all, but there’s hardly anything they can do about that now, so the less he sees from now on, the better, Isak thinks.

He’s just grateful his dick wasn’t the one whipped out, hard under someone else’s hand. The thought makes Isak squirm, and he surreptitiously reaches out for one of the throw pillows beside him to press onto his lap, hiding any evidence of how much, exactly, their small session actually affected Isak.

Yousef is oblivious to this. “Listen, I don’t want to get involved,” he says. “And — yeah, okay, I’m not going to, but — you realize you guys are playing with fire, right?”

Both Isak and Even stare at him.

Yousef blinks. “You know, because you’re *friends* now, and if any of us have learned anything from the stupid romantic comedies Even’s made us watch, then that means this is bound to get really, really complicated?”

Isak scowls, and Even frowns. “We’re doing just fine, though,” Even points out. “It’s been happening for — how long would you say, Isak?”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Four and a half months? Nearly five?”
“What?” Yousef stares at them in disbelief for a very long moment, a moment in which Isak begins to pray to whatever the fuck his mother used to make him pray to that the couch swallows him whole right now. “Since — oh, my God,” Yousef’s eyes widen. “Is Isak your rebound girl?”

Isak looks down at his hands. So, this again. Right. He’d almost forgotten the imaginary girl Even’s been sleeping with all these months has always been referred as “the rebound”, and considering it’s been him all this time, that title technically belongs to him.

“Can we not call him that?” Even’s voice sounds tight.

“Sorry,” Yousef sounds it, too. Isak keeps staring down at his hands. “I just mean — the girl you’ve been making us think you’ve been sleeping with. It’s been Isak all along?”

They’re both silent.

“Holy crap.” Isak finally looks up towards Yousef, who’s rubbing at his forehead, looking both shocked and confused. “Of course it was. I saw you the morning after the party.”

Oh, that’s right.

“I can’t believe I actually believed you’d fallen asleep in the tub.”

Isak grimaces. “Yeah, that was a pretty lame excuse.”

“Thought you were better than that, Acar,” Even chimes in.

Yousef ignores them. “And the weed.”

“Well, we technically were smoking together,” Even points out, and Isak nods in agreement.

“And you were always coming out the house with your hair all — and you—” Yousef looks up at them again. “I’m sorry, have you guys even been trying to hide this?”

Isak and Even exchange a glance.

“Well,” Even says, meeting Yousef’s gaze again. “It’s worked up until now, hasn’t it?”

Yousef blinks at them. “Uhm,” he licks his lips. “I don’t know if that’s because you two are good at hiding things or if it’s because we’re all just terrible at noticing things.”

Isak’s very recently had a very similar experience to the one Yousef is having right now with Jonas — so he wants to tell Yousef it’s probably the latter, because if he’s being completely honest, they have been getting very sloppy lately. Sex on couches, and showers, and that one time in the kitchen —

And suddenly he’s extremely aware of what’s happening here again, and it’s like the embarrassment floods over him one more time, with the same intensity as before. He feels his face turn red again, so he buries it in a pillow, waiting for this to be over. He’d leave, really, but he thinks his dick is still at least half-hard, or, well, hard enough to be noticeable, so he’s going to have to either wait this excruciatingly awkward situation out a little longer or exit the house with the pillow over his crotch.

At the moment, the latter does not sound like the worse option.

“You—” Isak hears Yousef, but he’s refusing to look up again. “Okay, never mind, I’m — this is probably gonna come up later, I know, but — you know, I’m gonna leave, it’s fine.”
Even’s voice joins the awkward atmosphere. “But I thought you’d forgotten something.”

“I can buy underwear,” Yousef replies, and Isak hears keys jingle. “It’s — yeah, I’m gonna buy underwear.”

“You forgot underwear?” Even asks, and Isak lifts his gaze just enough to glare intensely at the side of his face.

“You forgot to tell me you were sleeping with Isak?” Yousef counters with his brows raised, and that shuts Even up efficiently. Isak licks his lips, but before he can hide his gaze again, Yousef meets it — albeit a little hesitantly. Isak needs him to say whatever he wants to say before this gets any more awkward than it already is.

Yousef says nothing to him.


That’s the last they get out of Yousef, because then he disappears out the door.

They hear the door slam, then the both of them stay quiet for another minute or two. They’re not really looking at each other — Isak’s sure they’re both trying to digest what just happened, and Isak, personally, is trying to figure out how to handle it. It’s not that he doesn’t trust Yousef not to say anything, because he trusts Even will take care of that some more later, it’s that he has no idea how to handle the fact that someone knows about them now, that someone will look at them when they hang out and just — they’ll know.

Isak closes his eyes. He’s glad that the conversation was enough for his dick to soften again, since there’s no way he’s going to walk out of here while he’s still hard — there’s a part of him that wants to open his mouth and suggest they end this. Suggest they just stop, tell Yousef they’ve stopped, and make this easier on the both of them. It doesn’t mean they’ll be out of each other’s lives — that much isn’t possible, and they both know that — but things will be much simpler, right? They’d be less prone to being caught again, considering how careless they’ve started to become. There’s that part of him that thinks that’ll be easier, and he’s sure Even will understand, and he thinks it’s just the most logical solution and Isak likes logic, after all, and if it makes logical sense, then that should be at the top of the “next steps” list, and—

His thoughts are interrupted by a warm hand pressing against the side of his face. Isak leans into the touch instinctively, as if his skin knows the feel of Even’s own, and his eyes flutter open slowly to meet the blue ones staring back at him. Even is eyeing him carefully, clearly trying to gauge his reaction, but Isak’s not sure he’s able to convey much of anything other than embarrassment and regret.

“It’s fine,” Even tells Isak quietly, unsurprisingly knowing exactly what Isak needs to hear. “He’s going to get over it. I’ll talk to him some more tomorrow.”

Isak licks his lips. “Uhm,” he shakes his head, not in denial, but more in helplessness. “Maybe we should — shit. I don’t know. I don’t know, fuck, that was really stupid,” he groans, burying his face in his hands. Even hands travels to cup the back of his neck and pulls Isak closer to him, where his face can now rest on Even’s shoulder. “That was so fucking careless, oh my God.”

Even huffs a laugh, twisting his finger softly around a stray curl at Isak’s nape. “You were trying to make me feel better.”

“Yeah, well,” Isak scoffs, pulling back to look up at Even. “Apparently I need to find better ways to
make someone feel better, Jesus.”

“I thought it was a pretty good way,” Even smirks, but Isak merely glares in response. “Isak. Your intentions were good. We both thought Yousef wasn’t coming back tonight, alright? We’re both at fault here.”

“I should go,” Isak decides suddenly, and Even looks at him in surprise.

“What? Why?”

“This—” Isak shrugs helplessly. “I don’t know. This feels like a situation in which I should leave, right? After all of that? I should go.”

“Yousef’s not here anymore,” Even points out. “You don’t have to leave, Isak.”

Isak runs a frustrated hand through his hair. “I don’t know. This feels weird. Fuck,” he shakes his head. “Even, maybe we should — maybe we should st—”

Before Isak can finish the thought, Even brings their lips together again. “Stay,” he whispers, and a shiver runs down Isak’s spine, and when Even wraps an arm around his waist to press his hand against the small of Isak’s back, he lets himself be pulled forward on the couch and kissed deeper, and he allows his hands to rest on either side of Even’s waist, reveling in his touch, in his taste. His taste is sweet — he’s sweet, and it’s infuriating, and it’s electrifying, and the kiss is slow and nothing other than their lips moving together but Isak stops thinking. He stops thinking, and when Even pulls back just an inch and says, “I like it when you’re here,” Isak simply brings their lips back together and he can only think, I like being here. I like being here.

When they’re both finally out of breath, they break apart slowly and carefully, as if they’re going to break if they do it any quicker — Even’s thumb strokes Isak’s jaw, and his eyes seem to trace every inch of Isak’s face; Isak feels himself blush stupidly, and Even doesn’t mention it, but Isak notes the way his smile turns pleased.

Yeah. Kissing Even is probably Isak’s favorite thing. For a moment he asks himself why he bothers wondering what kissing someone else would feel like, because he knows the answer is simple:

Not like this.

“How are you feeling?” Isak asks, clearing his throat some.

Even’s smile is soft, still. “Good.” He searches Isak’s expression. “You’ll stay?”

Isak traces the skin underneath Even’s shirt. “No sex,” he warns, and Even laughs.

“I don’t think I’d be able to get it up again, anyway.”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “I want to take that as a challenge,” he replies. “But I am going to refrain.”

Even’s smile widens by such a large margin that Isak wonders if his cheeks hurt.

—

They make it up to Even’s room without any more casualties — by which he means they manage to refrain from trying to pick up where they left off on the staircase this time — and when they’re inside, somehow, the house feels a lot quieter. Even pulls them towards the bed, and for about a minute or two they’re quiet. Then somehow, things progress.
A couple of minutes later, the television is on in front of them, playing a program that makes hardly any sense to Isak, but it’s not like they’re paying enough attention to grasp the main idea — they’re lying on their sides and facing each other, Even talking to Isak about what he’d actually wanted to be when he was younger — he tells him he’d always wanted to be a teacher, enjoyed teaching people things they didn’t understand — and talks about his first pet, and his favorite aunt, and the reason why he likes certain films and music — and Isak does nothing but listen, as he usually does, because the more he learns about Even the more he fills Even’s file in his head, and he thinks that he may be oblivious to everything happening around him, but at least he seems to have a basic grasp on Even, and who he is, and where he stands.

At one point Even laughs at his own joke, because he’s an idiot, and Isak can’t help but reach over to trace his bottom lip with his thumb — Even’s smile falters some, but he doesn’t stop smiling completely, and Isak realizes that Even’s smile is probably one of the most breathtaking sights he’s ever come across, and he’s seen just about every constellation the sky has to offer him. He can’t help but wonder just how much longer it’ll take Even to use that smile on someone else, and then have it reciprocated — how much longer it’ll take for Even to find someone who will give him what he looks for in a partner, and how long it’ll take for both him and Isak to try and put their past behind them.

Isak doesn’t forget about the ninety percent chance. It’s always in the back of his head, and though he doesn’t necessarily think it fills him with dread, it’s most definitely foreboding — not because he’ll lose this. No, that’s ridiculous. But because he’s afraid this arrangement will be far too difficult to get over.

“What are you looking at?” Even finally breaks him from his stupor, and Isak realizes he’s been doing nothing but staring and tracing Even’s bottom lip. He feels his face flush hot and he brings his hand back to rest under his cheek, not allowing himself to break eye contact with Even, lest it seems like he’s done something wrong.

“You’ve just got a nice smile,” Isak admits. “It’s quite annoying.”

Even laughs brightly and Isak’s stomach flips once, and when Even leans forward slightly to press his lips against Isak’s, Isak’s hand reaches Even’s chin and to the side of his face, letting their lips move against each other softly. It’s only for a second, then they’re pulling away again, only this time Even’s running his fingers through Isak’s hair softly, stopping once in a while to stroke it with his thumb.

“Do you like kissing me?” Even asks suddenly, and Isak blinks, taken aback.

“What?”

“The kissing. Do you like it?”

Isak has to curl his toes hard enough to be painful so that he doesn’t blush. He bites his cheek, weighing his options — truth, and have Even take advantage of the knowledge, lie, and have him doubt himself every time he kisses Isak — though a part of Isak is sure Even knows the answer. Isak doesn’t spend nearly an hour making out with him for no reason, after all; sometimes that’s all Isak needs to destress. Even’s lips on his. It’s simple and it’s easy and he appreciates the lightness of it, how Even can make Isak feel like time is in his hands, and he has all of it in the world.

“Yep,” Isak replies quietly, trying for teasing, but sounding quiet and serious instead. “But you should know that by now. I think this wouldn’t work if I didn’t like your kissing.”

“Hm,” Even hums thoughtfully, thumb still stroking his hair, and Isak waits for him to find a place in
his head. As he does, Isak studies his face closely — his eyelashes, long enough to knock the wind out of Isak, his jawline, sharp enough it might just make his hands bleed, his nose, his eyes, his lips. Isak wonders if this is what luck feels like — he could have found anyone in the world, perhaps, to have this arrangement with, someone he could have never fit with so easily, someone who didn’t have a big heart that seems unable to stop giving, someone Isak could see himself having a life without. Even’s easy. Even’s this, and he’s tomorrow, a tomorrow promised without heartbreak or complication. And he’s yesterday, a yesterday easy on the memory and a ghost against his lips.

Isak’s never had experience with luck before. So he wonders if this is what it feels like, and if it is, he understands why people believe it’s real. That they have it.

It’s a nice feeling, knowing you’ve been gifted with something that’s convenient for you. A job opening. Money on the ground. A movie you almost missed playing for one last day at the cinema. A friend who offers you comfort without demanding what you can’t give him.

Isak thinks this is what Even has that Julian doesn’t.

Simplicity.

“A guy I hooked up with, like, two years ago told me my kissing was sloppy,” Even finally says, meeting Isak’s gaze once again. Isak snorts, amused, and Even glares playfully at him. “What? Do you think my kissing is sloppy?”

Isak shrugs as much as he’s able to in his position. “I mean. I guess it could be more graceful.”

Even growls and brings the hand in Isak’s hair to push at his shoulder, and Isak laughs loudly, shaking his head.

“Even, your kissing is great, fuck off,” Isak promises, rolling onto his back. He stares at the empty ceiling, momentarily missing his poster, before he decides to sit up on the bed while Even lays on his back beside him. Isak flicks at Even’s temple, but it does nothing to faze him. “You just brought this up to hear me say it.”

“Maybe,” Even grins up at Isak, who rolls his eyes. “I really did just remember, though. Because he was lying in the exact same position you were, looking at me as if he were concentrating very hard, and then he just said it,” Even sighs loudly. “Told me it was just some advice I should take. He literally told me practice makes perfect.”

Isak kind of wants to laugh, kind of wants to defend Even from this nameless hook-up, but he doesn’t think he can do either — instead, he reaches over to pat at Even’s forehead comfortingly, and Even grins up at Isak. Isak raises an eyebrow.

“Was he the only one who ever told you that?”

Even nods.

Isak sighs. “Then it’s obviously a one-off,” he dismisses it. “Plus, you’ve been kissing for, like, years, right? You’re probably considered an expert by now. A veteran, even.”

“Hm,” Even hums. “I guess. Though most of my kissing had always been limited to Sonja. She was my first kiss, did you know?”

Isak snorts unattractively. “That’s so cliche,” he rolls his eyes, and Even raises an eyebrow.

“What?”
“Your first kiss is your first girlfriend and you go off to college and you’re probably gonna end up together again,” Isak takes his hand back and crosses his legs on the bed, staring blankly ahead at Even’s drawings taped to his closet doors. Every time Isak comes over, there’s a couple of new drawings and printed memes on there; Isak hasn’t given them a good look in a long time. When he’s here, he mostly just lies in bed with Even, either talking or having sex, and both activities take up most of Isak’s time and concentration. He hasn’t had half a mind to examine them closely again, and he can see some of the outlines with his glasses on, but nothing concrete. “And then you’re gonna tell your children and your grandchildren about how you were each other’s first everything, and blah blah blah, you’ll become the exception to the rule and live happily ever after, I’m sure.”

Even’s quiet. For a moment, and then too long of one, because suddenly the silence is stretching into uncomfortable territory, so he turns to look over at Even, who’s gazing at him intensely. Isak wonders if the bitterness of his thoughts made way through his voice — but he doesn’t think it did. Isak’s stating facts, and it’s easy to state facts the way they’re meant to be stated: concretely, monotonously, knowingly. So Isak raises a challenging brow at Even and asks, “What?”

Even blinks at Isak. “You’re so sure I’m getting back together with Sonja,” he replies, and Isak shrugs lamely, turns back to look at the closet doors. “Why is that, exactly?”

Isak picks uselessly at a stray thread peeking out of his jeans. “Facts,” he replies. “Statistics. Did you know first kisses sometimes define what the rest of your romantic encounters will be like?”

“No,” Isak admits. “But that’s a thought, isn’t it?”

“So say it was true,” Even offers, and Isak looks at him. “What would yours look like?”

“Really?”

“No,” Isak admits. “But that’s a thought, isn’t it?”

“So say it was true,” Even offers, and Isak looks at him. “What would yours look like?”

Isak frowns. “What do you mean?”

Even smiles. “I’m asking about your first kiss, Isak,” he explains. “What was your first kiss like?”

“Oh,” Isak replies lamely. “Like, first real kiss? Or first fake-hetero kiss. Because that one was kind of gross. She used too much tongue — which I’m not opposed to, if I’m drunk enough, but it’s like my body knew it was a girl’s tongue or something. Wasn’t fun. Didn’t enjoy it. I assume I still wouldn’t enjoy it now.”

“So the former, then,” Even amends, finally sitting up on the bed, too. “First real kiss.”

Isak thinks. “Uhm,” he shrugs. “Some guy named Ken. First year of high school. I was at a party with the boys and I was drunk and he flirted with me and I thought he was pretty, so I let him take me outside and kiss me.”

Even is quiet for a moment. “Was it nice?”

Isak hums. “It was alright,” he admits. “I suppose it could have been worse. It was a little hurried, though,” he replies. “It’s like he wanted to get it over with so that maybe I’d blow him or something.”

“Did you?”

“Oh, God no,” Isak laughs. “I was drunk, but not drunk enough to not panic. So I said goodbye to him, threw up on the sidewalk, and walked home.”

“Huh.” Even looks thoughtful.
“What?” Isak raises an eyebrow. “I’m sorry, is that not as glamorous as sharing your first kiss with your first love?” He rolls his eyes. “People rarely share your experience, Even. First kisses come in all shapes and sizes. A lot of them are traumatizing, in fact. So. Good for you. You got the good story. You can tell it at parties.”

Even chuckles quietly and shakes his head. “It’s not that,” he assures Isak. “It’s only that doesn’t exactly sound like a real kiss.”

Isak scowls. “His lips were moving against mine and his tongue was shoved down my throat,” he deadpans. “I think that’s as real as it gets.”

“But you’ve never—” Even grunts in frustration for a moment. “Real. Like. You’ve never had a kiss that made you feel like — I don’t know. Like for that second, you’re — real.”

Isak considers Even for a moment. There’s something in his eyes, something like — naivety, Isak thinks. He’s understood, for as long as he’s gotten to know the real Even, that he shares one inherent flaw with Yousef: they’re both hopeless romantics, doomed to see the world through rose-tinted glasses and hoping that everyone experiences love the same way that they do. Even thinks a kiss can be more than the physical activity than it is, when it’s quite the opposite — kissing, much like anything else, is a science. That’s why it’s so simple to admit Isak likes kissing Even. Kissing is an evolutionary role that plays a part in the natural high their brain likes to offer them during any sort of intimate activity. Kissing is like sex, an easy way to lie to your brain, or to trick it into thinking things are more than they are.

Maybe this is why Even’s so adamant that kisses are meant to be something fantastical.

“Kissing, in general, is the same under any circumstance, you know,” Isak tells him. “So long as there’s an attraction, emotionally, kissing feels the same any time. Releases the same chemicals in your brain. Fakes the same high.”

Even groans. “Shut up,” he rolls his eyes, and Isak’s slightly offended. “Stop thinking with your brain for a moment.”

Isak blinks at him. “That’s literally all we think with, Even.”

“Kisses may be the same scientifically, but they’re different still,” Even insists, and Isak’s about to interrupt, but Even doesn’t allow him to. “A sloppy, drunk kiss at a party is different than a soft one with someone you have a connection with, right?”

Isak shrugs. “Maybe. Chemicals might be more intense that way, I guess. Though you could argue the same about a very good kisser you feel nothing for, so.”

Even looks at him. “Not once, then,” Even deadpans. “Not once have you ever felt the difference between a kiss that’s meant to mean nothing and a kiss that makes you feel rooted to the spot, like everything’s suddenly coming alive inside you?”

Isak breaks eye contact with Even, looking back down at the duvet. He absentmindedly dusts a crumb that looks like it’s from a cookie towards the edge of the bed. “That’s very poetic of you, Even,” he replies. “But, no. I guess not. It might just depend on your way of thinking.”

When Isak turns to look at Even once again, he looks a little sad — Isak can’t tell if it’s for himself, or it’s simply pitying, and Isak is suddenly angry and frustrated. He doesn’t want to be pitied. This is absolutely nothing to be pitied over.

“Jesus, Even,” Isak snaps. “I like kissing you. Isn’t that enough?”
“Is it any different from your other kisses, though?”

“I—” Isak gapes at him. “Why do you care so much? Fuck, I’m not sitting here asking you who’s the better kisser between me and Sonja, am I? And, no,” Isak warns. “I don’t want to hear the answer. I don’t care.”

“Isak—”

“Kisses are kisses and I don’t know why you think they have to be this life-changing, toe-curling, poetic experience that you carry with you for as long as you’re able to,” Isak is waving his arms aimlessly, maybe a little wildly. “And just because you feel like kisses vary with emotion doesn’t mean it—”

Isak’s interrupted by the press of Even’s lips against his own. He instinctively melts under the touch, and when Even places a hand against the side of his head, Isak tilts his head towards the contact.

Even’s kiss is soft and slow and gentle, like he’s trying not to break Isak, and it’s making his head spin out of anger and confusion and frustration — it’s kissing. So Even’s a good kisser. Isak’s aware. He’s aware that a kiss with someone else has never felt like this. He knows. He knows. But Even’s a good kisser, and it’s easy to fool themselves into believing it’s something to do with something other than their brains.

So kissing Even is different. And it’s good. But there are no fireworks bursting around them, no life-changing tilting of an axis, no strings breaking him free from his own inhibitions. It’s just a kiss. It’s just a good kiss.

When Even pulls away, it’s only barely, and his nose is still touching Isak’s — the lids of his eyes are half-hooded, and Isak looks at him until he meets his gaze.

“Did that make you feel real?” Even whispers onto Isak’s lips. Isak swallows, fighting the urge to pull away instantly, lest Even gets the wrong idea.

“I’m already real,” he counters quietly. “I am.”

“So my kisses are comparable to a sloppy, drunk kiss at a party in high school, huh?”

Isak shakes his head. “I don’t know what you want to hear.”

Even strokes his cheek, searching his expression. “I guess I don’t know either,” he admits, and Isak’s shoulders relax some. “Maybe I just wanted to know I’m not alone in this.”

“In what?”

Even considers him. “In feeling like your kisses are different than others,” he finally admits, and something in Isak’s heart freezes. Stops the even beats of it completely, and then it’s like the delay has caused them to try and catch up to where they’d been before, racing against time. “I don’t mean — I don’t want you to think it means something you’re afraid it means,” Even reassures him, and Isak has to swallow back his fear so that it tastes like relief. “I guess the more I know about what our kisses make you feel, the more I’m sure we stand on the same ground.”

Isak can’t ask Even what that ground is. Even hears his silent question anyway, huffing a fond laugh.

“You’re one of my best friends, Isak,” he says, and there’s his heart shutting down again. “I feel like that would have some bearing on what you feel when we kiss versus when you kiss someone else.”
Isak thinks about kissing Julian again. Isak’s lips don’t know his taste, and yet it still feels wrong against them.

He exhaled a shaky breath and finally pulls away from Even, needing that empty space between them, needing his thoughts gathered and controlled. Isak leaves whatever thoughts managed to escape him during that momentary lapse of reason, leaves them to hang in the dead space between Even and him.

“I should go,” he clears his throat and offers Even a wry smile that he doesn’t return. “I think I should try to get some sleep.”

Even nods, a little curtly. “Yeah.” He stands from the bed before Isak does, walking over towards his bathroom and closing the door behind him quietly. Isak stares at the barrier between them now, far more useful than dead space, but it feels worse, somehow, lonelier.

He quietly slips out of the bed, too, hearing the sink faucet running inside the bathroom and Isak squirms, a little impatiently, unsure what he’s waiting for. But whatever it is, it feels like it’ll come to him once Even’s out of the bathroom, so he makes way towards Even’s closet, perusing the drawings taped all over the doors to find the new ones he’s missed lately.

Memes. Stupid, outdated ones, but that’s no surprise. There’s a drawing of Yousef, staring blankly at a table, and a drawing of Elias, face disappeared behind a shadow. Isak sees a drawing of Vilde and Chris, sitting at a kitchen table eating cake. He sees Jonas and Mahdi sitting next to each other. There’s one of Mutta with what looks to be a German Shepard, smiling widely.

There’s one of him, and Isak looks at it for a moment, trying to place if it’s from a time and place, or simply a drawing from memory.

His legs are folded underneath him and he’s on a couch, glasses propped up barely by his nose. He’s reading a book. The title is illegible, but Isak’s pretty sure he knows what book it is. He reaches over to let his fingers brush the drawing gently, as if he’s making sure it’s real. There’s extraordinary attention to detail, as if Even spent more time on this one than any of the others, and something about it makes his stomach want to fall to his feet. Isak doesn’t grant it permission, though it feels desperate to.

Isak’s never thought himself as particularly interesting. But it seems like he’s interesting enough to be considered a subject worth spending time on, and that makes him feel — real.

The faucet shuts off suddenly, and Isak jumps slightly, quickly making his way over to the bathroom door. As soon as he reaches it, the door swings open, and Even nearly runs into him. Looking confused, he raises an eyebrow. “Hello.”

Isak feels sheepish. He hopes he doesn’t look it. “Hi.”

Even gestures towards his bedroom door. “Come on,” he tells him. “I’ll walk you out.”

Yeah, Isak realizes. This is what he was waiting for, wasn’t it? It’s become habitual by now, and he doesn’t know how to feel about it.

They walk towards the front door quietly, and as Isak is putting on his shoes, Even snaps his fingers as if he’s only just remembering something.

“I meant to tell you,” he says, and Isak finishes putting on his shoes in time to meet his gaze. “I’m going to be in Tromso from the 22nd to the 26th,” he says. “That’s where the family’s at this year. I’m flying out, so I’ve gotta pack relentlessly, so I might not be able to see you ‘till I’m back,” he
says, and that makes Isak feel — he doesn’t know. Weird.

“Okay,” Isak clears his throat. “Uhm, yeah. Are you staying at your aunt’s house, or?”

Even shakes his head. “Mom is, but there’s room for her in there. Everyone’s coming down from somewhere, so there’s no room in that house for me to sleep comfortably, so I’m springing for my own hotel room. You know, in case you wanna call,” he winks, and Isak isn’t sure what he means, but he’ll chalk it up to another one of Even’s movie references.

“Uhm, sure,” Isak shifts his weight. “So — then I won’t see you until after Christmas.”

“Seems like it.”

He nods. “Okay,” he clears his throat. “Well, uh, have a safe flight, and stuff.”

Even laughs once. “Thanks, Isak,” he pats Isak on the shoulder, though it’s gentle. “Call me though, for real. We’ll FaceTime or something.”

Isak nods uselessly. “Sure.”

He doesn’t know how he’s going to react to a week without seeing Even again. He thinks he was fine the last time because he was kept so fucking busy, but now it’s the holidays, and he’s nothing to keep him as busy as before, so that means thinking too much, and there’s room to remember this is what his life used to be, Even-less, and he’s going to feel the difference. He’s going to feel it, and Isak’s already exhausted over it.

Isak swallows. “Okay, I’m going.”

Even nods. “Bye, Isak.”

He opens the door for Isak, who slips past him quietly and off the porch, towards the driveway. A week without Even. Something he’s able to do.

But it feels like they’ve left things — weirdly, here, and so he quickly turns around to face a closing door.

“Even,” he calls out before the door is completely shut, and watches in both relief and fear as Even halts, opening it back up and raising an eyebrow at Isak.

“Yeah?”

Isak squirms slightly. “A kiss is a kiss,” he finally says. “It’s just lips on lips, and it’s nothing extraordinary or out of this world. It’s — the evolution of it is ambiguous, at most, because it’s — a lot of scientists think it came from mouth-feeding, which is really gross if you think about it, but there is evidence of kissing originating from even way before Homer’s epics, so it’s nothing new and it’s not crazy special or extraordinary and — and people share kisses every single day, every second, even, think about it, everyone kisses, and everyone’s kisses are the same.”

Even stares at him. “Okay?”

Isak opens his mouth, then closes it again. He opens it again, trying to find his words, and when he finally finds them, he speaks. “But I guess that if — there are people with kissing preferences, of course, and they’ll like kissing one person over the other, and maybe it’s nothing scientific, maybe it’s all psychological, but if — if kisses are different, maybe, then I guess kissing your best friend might be different, and preferable over — over sloppy kisses with complete strangers while drunk,”
his eyes flicker to the grass beside him. “And — while it — it may not make you feel real,” he continues, finally meeting Even’s gaze again. “It might — make you feel present, if anything, and that’s — maybe just as good as, right?”

Even stares at him for a beat longer, before a smile slowly starts spreading across his face. It’s not large — in fact, it’s very small, but there’s something happy about it, exasperated, even, and Isak doesn’t know how to take it into his hands and allow himself to understand it. He licks his lips nervously, waiting for Even to say something. Anything. Anything at all.

And finally—

“I guess kissing Jonas would probably feel pretty good for you, huh?”

Isak blinks at him, then he glares. He clenches his jaw and his fists and shakes his head once.

“Asshole.”

Even laughs and his laugh is enough to unclench Isak’s fists, because they don’t want to be angry at Even. They’re helpless against his laugh, and when Even walks over to him, they reach out towards his waist of their own accord while Even cradles Isak’s face between his hands and leans forward to kiss him softly.

Time is his.

When Even pulls away, Isak breathes a sigh that sounds like relief, and Even presses a soft kiss to the tip of his nose, causing it to wrinkle. “I’ll see you in a couple of days, best friend,” he teases quietly, and Isak rolls his eyes.

“Stop gloating.”

“You put me in this position of power, it’s impossible to control,” Even reminds him with a wicked grin, then kisses him again. “Don’t get into too much trouble without me,” he tells Isak as he pulls away and walks backwards towards the front door. “I’ll bring you back some hotel shampoo.”


“See ya, nerd.”

Even closes the door behind him.

Time goes on.

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It’s the 22nd, and Isak is currently starring as That Isak, sitting in Jonas’s apartment with him and Mutta. They’re not doing much else but talking over the television, mostly about things that couldn’t interest Isak less; they’re bringing up skateboarding, or something, and Isak tunes them out whenever it gets too boring, opting instead for scrolling through his Facebook feed aimlessly. He’ll stop whenever he sees the name of one of his good friends from high school to dutifully like a pointless status, then continue scrolling through muted videos and vacation pictures.

And for the record, he is not waiting for Even to pop up on his feed. He’s not. But the fact that he does after about three minutes of aggressive scrolling makes Isak pause on his photo status, because it’s only natural to check up on a friend he actually communicates with on a daily basis. If he’s going to like statuses from people who used to make idle conversation with him back in high school, then
why wouldn’t he take the time to do the same for his present friends?

Even’s uploaded three pictures to his status — all of them of him with two younger children, neither of them looking much older than ten — the last two pictures are blurry, catching all three of them in motion, but the prominent one on the left is clear and sweet: Even kneeling as much as he’s able to, the young boy propped on Even’s back with his arms around his neck, and the little girl sitting on whatever she can reach of Even’s leg. All three of them are smiling brightly at the camera.

When Isak clicks on the photo to enhance it, he reads the caption beside it: “The niece and nephew missed me the most.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek to keep himself from smiling at Even’s ridiculousness. He holds his thumb down on the picture and saves it to his phone, then opens the messenger app and finds Even’s conversation at the very top. The last message was sent by Isak, after Even told him his plane had landed after a quick two hour flight, who told him to have fun. When Even didn’t reply, Isak guessed he must have taken his advice.

Seems like he was right, in any case.

He attaches the picture of Even and his niece and nephew to the text, then types out his message:

**ISAK**

Didn’t know you had siblings. Your niece and nephew are cute

Isak doesn’t expect an answer any time soon, so he clicks on the home button and begins sliding towards the screen where Instagram’s pinned. Before he can press down on it, however, his phone vibrates twice, and a message notification from Even slides down from the top of his screen.

He doesn’t think about just how quickly he moves his thumb from one place to another in order to open the message. Isak’s simply bored — would much rather have a discussion about Even’s family than hear more shit about skateboarding.

**EVEN**

Stalking me, Valtersen?

**EVEN**

I don’t have siblings. They’re my cousin’s, but she’s like my sister, so. Just call them that

As Isak begins to type out a reply, another text message slides upwards.

**EVEN**

Nina insisted on seeing your contact picture and she’s decided she wants to be your friend

**EVEN**

She said you’re very cute and I couldn’t disagree

Isak breathes a laugh through his nose, shaking his head at the development.

**ISAK**

If I was stalking you I’d know a lot more about the situation unfolding rn

**ISAK**
That’s sweet. But I think you’re gonna have to keep her far away from me until she’s over it

**EVEN**
Have you seen yourself? No one’s getting over you anytime soon

Isak bites his lip to hold back a blush. His knee is bouncing restlessly against his phone.

**ISAK**
Are you seriously flirting in front of minors

**EVEN**
They have gone and left me for dead. I can flirt as I please

**ISAK**
Oh, really? Who else are you planning to flirt with?

**EVEN**
Well, I saw this very beautiful woman at the airport when we landed

**EVEN**
Couldn’t be much older than eighty, but didn’t look a day over seventy

**EVEN**
I might just find her again and ask her to Christmas dinner

**ISAK**
I wish you two a long and happy life together

**EVEN**
I’m so glad we have your blessing

Isak licks his lips, amused, suddenly feeling lighter than he’d felt before. His thumb hovers over the keyboard for a moment, trying to figure out what to write for about a minute, before Mutta’s loud and insistent voice finally snaps him out of his private conversation. “Yo, hot and cold,” he calls again, and Isak finally looks up at him. He blinks.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, you, simultaneously brooding and smiling,” Mutta gestures towards his phone.

Isak glares at him. “I’m not brooding.”

“Did you hear what we just said?” Jonas asks, ignoring Isak’s very lame attempt at a defense.

“Uhm. Sure,” Isak offers.

Both Mutta and Jonas exchange an incredulous glance, then they turn back to look at Isak in unison. Isak thinks they could probably have their own American sitcom with these mannerisms. “What did we say?” Mutta asks.

“Ah,” Isak struggles to come up with a viable reply. “You were sharing grooming tips?”

Mutta blinks at him. “The hell?”
Isak shrugs. He’s going to go ahead and give himself points for trying, because after the week he’s had, he thinks he deserves a win. “Jonas has a very meticulous eyebrow routine that could probably be applied to your luscious locks, Mutta.”

“I want to circle back to that later,” Mutta replies, and Isak grins. “But that’s not what we were talking about.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Isak replies.

“Mutta was talking about Yousef and Elias,” Jonas supplies, and Isak can feel his face clear with understanding. “He was wondering if you had any idea about what’s going on.”

Isak frowns. “Why would I know more than you?” he asks Mutta. And though before this might have been a valid point, it’s clear that Mutta sees this has changed — he doesn’t look resentful, just a little puzzled, as if he doesn’t know if Isak’s pulling his leg or not.

“You spend more time in that house than I do now,” he points out, and Isak squirms where he sits, trying to stop the blood from rushing to his face. Yes, well. Yousef probably knows that more than anyone now. “Just thought you might have overheard something.”

Isak shakes his head. “Nothing,” he tells them. “All I know is that they’re making the house uncomfortable and it’s wearing on Even. Which isn’t fair,” he adds, a little irritated at the entire situation again. “He has nothing to do with whatever they’re pissed about.” Mutta and Jonas are looking at him curiously, so Isak narrows his eyes suspiciously and eyes their expressions. “What?” he asks, a little put off.

“It’s still weird,” Mutta tells him, and before Isak can ask what he’s referring to, Jonas clarifies for him.

“You defending Even,” he says. “I know it’s been a while now, and for the most part I think we’re all used to it, but then you defend him so fucking quickly even when he’s not here that it reminds us that this — yeah. Still weird sometimes.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Anyway,” he changes the subject before they can dive any deeper into it, since he’s recently found out he’s not very good at hiding things anymore. “Have either of you tried asking the guys directly?”

Mutta nods. “I’ve asked Elias,” he replies. “His face just kind of shuts down and he changes the subject.”

“What about Yousef?”

“Hm,” Mutta shakes his head. “He’s a little less intense about it, but he still refuses to say anything. It’s like even if they’re mad at each other, they’ve both agreed it’s nobody else’s business. Which, fine, I get,” Mutta concedes. “But when it’s putting such a strain on their other relationships — something’s gotta give, dude, you know?”

Both Jonas and Isak nod in agreement. Isak wishes he could offer more to help, but he hasn’t exactly spoken much to either Yousef or Elias lately — mostly because he hasn’t been over to the house, so they don’t run into each other as often, though Elias has sent him a few text messages here and there. The conversation’s been light, questions back and forth about silly things Elias comes up with, but where it comes to Yousef, well.

Isak hasn’t spoken to him at all. He wants to think Yousef isn’t avoiding him on purpose, but he has no other explanation as to why he’s been so pointedly ignoring Isak. Isak’s considered texting him
more than once, seeing if he wants to talk about what happened, but then he realizes that they’d then have to talk about what happened, and he chickens out. There’s simply no easy way to bring up that night without immediately reliving the embarrassment he’d felt, and the embarrassment he’s sure Yousef had felt.

He doesn’t exactly know where Yousef stands on the subject, either. Even told him about two days later that Yousef wasn’t going to say anything, and when Isak asked him to elaborate, Even said Yousef didn’t want to talk about it anymore. Isak doesn’t want that to put a strain on any relationships — maybe his and Yousef’s, he can handle, but not Even and Yousef’s. Though that doesn’t seem to be a problem — Even brought him up once in a while while he was still at home, thoughtlessly telling Isak that they’re doing something together, so the only problem left there is —

Well. Him.

He wonders what Jonas would think if he’d walked in on him and Even instead of Yousef. He’d be peeved, Isak thinks, and rightfully so, but would he go so far as ignoring Even? And would this mean he’d be opposed to the situation completely? Isak can’t put himself in that position. He can’t. He can’t think of a reason to dislike only one-half of the agreement, especially when both parties are objective and consenting adults. No one’s been forced into this. Isak isn’t taking advantage of Even, nor vise versa, at least — well, not anymore, though “taking advantage” is too strong a term. Using each other, is what they’d been doing, really, but now it’s not just like that. It’s not.

They’re friends. Really, really close friends. And it only stands to reason that if this is something they need, to find relief without having to think twice about it, or having to worry about what it might mean the next day, they’d do it with each other. Especially after they’d become friends. These things are far more manageable that way. More communication, less glaring.

Isak looks down at his phone, turning it over and over in his hand. Again, he wonders if he should text Yousef, try and see where he stands with him, but before he can make a decision, Jonas interrupts his train of thought.

“I just hope they come out with it soon,” he admits. “Keeping something so fucking frustrating like that takes a toll on someone. I should know.”

Mutta raises an eyebrow at Jonas. “How so?”

Both Jonas and Isak freeze for a moment. When Jonas looks over at Isak, expression quietly asking for an out, it takes Isak far too long to come up with something believable — so he throws out the first excuse that develops entirely in his brain.

“Jonas has a gambling addiction,” he explains, and Jonas blinks at him. “Kept it to himself for a long time, but he’s finally seeking help.”


“Is it?” Jonas throws Isak a look. “It’s almost as if I wouldn’t know.”

“It’s okay, Jonas,” Isak says seriously. “You don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

“Man, we should have never let you in on all those bets. We’ll try to cut down on them now, for your sake.”

Jonas rolls his eyes. “Mutta, I don’t have a fucking gambling addiction.”

Mutta frowns. “But Isak said—”
“Yeah, Jonas, Isak said,” he interrupts pointedly, glaring at his best friend. For a moment, Jonas seems to consider keeping to the story, but Isak can tell the exact moment in which he decides he loses nothing by telling someone else the truth about his predicament, especially someone who’s already so preoccupied with two of his friend’s secrets. Isak thinks Jonas is incredibly brave. Meanwhile, Isak will sit here in a pile of his own secrets, dirtying his jeans.

“It’s not gambling,” Jonas finally says, and his voice is quiet. “It’s Eva.”

Mutta frowns. “What about her?”

Isak smiles encouragingly at Jonas, who exhales a long breath.

“I guess I’m still pathetically in love with her, or whatever.”

There’s a pause.

“Well, shit.” Mutta finally breaks the silence.

Jonas grunts in agreement, and Isak’s phone vibrates in his hands again. He looks down at it while Mutta asks Jonas to elaborate and Jonas complies, finding Even’s notification on his lock screen. He opens the text conversation immediately to find a picture of Even smiling brightly, offering Isak a thumbs up with a room with walls of muted tones in the background. Underneath it, the text reads:

    EVEN
    At the hotel room

    EVEN
    Wyd

    ISAK
    Looks nice

    ISAK
    With Jonas and Mutta

    EVEN
    Damn

    EVEN
    Later, then

Isak frowns.

    ISAK
    Later what??

Isak watches the typing bubble appear, then disappear, then reappear. Finally:

    EVEN
    You’re ridiculously cute

    EVEN
    Just wanted to call you, Isak

    EVEN
If I’m not asleep by the time you’re home, I’ll give you a ring

Were Even actually here with him, flirting in person, Isak would probably shove him or kiss him to shut him up, and he’s suddenly overcome with just how much he actually misses being able to do that, so much so that he has to willfully shut himself down before the feeling can spread any further. He licks his lips as he types his reply without haste.

**ISAK**

Sounds good

He locks his phone, and when he tunes back into the present conversation, Mutta’s looking at Jonas with the sympathetic expression his best friend abhors. He seems to be ignoring the fact, however, instead taking another drink of his beer, staring straight ahead at the television. Isak meets Mutta’s gaze and subtly shakes his head, indicating him not to push the matter. Mutta’s eyes flicker with something like pity, but then he clears his expression of anything resembling it, looking back at the television, too.

Jonas doesn’t seem to be quite finished with the subject in general, however. “How’s Noora?” he asks, looking over at Isak. Isak wants to sigh — Jonas has shown indications of being a masochist, asking about Noora in terms of Eva, as if he’s only waiting for her to finally drop the bomb on him. Isak doesn’t understand what the point of it is, why he’s so intent on hurting himself more than he already is, but even though Isak wants to help, wants to tell him to quit it, it’s clear Jonas is far too deep in now to care about what Isak has to say. He’ll hear him out, and that’s a hard *maybe*, before he kindly asks Isak to keep his opinions to himself.

“Still straight,” Isak offers, rolling his eyes. He looks back at the television as well, hoping his voice depicts just how bitter he truly is about this subject. “And Eva’s still obsessed with her.”

Through his peripheral, Isak can see Jonas nod once, tightly, and then he says nothing else on the matter. It’s clear, by the tension in the silence surrounding them, that he and Mutta are no longer welcome to contribute to this conversation.

The phone in Isak’s hands vibrates twice again, and when he unlocks it expecting to see a text message from Even, his heart sinks a little at the actual contact notification.

**R**

Hey Isak, was wondering if you changed your mind about coming over for Christmas this year

He usually gets this text around the holidays. It never fails. But he’s not sure why, because his answer is always the same, and he’s sure no one on the other side is surprised. Still, he gets why this Christmas might be more important than other Christmases. He’s so understanding of this, in fact, he almost did change his mind this year — almost convinced himself that maybe he could do it, a lonely night in bed, fooled himself by letting the darkness that surrounded him make him feel safe rather than afraid, and for about five minutes, Isak felt like he could. Like he would.

But then he didn’t.

Isak considers simply not replying this year, but he thinks that’s not fair — not after everything. So he presses down on the typing space and replies.

**ISAK**

No. I’ve got plans.
ISAK
But I sent a gift

There’s a pause.

R
Ok. If that’s what you want. Merry Christmas

Isak feels like his lungs might give in for a moment, like he’s going to have to find his way to the bathroom without a single breath available to him, but before the panicking can even begin to settle in, a notification slides down from the top of the screen with Even’s contact name written inside it.

He swallows and clicks on it quickly, looking for air.

EVEN
What are the chances we’ll all be wiped out by an asteroid soon

Isak finds a breath, and he exhales it slowly in the form of a small, disbelieving laugh.

ISAK
Not very likely.

ISAK
I mean, the chances of you as an individual dying in an asteroid impact? One in 700,000

ISAK
But wiped out by one a la dinosaurs? Not likely for an other tens of millions of years

ISAK
If I ever finish this stupid degree, that might actually be my job one day. Not killing the entire planet, but looking for asteroids in space. If I found the right observatory

EVEN
Shit, and killing the entire planet sounded like a dream job

EVEN
But really?? That’s really cool. You’d be like one of the doomsday heroes we see in apocalypse movies that no one listens to until it’s too late

EVEN
Don’t worry though, I’ll listen to you

EVEN
Good to know it’s not gonna happen anytime soon, though. I think it’d kinda suck to die alone in a hotel room in Tromsø

ISAK
I mean, that’s not the only way you could die alone in that hotel room

EVEN
Ah, always so refreshingly optimistic you are

EVEN
If I die, I bestow upon you all of my hair products. Do with them what you will
ISAK
I’ll burn them

EVEN
They’ve done nothing to you

ISAK
I beg to differ

Before Isak can read Even’s reply, he’s taken out of his conversation once again by a napkin hitting his face. Frowning down at it, now resting on his lap, Isak flicks it to the floor with his fingers, looking up to find the source of the attack. Mutta’s the only one looking at him, eyebrow raised. Isak raises both of his back in question. “What?”

“I said there’s a cat behind you.”

Isak jumps and quickly scrambles out of the couch, turning back to find Garfield dangerously close to him on the end table. He’s glaring at Isak, as per usual, and had Mutta not warned him about this, he’s pretty sure the cat would have jumped him and tried to gauge his eyes out.

“Fucking cat,” Isak mutters, only now realizing Jonas was no longer in the living room with them.

Mutta’s laughing, clearly amused with Isak’s wariness of the animal. “I just love seeing you panic whenever that cat’s near you.”

Isak turns over to him and glares. “You wanna switch places?”

Mutta stops laughing. “Are you kidding me?” he scoffs. “I’m not suicidal.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Isak mumbles lamely, unlocking his phone and opening up the camera. He carefully points it towards Garfield, who’s sitting still and looking at them with a menacing glare. Isak quickly presses down to capture the photo, then opens up Evens conversation. He ignores his most recent reply and types a message out quickly with the cat’s picture attached to it.

Before he can finish it, Mutta calls out to him. Isak turns over to look at him. “What was that?”

“I asked who you’re sending that to.”

“Oh, uhm,” Isak looks down back at his phone screen, hoping to hide his blush, though it feels minimal compared to his others. For a second, he considers lying to Mutta, but then figures that’s even more suspicious than telling him the truth, so he shrugs and continues typing his message as he says, “Even.”


“Will do,” Isak mutters.

ISAK
Jonas’s cat is finally ready to attack I think

ISAK
Also Mutta says hi

ISAK
Though that might be his last hi he ever says if the cat goes through with our murders
Isak looks up and finds Garfield slowly backing away from them, jumping off the end table and strutting over to the kitchen. He’ll turn and glare at them every three steps, but when he finally reaches it, he jumps on the counter and continues ignoring their puny human existence. Isak sighs in relief, and hear Mutta do the same. He sits back where he’d been seated on the couch before, meeting Mutta’s gaze. “He’s going to eat me one day.”

Mutta nods sympathetically. “Yeah, I think so.” His expression changes from solemn to curious in two point five seconds. “Hey, how’s Even, by the way?”

“Uhm,” Isak waves his phone lamely in the air. “He’s fine. At his hotel room. I think. He’s just talking about asteroids, or something,” he shrugs, as if the conversation is of no substance. Which, technically, it’s not, so he’s not really sure why he feels like he’s lying. “Where’d Jonas go?”

“He’s taking the longest piss known to mankind, I guess,” Mutta looks over his shoulder, presumably to check if Jonas has left the bathroom yet. When he looks back at Isak, he’s grimacing. “What are we supposed to do with him?”

Isak glances to the bathroom door, and shakes his head once. “Nothing, I don’t think,” he sighs. “Just look after him. Maybe one day Eva will pull away, and it’ll get easier for him.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I don’t think he wants to be helped.”

Mutta snorts quietly. “That’s the worst kind of problem.”

Isak nods. “I agree.”

His phone vibrates with another text message from Even. He opens it up.

```
EVEN
I refuse to let you die before me
```

```
EVEN
I trust no one else with my hair products
```

```
EVEN
Plus, life would be pretty boring for me if you went first
```

```
EVEN
Mutta too I guess
```

```
EVEN
Tell him I love him
```

Isak rolls his eyes. “Even says he loves you,” he passes on the message, and Mutta ‘aw’s.

“Tell him I love him more.”

Isak sighs loudly. “You have your own phones,” he mutters irritably, but types out the reply anyway.

```
ISAK
He says he loves you more
```

```
ISAK
```
Even doesn’t reply. Isak frowns and locks his phone, setting it down on his lap. When they finally hear the toilet flush, Mutta’s phone goes off and he reaches for it as Isak watches Jonas leave the bathroom, making his way towards them again. He takes a seat beside Isak again as Mutta grins up at Isak.

“Even told me to tell you he resents your words and will consequently ignore you for the next five minutes.”

Isak bites his lip to keep from laughing. “I’ll live,” he promises, and Mutta looks back down at his phone, typing away furiously. Isak’s pretty sure he’s embellishing his response, but at the moment he’s uncaring — he looks at Jonas, who’s looking at him curiously, so he raises an eyebrow in a silent question.

“Are you okay?” Jonas asks him quietly, and Isak blinks at him in surprise.

“Yeah?” he tilts his head to the side. “Are you?”

Jonas eyes him suspiciously for another moment, before he shakes his head once. “We should do something together soon,” he tells Isak. “Just the two of us. Go to the movies or something.”

Isak shrugs. “Sure, dude. You know I’m always down.”

“Are you, though?” Jonas’s smile is both a smirk and a little bitter. “You’ve kinda been ditching me for Even more often than not nowadays.”

“I — no I haven’t!” Isak lies immediately out of instinct, because he absolutely knows that he has — if he wants to be fair to himself, a visit to Even’s when he ditches Jonas almost always ends up in sex, which is not an option with Jonas, but that’s not necessarily an excuse he can bring up, so instead he tries for what he always does: deflecting with humor. “Are you jealous?” he teases, and Jonas rolls his eyes.

“Don’t you wish,” he bumps his shoulder against Isak’s. “Curious, mostly. What is it you two talk so much about, anyway? You’ve got to run out of conversation at some point.”

Yes, they do. So they just end up making out or fucking instead. “Silence can be comfortable,” he replies. “We run out of things to say to each other sometimes, too.”

“Yes, but I know more about you,” Jonas points out, and it’s the truth. More than Isak’s comfortable with anyone knowing, in any case. “Things you don’t like to share, so I gather you’re not talking about yourself with Even.”

He shakes his head. “Guess I just end up knowing a lot about Even.”

“Sounds boring,” Jonas deadpans, but he’s smiling. “Does he draw you like one of his French girls?”

Isak chokes, half in laughter and half in shock. “Fuck off,” he shakes his head. “He doesn’t. I’ve seen plenty of naked drawings of you, though. Modeling for him on your spare time?”

“It pays well and the world deserves to see this body in all of its glory,” Jonas gestures to the rest of him, and Isak laughs.

“Keep it to yourself, please.”
Jonas glares. “There was a time you would have jumped at the chance.”

Isak’s about to reply, but Mutta interrupts them, instead. “If you two are done flirting over there,” he says loudly, and both he and Jonas turn to look over at him. “I’m about to suggest we order pizza, and I would like it if you two agreed to it.”

They both nod.

Mutta clears his throat. “Hey guys, we should order some pizza.”

Jonas grins. “A great idea, Mutta.”

“Yeah, dude, didn’t see it coming at all,” Isak nods seriously. “I’m absolutely down.”

“Spontaneity is in my nature,” Mutta replies dramatically, looking down at his phone and unlocking it. “The usual?”

Jonas crosses his arms over his chest. “I swear to God, Mutasim, if you order us Hawaiian again—”

“I won’t, you big baby,” Mutta rolls his eyes, then mutters under his breath, “Grown man scared of some pineapples on cheese.”

“I am not having this discussion again, I will destroy you.”

“Lay off, Vasquez, I’m trying to order a Hawaiian pizza—”

“You fucker—”

Isak lets them hash it out, preoccupied instead by the text notification on his phone. He unlocks it, and is sent straight to Even’s text conversation.

    EVEN
    I’m done ignoring you now

    EVEN
    Did you miss me

Isak types out a ‘no’ immediately, then thinks twice about it. He glances up at a bickering Jonas and Mutta, then glances back down at his phone, backspacing the two letters. He tries again.

    ISAK
    Jury’s still out

    EVEN
    I’ll eagerly await the verdict, then

Isak shakes his head fondly.

    ISAK
    You’re here now, though

    EVEN
    Yes, I am

Isak smiles.
ISAK
I have to go, though. Jonas and Mutta are about to battle over whether or not Mutta’s ordering Hawaiian pizza

EVEN
Have they never heard of half and half

EVEN
Or two pizzas

ISAK
I think this is about pride and honor

EVEN
I believe it

ISAK
Gotta intervene before Jonas throws Garfield into the ring

EVEN
God speed, Valtersen

ISAK
I’ll talk to you later

EVEN
So long as an asteroid doesn’t wipe us out before that

ISAK
I’ll let you know if that’s the case

EVEN
I’ll find you before it hits

ISAK
I don’t doubt that

EVEN
Talk to you later, nerd

ISAK
Bye, asshole

Isak exits the conversation, smiling. When he looks up, Mutta and Jonas are still bickering about their pizza choices, so Isak rolls his eyes and scrolls down his contact, where he has their usual pizza place’s number saved.

“Shut up, douchebags,” he speaks over them. They both turn to look at him as Isak presses down on the call button and brings the phone up to his ear. “I’m ordering both.”

Jonas narrows his eyes at him. “Are you compromising?”

Isak smirks. “Sometimes two is better than one, you know.”
Jonas and Mutta exchange a glance. The pizza place picks up.

“Yeah, I’d like to place an order for delivery.”

He runs into Yousef the next day completely by chance.

Isak’s getting a coffee after his morning shift at work — he hardly ever gets coffee, especially from coffee shops, but he felt lazy and cold today and Julian kept smiling at him all shift and he’s too exhausted not to try and get some caffeine in his system. He’s planning on going home and try to work some more on his paper, see if he can get at least halfway through, and he’s not going to be able to do that if he’s not at least mildly awake for the rest of the day.

When he’s handed his to-go cup, he nods at the barista in thanks and starts to make his way out the door, eyes glued to the floor, drooping despite Isak’s best efforts not to.

Which is a terrible idea, and he only realizes this when he bumps into someone harshly, spilling only a little bit of his coffee. All over himself, thankfully, and he steps back, ready to apologize over and over, until his gaze meets Yousef’s, and suddenly they’re both standing awkwardly in front of each other in silence.


“Neither was I,” Yousef confesses. “So I think we’re both at fault here.”

Isak nods and coughs into his fist. “Uhm,” he finally meets Yousef’s gaze again, hoping this atmosphere wasn’t so fucking uncomfortable. “Yeah, I was just—” he gestures lamely towards the exit.

“Oh,” Yousef nods and steps to the side in order to give Isak room to leave. “Yeah, sorry, go ahead.”

“Okay,” Isak licks his lips, hesitating for a moment, before blinking at Yousef. “Bye.”

“Bye, Isak.”

Yousef walks past him quickly, and Isak lets him — though he shouldn’t, and he knows he shouldn’t, and this is probably the only time he can catch Yousef on his own and not be pointedly ignored, and he should ask, he just needs to know — what he’s telling Even, or, rather, what he’s not telling Even, what’s making him avoid Isak like the plague, even now. He watches as Yousef reaches a table and sits down, not bothering to order a coffee, instead resting his chin on his hand and looking pensively out the window like the period-drama hero Isak’s sure he is in his free time.

Sighing loudly at himself, he finally convinces himself it’s now or never, so he navigates through the couple of people in line and reaches Yousef’s table, clearing his throat to make his presence known. Yousef blinks, then looks up at him, and Isak notes immediately that Yousef’s cheeks redden, which in turn make Isak’s redden, and now they probably look like idiots blushing in front of each other like they’re teenagers talking to their crushes, except—

Except they’re both very aware that the embarrassment stems from Yousef very nearly seeing Even come around Isak’s hand, and that kind of puts a damper in the illusion.

“Yousef,” he begins, breathing deeply. “Do you hate me?”

Yousef looks actually taken aback, leaning back in his chair. “What?” he shakes his head. “Isak, I
“don’t hate you,” his brows furrow. “Is anyone physically capable of hating you?”

“You might want to talk to most of my female workers.”

“What?”

“Never mind,” Isak shakes his head, dropping the matter. “It’s just — we haven’t talked since — since, you know,” he mutters, eyes flickering outside the window. “And Even said it was all cool, but I feel like — I feel like maybe I’m the problem here, and I just want to understand, like — I hope you know I haven’t, like — forced Even into anything, you know?”

Yousef smiles. “Isak, I know you didn’t,” he promises. “Even’s kind, but he’s not a pushover.”

“Oh,” Isak nods furiously. “Okay, yeah, just — I just wanted you to know that I’m not taking advantage of him, or anything,” he continues. “Since, you know. All of this started so fresh after the breakup.”

Yousef hums thoughtfully. “You know just because we called the girl — or, sorry,” he coughs a little awkwardly. “You, the ‘rebound’, doesn’t mean you actually are,” he assu res Isak. “Even made his decision consciously and rationally. Of that I’m sure.”

Isak nods. “Okay.”

“That being said,” Yousef seems to hesitate, almost as if he’s trying to find the right words. “Even though he made this decision rationally, it doesn’t mean — it doesn’t mean he’s being rational now.”

Isak’s heart drops. “What?”

Yousef shakes his head. “It’s nothing against you, Isak, I promise,” he tells him. “It’s only — Even doesn’t do things halfway,” he explains slowly. “He’s either in it or he’s not, and right now, he seems to be really in it.”

“Well, yeah,” Isak replies, dumbfounded. “That’s kind of the point.”

Yousef’s blush intensifies. “What I mean,” he continues. “Is that you — you’re — I don’t know you very well,″ he says, and Isak nods tightly. “And that’s fine. I understand you might not want me to. But I do know Even,” he adds. “And this is — I don’t think he’s fully aware of what he’s doing. He dotes on you,” Yousef tells him, and something in Isak’s heart squeezes. “And where you can chalk it up to a very close friendship, which I’m sure it is, that can’t possibly lead anywhere desirable while you’re doing this.”

“We’re both aware——” Isak clears his throat before starting again. “We’re both aware of what we’re doing, Yousef. About where we’ve drawn the line. And if — if things start getting complicated, then we stop. It’s as simple as that. We know that. We set — we set up rules before all of this.”

Yousef considers him for a moment. “You know what you’re doing, then?”

Isak nods, boxing up all reasonable doubt.

“Well,” Yousef acknowledges his reply with a tilt of the head. “Then I can’t really do anything to stop you. Just — be careful with him, yeah?”

Isak doesn’t understand why Yousef thinks he has so much power over Even. His influence is not as great as he seems to think it is. They’re friends, and they fuck, but Isak doubts Even would let Isak do much to affect him — they’re both very aware of what they are, about what they mean. Even
hasn’t shown any signs that he’s forgotten, has even made sure Isak knows he hasn’t, so why is Yousef so worried?

“I will be,” he promises anyway, because it’s obviously what Yousef wants to hear. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Yousef smiles. “I believe you believe that.”

Isak blinks, trying to figure out whether or not that was reassurance, but he lets it go. “Why are you here alone?” he asks suddenly, gesturing towards the empty table. “And — without a coffee?”

“Oh, I’m meeting a friend.” Yousef replies. “From high school. He’s down for the holidays, and he’s considering staying in Oslo, so we’re gonna catch up.”

“Oh,” Isak nods. “Cool.” He squirms a little uncomfortably. “I should go, then.”

Yousef smiles. “Now that you’re sure I don’t hate you?”

Isak grins sheepishly. “I guess — a part of me thought I wouldn’t blame you if you did.”

Yousef shakes his head. “No need to worry, Isak,” he tells him. “I’m on both your sides.”


“Bye, Isak,” Yousef replies, and Isak turns once. He bumps into another man on the way out, and he mumbles an apology, not waiting to see if the man offers one back. He simply continues out the door and walks with purpose towards his tram stop, quietly, for once enjoying the cold, for once paying attention to the cloud forming in front of him every time he breathes. It’s easy that way. If he concentrates on his surroundings, then he doesn’t have to concentrate on the conversation he just had.

Isak wonders if he’s better off now that he’s talked to Yousef — there’s the fact that he now knows the other man doesn’t hate him, which is a relief, but then there’s his crypticness, and the way he assured Isak he simply wants — what? No one to get hurt?

He wishes he could explain. He wishes people would understand how this works. And maybe sometimes it doesn’t make sense to Isak, sure, but it eventually does, and that’s what matters. He doesn’t know how to assure Yousef that what they have is purely of convenience, that what they have isn’t anything but friendly affection towards each other, and sometimes it merely feels like more post-sex because of the chemicals and he wishes he could sit and — draw a fucking diagram, or something, so that maybe it wouldn’t be so frustrating to know someone knows about them, and someone’s watching them closely, and if they’re waiting for the moment all of this blows up in Isak’s face.

It won’t, and he’s not sure how to explain it. Isak won’t allow it. Isak doesn’t allow it. He’s made entirely of bricks and his heart is locked away, welcoming no person or situation that can hurt him. He’s immune to this, but there’s no way of explaining that without going into detail in order to prove it, so instead he’s left here, feeling vulnerable and misunderstood and suddenly he’s far more exhausted than he was when he didn’t have the coffee, and it’s not working for him anymore.

Isak walks past a trash bin and disposes of it unceremoniously, proceeding to bury his hands in his coat pockets and continue walking towards his tram stop.

It tasted like shit, anyway.
About an hour until midnight on Christmas Eve, Isak and Eva have exhausted all of the Christmas movies they actually enjoy and have had enough hot chocolate to last them the rest of next year. Their conversation, up until now, has been limited to commentary during the films and bickering about what kind of chocolate is actually the best kind.

They don’t exchange gifts — they’ve exhausted what they can give each other in one year, so they don’t bother to stress each other out over what gifts to buy. Being in each other’s company seems to be all they really need, as cheesy as it sounds.

When they put on Home Alone for the third time, Eva’s sitting in the love seat where Isak is sitting on the couch, and they’re both lying across the seats, backs propped against the arm rests, looking through their phones. When Isak reaches a particularly annoying post from a girl who used to relentlessly flirt with him in high school, Eva finally pipes up.

“I’d invited Noora,” she says, and her voice is quiet and careful, as if she’s testing the waters. Which is probably a good idea, Isak thinks, because his jaw immediately clenches and his grip on the phone tighten tenfold. He’s not only peeved at the fact that Eva can’t fully understand the magnitude of the problem she’s found herself in, he’s also peeved that she was going to let someone who’s practically a stranger ruin their Christmas tradition, all because she thinks the straight girl is beautiful and worthy of her obsession. While Isak is fuming silently over all of this, Eva continues, “She said no, anyway. She’s spending it in London with William’s family.”

William’s the boyfriend, Isak’s memory supplies. He remembers Eva mentioning him only once, the time she showed Isak Noora’s Facebook profile. It makes sense that she would. Considering how long they’ve been together.

But it’s Christmas Eve, Isak doesn’t want to spend what’s left of it arguing, so he changes the subject. “Where’s your mom?”

Eva snorts. “London, funnily enough.” She pauses for only a moment, not long enough for Isak to reply to her. “Did you send her a Christmas gift this year?”

Isak puts his phone down on his lap, and Eva follows suit. “Yeah,” he replies. “I did.”

That’s all he could do. That’s all he can do. He’s terrible and disgusting and a failure and that’s all he can do. He can’t make things right. He’s not strong enough to. He’s everything that’s wrong in a man and though for a second he thinks a Christmas gift can absolve him of some fault, he knows it can’t. He knows it can’t.

He likes to pretend, though.

“Did your dad call?” Eva switches gears, and Isak goes from regretful to angry in a second.

“Yes,” he replies. “But I didn’t pick up.”

“Ah,” Eva nods. “Did he text afterwards?”

Isak nods tightly. He doesn’t say anything more than that — his dad had offered Isak spend the holidays with him and his shiny, brand new family, so that Isak can meet the woman he’s trying to bullshit his fatherly instinct for, and Isak doesn’t fucking want it. He wants his father to leave him alone, to stop talking to him. He wants his father to make it easy for Isak to forget him, to want nothing more to do with him, to not want desperately to feel that connection his father is trying to build for his own selfish reasons. He wants to be able to hate him entirely so that his heart doesn’t
scream every time he calls, the small boy inside him wanting to reach where his father is extending an olive branch.

“What are the girls doing tomorrow?” Isak asks, quickly changing the subject to anything that’ll veer him off this path. Eva brightens up and starts talking about her friends, about what they’re doing for Christmas, about how Sana is so sweet to humor them during the holidays. She starts talking about how Vilde is actually spending today with her mom and her grandparents, but tomorrow she has to meet up with Mari to go over more wedding details. She mentions Vilde’s been working herself thin over this wedding, but Eva also says she supposes it makes sense — it’s basically her first solo case, and she’s sure Vilde wants to impress.

“She’s kind of obsessed, though,” Eva admits. “I’m afraid she’s forgetting to eat and stuff.”

Isak hums. “I guess planning a wedding will do that to you,” he offers. “But at least she’s getting along with the bride now, right?”

Eva nods. “Right.”

Isak’s text notification goes off on his lap, and when he picks it up, he smiles when he sees Even’s contact name pop up. He slides it open, unlocking his phone and expecting to see another ridiculous message with pictures of his family attached like he’d been doing all week, but then—

That’s not a family member. Unless dicks count as one.

Isak can’t stop the blood from rushing to his face in an instant, and he locks his phone and presses down against his groin. He’s wearing a stupid onesie that’s probably doing him no favors, and his mouth has gone completely dry as his dick starts twitching with interest at nothing but the memory now engraved in his head.

Eva narrows her eyes at him. “What?” she eyes his phone. “What’s wrong? What is it? Show me,” she sits up and extends her arm to Isak, and, yeah, over his dead fucking body.

“Nothing!” He insists, folding his legs and hugging his knees close to his chest in another lame attempt to hide his half-hard dick. “It’s mine, it’s nothing.”

Eva glares at him. “You’re not fooling anyone, Valtersen.”

“There’s only you in this room,” he points out. “Really, though, it’s nothing. Mutta just sent me a naked picture of some guy dressed in a Santa Claus outfit and — well, it was, you know.”

Eva smirks. “Why is Mutta sending you naked pictures of hot men?”

“It’s Christmas,” Isak croaks. “He’s in a giving mood, I guess.”

Even sends another text. Isak has to force himself not to look at his dick pic.

**EVEN**
I’m lonely and half drunk in a hotel room, forgive my rashness

**ISAK**
I thought you didn’t drink

**EVEN**
Half drunk is drunk enough, alright
EVEN
Did you like it?? Idk about the lighting

Jesus, the lighting is definitely not what Isak’s thinking about right now.

ISAK
You know I did

ISAK
But also why

EVEN
I just miss you it’s so frustrating

Isak squirms on the couch, feeling his neck a little flushed. God, he’s suddenly overcome with the realization that he has most definitely missed sex with Even, and that the masturbation hasn’t really done the trick. Though it never does anymore, not unless he thinks about Even. Still — just not as good as the real thing. And it pisses him off, kind of, because now he’s going to be sitting here with a boner until Eva decides to retreat to her room for the night, and by then he might just die of blue balls.

ISAK
I have no idea how to send a dick pic

EVEN
Oh don’t sweat it, I’m not expecting one in return

EVEN
Though maybe when you’re not busy we can text for both our benefits

Isak blinks at his words. He thinks he understands what Even’s insinuating, but he proceeds with caution anyway.

ISAK
Are you talking about sexting?

EVEN
Very astute deduction, Valtersen

ISAK
Idk how to do that either

EVEN
Alright. We don’t have to. Nothing you don’t feel comfortable with, okay??

Oh, fuck this guy.

ISAK
You can’t just send me a dick pic and then be nice and patient immediately after pick a side

EVEN
You’re ridiculous
Isak knows. Yeah, he knows very well. In fact, the tightness against the fabric of his boxers and underneath this stupid fucking onesie keeps reminding him about just how ridiculous he really is. He tries not to scroll up again to look at the picture, he really does, pours every single drop of strength he has into it, but it’s still not enough — he scrolls up again and sees it and nearly whimpers at the sight. He really hates Even.

“Hey,” Eva calls out to him, and Isak panics for a second, thinking she’s caught him, but she seems to have been enthralled in her own text conversation. She smiles at him sheepishly. “I’m gonna head to bed for the night. That okay?”

Isak nods, trying not to do it too enthusiastically. “Yeah, sounds good.”

Eva stands up and blows a kiss to Isak, leaving her mug on the counter and making her way to her room. When she closes the door behind her, Isak exhaled a frustrated breath, grabbing the TV remote and shutting off the box before scrambling to kill the living room lights and hurry to his room.

The first thing he does when he’s finally inside is rid himself of the stupid onesie, letting it pool around his feet and stepping out of it quickly.

Once he’s in bed, nothing but boxers on, he really does try to get off. He does. And the dick pic helps, absolutely, but the thing is now he’s thinking about the fact that he could probably get more from Even, a text, maybe even—

He doesn’t. He won’t. He’s not going to, it’s ridiculous and he’s only going to make a fool out of himself.

He calls Even anyway.

Even picks up on the second ring. “That was a quick getaway,” he chuckles on the other line, and he sounds a bit breathless. Isak bites his bottom lip, unsure of how to proceed. He listens to the silence between the lines, until Even finally speaks up. “Great conversation we’ve got going here.”

“I don’t know how—” Isak growls in frustration. “Phone sex. I don’t know how to have it.”

“Whoa,” Even laughs. “That’s not where I saw this going at all.”

Isak scowls. “Where else did you see it going?”

“You were so scared of sexting,” Even points out in reply. “I didn’t think phone sex would be an option, either.”

Isak blushed. “Maybe this was a mistake.”

“Hey,” Even says quietly, soothingly. It’s ridiculous how he can calm Isak’s nerves even from miles and miles away. “Relax, okay? There’s nothing really to it. Easier than sexting,” he offers. “Don’t have to pause every other minute to type out a reply.”

“Then what do you do?” he asks. “Just, like — talk?”

“Sure,” Even laughs. “We can talk. If that gets you off. But you can think of it as telling a story,” he offers, and Isak frowns.

“I don’t tell stories.”

“I know,” Even sighs. “But I do. It might be useful, if you’re into it.”
Isak stares up at the ceiling for a moment, taking quietly deep breaths. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka.

“What is it?” Even asks quietly from the other line, and Isak wonders how he can do that, know what Isak’s thinking even when he’s not there to see.

“Does it feel super weird to you that we’re doing this on Jesus Christ’s birthday?”

Even bursts out into beautiful laughter, and Isak lets it ring in his ears far after he’s done. “Listen, I’m sure Jesus will understand our need to get off.”

“Okay,” Isak squirms in his bed. “Uhm. How do we start this?”

Even chuckles. “How about you just start by trying to actually get turned on?”

Isak looks down at his dick. It’s gone soft, most likely due to the nerves and insecurities. The advice sounds reasonable, he thinks, and he reaches down to palm himself through his boxers. It feels fine, the same way touching himself always feels, but it’s strange, doing this knowing that Even’s on the other line. It’s as if he’s being watched, and though that thought might sound hot, he mostly just feels judged, a little bit.

“Okay, so, I’m doing that,” he coughs. “How long for?”

Even laughs breathily again. His laugh is so nice. “Just let me know when it starts to get frustrating, yeah?”

“Okay,” Isak agrees, and he tries not to concentrate too hard on whatever happening on the other line, but he can hear Even’s breath hitch once in awhile, almost as if he’s holding back the words he so obviously wants to say, and that helps Isak along as he squeezes himself. He bites his lip, slowly pulling himself out of his boxers, and starts stroking at the tip lightly.

“I think I’m frustrated.”

“Hah,” Even chuckles. “How’s it looking?”

“Well, hard, I guess.”

Even laughs, and honestly, honestly, Isak could probably get off to that sound alone. He squeezes a little tighter. “God, I missed you.”

Isak feels himself flush all over. He doesn’t know what to say to that. The line is quiet, and he’s pretty sure were he anybody else, Even would be far more vocal during this — but Isak’s a failure at most things, though he doesn’t necessarily want this to be bad for Even, not if the only thing he’s going to take away from this experience is a contender for “worst phone sex ever”. On a particularly harsh stroke, Isak can’t help the small whimper that escapes him, embarrassing him immediately.

This seems to work for Even, however, as Isak hears a small moan from the other side and oh. Oh, so that’s why this is popular when people are unavailable physically. The sound made way straight to Isak’s groin, making him shiver at the way his dick throbs underneath him, the hand holding his phone tightening its grip around it. “Do we say something?” he asks, a little hoarsely, and Even huffs.

“If you want to?” He asks, but Isak’s not sure what he would say. “I can egg you on?”

Isak swallows. “What do you want me to do?” He asks instead, and Even hums.
“Doesn’t matter. I missed your voice, you could talk to me about your grocery trip and I’d still come.”

Isak can’t handle that. He can’t. Even could have chosen a thousand different dirty things to say, Isak’s sure, but he doesn’t think any of them would have the same effect on him like this one, where his hand squeezes his dick a little tighter and he throws his head back slightly and his hips thrusts shortly into his hand, and he moans Even’s name quietly; he hears Even’s breath hitch on the other end of the line and then Even groans Isak’s name, and, okay, fuck, that’s starting to do something for him.

Isak starts to pick up the pace, suddenly lamenting the fact that he didn’t think to use the lube. Too far in now, however, he resigns himself to continuing old school, the way he did so when he was in high school and he had no other choice, desperate for release. This definitely feels like high school, he thinks, with the way he’s jerking himself off with more purpose.

“Isak,” Even whispers in his ear. “God, I want you so badly.”

Isak exhales a moan, thrusting upwards further into his hand. He bites his bottom lip to keep himself from moaning too loudly, not exactly eager to let Eva listen in. His thumb starts stroking the head, and Isak thinks he embarrassingly won’t be able to last much longer. He does what he knows moves Even the most: the pleading, and his name. Over and over, even though he’s not sure what he’s pleading for, his own hand being the one in control.

All Isak really needs to hear are Even’s quiet moans, and his groans, and it’s fine, it’s almost as if he’s here, because their sex is usually like this, when they find nothing to talk about — quiet, save for their gasps and their moans and their names, and once in awhile they’ll tell each other how good they feel, but for the most part it’s nothing special, and that’s why Isak thinks this is having this much of an impact on him. Thinking about Even works most of the time, but actually hearing him? Definitely worth the embarrassment of this.

His thrusts become fragmented, enough so that he stops and simply starts speeding his hand up around him. He gasps shorter breaths than before, pressure building in his stomach. “Even.” He’s whimpering pathetically, letting Even whisper sweet nothings in his ear, aware that Isak is near his breaking point.

Even encourages him, telling Isak he wants to hear him. And that’s all it takes, one last thrust upwards and he’s suddenly feeling his orgasm all over, stroking himself through the aftermath, biting down on his bottom lip. He’s always hated this part, the way his hand dirties, but for once he’s not thinking about it, instead focusing on listening to every change in Even’s breaths, every hitch, every stutter. Isak is only just coming down from his own climax when he listens to Even moan his name loudly, causing Isak to close his eyes and stroke at his dick again, just to feel it one more time, even though it causes Isak to shake uncomfortably.

He listens to Even try to catch his breath. After a moment, Isak finally breaks the silence.

“Okay?”


Isak licks his lips. “Definitely better than masturbating to a memory.”

“Hm?” Even sounds smug. “You jerk off to me, Valtersen?”
Isak blushes. “Shut up,” he mutters, and Even laughs again on the end of the line.

“You literally just jerked off with me on the phone,” he tells Isak. “I don’t think you need to be shy about what you do on your own time anymore.”

“It was—” Isak hesitates. “I don’t know if I — did it right?” He half-asks. “As far as I know, there should have been — more details, maybe?”

Even sounds amused when he replies, “You did it perfectly fine,” he mutters. “Phone sex is different for everyone. Different things work for different people. In this case, it seems all you really needed was to hear me do what I needed to do.”

Isak almost snorts at the phrasing. “And you?”

Even hums. “I did tell you all I really needed to hear was your voice.”

Isak blushing again, finally sitting up and grabbing the toilet paper on his bedside table. As he begins to clean himself up, he asks, “So you’ve done this before?”

“Yeah,” Even admits to him, and Isak hears some rustling on the other end. “A couple of times.”

Isak tries not to let his stomach swirl. “And — was it — like this?”

There’s a pause. “No,” he replies. “It wasn’t.”

Isak closes his eyes in regret and embarrassment and frustration, because of course it wasn’t, Isak can’t possibly compare to Even’s perfect ex-girlfriend or whoever the fuck else he’s been having phone sex with.

“Isak,” Even’s voice is firm on the other end. “It was different, okay? Not bad, like you’re probably already thinking. Like I said, different things work for different people. But this — this was good,” his voice sounds sincere and Isak’s heart forgets a beat. “Like, really good. So, thank you,” he adds. “I really needed it.”

Isak’s eyes open and he shoots his dirty toilet paper into the wastebasket. “You’re thanking me?” He snorts. He’s about to admit to Even that he hasn’t been able to successfully jerk himself off to completion for a week now, but he decides against it. Instead, he pulls up his boxers and situates his back against the wall. “You know if you needed to get off so badly — I mean,” he clears his throat. “You could have found someone there.”

The silence that follows isn’t exactly uncomfortable, but it’s not natural, either — it’s as if the both are finally acknowledging something they haven’t brought up since they’ve started this, acknowledging that what they have might be incredibly convenient and pleasurable, but they’re not bound to each other in any way, and they have the right to find someone else to get off with, if need be.

Isak doesn’t know why the thought makes him as sick as it does. He just wants to rest his stomach.

“I could have,” Even finally replies quietly. It’s not an affirmation, but it’s not denial, either, and it’s driving Isak crazy. He doesn’t say much else for a moment, then: “You could have, too.”

Isak’s free hand shakes where it’s playing with his duvet. “Yeah,” he replies quietly. “I could have.”

Neither of them say anything more of the matter. They leave the subject hanging between them, somewhere in the middle of the phone line.
"Two more days," Even replies instead, and Isak’s chest lifts some. "Then you won’t have to think about phone sex again for a while."

Isak huffs a laugh. "Thanks," he says. "Still don’t think it’s my thing."

"Well, you did a fantastic job either way," he replies. "My dick rates you 10 out of 10, would do again, even if it is unlikely."

Isak rubs the bridge of his nose, but he can’t help the smile that tugs at his lips. "I think I have to go to bed now," he replies, and he might actually mean it. His release was enough to exhaust him, calm him, making him feel like he’s not entirely alone. "I might be able to sleep, so I should take advantage."


Isak scoffs, grinning. "Goodnight, asshole."

They hang up, and after a moment he lies back on his bed and stares at his stars, quietly reciting them to himself, trying to time his breaths with each name, slowing his heartbeat as he does.

After removing his glasses, he closes his eyes, phone still pressed to his chest. He breathes, and breathes, and breathes, until he’s taken under by sleep.

His dreams are loud in color.

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It’s the twenty-seventh.

It’s meant to mean nothing. It’s a date, like any other date. Yesterday was the twenty-sixth. Tomorrow it’ll be the twenty-eighth. The number twenty seven is relatively unimportant — it’s a perfect cube, the number of letters in the Spanish alphabet, it’s a part of the alternative name for the Dumbbell Nebula — but no one pays it any mind. He doesn’t think anyone replies twenty-seven when they’re asked about their favorite number, there aren’t any yearly holidays that always fall on the twenty-seventh, it’s just a useless date between Christmas and New Year’s Eve, a nuisance to many. The twenty-seventh is useless, and Isak shouldn’t care for it.

And yet, he’s sitting on his couch, staring down at his lock screen, reading the date and time over and over again. It’s the twenty-seventh. It’s nearly 21:00. Eva should be getting out of work soon, one of her favorite programs on TV will be broadcasting in about an hour, and Even’s flight landed about forty-five minutes ago. They haven’t spoken since even was boarding his flight, and were he a more paranoid person, Isak would probably think something had happened to his plane by now. But he knows better — Even is busy. He’s not obligated to check in with Isak, of course, and Isak shouldn’t expect that at all, and if he really wants to know about how he’s doing, Isak would swallow his pride and text him first.

It’s all very logical. But he’s not going to text Even first, because he must be tired, and he must simply want to go home and sleep until the morning. In fact, Isak’s being pathetic, staring at the phone in his hand as if he’s waiting for a text or a call from — from a significant other; it’s as if he’s a teenage girl, for God’s sake, and that’s fine, he supposes, because he hasn’t had sex with Even in over a week, and it’s starting to grate on both his nerves and his dick, but he should find more self-control than this.

He glares at the television. It’s dark, not on, but he blames the lack of interesting content for the lack
of patience he’s found himself buried in. Were there something he could watch and enjoy, perhaps a minute wouldn’t fucking stretch into what felt like an eternity, and then another, and then another. Isak’s not sure what he’s waiting for anymore. He wonders if this is the night he’ll be able to force himself to sleep, because he’s exhausted just thinking about — about what he’s waiting for.

A couple of more eternities pass.

When he looks at the clock, it’s only been about twenty minutes — 21:20, and he blinks at it uselessly. He should just drop it. Even will surely text him in the morning. He needs his rest, Isak insists. What’s one more fucking day? It’s nothing. It’s the twenty-seventh, and it’s not important, and it’s nothing.

The clock turns 21:21 just before his lock screen goes dark again, and in that moment, there’s a knock at the door.

Isak is a little ashamed of how fast he jumps off the couch and throws his phone onto it. He looks around, as if he’ll find something to keep him cool, but, of course, he finds nothing, and instead all he does is adjust his glasses some, smooth his white t-shirt as much as it’s willing to, and then he reminds himself this could be anyone. It could be anyone.

(He’s not expecting company, of course, and Eva has her keys, but still. Maybe he ordered pizza and forgot.)

(Or maybe it’s exactly who he thinks it is and his stomach is cooperating not at all.)

(But it could be anyone.)

He opens the door.

The sight of Even is unsurprisingly one of relief. It’s welcoming, and it punches his stomach so harshly that Isak lets out a relieved exhale, as if he’s content Even remembered him. As if maybe he’s not as easily forgettable as he thinks. Even remembered him, and if Even remembered him, then maybe his walls aren’t as high as he thinks they are. Maybe he’s not all bricks.

“Hi,” Even sounds out of breath, almost as if he’d ran here, which Isak doubts. Still, Isak tries for a frown, but his lips betray him by contorting into a small smile.

“Hi,” he greets right back, and Even is still rooted to the spot outside the apartment, as if his feet are glued to the cement of the hallway. Isak tilts his head curiously, wondering why in the world Even looks so dumbstruck — did he expect Isak to change in a week? Is he looking for something in particular? Isak wonders if he should ask. Whatever he wants right now — Isak feels like maybe he could give it to him. Yeah, maybe he could.

It’s the twenty-seventh, after all.

“Is Eva home?” Even finally blurts unceremoniously, and Isak raises his eyebrows in surprise at the bluntness of the question.

“Uhm, no, but—”

“Good,” Even sighs the word, and suddenly he’s stepping into the apartment to cradle Isak’s face between his hands and his lips are on Isak’s desperately and Isak was going to protest. He was. At least, he thinks he was. His brain is short-circuiting, and for once, the part least listened to is allowing it to. No thinking, it tells Isak. You know what this is, it’s simple, it’s friendship, and it’s something you can have without fear, so no thinking — just feeling. Not with his heart, no, that belongs to no
one, but with what he knows, at least. Feel with what he knows.

Isak feels Even take his shoes off before kicking the door closed behind him, and Isak allows him to grab his legs and wrap them around his waist; then he’s leading the both of them towards the living room. Isak jumps slightly against the couch cushions when he’s thrown back-first onto it, and then Even’s on top of him and they’re kissing again and Isak feels like he’s right here.

He’s right here. He’s present in this very moment, the moment that belongs to him, that is under his control, and he can stretch it further and further, until it becomes the number after infinity, and time is in his hands. Time is in his hands, and the clock is stopped at 21:21, and it doesn’t move while Even’s lips are on his. Isak clings desperately to this control in the shape of his hands grasping tightly onto the back of Even’s head, fingers tangled in his hair. Even’s lips move against his just as desperately, his hand resting on the side of Isak’s face, thumb stroking so harshly he feels it pull at his skin. Isak thinks Even’s hand is shaking. Or are those his hands shaking?

Even pulls his lips back, only to trail kisses down Isak’s jaw, then his neck, then his collarbone, and Isak closes his eyes and lets Even’s lips find every inch of his body they’d like, reveling in the sensation of them. Even’s lips explore Isak’s chest over his shirt for a couple of kisses, and Isak’s hands are still tangled in Even’s hair — yes, it’s his hands that are shaking, after all — and he unconsciously spreads his legs some, making more room for Even in between them.

Even trails short kisses down Isak’s chest, before coming back up and kissing his lips once. Isak opens his eyes just in time to see Even shaking his head, smile on his lips. “God,” Even breathes, and then his lips kiss the corner of Isak’s mouth, which prompts Isak to turn his head the rest of the way to meet Even’s lips entirely again. “I missed you,” Even mutters against Isak’s lips, and Isak’s heart squeezes uncomfortably in his chest. He wants to return the sentiment — Isak did, Isak did miss him — and he reminds himself, as he always does, that they’re friends, close enough now so that Isak doesn’t cower every time this happens, every time he feels like Even’s kisses are different because he knows now, of course they are, Even’s one of the best friends he’s ever had, it’s only—

The window of opportunity closes, anyway, when Even pulls back and looks him straight in the eye, both of them panting against each other. “I really want to fuck you,” he says to Isak quietly, and a small, pathetic whimper escapes Isak’s lips, the words traveling straight down to his groin. “Can I please?”

Even’s already situating himself more comfortably between Isak’s legs, rolling his lips against Isak’s and Isak throws his head back a little, eyes closing at the sensation. He nods vigorously. “Yeah,” he breathes. “Okay, yes.”

He feels Even groan against his neck, and then there’s something — in the back of his head — and this time every part of him is allowing the thought to the forefront and—

“No, wait,” Isak shakes his head and opens his eyes. “I mean, no, no, no, stop.”

Even immediately obeys, sitting up on his knees, face flushed and hair tousled and God damn it, Isak just wants to jump him again now.

He resists the urge, instead scoots himself back further away from him and sits up, too, running a hand through his hair in a moot attempt at fixing it. “Eva’s coming home any minute,” he explains, and Even groans woefully, throwing his head back.

“Eva Mohn,” he sighs loudly, and the way he says her name makes her sound like an impossible obstacle. “Why must she do this to me?”
Isak laughs. “She’s not doing it on purpose,” he points out, adjusting his glasses some before standing up. “And it’s not like I don’t want you to,” he reminds Even, walking over to his seat on the couch and leaning downward to press a kiss against Even’s lips. Even responds immediately, trying to make it last longer, but Isak pulls away — even though their lips are still touching slightly. “Because I really, really do,” he whispers, and he can see the second his breath tickles Even’s lips and prompts a shiver from the other man. “But I don’t want another Yousef repeat.”

Even deflates. “God, you definitely know how to kill my boner now.”

Isak laughs and grabs Even’s wrist, tugging him upwards to stand. Even’s shoulders are a little slumped, so Isak moves forward to play with his hair until he feels Even’s smile returns. “We can go to my room, though,” he offers, and Even’s expression turns hopeful. Isak has to narrow his eyes to chase the obvious train of thought away. “We’re not doing anything,” he warns, and Even sighs loudly again. “We’re just gonna try to not look like we just attacked each other’s faces.”

Even smirks. “But I like the way you look after I kiss you,” he teases. “Lips all swollen, face all flushed—”

Which is currently an advantage, Isak thinks, because he feels his face warm even more in embarrassment. “Shut up,” he mutters. Even laughs gleefully.

“How can you go from so extremely seductive to humbled and shy in less than two seconds?”

A good question. Isak thinks it has to do with a lot of things, things that aren’t worth talking about right now. Instead, he ignores Even’s question, dragging him by the wrist towards his room. Isak hears Even’s sock dragging behind him, and when they finally reach Isak’s room, he pulls Even inside and then walks past him to close the door.

He turns to look Even over and sighs loudly. “I’m getting you a comb,” he tells him, walking towards his bedside drawer and pulling it open. He forlornly pushes the lube and the condoms aside to try to find the comb he hardly ever uses, and he sneaks a glance at Even, who’s now looking curiously into Galileo’s tank. He folds his index finger and taps on the glass carefully, and Isak looks back at the drawer, digging deeper into his mess.

“He’s not very receptive, is he?” Even asks suddenly, and Isak glances over one more time, eyes flickering from Even to Galileo, swimming aimlessly.

“Oh, he’s an expert at ignoring you,” Isak dismisses, raising an eyebrow. Even looks over at him sheepishly. “So it’s mostly light touching. No nails, almost no noise. Bothers them almost none, but they’re still aware of it,” he explains. “And yet, he has never once looked at me, as far as I remember.”

Even frowns. “How long have you had him for?”

Isak thinks. “Seven years now?”

Even makes a noise. “Seven years?” he asks, sounding disbelieving. “How long does this fish live
“With proper care? They can live up to ten years,” he tells Even proudly, and Even grunts in acknowledgment as he looks back at Galileo.

“So you picked this one on purpose?” he asks Isak, and Isak looks at him in surprise.

“What?”

“So he would last you that long,” Even explains. “You picked him because he’d last you longer than, like, a goldfish.”

Isak purses his lips and looks back at Galileo. Even’s right. He did his research before picking out a fish, knowing that he’d need the company more than he wanted to admit when he was fifteen years old — the longer the fish could last, the longer Isak would feel like he had something he could actually take care of, something he could keep alive and well. So he’d sneaked his mother’s credit card from her purse, found the nearest pet store, and bought all he needed. He remembers leaning down to look at the angelfish for hours, watching him swim as aimlessly as he does now, and then he remembers finding the courage to talk to him, talk to him as if he were listening, without feeling absolutely ridiculous.

Galileo is the friend that knows everything about Isak and can’t say a word about it. Galileo is perhaps one of the most important parts of Isak’s life, and the fish doesn’t know it. Maybe he’s better off, Isak thinks. Having a friend like Isak is exhausting, he knows, especially if they know everything about him. Every flaw. Especially if they’ve seen every rotten thing he’s tried to hide from his past. The cowering. The crying. The hiding.


He can feel Even’s gaze on him. It’s not heavy, but it’s familiar, and Isak can never miss it. “He means a lot to you, huh?”

Isak nods automatically. “I know it’s stupid, ’cause he’s a fish, but — he’s the only thing I have from home, you know?” he looks over at Even. “Besides, he doesn’t talk. Means he’s a great listener.”

Even smiles softly. “It’s not stupid,” he assures Isak, and Isak doesn’t reply. “But,” Even continues, and now he’s smirking. “You know I’m a great listener too, right?”

Right. But he’s also a human being, who can judge and hate him, who can look at him in disgust when he knows the person that he truly is. Even cannot know this part of him, he can’t. Even gets This Isak. The Isak that can’t say he misses him, but admits he’s his best friend, though that might just be on the surface. Isak knows Even’s character, learns more about him every day, but Even only knows what Isak is slowly allowing him to see. Before it was nothing. Afterwards it was something. Now, it’s more, and Isak’s aware, yes, that the deeper the friendship gets, the easier it is to say things he might not have said before, but it changes nothing.

It doesn’t mean he’s not still hiding behind his walls. And though it may feel, sometimes, like he’s not all bricks around Even — there’s always the crushing reality later in the night that he is. That’s all he is. All Even sees is the bricks around him, maybe a little worn, but still standing.

This Isak can tease and pretend like there’s nothing more to Galileo than a companion with a connection to his home. “Yes, but you talk back,” Isak smirks easily. “And you tend to never shut up when you do.”

Even gapes and clutches at his chest dramatically. “I’m so hurt,” he sniffs. “And here I thought I was
your best friend."

“I’m going to take that back if you keep bringing it up,” Isak glares.

Even grins. “You can’t.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “You’re a child.”

“Absolutely,” Even agrees. He looks over at Galileo again. “So — Galileo. I assume he’s named after the astronomer?”

Isak grins. “How’d you guess?”

“I’m psychic,” Even replies. “Is he your favorite?”

Isak shakes his head. “No, it’s—” he pauses. “I got him when I was fifteen,” he explains. “And that’s when I kind of started considering Astronomy a serious subject, you know? I mean, I loved it for a while, but when I was fifteen I thought, hey, people do this for a living, and so maybe I can, too.” He sighs. “Galileo Galilei was, of course, my first.”

Even waggles his eyebrows. “Was he any good?”

Isak snorts. “The best I’ve ever had,” he deadpans. “It’s a little cliche, I know, but — okay, you have to understand, he’s an Astronomer’s wet dream,” he tells Even. “He enhanced the telescope after it’d been invented. He made telescopes with thirty times the magnification. And because of this, shit, he learned so much more about the sky than anyone in the history of ever back then, and then he discovered Jupiter’s moons, and, shit, he was literally arrested for suggesting the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around.”

“Ah,” Even’s smiling fondly. “So you named your fish after the perfect astronomer.”

Isak shakes his head. “Because of the opposite, actually,” Isak counters, and Even raises a questioning eyebrow. “Even though he made these amazing contributions to science and astronomy, he — was still wrong, on some things.”

“Like?”

“Most notably? He refused to believe that the moon caused the tides,” he tells Even. “Thought it had more to do with the Earth’s rotation.”

Even tilts his head. “So — you named him after the not-so-perfect astronomer?”

“I named him after the astronomer that taught me that even the smartest people can make mistakes,” he says quietly. “That they’re not perfect. And maybe it’s silly to try and chase perfection, after all.”

Even stays quiet for a moment, before he offers him a smile. “So,” he begins teasingly. “You named your fish after someone who is just not perfect, huh?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

“No, I mean,” Even holds up his hands. “Tell him how you really feel, Isak.”

Isak shoves at him. “I see him every morning, every afternoon and every night,” he insists. “His name is Galileo, and I think of the astronomer, and so this fish reminds me every single day that I’m — maybe I’m allowed to make mistakes, too, I don’t know,” Isak avoids Even’s gaze now. “And, you know, he was very open about mistakes and second-guessing yourself. He once said — he said,
‘See now the power of truth; the same experiment which at first glance seemed to show one thing, when more carefully examined, assures us of the contrary.’ Things aren’t always what they seem at first,” he continues quietly. “There’s the surface of them, and then there’s what’s underneath when you look closer.” He finally meets Even’s gaze again. “But mistakes are how — how you reach the truth, how you reach the person you want to be, and so maybe — maybe that offsets your mistakes.” And maybe, with that, Isak will learn to forgive himself. Will be able to tell himself his own forgiveness is all he needs, and he’ll stop searching for it elsewhere.

Even studies him for a moment, and Isak is suddenly worried he’ll see, and he’ll say something, and Isak can’t handle that, he can’t, and he feels the fear wrap around his throat and he just hopes — he hopes Even takes his ramblings as facts and nothing else, nothing at all but what they are, and he pleads quietly, hopes quietly—

“Well,” Even finally says after studying him for a moment longer. “Sounds like he was as much of a nerd as you.”

Isak’s shoulders slump in relief, and he manages a playful glare. “Yeah, well, he was.”

“You think he talked as much as you, too?”

“I talk the right amount, alright, depending on the subject, okay — when it’s — my monologues are relevant to the situation—”

“Mhm,” Even nods noncommittally, stepping closer to Isak.

“You, on the other, hand, pft,” Isak snorts. “You’re — you’re like the theory Galileo denounced, you know, the Geocentric theory. You — you think everything — everything revolves around you, when in fact, the heliocentric — uhm, theory — you’re just — okay, what are you doing?” Isak asks as Even’s lips attach themselves to his neck. He brings his hands to press against Even’s chest, but doesn’t do anything to push him away or dissuade his actions.

“Sorry,” Even mutters against his skin, but Isak thinks he doesn’t sound sorry at all. “All the nerd talk is just turning me on some.”

“Oh, my God,” Isak laughs and finally pushes Even away, offering him an incredulous look for his cheeky one. “I can’t believe you.”

“You can.”

“How the fuck did you get people to sleep with you before this?” Isak laughs.

Even gapes, feigning offense. “Excuse me, Isak,” he sniffs. “I have turned on many a hook-up in my day. I’ve made them do very kinky things, too.”

“Oh, yeah?” Isak raises an eyebrow, amused. “Like what?”

“Well, I don’t mean to brag,” Even takes a step closer to Isak and wraps his arms around his waist. Isak lets himself be pulled forward, the warmth of Even’s chest against his own a welcome feeling after days of not being able to have this. His head keeps reminding him. “But the last guy I slept with talked to my dick once—”

Isak groans. “Oh, my God,” Isak throws his head back slightly when he laughs. “I hate you so much.”

“It was super hot,” Even nodded very seriously, expression never wavering. “I might actually call
him up, see if he’d be willing to do it again.”

“Shut up.” Isak narrows his eyes, but the corners of his lips keep twitching upwards.

“Listen, I’m sorry if you’re jealous, Isak,” Even raises an eyebrow. “But I can’t help that I have such impeccable taste in sexual partners.”

Isak smiles helplessly, bringing his arms to wrap around Even’s neck, pulling him impossibly closer. “Well, I can’t argue with that.”

Even’s serious expression melts into one of softness, and for a second Isak wants to live in it. He leans in to press his lips softly against Isak’s, only for a moment, but it’s long enough to leave Isak craving so much more. “Neither can I.”

Isak brings their lips back together and he knows Eva’s going to get home at any moment, he knows, but he can’t help himself from tasting Even’s lips as much as he’s able to, the feeling of him foreign and familiar all at once, and as his hands trail up Even’s neck to tangle in his hair, as Even’s head tilts in an attempt to bring the both of them closer, Isak wonders if there will ever come a day where he can live without this for more than a day at a time again.

And that’s so ridiculously frightening Isak doesn’t know what else to do than to quiet his thoughts with the texture of Even’s lips. He needs to tame his brain systems, compartmentalize accordingly as he usually does, because he’s afraid he’s misfiling so much that he might not be able to tell the difference between one or the other soon.

But that’s an easy fix, he reminds himself. It’s science. He can regroup. Friendship. Simplicity. This Isak. That Isak. His Isak. Real Isak. There’s no use in thinking, in theorizing this time around, because the results will end up the same with any evidence presented: Isak is not the person Even thinks he is, and therefore, Isak stops before he crosses that line. Isak wants this, but he wants it without — well, this, these thoughts, and he is capable of continuing this way. This Isak. Even’s Isak. The man who can smirk and talk openly about his fish and will let himself be pulled forward sometimes and blushes uncontrollably and will once in a while allow Even the slightest bit of information about his past — Even’s Isak, who gives the bare minimum, but receives autobiographies in return. Even’s Isak, whom Even thinks is a good person, maybe thinks he’s nice, and that’s fine. He’ll play along. He wants to play along. Have this, for however long he can.

But he isn’t This Isak. Or That Isak. He’s the Isak whose past wants to haunt him at night, and the Isak who did nothing when he should have done everything. Who does nothing, still. The only steps he can take are the ones in the opposite direction, keeping as much distance between him and everything in his past as possible, and maybe eventually forgetting. Eventually, the Isak that he is will cease to exist and whatever Isak is left will take the reins. He just needs the time. He needs the time.

So for now — for now there’s Even’s lips on his own, and maybe that’s the only thing he needs to know. For now he’s This Isak, and whenever Even pulls him closer and tighter, he imagines this is the only Isak that exists, an Isak that may not be able to give more than he can offer, but is worth of at least this — kissing without commitment, feelings without complications. An Isak with a best friend who kisses and doesn’t tell, and will eventually slink into something he wants and deserves — and Isak will at least have this. The memories.

Just a good kisser.

Even starts pulling Isak over to his bed, and Isak follows dutifully. They’re not doing anything incriminating, Isak tells himself. Even sits on the edge of his bed and Isak sits on his lap and they
kiss, and they kiss, and they kiss.

Just a good kisser, God, that’s all—

They hear a key at the knob, and they both break apart quickly. Isak stands and tries to adjust his hair again, and Even walks quickly over to where he’d apparently dropped Isak’s comb on the floor and starts attempting to tame his own hair with it. They both seem to be failing miserably, and as the door creaks open, Isak can’t help but laugh quietly at the way Even is glaring at his forehead. He walks quickly over to him and takes the comb from his hand, and does whatever he can do with it — when it looks like it at least hasn’t been tugged at desperately, Isak steps back and studies it. He smiles.

“Looks good,” he says, and Even grins.

“You sure you want to be an astronomer? You might have a future in hairdressing.”

Isak shrugs. “It’s a profitable career choice. I’ll think about it.”

Eva calls out Isak’s name from the living room. Isak looks at Even and spreads his arms in defeat.

“What were we doing in here?”

“Making out,” Even raises an eyebrow.

Isak glares at him. “I mean, what do we tell Eva we were doing in here?”

Even thinks. “Making out,” he suggests again, smirking, and Isak throws him a look. Even holds up his hands defensively. “Fine, fine. We were watching TV, it’s not that big a deal.”

Isak sighs. “Okay,” he gestures towards the door. “Let’s go say hi to Eva.”

“Eva Mohn,” Even sighs forlornly again, and Isak gives him a confused look.

“You keep saying that.”

Even hums. “I know.”

Isak doesn’t push it, mostly because Eva’s calling out to him again. He walks towards his door and pulls it open, walking out of the room and hearing Even walk quietly out behind him, too. When they make it to the living room, Eva’s carrying a plastic container looking like they’re filled with cupcakes, and she blinks in surprise when she sees Even.

“Even!” Eva quickly walks over to him and pulls him into a hug, container and all. Even smiles brightly and wraps his arms around her waist tightly.

“Eva!” He greets right back, and then they pull away from each other. Her happy expression turns into one of confusion all of a sudden, looking between Even and him, as if trying to figure something out. Isak braces himself, afraid she’s seen something, afraid she can tell, but all she does is let her puzzled gaze meet Even’s.

“Did you just get back?” she asks, and Even nods.

“Yeah, thought I’d drop by and say hi to this one,” he gestures to Isak with his thumb. Isak waves lamely. “I don’t know if you noticed, but he missed me very much.”

Isak scoffs, but Eva chuckles. “Oh, I noticed,” she replies, and Isak blinks at her, nonplussed, before he narrows his eyes.
“Stop bullshitting him, you’re gonna inflate his ego.”

“I’m not bullshitting him,” Eva rolls her eyes. “You were brooding all over the place. More than usual, I mean. Though, I’ve gotta say,” Eva’s eyes meet Even’s again. “I kind of get it. It was weird not having you around for this long.”

Even’s grinning so wide Isak’s pretty sure his lips are gonna fly off. “Don’t worry, I’ll be by so much you’ll start wishing I went on holiday again.”

“Nope, don’t think that’s possible,” she pats Even’s arm. “We like you a lot in this apartment.”

Isak scoffs. “Alright, are we done with the flirting?”

Eva waggles her eyebrows at Isak. “Why, you jealous?”

“I—” Isak gapes. “Why would I be—”

“It’s alright, I’ve gotta head out, anyway,” he says, raising an amused eyebrow at Isak. “Traveling is exhausting. I’m probably gonna hit the hay as soon as I’m home.”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea,” Eva proclaims, then opens the plastic container she’s been holding this entire time. She grabs one of the cupcakes in it and hands it happily to Even, grinning. “For the journey home.”

“Hey, thanks,” Even smiles right back, taking the cupcake from her and raising it in gratitude. Isak sighs loudly at the both of them, not because he’s jealous, Eva, but because they’re taking up far too much time here and the longer Even and Eva are in the same room, the longer Eva’s prone to figuring out they were not just being friendly in Isak’s bedroom.

“Oh, alright, I’m walking Even out,” he proclaims, and Eva salutes him.

“Sounds good, boss,” she says, then turns to pull Even into an awkward half-hug, this time holding the container in place. “I’ll see you soon.”

“You can count on it,” Even replies, and when they pull away he waves one more time for good measure and walks over to the entrance, where he starts putting on his shoes. Isak follows him dutifully and Eva makes her way towards the kitchen, presumably to put the cupcakes away, and when Even’s done with his shoes, he reaches out surreptitiously and squeezes Isak’s waist, his smile small, but still bright enough so that his eyes wrinkle prettily. “Next time,” he promises, voice quiet and low, and it does things to Isak’s stomach that he’s sure are gonna come up again tonight elsewhere.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he says. “See who’s got the empty place.”

Even grins. “You got it,” he raises the cupcake in his hand one more time and takes a bite out of it the way you would an apple, and Isak can’t help but laugh at the way Even’s nose is suddenly filled with green frosting.

“You’re a mess,” Isak rolls his eyes, reaching to wipe the frosting from Even’s nose with his index finger. Even’s nose wrinkles as he does, and once Isak’s done, Even grabs Isak by the wrist and brings his finger to his lips, and then he – the fucker just – he wraps his lips around Isak’s finger to slowly and torturously get rid of the frosting with his tongue, and Isak is standing here frozen and extremely hot. Like, abnormally hot. Like the kind of hot that might lead to death by heatstroke.

When Even pulls his lips back, he smiles and lets go of Isak’s wrist. Isak is still unable to move. “See
you tomorrow,” he says, and then he’s out the door, leaving Isak frozen at the entrance and uncomfortable in his sweatpants.

Isak almost whimpers when he closes his hand, fingernails digging sharply into his palm. This is Even being uncharacteristically cruel, he decides. Now he has to stand here for a minute or two, trying to think of terrible things while he lets his dick soften, because if his calculations are correct, Eva should be coming out of the kitchen in about—

“Hey, you okay?”

Now.

Isak nods, still giving Eva his back. “Yeah, I’m just – admiring our door.”

There’s a moment of silence.

“Isak, are you hiding a boner right now?”

Isak swallows. “I might be.”

There’s another pause, wherein the silence becomes a little uncomfortable. “Wanna tell me why?”

Isak shakes his head. “I’m not particularly inclined to, no.”

“You know I’ve seen you with boners before, right?”

“I’m aware, yes.”

“So why are you hiding it right now?”

Isak grunts in frustration, then turns around to look at Eva. “Maybe this particular boner doesn’t want to be seen, Eva. Maybe it’s tired of being in the public eye all the time. It needs its privacy. Boners are people, too.”

Eva blinks. “Did you stare at Even’s ass as he walked away?”

Isak bristles. “Wh – no! No, this has nothing to do with Even, I’m just. Uhm. Some guy on Grindr just, uhm. You know.”

“Ah,” Eva nods as if she understands. “Dick pics. Got it.”

“Sure.”

“For the record, though, I probably would get a boner staring at Even’s ass.”

Isak is so confused. Even is very attractive in many areas of his body, but his ass? Though of much use to Isak, the sight of it in loose jeans is nothing to write home about, but that’s fine, because Even knows he’s attractive in all the places that count.

Still, he can’t really tell Eva that, so instead he snorts dramatically and quickly walks past her. Trying to be stealthy, he reaches towards the couch seat and grabs his phone, quickly pocketing it.

“I’m going to give my boner shelter.”

“Cool,” Eva calls out as he enters his room. “You and your boner are welcome to a cupcake later!”
“We’ll discuss it!” Isak calls back, then he closes the door behind him and exhales in relief as he presses his back against it. The back of his head hits the door softly, and he closes his eyes and tries to forget about the conversation he and Eva just had. He tries to ignore the fact that they’re getting more careless by the day, because if he acknowledges it to its full extent, then he knows things would have to slow down considerably – and, while he may be thinking with his current boner, Isak doesn’t think that’s something his body would be able to accept, not when it’s so used to Even’s body that masturbating to anyone else is impossible. Not porn, not some dude in a movie, nothing. He just ends up thinking about Even in the end, and though he hasn’t exactly moaned his name when he finishes yet, it’s always a near thing.

That’s going to be weird when they end this thing, isn’t it?

Maybe they should slow it down, after all.

His phone vibrates in his pocket. When he pulls it out to read the text, he blinks at it for a couple of seconds.

**EVEN**
So what are the odds you’ll call me when I get home and help me take care of my problem

**ISAK**
Suffer, asshole

**EVEN**
Noted

Isak snorts and opens the details in Even’s text conversation, fully intending to delete his dick pic, but then he starts going through all the other pictures in their conversation – mostly of Even and his family, smiling brightly, looking genuinely happy. After all the stress he seemed to be going through at his house, it warms Isak’s heart to see him so relaxed, around people he loves, and who seem to love him right back.

He presses down on a picture of Even beside the Christmas tree, a Leonora Carrington printed picture punctured by a hook and hanging on it, doubling as an ornament. Even’s smile is large and blinding. Isak smiles back at an unseeing, immortalized Even.

He locks his phone, and walks towards his desk. He forgets what he was thinking about before this. He opens his laptop and pulls up his term paper, and begins to type.

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Magnus asked Isak to come with him to Toys R Us and help him find a gift for his nephew. Isak had asked Magnus what in the world made him think Isak would be any good at picking out toys for children, but Magnus said he had a foolproof system that would only work if Isak came with him — Isak was going to refuse, as he usually does on his days off, but Magnus had come with him to that dreaded work Christmas party, so he begrudgingly got dressed and did as Magnus asked.

Toys R Us smells like baby excrement and wipes, an odor that, mixed together, adds up to something resembling vomit; Magnus seems unfazed, clearly used to this kind of smell, what with all the nieces and nephews he has, but Isak has half a mind to walk to the dollar store nearby and buy a car freshener to hang on his nose. He wonders if it’s his exhaustion or his pride stopping him from doing so.
“What do you give a kid who gets practically everything he wants?” Magnus is nearly pouting, shoulders slumped and looking dejected. Isak grunts noncommittally, unsure again why Magnus thought he’d know anything more than him regarding this subject. When Magnus turns to give him a pleading look, Isak throws his hands up helplessly.

“I don’t know any children, Magnus,” he reminds him. “Don’t they like, like race cars or some shit like that?”

“Alexander doesn’t like cars,” he waves Isak off as they walk down the Barbie aisle. “I think he’s watched too many action movies and so he thinks they’re metal death traps now.”

“A wise kid,” Isak replies, and Magnus rolls his eyes exaggeratedly.

“You share the same fear as a six-year-old,” Magnus points out, stopping to examine a veterinarian Barbie set, complete with a cat and a dog and an x-ray of both. “I don’t think that’s anything to be proud of.”

“You think mosquitoes are aliens,” Isak counters. “You have no room to talk in terms of ridiculous fears.”

Magnus turns to look at him, pointing an accusatory finger towards Isak and glaring. “They survive in outer space, Isak,” he says, and Isak rolls his eyes. “They’re here to take over our planet and we’re just allowing them to.”

“I should have never told you that,” Isak sighs, and he rubs at his eyes tiredly. “Seriously. Get him a puzzle or something. Enrich his mind.”

“Do you want him to hate me? That’s practically as bad as clothes,” Magnus scowls.

“Puzzles are fun!” Isak scowls right back at him, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. “I had a shit ton of them when I was a kid.”

Magnus grins. “Nerd.”

“Idiot.”

“There are little kids over there,” Magnus points towards a couple of aisles over. “I think that’s where we’ll hit the jackpot.”

“Please don’t say it like that,” Isak pleads. “They’re gonna kick us out.”

Magnus laughs. “Dude, come on,” he leads Isak over to the aisle filled with kid, which turns out to be filled with superhero action figures. Magnus ‘ooh’s in interest, situating himself between a couple of young boys perusing the toys carefully, almost as if they’re making sure they’re worth the price. Isak tries to remember if he was ever this picky about toys when he was younger, but that’s digging into memories he’d rather not dig into, so instead he focuses on a hunched-over Magnus, who is concentrating terribly hard as he stares at a Hulk.

“See something you like?” Isak smirks, and Magnus glances back at him and grins.

“I’m all about the green and muscular,” he says, straightening back up. “Speaking of muscular,” he begins, walking further down the aisle. “I’ve noticed Julian’s been much happier lately.”

Isak sighs loudly. “Magnus,” he starts warningly.
“I’m just pointing out the obvious!” Magnus replies defensively. “You can’t tell me you haven’t realized by now.”

Isak looks at him. “Don’t you think the fact that I never noticed before speaks volumes about where I stand?”

There’s no need for Magnus to know about his inner turmoil. Isak’s positive he’d take advantage of the fact and try to lure him into a Julian trap, and Isak’s not ready to step into it. Not after everything that’s also been happening with Even — he just can’t think about it. He doesn’t want to think about it. It was easy, before. Before knowing Julian was keen on him, before—

He wants to say before Even. It’d be easy to, even. But that’s not true. Having Even in his life is perhaps one of the better things that has happened in it. But maybe things would have been easier today if they hadn’t started sleeping with each other, simply found themselves in the future, maybe gradually becoming friends. He thinks maybe that would have happened, eventually. Maybe not as quickly as it did since they jumped into bed together, but it had to. Eventually they’d grow and mature and decide that maybe it’s time to put their differences aside, and the conversation they had in Even’s bed so long ago would be had elsewhere, in less of an intimate setting.

Isak wonders how different his life would be today, had he not apologized to Even when he did. But then he realizes that maybe it’s a good thing he doesn’t know, and he snaps out of it when Magnus continues the conversation Isak had completely forgotten they’d been having.

“But you’re noticing now,” Magnus points out. “That’s gotta count for something, right?”

Well. Right. Yeah, maybe. “Julian looks like the kind of guy who’s looking for something serious,” Isak points out. “And you know I’m bad at that crap. I won’t be able to give him what he wants, and so it’ll end up in heartbeat and resentment and shit, which could have been avoided if I followed my gut and let it lie.”

“Isak, you haven’t even tried,” Magnus presses, grabbing for a Captain America figure. “I know, I know you have that thing about relationships and love and blah blah blah, but giving a person a chance doesn’t mean you’re stuck with them for life.”

Magnus doesn’t seem to understand how deep these feelings run for Isak — no commitments, no serious relationships, no dating for more than maybe four months, if anything — and he seems to always be so optimistic that Isak will come around to his way of thinking one day, perhaps even more so than Eva, that sometimes Isak wants to throw him a bone, just to let him feel like he’s won a battle.

Not today, however. He’s not here to be set up with Julian Dahl again. “I don’t want that, alright?” He raises an eyebrow. “I promise, if that changes anytime soon, you’ll be the first person I tell and you can set me up with whoever the hell you want, but I don’t want that right now, Mags. I’m happy where I am, thanks.”

Magnus rolls his eyes so hard Isak’s afraid they’ll fall out of his head. “Isak, how are you ever going to find love if you don’t go looking for it?”

Isak blinks at him. “Have you heard a word I’ve been saying?” he throws his hands up in the air, bemused. “I’m not looking for love!”

Magnus sets down the Captain America action figure, then proceeds to study an Iron Man one. Isak watches as Magnus presses down on the Iron Man’s chest, where it makes some sort of whooshing noise and lights up. Magnus doesn’t look away from it as he replies, “You’re just too pessimistic.
Isak rolls his eyes, trying to get out of this conversation as soon as possible. He tries to think of something to bring up, something to steer the conversation away from him, and Magnus keeps himself occupied with the superhero toys long enough for Isak to think of something.

“What about you?” he asks. “You seem to have better sense than to go ‘looking for love’ don’t you?”

Magnus stands from where he’d only just kneeled, looking at Isak in disbelief. “Are you kidding? That’s all I’m trying to do ever!” he grimaces. “Thomas fucked me up a little bit, though.”

Isak can’t help the small pang of sympathy he feels for Magnus. That’s everyone, he doesn’t say. Everyone’s gonna let you down and everyone’s going to fuck you up, even if it’s just a little bit. “Haven’t tried again since then?”

“I don’t know,” Magnus shrugs. “It’s hard to find someone with the same interests. Or the same sense of humor. Apparently mine’s a special kind of one.”

Isak smirks. “Oh, yes.”

“You think I’m funny, though, right?”

“Sometimes.”

“I’ll take it.”

Isak grabs at a Captain America shield, inspecting it as if he’s actually interested. “You haven’t tried Grindr?”

“I mean, yeah, duh,” Magnus rolls his eyes at Isak. “But a lot of those people are just looking for hookups. And, well, you know.”

“You want your first time with a guy to be special,” Isak nods. “I remember.” The sentiment, though unrealistic, is sweet, and that much Isak can admit — in fact, he hopes Magnus finds a man who means a lot to him to have sex with the first time. He doesn’t look forward to the day that man breaks Magnus’s heart, but at least he’ll be able to look back at his first time fondly, with more laughter than scowling and pain. Isak frowns down at the shield.

“There is this one guy, though.”

Isak looks up. “Oh?”

“Yeah, look.” Magnus pulls out his phone from his pocket and slides his fingers across his screen some, before pulling up a Grindr profile. Isak looks through all his pictures, and his eyebrows rise, impressed.

“Huh. He’s hot.”

“Right?”

Isak narrows his eyes and looks closer to a specific photo — he takes the phone from Magnus to get a closer look, then tilts his head just to make really sure. When he decides there’s no way he can dispute this argument, he looks up at Magnus. “He looks like Julian, a little bit.”

“What? No he doesn’t,” Magnus swipes the phone from Isak’s hand quickly, bringing it up to his
face and looking at the picture closely.

“Uh, yes he does,” Isak raises an eyebrow as he watches Magnus scrutinize his phone screen. “Swap out the blonde hair for brown, and—”

Magnus lowers his phone. “I think it says something that you’re seeing Julian in people that bear no resemblance to him.”

Isak blinks. “Yeah, I think it says that that guy looks like Julian and you’re being purposely obtuse about it!”

“I will have you know that I am never purposely obtuse.”

Isak snorts. “Yeah, well, I believe that.”

“And anyway, he’s nothing like Julian at all,” Magnus waves off the implication, swiping through the guy’s pictures again. “I think I might agree to meet up with him soon.” He pauses, then looks back at Isak. “Should I meet up with him soon?”

“I don’t know, Magnus,” Isak shrugs helplessly. “How long have you guys been talking for?”

Magnus thinks. “Two months?”

He can’t really say that’s too little time. He jumped into bed with a guy after really talking to him for only two weeks, after all. He really isn’t anyone to talk. “Well, I’m no expert at online dating — or dating at all — but as long as you’ve Googled him already and he’s raised no red flags, then, go for it?”

“Yeah. He’s apparently 6’4”.”

Isak’s brows furrow. “As tall as Even?”

“I — yeah?” Magnus looks at him strangely. “I mean, I don’t know why you went straight to him for reference, but, sure.”

Isak clears his throat. “I just mean — Even’s that tall, and this guy doesn’t look that tall.”

“He does!”

“No, he doesn’t. Look,” Isak grabs Magnus’s phone and swipes to the picture he’s been thinking of. When he finds it, he points at one of the girls in the picture. “He’s closer to that girl’s height right there than that guy’s,” Isak hands the phone back to Magnus, who continues to scrutinize the pictures. “You know statistics show that men on dating sites and apps tend to lie most about their height, right? Well, that, and their income.”

Magnus ignores his very interesting statistics. “He’s totally that tall.”

Isak sighs loudly. “Magnus, he’s not that tall. And when you meet and realize he’s lied to you about his height and probably everything else, you’re going to join the eighty percent of people who found no success in online dating, and the ten percent who give it up within three months.”

Magnus looks at him. “Why do you know so much about online dating if you don’t ever want to date?”

“For situations like these, obviously,” Isak points out, finally putting down the shield he hadn’t realized he was still holding. He’s probably been looking like a man child, tiny shield tucked in his
arm as if he’s trying to play pretend. “And to bring it up to people who try to set me up and scare them away.”

Magnus sighs, grabbing randomly at a Thor action figure. “So everyone online’s a liar and I have no hope, then?”

“Well, I didn’t say that,” Isak shifts his weight, a little uncomfortably. “Are you lying on the app?”

“Nah. Not worth it.”

“There you go,” Isak gestures towards Magnus. “Then there’s someone out there not lying, too, I’m sure.”

“Ugh,” Magnus throws his head back in despair. “Where are all the nice, available, honest men out here in the real world, then?” He looks back down at Isak with a pleading look. “Show me where I can find one.”

“Sorry, I don’t know any,” he replies. At least, not any he’s particularly willing to share — with a friend, that is. Because he can share with anyone else, since he’s allowed to, but if it was Magnus, things would get weird, and — so. Yeah. “And this is why—”

“Dude, no. I don’t want to hear it,” Magnus holds up a warning finger towards Isak with his free hand. “There are men like that. Men that are looking for a happy and healthy relationship the way that I am, and all I have to do is find one.”

“But the possibility of—”

“I don’t care! I don’t care. I want you to stop talking to me the way you talk to yourself, alright?” Magnus’s eyebrows both rise at once, silently asking for Isak’s answer. Isak blinks at him and nods, if only to make Magnus stop looking at him like that. “We don’t think alike,” Magnus continues. “I get that you think love is just setting yourself up for a bad ending but it’s not always like that, alright?”

“Sure. The exception to—”

“You won’t actually know that if you don’t fucking try, dude,” Magnus interrupts him again, and Isak’s starting to feel irritated at this entire situation. “Love is pretty dope, even if it lasts, like, two seconds. Like — you! You sir! In the suit!”

Magnus is pointing at a man walking down the hallway beside the aisle, stopping him in his tracks. The man is tall, well-dressed, and well-groomed, almost as if he’d just come here from work, most likely to find a last-minute present for someone, since he looks the type. The man looks around, as if making sure no one else is close to the general vicinity in which Magnus is pointing, then finally meets Magnus’s gaze.

“Uh, me?”

“Yes, you,” Magnus walks past Isak to get closer to the man, and Isak has to drag his feet behind him, face red in secondhand embarrassment. “You look like the kind of man who knows all about the beauty and wonder of love, right?”

The man is quiet for a second. “…I’m a divorce lawyer.”

Magnus looks at the man blankly. “Sir, I was so obviously trying to prove a point to my friend here. You couldn’t have just lied for a sec?”
“Magnus, *stop,*” Isak hisses, grabbing at his friend’s arm.

“Listen, he doesn’t count,” Magnus turns back to look at Isak, freeing his arm of his grasp. “If you’re just going to *willingly surround yourself with misery,*” Magnus shouts this part, pointedly looking at the man who’d just walked into the aisle across from them. Isak can’t even look at the man as he cautiously makes his way out of the aisle, most likely to duck for cover. Or call the police. “Of course you’re going to end up hating the concept of love.”

Jesus. Can’t *one* outing with Magnus end *normally* for once?

“Magnus, fine, I get it,” Isak concedes, mostly because he’s exhausted. “You’re looking for something we don’t see eye to eye on. Fine. I’m sure there are plenty of guys in your life fitting the description you’d like.”

“Yes, I guess.” Suddenly Magnus seems far more solemn. “Not many, though.”

Isak blinks. Is this not what he has been telling him *this entire fucking time*?

He breathes.

He loves Magnus. He appreciates his friendship. He puts up with Isak’s angry mood swings. He’s a good guy.

Isak needs to keep repeating this to himself before he storms out of here, most likely after punching Magnus in the gut.

“Well, I guess I could always take a shot at Even.”

Isak chokes on a swallow. He has a coughing fit for a second, not long enough to worry Magnus, and he finally replies with a calm and sophisticated “*What?’*

“Yes, I mean,” Magnus shrugs. “He’s nice, tall, hot, is a commitment kind of guy. He can cook and he’s funny. He laughs at my jokes, anyway. He’s always an option.”

Okay, so maybe the option of punching Magnus in the gut is still on the table. “Ah, *is* he, though?” He doesn’t know where he’s going with that. He’s sure Magnus will make of it what he will.

“What, just because I’ve been turned down a couple of times? Pft,” Magnus waves the fair point he made himself off. “That’s nothing, my high school girlfriend turned out to be a lesbian, I can put up with a couple more rejections.”

Isak’s eye twitches. “He’s just — it’s just—”

“Yes, you’re right,” Magnus isn’t even looking at him. He looks up at the ceiling pensively. “He’s still sleeping with that rebound girl, as far as I know.”

“Hmm?”

“Yes, Yousef tried to be coy about it with us, but we deduced that it’s still going on,” Magnus explains. “He’s just being a good friend, I guess.”

Isak swallows. “Oh.”

“Damn, it’s been a while, though, hasn’t it?” Magnus looks at Isak, but doesn’t wait for an answer. “When do you think that’ll be over?”
Isak mumbles unintelligently.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Magnus pulls a face. “Maybe they’re a thing and they’re just not telling us.”

No. “Eh,” he croaks.

“Yeah, I know, Even wouldn’t keep a relationship from us, right? Unless he was super ashamed of the girl.”

“Guh.”

“Dude, you’re right,” Magnus nods at Isak. “What if it’s only casual but totally not casual, at least maybe not for him, so he’s just keeping it a secret because she wants to keep it a secret and—”

“You know what, Magnus?” Isak holds up two placating hands. “We’re gonna go ahead and find you a fucking date.”

Magnus’s expression lights up. “Really?”

“Yep,” Isak says through gritted teeth. “So long as you shut up right now.”

“Okay, got it,” Magnus nods with purpose. “No more Even theories from me.”

Isak can’t really act relieved about the fact, because then Magnus will wonder why he looks relieved — right now, Isak’s pretty sure Magnus just thinks he’s gotten tired of his ramblings, which is fine, Isak guesses, it’s at least half-true. Isak glances down, realizing Magnus is still holding on to that Thor action figure. He raises an eyebrow and meets Magnus’s gaze again.

“So, are you going to take that Thor or not?”

“Huh? This? Nah,” Magnus throws the box unceremoniously on the shelf, tumbling over a Hulk action figure that falls and hits a kid in the head. Magnus doesn’t notice and walks past Isak. “We’re getting Captain America.”

Isak looks at the kid. He’s simply glaring at the shelf, rubbing the top of his head. He’s far too small to be left alone in an aisle like this, Jesus. He watches as he picks up the Hulk that’d hit him in the head, courtesy of Magnus’s carelessness, and examines it closely. After a moment, the kid seems to decide this is the toy he wants, and he skips out of the aisle, presumably to find the person who’s going to pay for that toy. Isak can’t help the small smile that fights for control of his lips.

“Isak,” Magnus calls out, and when Isak turns around, Magnus is staring at him impatiently. “Let’s go.”

Isak looks over his shoulder one more time, before sighing quietly and catching up to Magnus and the Captain America action figure in his hands. As he walks beside his friend and towards the cash registers, he gets a text notification vibrating in his pocket. He fishes his phone out and immediately opens up Even’s conversation.

**EVEN**
Hey, everyone’s coming over to the house. You in?

**ISAK**
Yeah, cool

**EVEN**
Is Magnus with you??

**ISAK**
Unfortunately

**EVEN**
Hah! Bring him along

**EVEN**
See you soon

Isak locks his phone and looks over at Magnus. “Hey. Even’s inviting us to his place,” he tells him, and Magnus’s face lights up. Isak glares at him. “He’s inviting everyone, Magnus.”

Magnus rolls his eyes. “I know,” he snorts. “No one’s stealing your new best friend, jeez.”

Isak does his best not to blush. When they finally reach a cash register and stand at the end of the line, Magnus blinks rapidly and seems to remember something. He turns to look at Isak, eyes wide.

“Hey,” he begins slowly. “Isn’t Even the fake boyfriend name you gave at work that one time?”

Isak’s officially outlawing hanging out alone with Magnus ever again.

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When Magnus and Isak arrive, the rest of the boys are already seated in the living room — the door was open, as it usually is (Isak has the decency to knock, okay, he knows he wouldn’t want people barging into his apartment at any second; but the guys have a different sense of boundaries, he guesses, which is just fine by Magnus, apparently, because he storms into the house like it’s his kingdom) and Isak closes the door behind them, taking off his shoes and resting them beside Magnus’s.

Magnus makes his way over to the couch, plops right down beside Mutta. He looks around for a moment as Isak makes his way to the living room too, eyeing the seat next to Jonas. He glances over at the seat beside Even, and he hesitates for a moment — then, stupidly, he makes a move towards Even, and now even if he’s changed his mind, it’d look ridiculous to switch gears so abruptly, so he simply finishes walking over to him, settling down beside him, avoiding everyone’s gaze.

When he looks up, however, nobody’s taken notice. Not even Jonas, whose gaze is glued to his phone screen, typing out what Isak assumes is a text message. A long one, at that.

Nobody takes notice, save for Yousef, who eyes the both of them carefully. Isak sinks a little further into the couch, and unconsciously closer to Even. Even’s knee knocks against Isak’s, and he keeps it there, quietly offering support, the same way he’s always done when it’s obvious Isak is uncomfortable in a situation. For a moment, he wonders if anyone can even tell how close Isak’s sitting to Even for comfort — and then no one notices, and shit, yeah, all of them are definitely the bad ones at noticing things.

“Where’s Elias?” Magnus asks as Isak shifts closer to Even, and Mutta grunts.

“Working, apparently,” he replies. “He’s been doing that a lot lately, hasn’t he, Yousef?”

Yousef studies his shoes very intently. “Yep.”

Even bumps his shoulder with Isak, the only gesture he can really make with how stupidly close Isak
is sitting to him. “Why do you smell like clay and diapers?”

Isak shifts his weight slightly and rolls his eyes. “Magnus and I were at a toy store,” he explains. Even raises and eyebrow and turns over to Magnus.

“I didn’t know you guys were still into toys,” he teases, grinning. “Guess I know what to get you for your birthday now, Mags.”

Magnus sniffs indignantly. “I will have you know there is no shame in liking children’s toys at this age,” he says, and the rest of the boys snort in unison, obviously disbelieving. “What? So grown men can be into My Little Pony but I can’t like some action figures?”

“He’s got a point,” Mahdi interjects. “At least he’s not a Brony.”

“What the fuck is a Brony?” Mutta asks, and Jonas snickers.

“You don’t wanna know, dude,” he replies. “Trust me.”

“And anyway, I wasn’t there for myself,” Magnus picks up where he left off, unaffected by the interruption. “I was there to buy a gift for my nephew. His birthday’s in two days.”

Yousef frowns. “The thirtieth?”

“Yep.”

“Sucks.”

“He’s cool with it!”

“He’s also five,” Isak points out. “He doesn’t know any better. When he’s older he’s going to hate the fact that his birthday is so close to New Year’s and he’ll refuse to acknowledge there’ll be a new year incoming. Magnus’s family will have to abide and never celebrate New Year’s again, and then, only then, will Magnus feel the full effect of having a birthday the thirtieth of December — when he no longer rings in a new year.”

“Ah, time is an illusion, anyway,” Mahdi pipes up. “In the grand scheme of things, the change of a calendar is arbitrary, and so he’ll learn to live with the fact that his birthday is, in fact, just as unimportant as New Year’s, and he’ll either decide not to celebrate either or celebrate both. Either way, that shit doesn’t matter.”

Everyone stares at Mahdi.

Mahdi scowls. “What?”

“We are cutting off your Isak-time, Mahdi,” Mutta replies, and Isak squawks.

“That is not my influence!”


“Nah, Mahdi’s been taking a philosophy class,” Jonas tells them. “It’s super fun to hear all that he has learned all the fucking time forever at home.”

Mahdi looks at him, aloof. “You’ll thank me when you have to find your inner peace, dude.”

“Are you studying philosophy or taking yoga?” Even smirks, and Mahdi shoots him a look. Isak
sighs loudly, throwing his head back against the couch.

“All of you are ridiculous.”

Even pats his leg in what Isak assumes is meant to be a reassuring gesture, but it does nothing other than heat Isak’s face. They’re already close enough to each other — Even definitely does not need to add hand-to-leg contact. His fingers, close to Even’s wrist, flick at it, requesting Even to move away. Even seems to understand this immediately, and pulls his hand away, clearing his throat. Isak can’t tell if anyone caught the moment — his gaze is still glued to the ceiling, and he’s pretending he’s not blushing.

The moment passes. “I bought him a Captain America action figure,” Magnus circles back to his nephew in that impeccably random way he knows how to do. “Kids are into Captain America, right?”

“Everyone’s into Captain America,” Jonas replies. “Aren’t you into Captain America?”

Isak finally looks down, feeling his face devoid of any color. Magnus thinks. “I’m definitely into Chris Evans.”

“Should have bought him an Iron Man action figure instead, dude,” Mutta says. “You can’t top Iron Man in the scale of useful superheroes.”

“Iron Man isn’t a superhero,” Yousef interjects. “He’s just a hero. He doesn’t have any powers of his own — only the powers that his suit allows him.”

“Oh, be quiet,” Mutta rolls his eyes, but Mahdi nods.

“No, he’s right, Iron Man is as much of a superhero as Batman is.”

“Batman’s totally a superhero!” Magnus gapes. “He’s in the Justice League!”

Jonas sighs. “Magnus, that literally means nothing.”

“It absolutely does.”

“Besides,” Jonas continues as if he hadn’t spoken at all. “All of you are wrong. It’s obvious Wonder Woman is the better superhero all around, Marvel and DC characters included.”

“I can grant you that one,” Yousef concedes, and Jonas grins at him before turning back to his phone again. Isak has no idea what to offer to this conversation — his superhero preferences are, as it were, completely superficial, but none of these guys have to know that, considering they’ll probably make fun of him for not “dissecting the inner workings of every hero’s powers”, so he’s keeping it tight and zipped.

Even doesn’t contribute anything, either, instead looking relaxed as can be, arm still pressed against Isak’s lightly. The contact is warm and comforting.

“Hey, Julian says that, too,” Magnus adds, and Isak suddenly feels his stomach drop to his feet. Oh, that fucker.

“Wow,” Jonas deadpans, raising an eyebrow at Magnus. “Nice segue.”

Magnus holds up both of his hands defensively. “What?” Everyone eyes him. “What? I was just saying,” he rolls his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest. “And if maybe a conversation about
Isak’s newly formed relationship with Julian is to come up completely of its own volition, well, who am I to stop that, you know?”

“Magnus—”

Isak is interrupted by Even. “Wait,” he glances at Isak, then back at Magnus. “What do you mean by ‘newly formed relationship’?”

Mutta sighs loudly. “Dude.”

“I’m just asking.”

Magnus grins. “And I’m glad you did. See,” Magnus shifts his weight on the couch adjacent to the one Even and Isak are sitting on. Even is paying close attention, and Isak wants to slap him over the head. “Julian’s been saying that they’ve been talking a lot more since the night at the club.”

Everyone turns to look at Isak expectantly. Isak hates the fact that all of his blood rushes to his face, effectively turning it into a furnace. And probably a tomato. “I—” he shakes his head. “Not like — we’re just friendly, God.”

Jonas looks at him curiously. “For real?” he raises an eyebrow. “Like — friendly friendly, or are you finally noticing he’s got, like, abs?”

Isak chokes a bit. “He doesn’t — he just — his body is of — symmetrical proportions, I—”

“He’s coming to the New Year’s party at Chris’s place,” Mahdi interjects, seeming to think he’s offering valuable information that Isak gives a shit about. “Or, he’s maybe coming to the party? What’d he say again?”

“He’ll see,” Magnus replies. “He might have to spend it with his super rich, super good-looking parents,” Magnus waggles his eyebrows at Isak. “I mean. Sounds like a good time, right? If you mentioned it, he’d totally invite you to spend it with his family.”

Mutta snorts. “Maybe he can be your midnight kiss, Isak,” he smirks. “Maybe that’s the moment you two finally realize you belong together.”

Isak feels Even stiffen beside him. He’s hoping Even will say something, get him out of this fucking situation, and just when he thinks he’s going to have to get himself out of this uncomfortable position, Even finally speaks, though his voice isn’t as collected as it usually is. His knee is pressed tightly against Isak’s, and Isak presses back in comfort. “I don’t think types like Julian are Isak’s speed.”

Everyone pauses. Magnus blinks. “Er, what?”

Even shrugs, but it feels stilted against Isak’s arm. “You know. Not taller than him. Arrogant. Trust fund kid. Seems a little desperate to me, too,” Even holds up his hands for a moment before dropping them back onto his lap. Isak thinks it’s meant to look like a casual gesture, but instead it looks like someone grabbed his arms and moved them as stiffly as you would a Barbie doll’s. “That’s just my impression, though.”

There’s silence. Looking at it from an outside perspective, Isak can kind of understand why. Even’s never been the type to outright insult anyone he hardly knows — he’s all kinds of happy and kind and forgiving (see: his entire fucked up situation with Isak) and even when he’s got a reason to be angry with someone, he usually stays quiet about it, seethes silently. As far as Isak’s seen, anyway. He’s never seen such an extreme reaction out of Even, and he can deduce, by the way everyone’s
blinking uncomfortably at him, that they haven’t, either. The fact that he’s being vocal about disliking — or, well, distrust — Julian has most obviously stopped everyone in their tracks, confusing them for a moment.

Isak’s leg bounces nervously, unable to come up with a reason that isn’t “it’s okay, Even’s just trying to get me out of an uncomfortable situation, it’s the only reason he seems out of character right now”, but before he can even find any words, Yousef interjects quietly.

“I think I agree with Even,” he says slowly, eyeing Even’s rigid posture cautiously. “Maybe not as, erm, passionately,” he clears his throat. “But it’s true. Julian can be playing an act in front of you guys to win a shot at Isak,” he tries, and it sounds a little out-of-ass to Isak, but, well. He’ll take it, considering his other out is currently frozen beside him. “So we’re just looking out for him.”

There’s still silence. Mahdi coughs awkwardly. Isak thinks that if death were offered to him in this moment, he’d welcome it with open arms and then ask to be taken to the deepest depths of hell, where no one would be able to find him ever again.

“That’s…” Magnus blinks himself out of his shock. “I mean, that’s probably not true, but — I guess I can see where you guys are coming from?”

“Definitely coming from another fucking dimension, jeez,” Mahdi mutters.

“Look,” Jonas offers, mediating. “Let’s just — forget about Julian, alright? If Sana were here, we’d all be getting another verbal beating, so I think we should live our lives and have our conversations as if Sana Bakkoush were always watching.”

Yousef is staring at his lap. Even is staring straight ahead. Isak is looking around at everyone’s expressions, trying to pinpoint exactly what they’re feeling, but it’s obvious they’re masters at schooling them — no one’s expression betrays an obvious emotion, or an unspoken thought, even, and Isak feels like if he didn’t have both Even and Yousef in his corner, his expression might just have given away all of his secrets.

Sometimes it’s so difficult to get through to these guys. Isak is fond of every single one of them, but the fact that they still keep trying to plant the idea of a date with Julian is getting exhausting — so exhausting, in fact, that a tiny part of Isak wonders if maybe he should just give them the satisfaction, then tell them all it didn’t work out and that their efforts were for naught, and they’d all live happily ever after, save for maybe Julian, but — well, Isak shouldn’t be so presumptuous. He’s hardly make or break material, after all.

“So,” Mutta clears his throat suddenly, disrupting the silence. “Did anyone catch the game last night?”

Mahdi frowns. “What game?”

“Any game,” Mutta presses desperately.

“Sure,” Jonas helps him out. “It was a great match. Love football. Watching the real thing is better than playing FIFA, that’s for sure.”

“It’s not even football season,” Magnus points out, and everyone shoots a heavy glare at Magnus. He blinks at all of them, then shrugs lightly, obviously confused. “Or, I mean, yeah. Great game.”

“I’d like to contribute to the conversation a whooping hurrah for whatever team we were rooting for last night,” Yousef jumps in, and the rest of the guys nod, obviously very delighted to partake in a conversation about a fake football match played between two fake football teams in order to escape
the awkward fake anger Even suddenly spewed in order to get Isak out of an uncomfortable situation he no longer wanted to be a part of.

“Too bad we lost,” Mahdi contributes, and they all groan sympathetically.

Are they literally sitting here making up an entire football match?

“All of you are ridiculous,” Isak says for the second time tonight. “We can move past the Julian thing, you know. It’s fine, we’re all fine, right, Even?”

He turns over to look at Even, who still looks stoic, both of his hands pressed tightly against his lap. Everyone’s looking over at him, and they look a little alarmed now, so Isak has to elbow him slightly in the stomach to get him to break out of his stupor. Even blinks for a moment, then turns to look at Isak, posture immediately relaxing when their gazes meet. “Hm?”

“We’re all good here?” Isak presses. “No more Julian talk?”

“Oh, that,” Even waves the concern off, turning back to everyone else. “Yeah, it’s whatever. Sorry for getting a little overbearing there,” he smiles easily, and it seems to work on everyone else, who, one by one, start relaxing their postures as well, some shoulders even slumping. “I’m sure the guy’s just great.” The boys start to smile, and Isak begins to relax against Even, who moves very subtly even closer to Isak. Isak doesn’t lean away. “Oh, and also,” Even smirks suddenly. “Superman is absolutely the better superhero out of all your contributions, no contest.”

“Oh, that,” Even waves the concern off, turning back to everyone else. “Yeah, it’s whatever. Sorry for getting a little overbearing there,” he smiles easily, and it seems to work on everyone else, who, one by one, start relaxing their postures as well, some shoulders even slumping. “I’m sure the guy’s just great.” The boys start to smile, and Isak begins to relax against Even, who moves very subtly even closer to Isak. Isak doesn’t lean away. “Oh, and also,” Even smirks suddenly. “Superman is absolutely the better superhero out of all your contributions, no contest.”

“Uhm!” Mahdi leans forward. “I will fight you right there.”

“Feel free to,” Even shrugs. “I’ve got bullet points for days.”

“You would like the do-gooder,” Mutta rolls his eyes.

Isak doesn’t say it, but he absolutely agrees. Favoriting Superman over any other superhero speaks volumes of the type of person Even is, and it’s — honestly, it’s as frustrating as it is endearing. Much like everything else about his personality.

Ugh. Isak hates him.

“Yousef, come here,” Mahdi waves Yousef over, who grins and immediately makes his way to sit next to Mahdi. “We’re tag-teaming.”

“Understood.” Yousef smirks.

“Who are you guys even defending?” Mutta raises an eyebrow.

Mahdi and Yousef glance at each other. “Uhm,” Mahdi blinks. “Captain America, I guess?”

Yousef shrugs. “I can live with that.”

Even gasps dramatically. “Betrayed by my own best friend?” he clutches his hand over his chest. “What is this? The Flashpoint series?”

“Stop being a geek,” Isak interjects, and Even glares at him playfully.

“What about you, Isak?” he waggles his eyebrows at him, and Isak is trying very hard not to blush. It’s so fucking stupid, how all Even has to do is look at him nowadays, maybe smile, on good days, and Isak wants to melt into the floor. If he were any stupider, he’d lean in right now and kiss him,
because that’s what Isak’s instinct is yelling at him to do — thankfully, he’s not any stupider, so instead he lets Even continue. “Are you on my team?”

His instincts act up again, wanting to say yes, fuck, anything you’d like, but he reminds himself, once again, that he has a little bit more dignity than that, so he shakes his head. “I’m with my best friend,” Isak replies, pointing at Jonas, who whoops victoriously. “I’m afraid you’re on your own on this one.”

Even sighs forlornly as Isak stands from the couch and makes his way over to sit next to Jonas. Without looking up from his phone, Jonas holds up a hand to the side, which Isak high fives obediently.

“Alone again,” Even pouts.

Mutta sniffs. “Not as alone as me,” he glares accusingly at Even. “I have to defend Iron Man on my own.”

Even grins. “If you switch over to Superman we have more manpower.”

Mutta considers this. “Okay,” he relents. Magnus cackles.

“You have no sense of loyalty!”

“I do, too!” Mutta glares at him, then points at Even. “It lies right over there. My sense of loyalty towards Even has caused me to switch sides.”

“Aw,” Even grins, and spreads his arms open. “Come here.”

Mutta obediently jumps over to the couch Isak’s just left and into Even’s arms, where Even wraps them around Mutta, who has now situated himself comfortably with his head on Even’s chest.

That’s good, Isak thinks very carefully. Even deserves to be cuddled. Wasn’t Isak supposed to tell Mutta to cuddle him more often? Jesus. Maybe he did. Maybe he can’t remember. Maybe he should shut the fuck up and glance at Jonas’s phone nosily and see what’s been keeping him occupied this entire time, to maybe stop his head from being ridiculous.

He manages to catch a glimpse of the contact name above the text conversation. Eva. Isak’s stomach sinks. He looks away quickly, jaw clenched, and he catches Mahdi’s eye, who looks at Isak with the same worried expression Isak feels he’s been wearing around Jonas all the time now. Both he and Mahdi don’t communicate anything other than worry and exhaustion with their gazes, and then they break eye contact, both of them bringing their attention to a demanding Magnus.

Magnus stands from his seat, clearing his throat. “Since I’m defending no one — because even though Batman is clearly the superior hero here—” Everyone boos. “Hey! I am speaking. Because even though Batman is clearly the superior hero—” Everyone boos again, and Magnus glares at them. “I hate all of you.”

Even laughs. “We get it, Magnus, you’ll be the judge,” he nods his head. “Let us know who you would like to start with.”

Magnus contemplates this, looking over all of them. He grins. “Yousef and Mahdi, talk to me about Captain America.”

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In the end, Superman wins.

Isak has the sneaking suspicion it’s mostly because Even smiles at all of them charmingly and it leaves all of them flustered.

Some more than others, Isak thinks.

Even catches Isak’s gaze as Mutta gloats over their victory, then beams at him.

Yeah, Isak thinks, stomach fluttering. Some more than others.

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Chris Berg has a house big enough so that any party she throws looks like it’s not well-attended, even though almost everyone shows up to the house. As far as Isak knows, Chris inherited the house from her parents, who moved to Scotland for work, so now she lives in it alone, and Isak wonders if she ever gets lonely in such a big space. Eva’s told Isak that Vilde practically lives with her, though, save when she’s taking care of her mom, so he’s not too worried. For either of them.

In any case, Chris’s house is so big her parties usually aren’t crowded or sweaty — tonight, however, is something of an exception, considering Isak’s already smelling alcohol all over the people he pushes past to reach the spot where he’d left Mahdi and Jonas. They’ve all been here for about an hour and a half, putting up with the smell and the screaming, but outside of this crowd isn’t so bad, if only he hadn’t gotten lost in it on his way to the kitchen. It’s gross and annoying, and he considers just walking out the front door and letting his friends find him, instead, but Isak perseveres, pushing forward. He can get through this crowd if it means finding his friends again.

Despite that totally wonderful and obviously effective pep talk, after a minute of trying to find his way through the crowd, Isak starts feeling his lungs constrict and his vision blur, and just as he’s starting to gasp desperately for air, he feels someone reach out and grab his wrist. Isak’s about to turn around and kick whoever he needs to, but immediately relaxes when he meets Even’s gaze, which looks relieved and yet simultaneously worried.

“Hey,” Even shouts over the crowd, searching his expression. “You okay?”

Isak shakes his head once. “Too many people” is all he’s able to get out, not having enough energy to lie to Even. Even nods in understanding, pulling him in a direction Isak hadn’t thought of heading towards, and before he knows it, he’s out of the danger zone — the crowd seems to have accumulated mostly in the living room, and now he’s safe in the dining room right beside it, where a crowd is still present but it’s not constricting, or, you know, trying to kill Isak. He takes a deep breath, closing his eyes and trying to concentrate on regulating his breathing.

He’s having a ridiculously hard time doing so, until he feels two hands cradle his face gently, making him momentarily forget about his breathing pattern. The touch is warm and familiar, skin smooth against his, and when he opens his eyes, it’s only to meet Even’s concerned ones, which are studying Isak’s face carefully. Isak is not surprised — he could know Even’s welcome touch in the most extenuating of circumstances, accustomed to the way his thumbs stroke Isak’s cheekbones softly, as if he were trying not to break him. For this, Isak inhales a deep breath, concentrating on the blue of Even’s eyes rather than the panic settling in his stomach.

“Hey,” Even raises both his eyebrows. “Look at me.”

Isak’s already looking at him, thanks very much. And it’s not like he’s looking at very much else these days, either.
“Breathe with me,” Even instructs, and Isak nods uselessly. When Even inhales exaggeratedly, Isak follows suit, and exhales in time with him, too. They do this for a couple of more breaths, until Isak feels the air slowly and carefully settle back into his lungs, his vision finally focusing behind his glasses. He swallows harshly, momentarily relieved, and then he realizes he’s standing in the middle of a party, Even’s hands on either side of his face, being a fucking ridiculous child.

He pulls back hastily and coughs awkwardly, leaving Even bewildered where he stands. “Uhm,” Isak rubs the back of his neck. “Thanks, but it was just — really hot in there.”

Even nods. “Yeah, I get it,” he smiles. “Feeling better, though?”

Isak nods. “Yeah,” he returns Even’s smile, if only because it’s so fucking hard not to. “How long have you been here?”

“Uhm,” Even frowns, then looks down at his watch. “Two hours? Give or take a half,” he replies, and Isak nods.

“Me, too,” he replies, and Even’s eyebrows rise.

“What, seriously?” Isak nods. Even laughs. “I’ve been looking for you the entire time I’ve been here. I was totally sure I could find you in a crowd-full of people.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Definitely not this crowd.”

Even grins and steps closer to Isak, leaning down to talk in his ear — presumably to make sure Isak can hear him, but all it does is make Isak shiver and want to turn his head slightly to the right to close the distance between their lips. They probably could, and it’d go unnoticed at this party, lost with the rest of the going ons here, but he doesn’t risk it, instead listens to what Even has to say to him.

“Come find me later,” he requests, and Isak smirks.

“Why don’t you come find me?” he asks, and Even laughs and pulls away, only slightly.

“I already did,” he points out, and Isak supposes he can concede to that point. “Besides, Mutta’s asked me to be his wingman tonight. We’re looking for the perfect girl to be his midnight kiss, apparently.”

“Look for the one who’s not drunk,” Isak suggests, and Even grins.

“Way ahead of you, Valtersen,” he winks. “You’ll find me, though?”

Even’s looking at Isak as if he doesn’t already know the answer, which is so fucking ridiculous it makes Isak’s head hurt. Isak’s said yes to Even so many times he could write a self-help book about saying yes to any situation to welcome opportunities in your life, but he realizes that every time, every single time he’s said yes it’s because he’s wanted to, and maybe it’s foreign to Isak because he’s spent so many years not allowing himself to want for fear of repercussions but now — here’s a situation where he doesn’t have to. There’s this, and it’s uncomplicated, and he’s happy he can have this. He is.

“I’ll find you,” he promises, and Even beams at him. Isak’s heart constricts, and he wants to kiss that smile right off of Even’s lips, feel it for himself. Even’s eyes flicker down to Isak’s lips, and he can tell Even wants to do the same — but they both seem to refrain, even though they haven’t had sex since Even came back from holiday, because their roommates have been oh so very present all the time. So all they’ve really managed to do lately is make out quietly in their rooms and then force themselves apart until their dicks come down from where they’d found excitement, and this is only building up their frustration.
Isak could, in theory, go find someone else tonight to make out with. Maybe let them blow him. He could, and he’s allowed to, but he’s looking into Even’s eyes and he kind of doesn’t want to.

He wonders if Even’s going to.

“Uhm,” Isak shakes himself out of those thoughts. “Yeah, have fun,” he smiles lamely, and Even’s expression turns curious. “I’ve gotta go find Jonas and Mahdi, I ditched them accidentally.”

Even nods. “You’ll be careful?”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Goodbye, Even.”

Even smiles softly at Isak, and Isak doesn’t let him get another word in, instead turning around quickly and walking towards the kitchen he can now actually see, where he’d left Jonas and Mahdi about ten minutes ago. Fifteen? Five, maybe. How long had he been trapped in that fucking crowd?

When Jonas sees him approaching, he holds out his arms in question. “Where was the bathroom, man?”

Isak finally reaches the two and sighs. “I had to use the one upstairs,” he explains. “The two down here are being used for very exciting sex, as far as I could hear.”

Mahdi shakes his head. “Public bathroom sex,” he smirks. “Gotta check that off my bucket list someday.”

Isak coughs and thanks the universe his blush can be chalked up to how hot it’s beginning to get in the house, despite the brutal cold outside. He’s trying very hard to keep his expression neutral and not nostalgic, now thinking about Even fucking him against the bathroom stall at that club, and now he’s thinking about Even again, and he only stops when Jonas is snapping his fingers in front of him.

“Huh?” he blinks over at Jonas, who rolls his eyes.

“Jesus, dude, where the fuck do you go?” He doesn’t wait for an answer from Isak, which is just as well, because he doesn’t have one that isn’t I just find myself thinking about my fuck buddy a lot nowadays, no big deal. “I asked if you know where Eva is.”

“Oh, uhm,” he blinks at Mahdi, who looks unamused at the question, then Isak looks around as if he’s going to spot her with this many people in the house. “No, sorry, dude,” he replies, grimacing sympathetically. “Lost her when we got here.”

Jonas nods tightly, and Mahdi gives him a look. “Why are you looking for her, dude? You’re just gonna find her with Noora.”

Isak shakes his head. “Noora’s still in London with her boyfriend’s family,” he says, and Mahdi’s eyebrows rise.

“Boyfriend?”

Isak blinks. “You didn’t know?”

“It never came up,” Mahdi eyes Jonas suspiciously, but Jonas avoids his gaze pointedly, seemingly trying to catch a glimpse of Eva through the crowd.

“I’m gonna go look for her,” he decides, looking at Isak. “I’ll come back.”

Yeah, right. Once Jonas finds Eva, he’s not coming back to him and Mahdi, he knows that for a fact.
Maybe that’s why neither he or Mahdi say goodbye to him once he’s making his way past Isak, and they both watch him go with disapproving expressions. When he turns to look back at Mahdi, the poor guy looks exhausted, and Isak can understand the sentiment.

“What are we supposed to do about that?” Mahdi asks Isak, gesturing towards the kitchen’s exit, where they’d watched Jonas disappear into the crowd. Isak would think it’s a rhetorical question, were it not for the expectant look on Mahdi’s face as he looks at Isak right now, and Isak wishes he had an answer for Mahdi, really, he does; in fact, he wishes he had an answer for everything that had to do with social interactions, but he doesn’t, and he shakes his head helplessly in order to communicate this to Mahdi.

“I don’t know,” he admits, and Mahdi deflates some. “It’s not like he wants our help. He keeps pushing us away.”

Mahdi purses his lips. “Dude, listen,” he looks at Isak seriously, so Isak does as he’s told — he listens. “Eventually, Eva’s going to find herself in a serious relationship. Maybe it’s not going to be Noora, who the fuck knows, I’m not well-versed in that dynamic, not enough to know where that’s gonna lead, but all I’m saying is he can’t keep pining after her forever,” he raises both of his eyebrows at Isak expectantly, so Isak nods solemnly. “I don’t care what excuses he’s coming up with in his head, that,” Mahdi gestures towards the kitchen exit once again. “Is not healthy.”

Well, it’s not like Isak disagrees. Still—“Mahdi, I’ve been trying to dissuade that asshole from making stupid decisions since I was thirteen years old, and the one thing I’ve learned since then is that if he doesn’t want to be dissuaded, he’s not going to be,” he replies, and Mahdi huffs. “If he is, it’s because he wanted to be, so there’s no point in patting yourself on the back for your victory. Jonas is — just as much as he’s caring and sympathetic, he’s also unwavering in his decisions; that’s literally part of the reason why Eva broke up with him in high school,” he points out, and Mahdi’s expression flashes with something like remembrance. “What do you suggest will make him change now?”

Mahdi pauses. “That?” he offers Isak, and Isak blinks at him, confused. “We could remind him this is exactly why Eva decided they weren’t good for each other, and that maybe he should take a time-out or something, I don’t fucking know,” he shrugs. “We could set him up with someone.”

Isak snorts. Jonas and his very special taste? They’d need a miracle. “Fine,” he replies, only because he has no more energy to keep up discussing this. “We’ll figure this out some other time, alright? The music’s too loud to concentrate here.”

Mahdi nods in agreement. “Alright,” he replies. “Hey, hand me a beer.”

Isak turns around to grab one of the cans resting on the island behind him, and when he turns around they’re being joined by an agitated-looking Elias, who’s looking past them and scanning the kitchen crowd. Isak and Mahdi exchange a look, before they turn back to Elias.

“Hey,” Isak greets, and Elias looks down at Isak, almost as if he hadn’t realized he’d been standing there. Isak narrows his eyes. “Everything okay?” he asks slowly.

Elias nods dismissively. “Fine,” he replies curtly, turning back to scan the crowd behind him now. Mahdi gives Isak a look, and Isak shrugs in reply, adamant that he’s done all he can in this situation to find out what Elias is so angry about.

Before Mahdi can attempt to bring Elias back, however, the other man turns around and looks at the both of them. “Have either of you seen Sana around?”
Isak shakes his head, and Mahdi follows suit when Elias’s eyes find his.

Elias growls and rubs at his head. “I can’t find her anywhere,” he says, and Isak blinks up at him.

“Is she alright?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” Elias replies, and Isak is absolutely not understanding what’s happening right now. When he meets Mahdi’s gaze again, he nods at Isak once, then reaches out to tap at Elias’s shoulder. Elias turns around and looks at Mahdi.

“I’ll help you find her,” he offers, and Elias seems to relax some at the offer.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, dude, lead the way,” Mahdi hands Isak his empty beer can instead of taking the one Isak was about to give him, nodding over to where Elias is already exiting the kitchen. “I’ll find you later.”

“Yeah, don’t sweat it,” Isak tells him, and as Mahdi is leaving, he calls out a hearty, “Good luck!”

They’re gone an instant after that, and Isak stands alone in the kitchen, which, funnily enough, is where he always finds himself at large parties like these. He doesn’t mind it, likes having some time to think for himself, but he also wishes he’d just stayed home instead, if this is what he was going to be doing for the night. He sets down Mahdi’s empty beer can and instead opens the new one Isak had grabbed, listening to the sizzle after he folds the tab on his beer. He takes a sip of it, not really in the mood to get too drunk after the debacle in the crowd, and he moves over to where Mahdi had been leaning against the counter to do the same.

He’s maybe stood there for about fifteen minutes, politely rejecting three drunk girls’ advances, when he spots Chris walking over to him, large smile on her face. Isak can’t help but smile back; her smile’s always been endearing and contagious, which are also adjectives that can describe her personality. “Hi, Isak!” she nearly-shouts as she reaches him, and Isak laughs.

“Hi, Chris,” he gestures aimlessly around the kitchen. “Nice party.”

“As per usual,” Chris grins, and Isak tilts his head in agreement. “Where are the guys?”

“Oh, uhm,” Isak wrinkles his nose. “Jonas went to look for Eva, Mahdi’s helping Elias find Sana, and I believe Magnus is following Vilde around,” he shrugs. “And I, of course, am here.”

“Brooding,” Chris offers, and Isak scoffs.

“Skulking,” Isak corrects, and it prompts a laugh out of Chris.

“So you’re not looking for a dance partner?” Chris waggles her eyebrows. “I can find you one. Kasper brought a lot of his friends over,” she frowns. “Granted, a lot of them look like they’re thirty, but there are a couple who look about our age. They’re, as the Spanish say, caliente.”

Isak shakes his head, amused. “I don’t dance, Chris,” he replies. “I don’t think there’s a soul on earth who could convince me to do so.”

Chris sighs dramatically. “You’re the worst gay to ever gay.”

“Were you anyone else, I’d resent that,” he raises an eyebrow at her, and Chris waves him off.

“I’m drunk, I get a pass,” she looks over her shoulder for a moment, before seemingly making a decision to lean against her kitchen island, the way Isak had been doing when Mahdi was present.
She’s now standing directly in front of Isak, looking like she’s catching her breath.

“Rough night?” Isak asks sympathetically, and Chris shakes her head.

“Just walking around, making sure no one’s breaking anything,” she replies. “I hid most of my valuables, mind you, but I don’t doubt some of those assholes would find something.”

“Taking a break, then?”

“Kasper’s on the case for now,” Chris grins. “You know your boyfriend’s a keeper when he spends a party looking out for your shit instead of having fun.”

Isak laughs. “Sure,” he agrees, because he’s not going to sit here and lecture Chris on the dangers of heartbreak — one, because it’s New Year’s Eve, two, because it’s her party, and three, because Isak doesn’t think Chris would listen to him at all — well, nobody else really listens to him, but he thinks Chris would just roll her eyes and leave him talking to himself half a sentence in, which is far more brutal than anyone else’s reaction. “How’s, uh,” Isak shifts his weight. “How’s Vilde?”

Chris doesn’t seem to notice this is absolutely the start of a fishing session. “She’s good,” she replies. “Stressed because of the wedding, but at least she enjoys meeting with the bride now.”

“She hasn’t seemed—” Isak searches for the right word. “I don’t know, a little subdued?”

Chris frowns. “Maybe, but I think it’s just the stress?”

Isak looks at her. “Or maybe it’s because of Noora.”

Chris sighs. “I don’t know, Isak,” she shakes her head. “Neither of them are very upfront about the situation, but as far as I see, Noora’s taken a liking to her,” she frowns. “I mean, granted, she’s really impatient sometimes, because she hasn’t known Vilde as long as we have, obviously, but she’s starting to get the hang of her.”

Isak purses his lips. “And is Vilde feeling that way?”

“I think Vilde’s feeling like Noora’s taking her best friend away from her,” Chris replies with a shrug. “Which is normal to feel, right? I mean, there’s a shit ton of love between Eva and Vilde, and that hasn’t changed, but Eva’s been a little — erm, how do I put this delicately?”

“Obsessed?”

“Smitten,” Chris speaks over him, and they both look at each other for a moment. Both he and Chris laugh at the fact, then Chris nods. “Well, basically,” she agrees. “And I see why, I mean, Noora’s really hot.”

“Conventionally,” he mutters bitterly.

“And Eva’s fucking beautiful, obviously, and were it physically possible their babies would be supermodels, so the fact that there’s something there isn’t a surprise to me at all—”

“Wait,” Isak holds up a hand. “There’s something there?”

Chris blinks at Isak. “I mean, yeah,” she snorts. “Have you seen the way Noora looks at Eva when she’s not looking? Sorry about it, but if there’s one thing I’m sure of, is when someone is giving someone else The Look of Longing, and Noora’s wearing it almost all the time around her.”

Isak shakes his head. “She’s straight.”
“Maybe,” Chris offers him. “But if you fall for a woman, then are you really?”

“Were Noora really into Eva, I think she’d have dumped the boyfriend by now,” he counters. “Eva’s worth it. And if she doesn’t see that by now, then she won’t see it ever.”

Chris looks at him a little worriedly, but before she can say anything, someone alerts the party loudly that there is only fifteen minutes until midnight. Chris pushes herself off the counter and grins at Isak. “Gotta go find my boy toy,” she tells Isak. “These lips are not gonna kiss themselves at midnight.”

Isak laughs. “Happy New Year, Chris.”

Chris’s expression turns fond, and she envelops Isak in a hug so quickly he almost stumbles over her. When he finds his balance, he laughs slightly, wrapping his arms around her waist and patting at her back awkwardly. She pulls away then, hands on Isak’s shoulders, and looks at him very seriously. “I wish you the best new year ever to come to you,” she tells him, and her voice is so sincere Isak has to avoid her gaze for a moment. “Listen to me. I have a feeling it’s gonna be really great for you. So don’t fuck it up, okay? I like to be right.”

Isak laughs uneasily. “Yeah, okay, got you.”

“Adieu, first love.”

Isak laughs as Chris turns around and runs straight into the crowd, barking at people to move. Isak stays where he is for a moment, then he sighs, putting the beer down. He looks at the clock hanging over the fridge, counting about thirteen minutes now until midnight. He remembers, suddenly, he’d told Even he would find him by now, and he swears under his breath when he pulls out his phone and finds it dead. There’s no way to call or text him to find out where he is now, so he’s going to have to venture out into the crowd to try and catch his eye.

With a deep breath, Isak exits the kitchen and makes his way to the dining room, pushing past people and scanning the room over and over, to the point where he thinks he might just be going in circles. He’s pretty sure Even’s not in the living room crowd, thinks he wouldn’t do that to Isak, so he keeps searching, in the dining room, at the foyer, along the stairs, the backyard; he reaches the TV room eventually, he thinks, where he hadn’t ventured before, and he still finds no sight of him. It’d be easier, Isak thinks, if there weren’t so many giants here tonight, making sure that Even would get lost in the sea of them.

He’s been looking for so long, in fact, that by the time someone yells out at the top of their lungs that it’s three minutes until midnight, he’s found himself back in the dining room, completely put-out. Isak’s debating whether or not he should push past towards the backyard again, but he suddenly feels two arms wrap around his neck from behind, and Isak stumbles in surprise as he turns around in them.

Eva’s grinning brightly up at him, and Isak smiles back, the sight of her always a welcome one. “Hi,” Isak greets her, and Eva’s grin grows wider.

“Isak Valtersen, we have to ring in the new year together,” she tells him very seriously, her words only slightly slurred. He’s proud of her, he thinks. By now, much like at every party, she’s already drunk out of her mind, enough so that Isak’s taking her home as she’s muttering incoherencies at him; so the fact that she only seems tipsy is a great feat for her. Isak holds her up straight by the waist anyway, smiling.

“You got it,” he tells her, then hesitates a moment before looking around. “I was just looking for—”
“Oh, there’s Jonas!” Eva squeals excitedly, waving him over to where they are as she steps back from her grasp on Isak. Isak turns back to find Jonas walking up to them, easy smile on his lips, raising an eyebrow at the two of them.

“Thought I lost you,” he tells Eva, and Eva snorts.

“You wish,” she teases, and Isak can’t bring himself to look at Jonas’s expression when she says this. Instead, he turns back around, eyes scanning what he can of the crowd again quickly. Behind him, Eva’s still gushing, unaware of Isak’s endgame.

“We’re the original trio, okay, I thought it appropriate we ring in this new year together,” she continues, and Isak is half-listening to her. At one point, he thinks he spots Even, but it happens to be some other blonde giraffe, so he keeps looking, irritated. “This is gonna mark our eighth year of knowing each other.”

“Ten for me and Isak,” Jonas points out, and Isak can’t help but throw a grin over at Jonas for the comment.

He doesn’t need to look at Eva to know she’s rolling her eyes. “You two weren’t really living until I was in the picture,” she replies, and Isak huffs a laugh. He turns back to look at her, at the way she looks flushed and proud and fond, and Isak can’t help but feel his heart squeeze at the fact there’s still so much hope and love in this girl, his best friend, and he’s seen her go through so many hardships and she’s still here, she’s so strong, and Isak loves her very, very much. Against his better judgment, he loves her, the same way he loves Jonas. And he knows, as he’s always known, that if there are people he’s going to love, then he’s happy it’s these two. For however long they’ll allow him to. He’s been far too deep in this before he realized what love would cost him, after all.

Isak leans forward and presses a kiss to the top of Eva’s head. “You’re right,” he tells her softly, and Eva’s eyes shine brightly when she looks up at Isak, and, God, Isak’s pretty sure they’re glistening with tears, not shining. Isak sighs loudly. “Don’t do that,” he whines, and Eva laughs, offended, wiping at her eyes.

“Shut up,” she shoves him, then reaches over to grab Jonas’s wrist and pull him into a hug, too, arms wrapped tightly around his neck. Isak watches as Jonas’s eyes close, hands wrapped around her waist just as tightly, and Eva whispers something in Jonas’s ear that Isak can’t make out, which he thinks is the point — the words are meant for Jonas only, and when Jonas replies, they’re meant for Eva.

He has to look away, feeling like he’s intruding on a private moment, and right when the countdown begins at fifteen seconds, Isak’s eyes finally find the mop of blonde hair he’s been searching for for the past fifteen minutes. It seems like Even’s also scanning the room looking for something, and when his eyes finally meet Isak’s as the countdown hits ten, it’s obvious he’s found what he’s looking for.

Isak doesn’t think ten seconds is long enough to push past the crowd of excited, drunk partygoers and find their way to each other; he can’t think of anything else to do but offer Even a private smile, one he hopes conveys his regret at not being able to find him before midnight, and Even smiles at him right back — there’s something behind his expression that would speak volumes to Isak if he’d let himself hear it, but he doesn’t, so instead he lets the crowd yell the countdown at the top of their lungs, the noise almost muffled in Isak’s ears as he continues to watch Even through the five seconds, then the four, then the three, then the two, then the one —

Shouts of celebration suddenly bring Isak’s senses back towards himself, and when Even smiles at him a little ruefully, tilting his head in acknowledgment, Isak does the same.
He almost makes the rash decision to walk over to him as Even starts to fiddle with his phone, but then he’s watching in surprise as Magnus runs over to Even and plants a big kiss on his lips, lasting for a second or two, then running away, hands in the air victoriously amidst a battle cry. Isak can’t help it — he laughs at the ridiculousness of a drunk Magnus, and as Even blinks over at him in both confusion and amusement, he sees Mutta reach for him and envelop him in a bear hug, just as Eva pulls him and Jonas into a simultaneous hug. That’s the moment he loses Even to the crowd once again, but he doesn’t let himself feel the loss — instead, he holds tight to his two best friends, and offers them a happy new year, as well.

Midnight comes and goes, and this is maybe when the party really begins for everyone else, but for Isak, it’s cause for extreme exhaustion — it’s another year of happiness, he thinks, of being the several Isak he needs to be in order to keep up with the different people who speak to him, but then it’s another year of regrets, of lies, or knowing he’s not who he wants to be. Knowing there’s someone locked inside him, a cowardly little boy, and this is the part where Isak needs to sleep it off, remind himself of what Mahdi said a couple of days ago — the change of a calendar is arbitrary. It doesn’t really mean much, in the end, so when he says goodbye to his friends and finally makes it out the front door, it’s this thought that keeps his feet stepping one at a time, one in front of the other, rooted to the ground and not tripping over themselves.

He’s about to reach the sidewalk when he hears his name shouted behind him. He turns around and catches sight of Even running down the porch steps and towards him, even though he doesn’t have a reason to rush any longer, considering Isak’s halted his steps and is now waiting for him to reach him. His heart does a stupid flip when Even finally does reach him, though, and when he grins down at Isak, trying to catch his breath, Isak feels as if he, too, had been running. “Hi,” he greets, and Isak huffs. “Hi,” he replies, and they do nothing but look each at other for a moment, neither of them saying another word, gazes simply locked with each other’s. For a moment, Isak thinks they won’t say anything at all, but then Even’s reaching for Isak’s wrist and squeezing it.

“Hi,” he replies, and they do nothing but look each at other for a moment, neither of them saying another word, gazes simply locked with each other’s. For a moment, Isak thinks they won’t say anything at all, but then Even’s reaching for Isak’s wrist and squeezing it.

“Happy new year,” Even tells him, and Isak can’t do much else than mimic the sentiment, causing Even’s smile to brighten.

For a moment, this is how they stay — Even’s hand wrapped around Isak’s wrist and their gazes unwavering — until Even licks his lips, looking nervous, hesitant. Isak watches him curiously, his mannerisms, the way his mouth opens and closes for a moment, until he seems to finally muster up enough courage to say something.

“Listen, I—”

“Even!”

They both break apart instantly, looking over towards the front door, where they shout had originated from. They see a frantic Mutta wave his arms above his head, and when Isak glances at Isak in question, Even seems to be just as clueless as Isak.

“Elias!” Mutta shouts, and this seems to elicit a response from Even. “He’s doing the thing again!”

“Fuck,” Even mutters under his breath, then he turns towards Isak. “I’ve gotta go take care of that, but—” he licks his lips, eyeing Isak, who simply looks back at him with his eyebrows raised. “Yeah. I’ll see you soon?”

Isak smiles. “Sure,” he replies, and Even nods with purpose.
“Okay,” he seems to hesitate for another moment, before finally deciding to turn and sprint back towards the house, Mutta immediately leading the way inside when Even catches up to him. Isak stares at the open door for only a beat longer, before resigning himself to turning back around and making his way home.

People are flooding the streets in celebration, fireworks are illuminating the night sky, several different genres of music are echoing from different houses, mixing together in terrible harmony, but Isak’s only paying attention to his feet. One after the other. And his ears are ringing, but they’re not listening.

Just one foot after the other.

--

He doesn’t fight with his doorknob tonight, thankfully, and he takes one quick look around his empty apartment before taking his shoes off and making his way to the bedroom.

When he’s in there, he quickly strips of everything save for his boxers and walks over to his bed, sitting down on the mattress and searching for his phone charger on the floor. When he finally finds it, he plugs his phone in, resting it on the bedside table as he walks over to Galileo’s fish tank. The fish is still swimming around aimlessly, despite the time, and Isak presses his hand against the glass, opting out of trying to get his attention tonight.

He smiles softly at it — eight years of owning this fish, now, and Isak wonders how much longer he’ll last, and what exactly Isak plans to do when that day comes. He tilts his head and lets his eyes trail the fish’s movement for a couple of more seconds before he decides to stop thinking this way, instead straightening his back and making his way to the bathroom, intent on washing his face and brushing his teeth.

When he’s done, he sets his glasses on the bedside table and rubs at the bridge of his nose — he notices, then, that his phone has come back to life, and there are several notifications lighting up his lock screen. Isak picks it up and eyes all of them.

There are three from Julian, which make Isak pause for a second, breathe for three. There are four from Eskild, one from Sara, two from his dad, and then, right at the top, one from Even.

He doesn’t think twice before sliding that one open first, allowing his phone to take him straight to Even’s text conversation.

And there, in a gray box sent to him exactly at midnight, there’s simply:

EVEN

😊

Chapter End Notes

i’m on tumblr, if you’d like to come say hi!

once again, i cannot tell you how long the next update is going to take. hopefully, things
will be okay after today and i’ll have more time to dedicate to writing. plot’s starting to pick up from here — the next four chapters are more plot-heavy, so. (don’t worry, still plenty of evak.) i love y’all! i hope you’re enjoying it so far!

much much love to you, and thank you, as always, for reading!
Galileo Galilei (Part Two)

Chapter Notes

**HEY!** stop right here if you have not read part one of this chapter (the chapter before this!) because it seems a lot of you are reading this first and it'll make no sense if you don't!!! ily!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A couple of days after New Year’s finds Isak lying on the living room couch, staring unseeingly at the television in front of him. Today’s his day off, and he’s been surfing the channels aimlessly, finding nothing interesting to watch, as per usual. He considers rewatching Narcos on Netflix, but he’s also aware that by the fourth time rewatching a show you may have a problem, so he’s holding out on that particular decision until he feels exceptionally desperate.

His phone vibrates with a text from Jonas, who’s been talking to him about the theory of time travel — or, rather, asking Isak his opinion on the theory, since he’s apparently watching an American show that deals with the subject and he wants to be able to understand what’s happening, even though Isak is sure they’re explaining it vaguely for a reason. Still, Isak’s been humoring him, replying to all of the questions he knows the answers to.

When he sends his latest text, there’s an urgent knock at the door. Isak looks over at it accusingly, aware that he’s invited no one over today. Even had some bridal photoshoot or something to get to today, which meant he can’t see Isak until later tonight, and Eva’s still at work, and he’s texting with Jonas, and Magnus and Mahdi wouldn’t show up unannounced—

No, they would. With a long sigh, he pushes himself off the couch as another urgent knock rings through his apartment. Annoyed, he shouts, “I’m coming, Jesus,” and finally reaches the door, unlocking it and pulling it open.

He barely has time to register it’s Vilde who’s at the door before she’s pushing past him and into the apartment, pacing impatiently back and forth at the entrance.

“Uhm, come in?” Isak blinks uselessly, turning back to look at her as he closes the door. Vilde looks down at her shoes and then hastily takes them off, as if only just remembering, then she continues to bounce on her feet, avoiding Isak’s gaze. Isak crosses his arms over his chest and waits for Vilde to say something, anything, really, but she doesn’t, so instead—

“Eva’s not here, you know.”

Vilde’s gaze snaps up to meet Isak’s, and she looks far more panicked than is normal for Vilde. Isak frowns, taking a step towards her carefully, tilting his head in concern. “Are you alright?” he asks. “Do you need something to drink?”

Vilde shakes her head. “No,” she croaks, then clears her throat. “No,” she repeats, this time firmly. “I know Eva’s not here. I need to talk to you.”

Isak stares at her, waiting for her to continue, but it seems as if she’s waiting for encouragement, so his eyes flicker around the room bemusedly before he meets Vilde’s gaze again. “Uh, okay?”
Vilde nods once. “Okay,” she pulls out her phone and starts scrolling through it, leaving Isak useless and motionless in front of her, waiting for the rest of the statement. Finally, she finds what she needs to, then turns over the screen and shoves it into Isak’s nose so quickly that Isak has to take a step back before it hits his face completely. Vilde lowers the phone, looking sheepish. “Sorry,” she apologizes, then raises the phone again, this time at an acceptable distance from Isak’s face. “Look.”

Isak does. He sees a Facebook profile — it’s private, but there’s a picture of a man with a brooding smile on his face, looking like he’d rather be taking a shit on the toilet, and Isak’s not sure what Vilde’s trying to show him, because he doesn’t know the guy, until he realizes the picture’s a selfie of him and — Noora.

Isak looks at the profile’s name. William Magnusson. Right.

Isak looks past the phone and at Vilde. “You didn’t know Noora had a boyfriend?” he guesses, and Vilde shakes her head.

“No, it’s not that,” she replies, locking her phone and pocketing it in her coat again. “I know him.”

Isak blinks. “What?”

“So,” Vilde shifts her weight. “Sana came to me like, last week talking to me about how worried she was about Eva, and her relationship with Noora,” she explains, and Isak nods once, already knowing this. “Well, I told her I didn’t know there was anything to worry about, and Sana was all like, ‘Well, there’s Noora’s boyfriend, for one’, and I said, ‘Oh, yeah, there is that guy, where has he been?’ and then Sana was all, ‘Well, I don’t know, but we should find out and talk to Eva before all of this gets even more complicated’, and I, of course, agreed, because Sana tends to know everything, but we couldn’t continue our conversation there because then Eva and Chris joined the table, and I only just remembered like three days ago about checking up on Noora’s boyfriend because Eva texted me asking me if I wanted to hang out with Noora and her after Eva gets off work, and I couldn’t, anyway, because I have a meeting with Mari, who’s been stressing so much over her dress, you wouldn’t believe, even though she looks unbelievable gorgeous in it—”


Isak frowns. “Yeah, I got that. So — you know him from…?”

Vilde bites her lip. “There was a wedding I went to with my boss, you know, as her assistant, where we were making sure everything was going smoothly, and it was in London and I speak better English than Angela, who’s French, by the way, but her Norwegian is better than her English because she actually grew up with a Norwegian mom—”

“Vilde, I swear to God—”

“Oh, sorry, right,” Vilde nods. “So I was at the front and seating people, showing them where they were situated, and then I ran into Ingrid.”

Isak blinks. “The bitch in high school?”

“Oh, not anymore,” Vilde waves him off. “We made up after high school, don’t you remember?” Well, no. He doesn’t. “Anyway, we say hi and we’re super excited to see each other because what are the chances, right? Seeing each other at a wedding in London? And I ask her who she’s here for and she tells me the bride is her cousin and I talk to her for a second and then I notice a tall man standing next to her, just kind of like, politely waiting, I guess, and I was like, oh, is this your plus
one? And Ingrid told me he was, and that his name was William, and I said hello and he said hello and then I let them into the wedding and obviously didn’t think twice about it until now that I know he’s Noora’s boyfriend.”

Isak takes a moment to let all of that settle in. Then: “He could have been her friend or something,” he points out after a moment. “And it could have been long ago, when he and Noora weren’t dating.”

“Right!” Vilde nods in agreement. “I thought that, too. So then I went back in my Google calendar to see when that wedding had happened, and it was only last year, and as far as I know Noora’s been with him for like, ever, so I was like, okay, maybe they were taking a break, right?” Vilde waits for Isak to nod stupidly. “Right, so then I was like, I guess the only way to really find out is to go straight to the source.”

Isak gapes. “You went to William?”

“What? No! Do you think I’m crazy?” Vilde rolls her eyes. “I went to Ingrid, we got together and talked about some things, and then I got super serious and I asked her, listen, that guy you went to the wedding with last year, was he your boyfriend? And then Ingrid got all uncomfortable and admitted that she thought he could be, but about two months after the wedding, she found out he had a girlfriend, and Ingrid has sworn off of taken guys after high school, so she was really pissed and called him a pig and threatened to tell his girlfriend, but William apparently told her he’d pay her off not to say anything.”

“And—” Isak shakes his head. “She took the money?”

Vilde grimaces. “She did. She felt terrible about it, mind you, but she really needed the money to pay for her bills, you know how the workforce is nowadays, so she just stopped seeing William and never told Noora. But now I know that he was cheating on Noora for at least half a year, and that’s not all — he apparently sleeps around all the time, Ingrid told me that William told her that he wasn’t looking for anything serious, so he was exploring his options, and Ingrid had caught him hooking up with at least two girls until he finally agreed to go to her cousin’s wedding with her, and she thought she was finally getting somewhere until, you know. She realized he wasn’t just a man slut, he was a cheating man slut.” Vilde takes a breath. “Ingrid said she could understand his sleeping around when he told Ingrid he didn’t want anything serious. But when he found out he had been in a serious relationship the entire time — well, that’s when she knew he was worth absolutely nothing.”

There’s silence between them save for Vilde attempting to catch her breath, and Isak’s trying to find his footing here. He’s trying to figure out just what, exactly, he’s supposed to take from all of this — Noora’s boyfriend is an asshole, right. Eva’s been telling Isak this from day one, but he never knew to what extent he was an asshole, so now he’s standing here feeling a little sorry for Noora, even though she’s totally fucking with Eva’s brain, and unsure of how to proceed with this information. He’s so bad at this. So, so bad.

“Uhm,” he finally clears his throat, and Vilde looks at him. “Have you told Sana about this?”

Vilde shakes her head. “I don’t know who I should tell,” she admits. “I’m telling you because I needed to get it off my chest and you probably know Eva better than I do at this point, so — do you think I should tell her? Maybe tell Noora, instead?”

Isak sputters. How is he supposed to know? He hasn’t been part of this much drama since freshman year of high school, Jesus. His endgame here, anyway, is always to look after Eva, and even if Noora’s boyfriend is a cheating scumbag, Isak’s trying to find a way out of this that doesn’t involve Eva getting hurt somehow.
“I—” Right. So that didn’t help. “Fuck if I know, Vilde,” he throws his hands up in the air uselessly. “I think — I think maybe you should ask Sana,” he replies, and Vilde grimaces.

“Not Eva? I feel like this is something I should tell Eva first, so then maybe she can talk to Noora, since they’re the closest, but then I don’t know if that would be feeding into what Sana doesn’t want me to feed into, which is why I haven’t told Sana yet.”

Vilde obviously has no idea that Isak is another Sana in this situation, so he shrugs his shoulders. “Sana knows everything,” he reminds her, and Vilde nods once, albeit a little hesitantly. “Listen, if you’re so worried about it, just make Sana promise she can’t do anything rash after you’ve finished talking, yeah?”

Vilde sighs. “I guess,” she squirms uncomfortably, finally pocketing her phone in her coat again. “Isak,” she looks him straight in the eye. “You have to promise me you’ll tell no one about this until it’s reached Eva, okay?”

Isak nods. “Yeah, of course. I promise.”

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“He’s cheating on her?”

Isak’s head is lying on Even’s lap, and his fingers stop playing with Isak’s hair for a moment as he looks down at him in shock. Isak nods, equally bothered. “I know! What the fuck!”

So Even’s been caught up on the whole Noora/Eva situation for a while now. Listen, it’s not Isak’s fault he needs someone other than Sana to hear him out. Sana will always be like, “calm down, we need a plan”, but sometimes Isak just needs to rant about it, so a while back he started keeping Even in the loop; Even seemed to understand all Isak really needed was to rant angrily and worriedly at someone, so he’s been a great silent participant in the situation.

And Even technically doesn’t count where Isak’s keeping a secret, because Even’s technically a secret, and so both of them offset each other.

It makes some kind of weird, tumultuous sense in Isak’s head.

“I mean, I knew the guy was an asshole, obviously, after everything Eva’s said, but it didn’t occur to me he’d be cheating on her for so long, and with multiple women, at that,” he shakes his head in disappointment just as Even’s fingers start stroking his hair again. “That’s such a — a cowardly move.”

Even hums. “I agree.”

Even’s other arm is lying across Isak’s stomach, fingers there brushing the side of his bare waist — they’re in nothing but boxers, after a very long, very satisfying fucking session, where they got to come more than once in a three hour period, taking advantage of the fact that they were the only two in the house and got to be as loud as they wanted to be.

The sensation, anyway, makes Isak’s eyes want to flutter closed for a moment, but the adrenaline of the rant is keeping them open. “See, this is why relationships are a fraud,” he points up at Even, who’s looking at him with an eyebrow raised. “How are you supposed to trust someone that much? Trust them enough to know they won’t just — just turn around and cheat on you?”

Even shakes his head. “Well, because not everyone’s a cheater.”
Isak glares at him. “You were willing to cheat on your girlfriend the night we met,” he reminds him. “You said you would have fucked me.”

“That’s not true,” Even replies, calm as anything. “Sonja and I were taking a break then. Did you see her anywhere there that night?”

Isak blinks at him, confused. “Uhm,” he pauses. “Okay. Well. You know, you got back together, and — my point still stands,” he continues, trying to find his footing and slow his heartbeat. “I mean, there, there’s Sonja, who left you in the dust for someone else when you were obviously still hung up on her, leaving you distraught and sulking in a kitchen corner.”

Even’s jaw clenches, and Isak’s suddenly afraid he’s managed to insult him again, so he’s readying every apology he can think of, but before Isak can say anything, Even replies, “That’s not what happened.”

Isak’s brows furrow. “That’s what everyone’s told me happened,” he points out. “And you’ve never debunked it.”

Even looks frustrated. “I know,” he replies. “I was — it’s just—” he grunts. “Back then it was just — frustrating for me,” he replies. “But it wasn’t because of her. It wasn’t.”

Isak looks at him. “Oh?” he asks, and his voice is quiet, and it’s almost as if he’s afraid to hear what’s coming next.

Even doesn’t seem to notice, however, obviously caught up in a memory. “She’s not a bad person,” Even finally tells him quietly. Isak looks down at Even’s fingers brushing along his waist, then looks back up at Even.

“That’s very big of you,” he replies. “Considering the way she left you.”

“No, you don’t—” Even grunts in frustration again, probably thinking Isak’s being purposely obtuse. Which he might be. “I know I tell the abridged version of the story, but the thing is — she had every right to go falling for someone else.”

Isak pauses. “Why?”

Even meets his gaze. “Because I fell out of love with her long before that,” he admits quietly. Isak’s heart flips. “And I was — I was so obvious about it. Maybe for a year? I just didn’t — didn’t want to leave her, because,” he clears his throat. “When a girl sticks with you for that long after witnessing the worst parts of you, it’s scary to let go of that. And it wasn’t fair to her. It wasn’t. Even if I knew she’d fallen out of love with me, too.” He takes a deep breath. “We were just going through the motions, by that point. Pretending we were still in a good place, for our sakes. And — you know, I didn’t realize she kept pulling and pulling away, until she finally told me — she told me she’d fallen in love with someone else.

“And that’s not even what hurt. We had a long talk about it, actually. I don’t know how everyone got the idea that it was over in five minutes flat. And I think what hurt the most was — was the fact that it was my fault. I think it was, anyway. My heart was dulled, you know, and I refused to get involved with anyone else because I just didn’t think I could love enough, you know? I couldn’t love her enough, so she left me, and so the hurt — that was entirely selfish. It had nothing to do with her.

“And it irritates me, that everyone sees her in such a bad light, but every time I bring this up to the boys they just — point out how controlling she’d become, and how they didn’t like the way she kept me like a pet, or something, but that’s not the way I saw it. I saw a girl who loved me and was
worried about me and wanted to protect me, and the only way she knew how to do that was by talking me down of everything that could make me snap.

“But,” Even’s gaze softens. “I guess the only people who can ever know the truth about something are the people involved. Everyone can speculate, even dramatize, but the truth stays between those people, and remains blind to everyone else.”

Isak stays quiet for a moment, trying to digest this. Maybe it makes him happier to know Even’s not hung up on Sonja, that he hasn’t been for a while. Maybe it scares him, because if Sonja’s as great a person as Even’s making her out to be, then she’s most likely easy to fall back in love with. Both of these things, Isak tells himself, are feelings that are unwelcome either way, so he takes Even’s last statement and applies it elsewhere. “Like us. With the, uhm—” Isak shrugs. “Art show thing.”

Even looks at him again, then smiles slightly. “Yeah, kind of like us.”

“You know you can—” he clears his throat nervously. “You can tell them, if you want. What happened between us that night. I know — I know you’re not telling them because it’s sort of been like, an unspoken agreement between the two, but the truth of the matter here is that I’m the only villain in that story. I fucked up. So you’d come out unscathed and that’s — that’s fine. I don’t mind it. I was a shitty person, and if you need to tell them that—”

“We had one bad interaction, Isak,” Even interrupts, and Isak kind of wants to point out that’s not technically true, though he supposes the interactions between them after that weren’t long enough to be considered interactions at all. “It took me a long time to accept that it didn’t define you as a person, so it seems pretty pointless to me to bring up past mistakes now.”

Isak leaves it be. He doesn’t know how to tell him he doesn’t deserve Even’s kindness, his forgiveness. He doesn’t know how to tell him, because then Even might realize this, and he might leave, and Isak can’t handle that. Isak can’t handle losing Even as a friend — not yet.

“Well,” Isak clears his throat. “Still doesn’t prove my point wrong. You fell out of love with her,” he tells him. “And she fell out of love with you. And even if it wasn’t trust that was the villain then, it was still love that was. They come hand in hand,” he tells Even. “Trust, love, faith and hope — the four horsemen of the apocalypse.”

Even laughs quietly. “I don’t agree,” he replies, and Isak rolls his eyes, because of course he doesn’t. “There’s more to it than that, you know? You can’t just box all of that in. Love varies in intensity, depending on the person, and that’s where the trust comes in and the willpower to stay faithful comes in and it’s all about the person you choose to love,” he replies. “Things don’t have to go south if it’s the right one.”

Isak scoffs. “Even if it is the right person,” Isak raises an eyebrow at Even, who’s still softly stroking at his hair. “It’s not guaranteed? So things didn’t go that terribly with Sonja, but it still ended, didn’t it? Love’s a shitty thing to place your bets on. The person you love most intensely can still fuck you over.”

“Hm.”

Isak frowns. “What, seriously? You don’t think so?”

Even shakes his head. “I can at least see how you can.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean — I know love is irrational. It makes you stupid, right? Makes you near delusional?” Even
looks down at him. “Makes you believe the person you’ve chosen to love is the right person and it makes you vulnerable to ‘being fucked over’, as you so eloquently put it.”

“That’s right.”

“That’s—” Even pauses. “Have you ever heard that poem — the one told by an anonymous Kwakiutl Indian to a missionary about his true love?”

Isak scoffs. “Why the hell would I have?”

Even laughs. “Right.”

He doesn’t say anything after that, and Isak, brimming with unwanted curiosity, finally gives in. “What was it?”

Even smiles knowingly down at Isak and runs his fingers through Isak’s hair. “Fire runs through my body with the pain of loving you,” he starts quietly. Isak does nothing but look at Even’s chin, the only part of his face he can see as Even’s looking forward. “Pain runs through my body with the fires of my love for you. Pain like a boil about to burst with my love for you, consumed by fire with my love for you,” Even’s fingers feel warm on Isak’s scalp. He almost wants to close his eyes and drown in the touch, just for a moment. But he doesn’t.

“I remember what you said to me. I am thinking of your love for me. I am torn by your love for me. Pain, and more pain.” Even looks down, then, to meet Isak’s eyes, and Isak suddenly can’t feel his hands. Even’s fingers continue to stroke Isak’s hair softly. “Where are you going with my love? I am told you will go from here. I am told you will leave me here. My body is numb with grief.” Even’s thumb moves from Isak’s hair to trace Isak’s eyebrow softly. Isak can’t break eye contact. “Remember what I said my love,” Even finishes quietly. “Goodbye, my love, goodbye.”

Isak swallows for a moment, unable even now to look away from Even. His gaze is bluer than Isak has ever seen it be before, and here, in this moment, Isak feels as if he can dip his toes in the color.

After however long they continue to look at each other, Isak clears his throat. He brings his hand to remove Even’s from where it’s stroking at his bare waist, but he doesn’t let it go — just brings the hand up to his chest, and plays with Even’s fingers instead, studying them closely. “And you just know that by heart, huh?”

Even laughs. “I once used it in one of my short films,” he admits. “Resonated with me, I guess. Stuck in my head.”

“Good memory,” Isak jokes weakly.

“But related to what you said, right?” he asks. “Love makes the pain even worse when it’s over.”

“Yeah,” Isak replies quietly, tracing the shape of Even’s fingers with his own. “So, there you go.”

“No,” Even shakes his head. “Do you know what’s really beautiful about that poem?”

Isak looks up. “What?”

“It doesn’t make love sound like a mistake,” he replies. “Just acceptance that this is the pain that comes with it, but there’s not a single regret about loving someone in there.”

Isak is quiet.
“He accepts that she’s gone,” he says quietly. “And though he’s numb with grief, he asks her to remember him, remember what he’s said to her, and doesn’t resent her for leaving. There’s nothing to gain from regretting having loved.

“And maybe that’s what you don’t understand,” Even offers. “I think people are aware of what love can bring. I think they accept the fact that it can maybe break their heart. But they loved — and that’s something not everyone can say. They loved. And for, I don’t know, even a fucking second, or a day or a week — they got to feel that rush, that beauty, and it may feel excruciating afterwards, but love is not made to regret, Isak. I don’t think so.”

“A life without love is a life without heartbreak,” Isak insists, ignoring the knot in his throat.

“A life without love is a life you’ll never truly embrace,” Even corrects. “Be it romantic love, or a deep platonic love — a life without love is a life without the best people in your life. And maybe that’s not really a life at all.”

Isak licks his lips before shaking his head. “I don’t know how people willingly allow themselves to feel that kind of pain. It doesn’t make any fucking sense to me.”

Even laces his fingers with Isak’s where they’re still tracing them, and he hums as his other hand continues to stroke at Isak’s hair gently. “Maybe it doesn’t have to,” Even points out. “But I think if you find the right person — you’re willing to let them break your heart.”

Isak’s smile is a little bitter, he can feel it. “There’s the trust I keep telling you not to offer people.”

“I’m okay with pain, Isak.”

You shouldn’t be, he wants to snap. You don’t deserve it. You should never feel any pain.

He doesn’t say any of this, though. Instead, he sits up, and traces Even’s jaw for a moment before leaning in and kissing him once, softly. When he pulls his face away about an inch, he asks Even, “Why?”

Even brings his knuckles to softly trace a line from Isak’s temple to his chin. “Because pain reminds me I’m alive,” he replies quietly. “And every day I’m really, really glad I am.”

Isak looks at him for a long, long moment. It feels like an eternity served in a minute, and finally, he speaks. “It’s scary,” he admits quietly, soft enough for Even’s ears to pick up the words.

Even’s eyes search Isak’s expression. “Why do you think so?”

“Acknowledging that there may be pain when you love doesn’t make it any less real,” he explains. “Or any less hurtful. So — that’s the scary part,” he swallows, bring a hand to play with a stray curl near Even’s temple. “It’s the fact that you can never go to bed at night without knowing they might not still love you in the morning.”

Even’s breaths are deep and even, and Isak tries to match their pace in order to keep himself in place. Even’s hand wraps around Isak as much as it can to rest on the small of his back, causing Isak to shiver. “That’s not a very long time frame.”

Isak smiles bitterly. “It’s long enough.”

This is when Even leans in and kisses him, and the words are gone and the conversation is halted, and he feels the tension bleed from both of their shoulders and the air around them lift, saving the exchanging of words for another day. Isak kisses Even as deeply as he’ll allow him to, and
eventually, Isak climbs onto his lap, hands tangled in Even’s hair, pulling him closer and closer, and Even’s arms wrap under Isak’s shoulders, fingernails digging painfully into his back. It’s easy to ignore this, however, with the way his mind is merely concentrating on the pleasure of Even’s lips against his, the taste against Isak’s tongue. He thinks he might be shaking. He thinks Even might be shaking. But he can’t be sure he’s not imagining it, with how closely he’s pressing himself against Even.

And then Isak’s hands trail down to cup either side of Even’s neck, and the shaking’s far more prominent there.

Isak frowns when he realizes that the shaking isn’t in his head, but instead against his hands; Even’s shivering under his touch, though he kisses as if there’s nothing wrong at all. Isak’s brows furrow worriedly and he pulls back, stopping Even’s course as he chases his lips with a hand to his chest.

“Are you cold?” he asks him, bemused.

Even nods. “Yeah,” he admits. “But it’s whatever, this’ll warm me up,” he leans forward to capture Isak’s lips in a kiss once more, but Isak can’t concentrate on his taste any longer — instead, he pulls away again, ignoring Even’s whimper of protest. He rests both of his palms against Even’s chest now, nothing but heat radiating off of him, and then he proceeds to examine Even’s cheeks, and then his forehead, and finally his neck.

“How are you cold?” Isak asks. “Even, you’re really hot.”

“Thanks,” Even smirks. “Was that a line? It was impressive.” Even leans in once again, most likely intending to kiss Isak, but Isak pulls away and offers him a warning glare. Even sighs loudly and pulls back, back resting against the headboard. “Isak, what?”

“I mean it literally,” Isak replies. “You’re burning up,” he tells him as he removes himself from Even’s lap and scoots off the bed. “Where’s your shirt?”

Even groans. “Isak, what are you doing?”

Isak walks towards the closet, where Even’s t-shirt is lying after being thrown carelessly to the side, and he grabs it. He walks over to the bed and holds it up towards Even, who’s looking at it in complete bewilderment.

“I don’t understand.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “Put it on,” he orders, and Even looks a little annoyed, but he grabs it and listens to Isak anyway. Isak scurries towards Even’s bathroom, pushing the door open and opening several of the drawers under the sink, pushing past nothing but junk.

“What are you looking for?” Even calls out to him.

“Your thermometer,” he calls back. “Do you even have one?”

Isak can hear Even’s sigh. “Isak, I’m not sick.”

Isak straightens up and glares at Even through the door frame. “You might be sick.”

Even rolls his eyes. “I’m not sick.”

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So Even is sick.

Isak is actually surprised it hasn’t happened sooner, considering how careless he and every other man living in this house is, but he supposes there’s no use in lamenting that now — instead, he scolded Even for at least half an hour as he started to shove all of his dirty clothes in a hamper, forcing him to stay in bed every time Even wanted to stand up and help. Isak tossed a blanket at Even and told him to cover himself with that, but not under the duvet, or it would make the fever worse.

“You don’t have to take care of me,” Even had pointed out, but Isak had merely glared at him pointedly and it’d shut him up effectively.

Isak had forced all of Even’s color laundry into the washing machine downstairs, leaving the lights in the hamper. When he was finished, he’d gone to the kitchen to search for ibuprofen or even acetaminophen, but these boys seem to have no sense of self-preservation and therefore there was none to be found.

(He’d barely even been able to get Even’s thermometer to work.)

So Isak had marched right back upstairs and told Even he was going to go get him some meds, Even had objected, and Isak had told him to shut up and stay in bed.

Which brings him here, sitting beside Even and watching closely as he swallows his meds after Isak had carefully read the label on Even’s mood stabilizers to make sure there would be no interactions. His arms are crossed over his chest and Even looks put-out, but he’s doing as he’s told, anyway, which Isak counts as a win.

When he’s done, he glares at Isak some. “This is extremely unnecessary.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re only going to make yourself sick too if you keep this up,” Even points out as Isak walks towards the bathroom to refill Even’s glass of water.

He’s closing the faucet when he replies, “That’s ridiculous, my immune system is impeccable,” he walks over to Even’s side and places the glass back on the bedside table. “I actually know how to take precautions and take care of myself, Even. This is such a simple thing to avoid.”

“Stop scolding me.”

“I’m not scolding you,” Isak scolds. “Besides, I can’t have sex with you until you’re better, so trust me, you want this.”

Even rolls his eyes, but there’s a smile twitching at his lips. “You’re ridiculous.”

“So you keep saying,” Isak mutters, making sure the blankets fully wrapped around Even. “Stay in bed,” he warns. “Take a hot shower if you start getting congested or your throat starts to hurt. Don’t step into a cold shower, Even, don’t be an idiot.”

“Fine, Isak.”

“I’m gonna make you a cup of tea before I go,” he decides, then pauses, then backtracks. “I’m going to tell Yousef to make you a cup of tea before I go, because I’ll probably fuck it up.”

Even huffs, clearly amused. “Alright.”
Isak walks over to where he’s left a rag wrapped in ice and holds it towards Even. “On your forehead until you feel normalish again,” he instructs, and Even takes the rag from him. “Though the meds should reduce the fever in about an hour or two, anyway.”

“Want to hand me my teddy bear and read me a bedtime story, too?”

Isak narrows his eyes. “Don’t try me, Bech Næsheim.”

Even laughs, rag still in his hand, nowhere near his forehead. Isak glares at it, but Even ignores him. “If you’re really looking to look after me like a God damn mother, you would also kiss my forehead and turn off the lights on your way out.”

Isak crosses his arms over his chest, glaring down at Even unamused.

“What?” Even grins. “Listen, all I’m saying is, when I get the full sick day treatment, my mom—”

“God,” Isak rolls his eyes. “You’re such a fucking baby.”

Still, he has very little will power, it would seem, and so he leans down from where he stands beside the bed and grabs each side of Even’s face with his hands, only to press a soft kiss to his forehead. When he leans back, he feels his cheeks burning slightly, but at least Even’s face tints pink, too, though that might actually be because of the fever.

Either way, Even grins. “Isak Valtersen, doing The Most.”

“Shut up,” he replies, and walks over to grab his hoodie. “I do have to go, though. I work tomorrow morning. But I’ll come by after and bring you some food,” he replies. “Don’t have a heavy breakfast.”

“That’s just no way to live, Isak.”

“Don’t have a heavy breakfast,” Isak repeats warningly. “No fat.”

“You’re less fun than my History of Mass Media professor.”

“I’m the fucking life of the party,” Isak counters, shrugging on his hoodie. He walks over to Even and grabs the hand that’s holding the rag, raising it to his forehead and looking at him pointedly. “Keep it there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I have to go,” his voice is final this time around, and he raises both eyebrows at Even. “You’re gonna stay in bed?”

“What else am I gonna do, fly a plane?”

“I wouldn’t put it past you, asshole,” Isak mutters, rolling his eyes. Even grins.

“See you tomorrow, nerd.”

Isak sighs and leans down to kiss Even’s lips quickly, nothing but a peck, offering him a quick “bye” and then he’s walking towards the door and exiting the room and closing the door and then he stops where he is—

Did he just—
Had he just—

Isak stares blankly at nothing in front of him. He had, hadn’t he? He’d just kissed Even goodbye.

His face contorts into one of shame and he swears silently, rubbing at his forehead. He’s such a fucking idiot. They don’t do that. No, they’re not supposed to do that, that’s not what fuck buddies do, they’re friends, they’re supposed to be — they’re meant to be — they say goodbye like any friends would, it’s—

It’s not as if they haven’t kissed before leaving before; but it’s never been the goodbye, maybe a long kiss before they exchange a couple more words and then say goodbye, but this is — this is not something they do, and Isak feels like such a fucking idiot, and he can feel his entire face flush in embarrassment.

Maybe Even’s too sick to notice what just happened. He only hopes he won’t bring it up again or think too much of it. Isak has no idea how he’s meant to explain that one to him, when he’s not sure he can explain it to himself.

After taking another second to compose himself, Isak finally inhales deeply and walks quickly down the stairs. As he’s making his way past the living room, the door opens suddenly, making Isak stop in his tracks and stare at Yousef, who’s whistling quietly to himself as he walks inside, plastic bags in hand. It’s only when he closes the door that he looks up to meet Isak’s gaze, which probably looks sheepish right now.

“Oh,” Yousef blinks at him. “Isak, hi.”

Isak nods once. “Hello.”

Yousef glances towards the stairs, then back at him. “Uhm, were you—”

“No,” Isak shakes his head. “I mean, yes. I mean — no! No, we weren’t, I mean—” he clears his head. “Even’s sick.”

Yousef’s eyebrows rise. “He’s sick?”

Isak nods. “He’s got a fever, but it’s nothing life-threatening, and his symptoms indicate it’s a cold, so his fever shouldn’t last much more than tonight,” he tells Yousef. “I — was gonna make him a cup of tea, but I’m hopeless with a kettle, and I have to go, so — I was wondering if maybe you could make one for him?”

Yousef smiles slightly. “Sure,” he replies. “If he lets me.”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

Yousef shakes his head. “I’ll make one,” he promises Isak, and Isak relaxes some. “I assume you’ll be coming over tomorrow?”

“Oh,” he clears his throat. “Yeah, if that’s okay.”

Yousef laughs quietly. “Since when have you had to ask permission?” he shakes his head. “I’ll be here in the afternoon, if you’d like anything.”

Isak shakes his head. “Oh, cool, uhm, I’ll be here then, too,” he nods, and Yousef does, too.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then, Isak.”
“Yes,” Isak clears his throat. “Bye, Yousef.”

Isak makes his way out of the house after grabbing his coat and putting his shoes on and allows the cold to block any thoughts that want to make their way to the forefront. Not tonight, not right now. He hugs his coat closer to him and exhales slowly. Not tonight, not right now.

--

The next morning, he’s running on nothing but two hours of sleep and some scrambled eggs Eva had made him quickly before she had to run to work, too.

It’s better than nothing, Isak supposes, but also nothing would feel pretty close to this, so he’s not sure if any of this is a win.

It becomes abundantly clear he is going to have a terrible time this shift, too, because when he reaches the counter, Chris is only just finishing clocking in, and he looks up at Isak with a smirk. Isak holds up a finger to stop him before he begins.

“Flirt with me once today, Schistad, and I swear to God, I will find a way to throw up all over your shoes.”

Chris makes a face. “Jesus,” he eyes Isak, almost looking worried. “Are you even awake, Valtersen?”

“Why is it always so fucking cold in here?” He mutters bitterly, and Chris clicks his tongue.

“Haven’t been able to fix the heating system,” he explains. “So we’re running on a shitty backup system.”

“Still?”

Chris raises an eyebrow. “Do I look like the building’s owner?”

Isak narrows his eyes. “Run along now,” he waves Chris off, but he goes nowhere as he steps aside and allows Isak entrance behind the desk. As Isak slowly clocks himself in, Chris pipes up again, causing Isak to sigh so loudly he’s sure he’s summoned a soda commercial.

“I was told you didn’t bring your boyfriend to the Christmas party,” he tells Isak, and Isak glances up at him for a moment before looking back at the computer screen.

“He was busy.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

Isak successfully clocks in and he straightens his back, narrowing his eyes at him. “We’re perfect, Chris,” he replies. “In fact, the reason I’m so fucking sleep deprived is because he was fucking me all night, and I him, into the wee hours of the morning, and it was—”

“There are children walking in here, Isak, my God.” Eskild’s voice perks up behind him and Isak jumps, feeling himself blush a crimson red.

“Uhm—”

“Hey, don’t stop now, Valtersen,” Chris presses, and Isak turns to look over his shoulder, watching him smirk. “I’d like a clearer picture painted, if you don’t mind.”
Isak narrows his eyes. “Fuck off.”

Eskild waves him off, the same way Isak had done before. “Go on,” he orders. “Leave the poor child alone.”

“Ah, next time,” Chris replies, but before Isak can tell him to shove it up his ass, he’s gone to the main floor, leaving Isak and Eskild standing alone at the front desk. Isak lowers his gaze and rubs the bridge of his nose tiredly.

“Eskild, I’m sorry you—”

“So it is him,” Eskild interrupts, smirking.

Isak frowns. “Eskild.”

“If it’s not him, then let me tell you, little one, it should be him, because every time someone brings him up your little ears perk up and your little eyes shine brightly,” Eskild wiggles his finger in front of Isak’s eyes, and Isak steps back, glaring at him.

“He’s just my friend.”

“I thought he was a friend of a friend?”

“I — how do you even—” Isak exhales deeply. “I don’t know what to say to you.”

“Do you look at him as if you’re looking directly at the sun?” Eskild waggles his eyebrows, and Isak growls.

“That makes no sense!” he insists, and Eskild cackles as he turns around.

“I’ll find out sooner or later, little one,” he calls back. “Though I’m sure I already know.”

Isak scowls for a very long second at Eskild’s back, only to be startled by Sara’s voice behind him. Isak turns around and blinks at her, watching as she grows more and more amused.

“Sara, hi,” Isak clears his throat. “You’re uh — hello.”

“I’m sorry about Laila,” Sara tells him, and, oh, they’re talking about that. They haven’t brought it up since the party, so Isak simply thought they were going to let it slide, or maybe Laila hadn’t told Sara, but for some reason or another, Sara’s deciding to bring it up now, so—“She’s a little forthright, but, well, you know,” she shrugs. “Women, am I right?”

Isak blinks. “I guess?”

“For the record, I promise she hasn’t told anyone about your disinterest towards Julian,” she assures him, and Isak continues to blink at her blankly. “Or, okay, no one but me,” she grins sheepishly. “But I won’t say a word, either. I get it, you know, you’re a man of a certain taste, we can all respect that.”

Isak looks around, a little paranoid. “Can we, uh, not talk about it here?”
“Sorry,” Sara nods her understanding. “But, I mean, he’s not working today, so,” she smiles. “Should be an easy shift for you, eh?”

Isak sighs. “Christ.”

“You’re blocking my seat, by the way,” Sara says, and Isak jumps slightly and moves to the side, allowing Sara to take her seat back at the front desk. She looks up at Isak and smiles. “Laila’s looking for men to hook Julian up with, if you’d like to know. She says she’s looking for you-lookalikes, just so he’ll give you some space.”

“That’s — weird, but also, nice, I guess?” Isak doubts it will work, and not because he’s *conceited* or anything, but it seems that Julian has harbored this Thing for Isak for a while now, and if it hasn’t stopped then, what would make it stop now? Still, Isak supposes that for this, he can probably say hello to Laila when they get back to school in Astrophysics.

“That’s Laila,” Sara grins. “I guess I kinda like her.”

“I suppose you must,” Isak clears his throat. “Uhm, I should get to work.”


“You, too.”

Isak turns around and makes his way to the space exhibit, where everything makes sense. And when he walks inside, allowing himself to be surrounded by the darkness but illuminated by the brightness of the stars, he feels a weight off his chest, and he feels good. He feels okay.

He’s going to be okay.

--

Isak’s glaring at the back label of a chicken soup can when Yousef walks in, looking sleep-muddled.

“Oh,” Yousef says, and Isak blinks up at him in surprise. “You’re here.”

Isak smile sheepishly. “Yeah, sorry,” he replies. “Even said to let myself in, but I’m trying to figure out the instructions to this stupid canned soup, and—”

Yousef yawns, nodding. “You’re fine, Isak,” he replies, walking over to him. He looks over Isak’s shoulder, presumably to read the can’s instructions, as well, and Isak can see him smile in amusement through his peripheral. “Seems like the same instructions for every can of soup.”

Isak narrows his eyes and turns around. “I know that, okay? I just don’t—” Isak grunts. “I don’t want to fuck it up. He needs soup and this is the only can I got.”

Yousef looks at him, still looking amused, and then he sighs quietly and takes the can from Isak’s hand. “You’ve done this before?”

Isak nods. He’d learned how to heat up canned soup when he was very, very young, so he’s not sure why he’s so nervous about fucking up *this* specific can of soup. Maybe it’s because he’s been so prone to fucking up lately, he tells himself. If he’s been able to kiss Even goodbye accidentally, why wouldn’t he burn canned soup, too?

“Okay, then you can say you made it,” Yousef offers, yawning again. He hums as he sets the can down and grabs for a pot, turning the knob of the stove on. “How’s he looking?”
Isak thinks back at a glaring Even, eyes swollen and nose red. He bites back a smile. “Irritated.”

“Sounds like Sick Even to me,” Yousef smiles, allowing the pot to heat up properly. He eyes Isak for a moment, before asking, “And have you two — uhm, is that something you—”

Isak’s face flames. “No,” he clears his throat. “Not while he’s sick, God. And also — not while you’re here.”

Yousef sighs. “That’s good to know,” he admits. “I don’t have to listen to music on my headphones at full blast when you’re here, then.”

Isak laughs lamely, and thankfully, the subject is dropped almost immediately after. Instead, they start to talk about Isak’s job, then Yousef’s, and they settle into a nice back and forth conversation, both polite and funny, and by the time Yousef announces that the soup is just about done, Isak’s getting a text from Eva.

“Excuse me a sec,” Isak tells Yousef, and Yousef waves him off as he grabs a bowl from the cupboard.

---

**EVA**
Come home for dinner tonight pleeease

**EVA**
No one else is hanging out with me and I’ll be lonely

---

Isak snorts.

**ISAK**
I’m your last resort?!

**EVA**
You’re my first last resort

**ISAK**
Fine. I’ll see you in a few hours

**EVA**
Love you!!!!!!!

---

Isak locks his phone just as Yousef’s grabbing a spoon to place inside the bowl. “There,” Yousef says, setting the bowl on the island. “That should do the trick.”

Isak grins at him gratefully. “Thanks, Yousef,” he says, moving over to the counter. He grabs the bowl carefully, feeling the warmth of it from underneath, but before he can get another word in or leave the kitchen, Elias is walking in with his head down, looking at his keys.

He stops when he spots Isak, and breaks into a grin. “Hey, Isak!”

Isak smiles. “Hi, Elias.”

“I didn’t know you were here,” he says, and Isak shrugs.

“Looking after Even,” he replies. “He’s sick.”

“Ah, I did hear him whining last night from downstairs,” Elias grins. “Is he being a baby?”
“He really fucking is.”

Elias laughs. “Good luck with that one, he usually never—” This is all Isak will ever know of that sentiment, because it’s as if Elias only just noticed Yousef in the kitchen with Isak. His expression immediately turns tight, eyes narrows slightly, and when Isak glances at Yousef, he’s avoiding Elias’s gaze altogether, studying the kitchen counter carefully.

“Anyway,” Elias looks back at Isak. “I’ve gotta go. Hanging out with a buddy from high school.” Isak wonders if it’s the same friend Yousef had been waiting for at the coffee shop before Christmas that one time, and then Isak thinks he’s sad that they can’t hang out with their mutual friend together, out of — animosity, or something. “I’ll see you later, Isak.”

Before Isak can reply, Elias is already turning around and walking out of the kitchen, leaving behind a trail of awkward silence. Yousef still isn’t looking at Isak, and Isak has no idea how to bring this up without making things worse, so he just — clears his throat to grab Yousef’s attention. When he meets Isak’s gaze, Yousef smiles, as if he’d been unaffected by the entire situation.

“You should get that up to Even before it gets cold,” he suggests, and Isak hesitates for a moment. Yousef doesn’t let him say another word, however, walking towards the exit. “I’m gonna go lay down for a little while longer,” he calls out to Isak. “Good luck.”

In the blink of an eye, Yousef is gone, leaving Isak with a warm bowl of soup and a million questions he’s not allowed to ask. He licks his lips, and as he walks out of the kitchen and up the stairs towards Even’s room, he wonders if this is what Even feels every single day, living with two people who are so obviously not getting along. It’s been so long, too, Isak has to wonder the gravity of the situation — it’s none of his business, of course it’s not, but — well, he can’t be blamed for being curious, can he?

He opens Even’s half-closed door carefully, and finds him sitting up and glaring at the television. Isak snorts at the sight, prompting Even to look over at him, and his gaze immediately lightens up. Isak walks over to set the bowl of soup down on his bedside table and raises an eyebrow at Even. “So,” he walks over to the door to close it the rest of the way. “Yousef and Elias.”

Even’s expression shuts down again, and Isak immediately wants to take it back. “Yeah,” he sighs quietly. “I don’t know. They still won’t tell me or Mutta anything. It’s getting — it’s starting to interfere with a lot.”

Isak’s smile is crooked and rueful. “I can talk,” he admits. “I’m sorry.”

Even shakes his head once. “It’s not like any of us can do anything.”

Isak wishes they could, however. If only so that Even would stop looking so fucking dejected all the time. He walks around the bed and climbs on top of it, folding his legs to sit on his knees right beside Even. “Eat your soup,” he instructs, and Even complies, reaching over to the bedside table and grabbing the bowl.

As he eats, he and Isak chat idly, Even talking about his art or his photography, and Isak sometimes comparing it to the art people used to make tens and thousands of years ago, out of stars. Even smiles at Isak as he explains this excitedly, and when he notices he’s gone off on a tangent, he feels himself blush furiously and stupidly. Even shakes his head, laughing, and assures Isak that he likes hearing him rant, especially if he’s relating to something Even’s passionate about, too. It’s a very rare thing, when those two worlds intersect, so they take advantage of it when they do.
Eventually, Even finishes his soup and sets it aside, sighing loudly. “I’m cold,” he proclaims, and
Isak nods, reaching over to grab the blanket Even’d kicked off of him earlier. Even takes it, smiling
gratefully at Isak, and covers himself as much as he can with it while he looks at the TV. Isak
reaches over him to grab his book — the one he hasn’t been able to make much progress on,
considering how much his life has tried to be in shambles lately — and then sits back besides Even,
letting him watch the television, Isak opening up the book on his bookmarked page.

Isak is maybe only halfway through the second page of the fourth chapter by the time Even is
sighing loudly again. Isak peeks up, raising an eyebrow and meeting Even’s eyes. “What?”

“I’m still cold,” Even deadpans, and Isak sighs irritably, setting his book down.

“You can’t have any more blankets,” he reminds Even. “That’ll do you more harm than good.”

“So I have to freeze to death,” Even sighs forlornly, and Isak narrows his eyes at him.

“You’re such a baby.”

“A baby who’s about to die of cold.”

“Jesus,” Isak mutters, closing his book and setting it on the other side of the bed. He adjusts his
glasses one more time before scooting closer to Even and raising the leftover blanket from the
mattress and burying himself under it, pressing his chest against Even’s side and hugging him closer,
head falling on Even’s chest. “Happy?” he asks, but then he feels Even stiffen, and Isak realizes the
full magnitude of what he’s just done.

This is — not allowed. Even’s not Eva, not someone he can just freely scoot closer to
and cuddle when they’re feeling cold, except Isak didn’t think about that — he’s so used to doing
this whenever Eva whines about it, that it was almost instinctual, leaning closer to Even and lying his
head on his chest and, fuck, how does he untangle himself from this without making it more
awkward than it already is?

“Uhm,” Isak clears his throat. “I didn’t — this doesn’t—”

He starts pulling up and away, but Even’s arm, now wrapped around the back of Isak’s shoulders,
pull him back into place, squeezing tightly. Isak’s heart jumps to his throat, and his body hums in
approval, because it’s a fucking traitor. “It’s fine,” Even says, and his voice is so quiet Isak has to
make sure he hasn’t imagined it. “Thanks,” he clears his throat. “It’s just to make me less cold,
right?”

“Right,” Isak clears his throat as well, peeking upwards to meet Even’s gaze. “It doesn’t count.” He
narrowes his eyes.

Even smirks. “Uh huh.”

Isak’s eyebrows rise. “Listen—” he starts pulling away again, and Even laughs, pulling him closer.

“Stay,” he requests, and it’s not like Isak’s body is helping him leave, anyway. “It’s comfortable.”

Isak licks his lips and settles his head back on Even’s chest, feeling his heart beat ten miles a minute.
He’s afraid Even can feel it against his side, afraid this is just another thing to add to the pile of lies
his body thinks are truths, but the thing is Isak can’t help but cling onto Even, both of them under the
thin blanket, his hand coming back to rest beside his face on Even’s chest.

It feels good. And of course it does, because it’s cuddling, but good, in this context, is
probably dangerous.

Ask him if his heart is listening, though. He thinks no one would like the answer to that one.

It takes them about two minutes to finally relax into their positions, supposing the other isn’t going to bolt or panic at any second anymore, and Even’s hand comes up from behind Isak and starts stroking his hair softly, causing Isak’s eyes to flutter closed. His breaths are deep and even and he lets the sensation flood through him for a moment, if only for this very moment.

“Keep doing that and I’m going to fall asleep,” Isak mumbles, and Even chuckles from above him. Isak feels his lips brush against Isak’s head as he hums.

“Maybe you should,” he offers. “You’re so bad with sleeping.”

Isak’s eyes open rebelliously. “I’m not the one who needs sleep right now,” he points out, and Even sighs above him. Isak can’t see his face, not if he’s looking straight at the television, but he’s almost sure he knows exactly what it is: exhaustedly fond, and he only knows Even’s smiling because Isak feels it against his head as Even presses a kiss there, too.

“You’re really warm,” Even replies instead, and this is when Isak turns his head up to look at Even, who’s already looking right at Isak, smiling. “You’re a human furnace.”

“No,” Isak shakes his head, lips twitching. “You’re just a human popsicle.”

Even narrows his eyes. “Aren’t you supposed to be nice to me when I’m sick?”

Isak scoffs. “Where’s that section in the rule book?”

Even raises an eyebrow. “You want me to write you one?” he smirks. “The same way you did, with pen and paper—”

Isak leans upwards, turning chest-first to be able to glare at Even properly. Half of his arm still lies on Even’s chest, Even’s arm still stroking the back of Isak’s head. “I’ll have you know that rules are good in any situation and/or society—”

“If you follow them,” Even points out, and Isak glares at him.

“Are you insinuating you want me to move away, Bech Næsheim?” he challenges. “Because I will.”

Even shakes his head, leans his head forward some. “No, but I’d really appreciate a kiss right now.”

Isak legs tingle, seemingly trying to restrict the shivers to the lower part of his body so that he doesn’t immediately freak out and leave, and he feels his cheeks heat up slightly. Even smiles at him, and Isak raises himself slightly to press a kiss to his lips, and then another, and then another. When they pull apart, Isak feels completely out of breath, even though the kisses were small and quiet. His eyes flicker towards Even’s lips, then right back to meet his eyes. “Better?” he asks quietly.

Even’s free hand comes up to stroke Isak’s chin. “Much,” he replies, just as quietly.

There’s a knot beginning to constrict in Isak’s throat, so he turns on his side once again and quickly presses the side of his face on Even’s chest, ignoring the racing of his heart. He keeps counting up to three, and then back to one, and again and again until he feels his pulse stabilizing, and he has to repeat to himself over and over and over that Even’s sick, that Even needs this, that this is friendly and it’s nothing and it’s just his mind playing tricks on him, it’s his mind playing tricks on him, because sometimes his mind is sadistic and wants to see Isak panic and run away from everything he
knows, because sometimes, that’s all Isak is good for.

They remain quiet for a while, both of them watching a drama on the television. Isak’s not sure what it is, but from what he can understand, the girl’s in love with the guy she can’t have, which sounds just about right, and most of the scenes are repetitive and over-acted and boring. He clings to Even the entire time, loosely, and Even’s hand never stops stroking his hair.

At one point, the girl on the television starts waxing poetic about the guy to her friend, and during her terribly scripted speech, she compares looking at the guy’s smile to looking directly at the sun, and Isak’s eyes narrow in frustration. What is it with this fucking simile?

Even grunts above him. “Wouldn’t you be squinting at someone if you looked at them that way?”

Isak gawks and sits up quickly, some of the blanket falling over, and looks at Even. “Thank you,” he says. “That’s all I’ve been saying! You don’t look at someone like you’re looking at the sun, oh my God.”

Even looks taken aback, but amused nevertheless. “Jeez, someone’s got quite an opinion.”

“It’s stupid. Compare it to like, looking at the moon or something.”

“The stars,” Even suggests, and Isak nods.

“The stars,” he agrees, then sighs loudly and settles back into Even’s chest, where Even’s hand begins to stroke at his hair again. “I just feel like if you’re going to try and be poetic about something, at least think twice about how it looks.”

“Maybe it’s just a heat of the moment kind of thing.”

Isak snorts as he grabs the end of the blanket and pulls it back up to him again. “People should practice their speeches, then.”

Even laughs. “God, you’re such a nerd.”

“Asshole,” Isak replies automatically, and Even does nothing but reply with a squeeze.

Eventually, their bodies start radiating far too much heat together, so they both mutually decide it’s time they pull apart — for a moment, Isak feels so empty he has half a mind to pull Even back towards him, but then the moment is gone and he stretches himself instead, sitting up and scolding his body, scolding his mind.

Even yawns loudly and burrows further into the mattress. “I think I’m gonna fall asleep,” he confesses, and Isak nods.

“Yeah, go ahead, I’ll head out.”

Before Isak can move, however, Even reaches out and grabs his arm. “No, wait,” he insists, and Isak looks down at him with a raised eyebrow. “Just stay here a little longer, yeah? At least until I fall asleep.”

Isak rolls his eyes, but he’s so endeared he might punch himself in the face after this. “Alright,” he agrees, and Even grins brightly at him, taking his hand back. “But you’re actually gonna try to sleep?”

“Yes,” Even promises. “It won’t take long.”
“Fine,” Isak sits back against the headboard, scratching at his eye under his glasses with one hand and reaching for the book sitting beside him with another. When he’s done with both, he opens his book back where he’d been and gets comfortable, glancing at Even. When he realizes Even’s simply staring at him, smiling softly, he glares and turns the rest of the way. “What?”

Even shakes his head. “Nothing,” he replies, then buries his face deeper into his pillow. “Goodnight.”

Isak huffs. “Yeah, yeah,” he mutters, looking back at his book. After a moment or two, he’s enthralled in what he’s reading, fascinated by ideas that haven’t captured his attention since high school, that almost bring back the childlike wonder he’d lost so long ago.

It’s maybe about half an hour or forty minutes in that he finally looks up from the book and over to Even.

Even’s blanket is wrapped tightly around him, nose buried in his pillow, eyes closed. His breaths are even and consistent, which most likely means he’s fallen asleep, leaving Isak with a book in his hand and a television that’s entertaining no one but itself.

Isak bites his lip. He reaches for the remote and turns off the television, fully intending to stand up and turn off the light, too, and then walk out of the house. He’s got other things to do, after all — still has a paper to write, homework to do, a fish to feed; Eva’s probably actually expecting him home for dinner by now, so Isak’s better off just leaving. And he wants to. He does. He really, really does.

But there’s something about the sight of Even that keeps him rooted to the bed — Isak’s never seen Even sleep. At least, not really — there’s the very first time they woke up together, long ago, but Isak was definitely not in a place where he’d wanted to admire Even; so this is an entirely new sight. It’s different, but it’s not — Isak’s surprised to find it’s not unwelcome. Quite the opposite, in fact: his mind accepts the picture as if it’d always belonged there, allowing Isak to save the memory where the good ones are stored.

Even’s breaths are quiet. Isak plays around with the idea of telling him he snores, but he thinks the fact that he doesn’t is entirely more fascinating — for all Even is loud and open in consciousness, when he sleeps, he’s quiet and almost guarded, like the duvet’s the only thing protecting him from the outside forces he’s so afraid will infiltrate his editing room. As if thinking that in unconsciousness, they find it easier to sneak in, and ruin the movie he’s worked for his whole life.

There’s a part of Isak that wants to help him do just that, but doesn’t know how to — Even’s hair falls softly over his forehead from lack of product, and Isak fights the urge to run his fingers through it for exactly ten seconds, before — almost if by its own accord — his hand reaches out and gently pushes Even’s hair back from his forehead, keeps stroking at it until it’s found its way back permanently. His skin feels warm, but not as hot as before, which is a good sign. Isak’s fingers travel from Even’s hair down to his temple, then they trace at his jaw, then his thumb finds Even’s bottom lip and strokes it softly.

His heart is tightening in his chest, but his mind refuses to acknowledge it.

Isak’s thumb comes upward to trace Even’s eyebrow, the same way Even loves to do to him, and there’s something in him — Even looks so fucking peaceful. Isak wants him to look like that all the time. He deserves to find peace every single fucking day.

There’s a voice that whispers to him in the back of his mind. He ignores it.

Isak takes his hand back and closes his book, setting it on the bedside table. He’s about to swing his
legs over the bed and grab his shit, but then Even stirs, turns over in the bed and gives his back to Isak. Isak stares at him for a moment before sighing quietly, leaning downward.

His nose nuzzles the skin right above Even’s ear. His hand runs down Even’s side softly. He’s so quiet. He’s so gone.

Isak presses a soft kiss to Even’s temple. It’s the tiniest, doesn’t last very long, but Even sighs in unconsciousness anyway, and something in Isak wants to burst.

He’s just so—

Fuck. Isak doesn’t know. Isak just wants to kiss anything he can reach of Even, just wants to taste every single inch of him.

Isak licks his lips and pulls back. But that’s not something he can do outside of their arrangement. He’ll save the desire for the next time they fuck, because that’s what’s the best part of this, right? They don’t have to hold any desires back, not unless they’re incredibly impossible.

Isak finally does swing his legs over the bed and rubs at his face before standing. He reaches for his book and tucks it under his armpit momentarily, in order to reach for his hoodie on the other end of the bed. When he picks it up, Even stirs again, but this time he doesn’t move — this time his eyes open just a fraction, and his brows furrow when they see Isak standing in front of him, obviously getting ready to leave.

“Are you leaving?” Even asks in a mutter. He looks a little disoriented.

Isak nods. “Go back to sleep,” he commands quietly. “You need it.”

Even looks at him for a moment longer before he reaches a hand over to Isak. “C’mere,” he demands, and Isak sighs walks closer to him.

“I have to go,” he points out, but there’s still a smile on his face when Even’s hand grabs at his hoodie and sits him down on the bed. He lets his book fall onto his lap. “What?”

Even pulls him closer. “Stay a little while longer,” he pleads. “Just a bit.”

Isak huffs. “I can’t,” he tells him. “Eva wants me home.”

“Ugh,” Even groans, closing his eyes again. “Eva Mohn.”

Isak laughs quietly. “Again?”

Even grunts. “She gets all the good stuff.”

Isak frowns. “What?”

Even mumbles incoherently, before his eyes open just an inch one more time. “Will you come over tomorrow?”

Isak nods, not a second thought in play. “Yep,” he promises. “I’ll be here.”

“Good,” Even yawns, burying his nose back into the pillow and shutting his eyes. “I’ll be here, too.”

Isak feels his expression soften, and once again his hand reaches over to Even’s face of its own accord — his thumb strokes Even’s cheek softly, and Even hums quietly before turning his head slightly and pressing a kiss to Isak’s palm.
The skin there burns, and Isak pulls it back immediately, as if the fire were real.

Even doesn’t notice. His breaths seem to immediately even out once again, and in a moment, he’s back asleep, leaving Isak with a burning hand and a knotted throat.

He’s not thinking about it. He’s not thinking about it. He’s not thinking about it.

He stands and shrugs his hoodie on quickly, grabs his book and makes his way out of the room. The door closes quietly behind him, and he makes his way to the top of the stairs, jaw clenched, hand clenched too.

The thing is, he still feels the prickling in the exact same spot Even’s lips brushed his palm. He feels it burning and stinging and running up his arm and down his spine, and he hates that it’s not something that feels *bad*, just something that feels like it’s trying to find a home in its bloodstream. Like it’s wandering aimlessly, looking for an entrance, but Isak isn’t letting it find one — so it continues to sting, and Isak can’t do anything more than sit down on the top step, catch his breath before he has to leave.

It’s nothing, he reminds himself. No one’s lips should have any effect on Isak like that. He knows better, and he tells himself so, and he’s so very close to quieting the sting. He feels his walls tighten around him. It’s easier this way.

He doesn’t notice when Yousef stands behind him, but he does startle slightly when he calls Isak’s name. Isak turns around to find him peering curiously down at Isak, expression cautious.

“Are you okay?” Yousef asks him, and Isak is quick to nod.

“Yeah, yeah,” he clears his throat. “Just — uhm, catching my breath.”

Yousef nods, and Isak looks at his knees again. He’s going to get up now, he promises, but then Yousef takes a seat right beside him, feet pressed two stairs down. “Is Even okay?”

Isak avoids his gaze and nods. “Yeah. He’s asleep.”

“Hmm,” Yousef nods. “You know, he hardly lets anyone take care of him when he’s sick?”

Isak snorts, glances at him. “Really? Because he’s kind of needy, in my opinion.”

Yousef laughs. “He doesn’t like it when any of us try to intervene. Tells us he’s not a child, but if he needs someone to take care of him, he’ll call his mom.”

Isak’s smile is small. “Sounds like something a child would say.”

“I tell him that,” Yousef sighs in disdain. “But he refuses to acknowledge the fact.”

Isak huffs. “He’s a bit — fucking — ridiculous.”

“He is,” Yousef looks at him. “So it’s just surprising to me, that’s all.”

Isak frowns. “What is?”

Yousef shrugs. “That he’s letting you take care of him,” he replies, and Isak suddenly can’t meet Yousef’s gaze anymore. “But, then again. You *are* having sex with him.”

Isak chokes. It still feels so strange to him, having someone know about him and Even and so casually bring it *up* like this. And yet — still somehow feels good, like he doesn’t have to keep this
to himself, like he can bring it up to Yousef in conversation and not feel strange, not feel invalidated. Yousef knowing reminds Isak about what this is — an arrangement in the midst of a friendship, and nothing more.

“Maybe,” Isak clears his throat. “I guess you’ll only know if you start having sex with him.”

Yousef laughs. “Not for lack of trying.”

Isak blinks. “What?”

Yousef laughs again, this time louder. “I’m kidding, Isak,” he tells him, and there’s something in Isak’s chest that loosens. “I’m no competition.”

“Pft,” Isak scoffs. “I mean — were it a competition—”

“Oh?” Yousef raises his eyebrows. “You think you’d win?”

“I mean,” he shrugs easily. “I’m pretty boss in bed.”

Yousef scoffs. “And you think I’m not?”

“Are you offering me to find out?” Isak smirks, and Yousef shakes his head, laughing.

“Is this how it went with Even?” he asks, and Isak frowns, trying to remember.

“Actually—” Isak thinks a little harder. “Kind of? We were really drunk.”

“Ah,” Yousef nods, understanding. “Liquid courage.”

Isak purses his lips. “Not that I — I mean, I don’t regret it.”

Yousef’s smile is soft and understanding. “Of course not. Having Even as a friend is something no one’s come to regret just yet, as far as I know.”

Isak nods. “I believe that.”

“I can say the same thing about you, though.”

Isak rolls his eyes at Yousef’s blatant pity lie. “Alright.”

Yousef doesn’t say anything for a moment. Then: “And you know what you’re doing?” he asks quietly, gaze burning intensely on the side of Isak’s face. “You think this won’t end badly?” They’re the same questions he’d asked Isak before, except this time—

Isak pauses. He pauses, because the palm of his hand still stings, and his heart stills skips every other beat, and his lips still feel the softness of Even’s skin against them, and his arms still feel the desire to wrap themselves around Even, and there’s something in him waiting in anticipation for Even to wake up soon, talk to him for the rest of the night, just like any other night.

But that pause ends pretty quickly — because those are all superficial feelings. Brought about by the dopamine released after sex, after proximity, and they’re nothing to worry about. His head keeps reminding him of this. There’s a line, and then another, and then another. Keep him behind one. Don’t cross the other two.

So Isak shakes his head in comfort. “Nah,” he tells Yousef, voice smooth and easy. “I think we’ll be just fine. We’re friends, after all,” he reminds him. “I think that makes it easier for us to understand
each other.”

Yousef looks at him for a long time, then nods tightly. “How close of a friend would you consider yourself to be?”

Isak raises an eyebrow. “What?”

“You know, is it the kind of friendship that’s like, yeah, I’d lend him twenty bucks if he needed it, but I wouldn’t wake up in the middle of the night for him,” Isak shifts his weight uncomfortably. “Or the kind that’s like, alright, sure, I’ll rob a bank with you if you need it,” Yousef continues, and Isak snorts. “Or the kind in which you’d go to war with him?”

Isak quiets the thought. He doesn’t let it make its way to the forefront — he derails it. He quiets it. He doesn’t believe it.

He looks at Yousef. “I’ll get back to you on that,” he replies quietly. Yousef eyes him for a moment, then smiles ruefully.

“Okay,” he agrees, voice just as quiet as Isak’s. “You do that.”

“I should go,” Isak decides suddenly, standing. Yousef follows suit, nodding his head in understanding.

“Of course.”

“I’ll — hey,” Isak looks at Yousef, who tilts his head curiously at him. “You and Elias—”

Something like regret flashes through Yousef’s gaze. “You — is everything gonna be okay there?” Yousef doesn’t answer for a moment or two. Another beat, and then he offers Isak a small smile, one that does not look confident at all, but rather looks like it’s trying to be. “I’m sure it will be,” he replies. “There’s — things I wish people would have told me, before,” he adds cryptically. “I try to be that person for others now.”

Isak looks at him. “Am I meant not to understand that?”

“Of course.”

“You’re doing a fantastic job,” he grins, and Yousef smiles at him gratefully. He follows Isak down the stairs and politely walks him to the door, where Isak leans down to put his shoes on. Yousef watches him as he does, silence not uncomfortable, and when Isak’s read to head out the door, he offers Yousef another smile.

“You’re a good friend, you know that?” He’s not sure what makes him say this, but he does, and it seems to brighten Yousef’s expression some. He nods at Isak.

“So are you,” he replies. “Bye, Isak.”

Isak waves lamely, then steps out the door and into the cold, making his way over to his tram stop.

His palm burns.

When he gets home, Eva feeds him chicken and broccoli, and she commandeers the conversation by talking about her day and her friends and work, and Isak contributes very little as he concentrates on his dinner. He knows Eva can tell there’s something up. He knows Eva’s not going to pry, but is
going to quietly make sure Isak feels okay afterwards.

When they finish their meal, Eva hugs him tightly and asks if he wants to cuddle. Isak, still feeling the ghost of Even’s body against him, declines her offer, smiling softly and telling her he’s going to work some more on his paper and go to bed.

He makes his way into his room and closes the door behind him, stays still for a second before feeding Galileo, tapping softly on his glass thrice, being ignored by him, then he removes his glasses and his clothes and he climbs into bed, exhausted.

His eyes don’t close. They stare up at his poster, and he breathes in time with the stars.

The phone beside him lights up with several notifications. He ignores all of them, and closes his eyes instead.

Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka.

He dreams of paintings made of stars, and blue eyes smiling at him.

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Three days later, as far as he knows, Even’s made a full recovery — Isak promises he’ll show up tomorrow morning when he has the time, and Even tells him this is a great idea, because he has plans that evening, anyway. They end that conversation there for about an hour, both preoccupied with their own shit, he’s sure.

At the moment, he’s sitting with Mahdi, Jonas and Magnus at McDonald’s, and Magnus is narrating his latest Grindr conversation with Blonde-Julian.

“So that’s like — he’s totally asking me for my penis size that way, right?”

Mahdi rolls his eyes. “It’s Grindr. If he was asking for your penis size, he’d be asking for your penis size.”

“There’s gotta be a double meaning to this.”

“Wrong, there is not,” Jonas contributes. “Isak, tell him there’s not.”

“There isn’t,” Isak obeys automatically. Magnus immediately deflates. “Also, I don’t understand why you haven’t met up with this guy already?”

Magnus squirms. “I’m trying to make sure this thing can turn into something, alright?” he eyes all of them. “And that he’s not talking to other guys, like, wooing them the same way.”

Mahdi cracks up. “Wooing them?”

“There’s no way to know that unless you ask, Magnus,” Jonas replies, sounding amused. “It’s that easy.”

“Or,” Magnus points straight at Isak, and Isak’s already shaking his head. Magnus ignores this. “You could message him with your profile, and we can see if he chats you up the same way he does me, or just ignores you, which would mean—”

“Oh, one, that’s fucking insane,” Isak interrupts. “And two, I don’t have my Grindr app anymore. I haven’t for a while. I don’t use it and I don’t want it back.”
“Right, because this guy here can get by on his looks alone and doesn’t need to prove he has a personality,” Mahdi smirks, and Isak glares at him.

“No, because I don’t have time for meaningless hookups.” And he also has someone to offer that to him whenever he does have time, so. “I have actual important things to do, like, work, and school, and more work and more school—”

All of the boys start making choking noises. Isak glares at them.

“Sorry responsibility is boring,” he scoffs.

“You need to get laid,” Mahdi proclaims. “Like, pronto.”

Isak rolls his eyes. “I don’t.”

“Get it out of your system, dude,” Jonas adds. “Go find some random dude at a party, drunkenly make out with him like you usually do, except this time, you know. Finish the job.”

He’s already done that, thanks very much. Isn’t very much looking to doing it again.

“What about Even?” Magnus asks, and Isak freezes.

“W-what?”

“Yeah, can’t he hook you up with someone?” he asks, and Isak has to force himself to relax at the words, shut his heart down some until it finds a slower rhythm again. “You guys hang out like, all the time, I think he’d know someone who would wanna, you know. Fuck you.”

Isak throws his head back and looks up at the ceiling, counting to ten.

“So long as it is only sex,” Magnus continues, ignoring how Isak’s so obviously irate. “Because there’s still Julian as an option, and you get with that, that’s just sex on the regular.”

Jonas groans. “Magnus, can you drop it for like, two seconds?”

“What?” Magnus sounds genuinely confused. “It’s not like Isak doesn’t find him attractive!”

Isak finally lowers his head to glare at Magnus. “I don’t want anything serious, Magnus, for the last fucking time,” he growls. “And yes, Julian is very attractive. Extremely so. And he might be funny and nice, but he’s not — he’s not looking for what I’m looking for. Which is nothing,” he adds before Magnus can ask. “And do you really want to be responsible for breaking Julian’s heart?”

“You would be good together,” Magnus insists. “You would.”

“I’d be good with Jonas, too, probably,” he gestures to his best friend, who grins. “Doesn’t mean I’m jumping into bed with him.”

“He couldn’t handle all of this,” Jonas insists, and Isak rolls his eyes.

“Just because people can maybe work doesn’t mean they make any sense, Magnus,” he argues. “Julian and I — it’d last a month, maybe two.”

“Well,” Mahdi pipes up, a little hesitantly. Everyone turns to look at him. “I mean, I feel you Isak, I do, but like — maybe a month or two is all you need to make up your mind.”

“Oh, Christ Almighty,” Isak groans.
“Isak, it’s just—”

“What part of I don’t want anything serious do you guys not understand?” He asks, but Magnus keeps pushing, because Magnus is an asshole.

“You don’t always have to be looking for something serious to find it.”

“No, you do,” Isak snaps back. “Especially when it comes to me. You know why? Because I don’t want to find it.” He knows that Magnus and Mahdi aren’t well-versed in His Isak, but there can be only so many times he can yell at them about this. He can’t get through years and years of wall-building in one sitting, he can’t explain to them why anything serious, anything regarding love is a fucking waste of time, and he can’t get any deeper into this conversation without revealing some of His Isak, losing That Isak.

“I’m gonna go,” Isak mutters, standing from his chair.

“Aw, come on, dude, don’t go,” Jonas says. “Look, they’ll shut up, they’re just trying to help.”

“Isak, come on.” Mahdi agrees. “We’ll fuck off.”

Isak shakes his head. “It’s not you guys, it’s—” his own damn fucking fault, isn’t it. “Yeah, I need to head out anyway, I’m meeting Eva at — a place that isn’t here.” He turns around and walks right out of the McDonald’s and into the cold, hands turned into fists and heart freezing with the weather. He walks around aimlessly for half an hour, mind blank, heart frozen.

There’s a small part of him that wants.

He just doesn’t know which one.

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Maybe he shouldn’t go to Even’s the next day, because he’s been irritable since the talk at McDonald’s, and hasn’t budged since, but—

It’s the morning, and Even keeps texting him to come over soon, because he’s been irritable since the talk at McDonald’s, and hasn’t budged since, but—

He knocks on the door when he reaches Even’s house, as he always done. Someone yells to him that the door is open, and he sighs as he opens it up, stepping inside quickly as to not let any more cold travel into the house. As he’s removing his shoes, Elias is exiting the kitchen, pizza that looks cold in his hand. He grins at Isak.

“Hey!” he greets, and Isak offers him a smile.

“Hey, Elias.”

“Even’s upstairs,” he gestures over with his pizza, then takes a bite out of it. “Just follow the beautiful harmonies of the Tarzan soundtrack.”

Isak sighs loudly. “God dammit.”
Elias grins. “Have fun,” he offers, then walks over towards the couch and sits in front of the TV, playing a Fast & Furious movie. Isak can’t tell them apart anymore. The Rock’s in this one. Has The Rock been in all of them?

This is the debate he’s having with himself and in his head when he reaches Even’s bedroom, which is, indeed, blasting the Tarzan soundtrack. With another, much longer sigh, he knocks loudly on the door. After about a minute of no response, Isak knocks louder, this time with his palm. Finally, the door pulls open quickly, Even immediately grinning at the sight of Isak. “Hi!” he greets brightly, and Isak can’t help but feel something in his chest lighten. “Didn’t hear you.”

Isak raises an eyebrow as he follows Even inside. “Can you hear anything with that fucking thing playing?”

Even shrugs. “Probably not,” he admits. Isak keeps staring at the phone plugged into the speakers and he finally rubs at his head irritably.

“Can you shut it off?” he snaps, and Even turns over to look at him where he’d been rummaging through his desk. He frowns, but complies, walking over to his phone and stopping the music. The silence in the room now feels much heavier than before, and maybe Isak should have let it keep playing. It’s also awkward, and a silence between him and Even hasn’t been awkward in months, now, and Even seems to take notice.

He tilts his head. “Everything okay?” he asks Isak, and Isak nods, trying for a casual smile.

“Headache,” he tries, and Even eyes him for a second longer, before nodding, accepting the excuse.

“Okay,” he smiles. “I’ve got some painkillers in the bathroom, if you’d like. I have a lot leftover from this nerd who decided to play nurse with me for a couple of days.”

“Sounds kinky,” Isak replies, and Even laughs. The sound is colorful. “No, thanks. It’ll go away on its own, I’m sure.”

Even nods. “Sure,” he explains, then turns back around to rummage through his desk. “I’m sorry you have to be here so early, but I’ve got to be somewhere tonight,” he continues, and Isak is only half-listening, looking around the room aimlessly. “I did want to show you something I drew yesterday, though — if I can fucking find it,” he asks, and Isak nods.

“Yeah.”

Even continues to mutter incoherently under his breath, and Isak keeps walking around the room aimlessly, unsure of what exactly he’s looking for. Maybe he wants to walk the negativity off. Maybe he wants to find something else to get angry at. Maybe he just doesn’t know what he’s doing anymore, and there’s something about this room that both dulls and intensifies the fear.

He doesn’t know what compels him to look up. He doesn’t think it was anything good. He thinks, for once, that there maybe is anoutside force, out to get him, and it wants to shut him down, and it
wants him to see this. It wants Isak to hate this, and hate himself, and remember. It wants him to ruin what he touches. It wants him to find the person that he’s always been, and it wants him to lose what he has built, if only for a moment.

“I had to have it specially made,” Even is suddenly standing beside him, arms crossed over his chest and staring up at the ceiling with him. Isak can barely hear him over the pounding in his ears, which attempts to cumulate all of his weight and crush him underneath it. “I have no idea how you found yours,” he says. “Not a lot of Orion’s Belt posters lying around, apparently.”

Isak bites the inside of his cheek, heart beating rapidly. He’s not — it’s not—“I don’t know,” he tells Even quietly.

Even looks down at him. “Don’t know what?”

Isak can’t look at him. Isak can’t look at him and let him see. Isak can’t look at him and let him see and let him know.

“Where I found it,” he replies, voice barely above a whisper, still. “It was a gift.”

It doesn’t mean anything to Even. It’s obvious, because Even simply grunts in acknowledgment. “Makes sense,” he admits, and then he’s walking back towards his desk, presumably to continue to look for the drawing. Isak thinks he hears him keep talking, but it’s background noise, nothing but the whiteness of it, and then he’s completely tuned out — nothing left of Even’s voice, no trace of the ruffling of pencils and papers in a drawer. It’s quiet in his head, and his eyes are glued to the ceiling. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka. Alnitak, Alnilam, and Mintaka.

He feels the knot form in his throat. He feels the tears well in his eyes.

He feels his hands shake. Then his lip quiver. And then it’s like an unstoppable force — like the memories he’s spent years trying to forget are suddenly starting to take shape again, making themselves visible and known and Isak had forgotten. He’d forgotten.

So you don’t get cold.

Everything inside him gives out. Everything inside him starts to yell. His heart races a million miles an hour and there’s nothing Isak can do to stop it. There’s nothing he can say to cloak this. His feet are rooted to the floor, eyes glued to the stars, and suddenly he’s ten years old, looking up at a pair of bright, brown eyes, and he’s happy. It’s rare, but it’s pure, and it’s uninterrupted, and he’s happy. He feels his arms around a waist. A hand running through his hair.

He feels remembered. He feels important.

Isak can’t see the poster anymore. His vision is blurred by tears unwilling to shed. He can’t get a word out, his throat too constrained to help him out.

“Isak?”

It sounds like Even’s been trying to get his attention for a bit now. Isak doesn’t turn around. Isak doesn’t want to leave this memory.

“Isak.”

He hears Even approaching. Immediately, Isak forces himself out of it, and then it’s dark again and his heart is quiet and his mind is blank. There’s no room for this here.
Isak wipes at his eyes with his arm and sniffs, trying to compose himself. He feels Even stop directly behind him, and he feels the confusion radiate off him in waves.

“Isak?” This time, his name is spoken quietly, fast enough for it to sound like one syllable instead of two, and it’s laced with concern.

Isak doesn’t want it.

“I have to go,” he says suddenly, refusing to meet Even in the eye. His voice is hoarse and his head is pounding, but he manages to collect his things quickly enough. It’s the adrenaline, he guesses. The will to leave the room, the memory.

“What?” Even tries to reach him again, but Isak is quick to move towards the door. He throws it open and walks past it, down the stairs in a hurry.

“Isak!” Even shouts behind him, and Isak’s almost sorry that he sounds so perplexed. He clutches his hoodie to his chest and walks quickly past Elias sitting on the couch, who turns around quickly to eye him.

“Isak?” he asks, sounding just as confused as Even, but Isak doesn’t stop. He grabs his shoes beside the front door and tucks them underneath his arm, not bothering to put them on before opening the front door and walking through it. He slams it a little too loudly behind him.

It wasn’t his intention.

The further he walks from the house, the lighter his chest feels, the foggier his memories get. Quiet, he begs them. Please, please be quiet.

He doesn’t stop to put his shoes on. He doesn’t stop to put his hoodie on. He nearly sprints towards the tram stop.

So you don’t get cold.

Isak clutches the hoodie to his chest tighter. He looks down at it and realizes he’d picked up Even’s by mistake. He doesn’t put it on, then.

He’s cold. He’s cold.

--

When he gets to his apartment, Eva’s not there, and he locks himself in his room.

He wants to cry. It almost happens, even. For once, he wants it, needs it, even, but the tears won’t come. They won’t. The memory was there, and then it was gone, and for once Isak wants it back, he wants it back so, so badly. But it’s gone. It’s gone. It’s left him, because Isak left it behind so, so long ago, and he doesn’t deserve it. He doesn’t deserve it.

Isak knows Even didn’t mean it. He didn’t know. And were he in any other kind of mindset, it’d be sweet. It’d be Isak realizing Even pays attention to him in ways no one else has, and he’d be — he’d be in a far different position, perhaps more confused, he doesn’t know, but he’s not, so he’s here, shaking in his skin, Even’s hoodie clutched in his hands.

He doesn’t know how long he sits in his bed for. Hours. And hours and hours and hours. He doesn’t move, doesn’t eat, doesn’t think. He’s simply staring at the wall in front of him, unmoving and unmoved. He’s No Isak for hours upon hours, stuck in the middle of what was and what is, a sort of
limbo that feels suspiciously like purgatory.

It’s only when his phone rings for a third time that Isak finally snaps out of it, looking over where it lies beside him on his bed. It’s after five, now, and Isak blinks harshly, eyes dry. He can hardly swallow, his throat just about as dry, and his back is so sore when he slumps over that he immediately arches it again, hissing in pain.

He grabs his phone. It’s Jonas who’s called three times. Jonas doesn’t call three times unless it’s important, so after a moment, Isak presses the answer button.

“Hello?” His voice is hoarse, and he needs to force himself to swallow again.

Jonas doesn’t seem to notice however. Judging by the urgency in his voice, though, maybe he just doesn’t have the time to.

“Hey,” Jonas’s voice sounds a little stilted. Isak immediately scoots towards the end of the bed, alarmed.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, and there’s silence on the other line for a moment.

“I need you to come over,” Jonas replies. “Like, now.”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there,” Isak says, standing up and shuffling for his things. “I shouldn’t be long, alright? See you soon.”

“Wait, Isak—”

Isak hangs up.

Thoughts and feelings and worries are rushing back into him all at once, and he has to take a moment to catch his balance before leaning downward to pick up the hoodie he’d dropped when he stood. He hesitates for a moment when he brings it up, looks at it again. Looks like Even. Feels like Even. Smells like Even.

He doesn’t have time for this — he puts it on. His phone vibrates again, but before he can pick up, he realizes he’s at fifteen percent — swearing under his breath, he turns it off, trying to save battery until he gets to Jonas’s and can use his charger. He grabs his keys, puts on his shoes, and is out the door in a second.

He almost leaves without locking. A couple of steps ahead, he turns back around and quickly does.

He’s gone again, footsteps rushed, mind reeling.

There’s no time to go back.

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His knocks on Jonas’s apartment door are urgent and loud. It takes Jonas but a second to come and greet him, pulling open the door. His eyes look worried, and Isak immediately thinks the worst — Mahdi, maybe, Eva, he doesn’t know, and he should have let Jonas talk, he should have, except—

Isak freezes when Jonas steps aside quietly. And then he sees him.

He’s five years old and sitting at the foot of the devil’s chair.

It doesn’t feel real. For a second, Isak thinks it’s not, and maybe he fell asleep in his room, and
maybe all of this is some sick game his subconscious is trying to play with him — first a memory you can’t have back, and now a memory you wish you wouldn’t.

He should turn around. He should turn around. The adult inside him, the rational part of him, tells him to. Turn around, and forget about this, and forget about him, and make it clear. Make your silence and your retreat count for something.

But then there’s that part of him. Small. The child who never had what he’s always wanted, the child who wants to be fooled into thinking this is real. He’s real. That maybe he can have this, despite everything. It’s the part that’s screaming lies to him over and over again, but the screams are loud enough to drown any piece of rationality, and so he steps inside. One foot at a time.

“He wouldn’t leave,” Jonas suddenly whispers when Isak’s inside and standing beside him. “I tried to tell you, but your phone—”

Right. Isak had turned it off.

A sick, cruel fucking joke.

He doesn’t blame Jonas. He knows this man. He knows the man who insists is his father, through the good and the bad — the good? The bad. Only the bad. — and he knows he’s relentless, and stubborn, and frightening. Isak’s hands are shaking and his eyes are burning and his heart is racing and he should turn around. He should run away.

And isn’t that everything this man has taught him? Don’t stay. Run away.

Be scared.

It’s almost unfair, how exactly replicated the color of their eyes are, as if Isak’s looking into a mirror. It’s the only part of his father Isak found himself in when he was younger and desperate for a tether, any tether. He remembers being eight and mentioning this to the man in front of him, and the words that came afterwards — Genetics, son. Nothing special.

Because he was never anything special. Isak was as much of a nuisance as a gum on his shoe — annoying, but not important enough to take care of.

Isak wants to run so badly. He feels Jonas’s hand squeeze at his elbow, offering his support. He feels his blood calling west rather than north — there’s only one member of his family in this apartment. And it’s not the man responsible for his existence.

When the man talks, his voice sounds like nails on a chalkboard. “Isak,” his voice is soft, but his name on the man’s tongue sounds polluted, uninviting, rehearsed. Isak wants him to never say it again, demand he forget it altogether, but all Isak can do is stand, and watch, and listen. “Son, I — you’ve been ignoring all my attempts at reaching out, so — I’m sorry I had to do this like this.”

Isak doesn’t think apologizing is in this man’s nature. Empty words, sure. Empty sentiments. Empty stares. But apologizing? Nowhere near this man’s orbit.

He hears the lie before he speaks it. “I want to work this out,” he says, and it’s almost funny enough that Isak laughs. “I want to have you back in my life, Isak.”

Fuck, Isak was never part of this man’s life. Never, not once. How dare he — how dare he pretend he was once there, he was once present, how dare he pretend like Isak was anything other than a mistake to him?
Isak doesn’t know where his voice is anymore. Perhaps this man’s taken that from him, too.

“Isak,” the man’s expression turns regretful. Isak notes the way his eyes wrinkle at the corners, a clear indication of the effort he’s putting into schooling it. “I know you’re angry with me. I know. I just — I wish you could understand what it’s like to love someone and — and see them not want to take care of themselves,” he continues, and Isak wants to shout at him. That wasn’t it. That wasn’t it, and how, how is it that his lies always sound like truths when they reach Isak? How, when he knows what they are? “It was hard. It was so hard, Isak.”

Stop, Isak wants to plead. Leave.

The man still has his voice. He’s seven years old and begging his father to play with him outside, and he’s seven years old and watching his father dismiss him as he walked out the front door, suitcase in hand on a Saturday.

“I’m so sorry,” he apologizes again, and God, it’s so hollow and empty Isak wonders how many truths he could fit in there if he actually tried. “I’m so sorry about your mom, Isak. I truly am. I wanted to help her, I did.”

Isak’s eyes burn even harder. He doesn’t get to pretend he’s sorry about his mother. He doesn’t. He doesn’t get to pretend like he saw her through her worst, he saw her through her fears, he saw her through her confusion. He doesn’t get to pretend Isak wasn’t only fifteen years old when he’d gone one day without a word, without a goodbye, and with everything unknown inherited to him.

He doesn’t get to pretend he wanted or tried to help. He didn’t. He didn’t. He left.

And Isak—

It’s all he knew. It’s all he knew.

“You understand,” the man says softly. “You had to do it, too.”

It’s all he knew, it’s all he knew, and that isn’t fair, it’s not fair.

He doesn’t realize he’s clenched his fists until he’s doing it so tightly that his palms are starting to burn with how deep his fingernails are digging into them.

The man steps closer. Isak is frozen to the spot. He wants to scream at him to stay away, to not come any closer. But he does, and the little boy in Isak soars.

“I’d like to have a relationship with you,” he keeps talking and talking and Isak keeps listening. “I know it’s hard for you to reach out, but we can start — start slow, yes? We can go out to dinner together,” he offers. Isak says nothing. “And then afterwards you can meet Kim and David. You’d get along so well, I promise. Kim really wants to meet you.”

Kim and David. Their names carry far more weight than Isak’s ever has on the man’s lips. And right where Isak stands now, is where he’s always stood.

“Does that sound good?”

It doesn’t.

He nods anyway, helpless, out of control. Isak’s stepped out of his body and he’s merely an observer and he’s alone. There are two people in this room and Isak stands to the side, alone, watching as his chance slips away. Fuck off, he wants to say. Fuck you. You made me this way. This is your fault.
But inside of Isak’s body is the boy looking for approval and for the affection his father has never allowed him, and the boy inside Isak’s body lets his father step closer to him and envelop him into a hug. He doesn’t return it, arms limp at his side. Isak watches on. Isak says nothing.

When it’s over, when he’s gone, Isak steps back, and the first thing he feels is the quivering of his lips.

Then the quivering of the rest of him.

He’s shaking uncontrollably suddenly, and there’s a huge knot in his throat, but there are no tears in his eyes. They’re not there. They refuse.

“Isak,” he hears Jonas’s voice in the distance. Is he very far away? “Isak.”

He doesn’t reply. He feels Jonas’s arms around him, and Isak can’t do anything for a moment.

The man is gone, and he’s left Isak’s voice behind.

“I have to go,” he croaks, and Jonas pulls back and eyes him, expression concerned. “I can’t be here.”

“Isak, stay,” Jonas’s voice is careful. “Just stay for a little while, alright? We can—”

“You can’t fix this,” Isak snaps. “You don’t know this, Jonas, so you can’t fix it.”

Jonas’s expression is solemn. “I’m not trying to.”

He is. Isak can tell. He doesn’t know how to tell Jonas that this is rooted far deeper inside him than Jonas can see, he doesn’t know how to tell Jonas that this dates farther than he can remember, he doesn’t know how to tell Jonas this is his. This is his.

“I have to go,” he repeats, and after a moment he finds his footing again and he’s turning around to grab the doorknob, pulling the door open.

“Isak, come on—”

“Thank you,” Isak tells him, not looking back at him. “For being here.”

And that’s all he says before he’s walking out the door, nearly sprinting down the stairs, breaths short and hands shaking and he’s raging, there’s so much anger inside of him — he wants to hit something, he wants to scream at the top of his lungs, he’s such a fucking coward—

That’s the longest conversation he’s ever had with his father. His entire life, he’s had very few, and this, by far, has been the longest.

And he wasn’t even a part of it.

And how is that fair? Isn’t Isak the one who’s meant to talk? The one who gets to talk? Fuck, he’s nothing but fear, that’s what he’s made up of, and he sees it. He sees who he is. He sees his father standing in front of him and it’s just him. Isak is looking right back at him.

This is who he is. This is who he’s going to be.

It’s all he knows, and this is where he’s going to end up, and he’s so afraid, and he’s so resigned.

Isak reaches desperately for his phone inside his pocket, clicking on the lock button. He remembers
he’s turned it off, so he turns it back on, waiting impatiently for it to come back to life. His hands are shaking — his phone nearly falls. When it comes back to life, he ignores all the notifications on his lock screen. It’s still light out, and the orange sun is making it difficult to see the screen through the glare, but the contact he’s looking for is one he finds so often his fingers know exactly when and where to press down.

His hand is still shaking when he brings the phone up to his ear.

It rings four times until it’s answered.

“Isak?” Even’s voice is both puzzled and relieved. “What’s—”

Isak interrupts, uncaring. “I really need you right now.”

“What?” Even pauses, and in that moment Isak becomes angrier. “I mean, yeah, but what’s — what’s wrong?”

For the first time, Isak hears loud noise in the background. Muffled voices. Busy atmosphere. He closes his eyes. “Fuck, are you busy?”

“Oh, no,” Even backtracks. “Well, yeah, I’m at the movies with the guys, but I can ditch, so — Isak, this morning—”

He can’t. “Can we meet at your place?”

There’s a pause. “Sure, Isak, but you need to tell me—”

“I’ll be there soon.”

He hangs up.

He leaves.

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When he gets there, Even’s bike is the only thing in the driveway, so he figures he’s home. Isak doesn’t think as he marches towards the door and slams on it repeatedly and repeatedly and repeatedly—

Even opens the door, eyes worried.

Before he can say anything, Isak storms inside, pushing past him. He barely has a chance to take off his shoes at the entrance, and then he’s walking upstairs, taking them two at a time, faster and faster—

Even keeps up with Isak — probably because his legs are so fucking long — and when they reach his bedroom, Even closes the door behind him softly, like this shouldn’t be a loud occasion, like this shouldn’t be him fucking for a reason.

Even’s about to turn the light on, but Isak stops him, immediately pulls him closer and starts kissing him:

Is it a kiss? Isak’s mind is far too clouded to tell. It feels more like he’s knocking his teeth against Even’s, and his hands want to rip every inch of his hair out, and he doesn’t know where he’s taking this, all he knows is he wants to forget, he wants to fucking forget, he wants — he wants the voices to shut up, he wants — he wants the pressure to lift from his chest, he wants — his memories to stop
singing to him off key, he wants — he wants to pretend like he didn’t just stand in front of the man that ruined him and let him take again, let him—

He wants to forget—

He just—

Everything is so dark—

And suddenly his lips are cold and lonely and the thoughts are looming over him like his shadow has grown ten feet, overwhelming his vision, wrapping around his heart and taking, and taking—

His hands are shaking. Are they shaking in anger? Are they shaking in fear? Isak can’t pull himself together. It just — it feels like—

It feels like he’s breathing in water, inviting it into his lungs, and he can’t breathe, and he can’t speak, and his heart is doing nothing to help. It feels like his heart wants to give in.

And fuck, fuck.

He marches up to Even and tries to pull him down for a kiss again, but Even presses his hands against Isak’s chest. The contact feels like nothing. “Isak—”

“Jesus Christ, just fucking—”

Even’s eyes are blue. Isak knows this. He knows Even’s eyes are blue. It’s a simple fact, it’s a simple color. The first answer to the question. His eyes are blue and Isak sometimes feels like he can drown in them. His eyes are blue and Isak sometimes feels like he can fly into them. His eyes are blue and Isak sometimes feels like he never wants to look away from them. His eyes are blue, and his eyes are Isak’s favorite color.

But right now, his eyes look like nothing. They’re devoid of any color Isak’s ever seen in his entire life, and they confuse Isak, because his eyes are blue, but he can’t see the blue. He can’t see the blue.

“Isak, I need you to breathe.”

And why the fuck would he do that?

Isak pushes Even away and growls at him. “Don’t tell me what to do,” he snaps, but his voice sounds distant. “You know why I’m here. And you need to fucking get on with it.”

Even’s an expressive guy. Always has been. If Isak weren’t so willfully ignorant, he might know everything he’s thinking at all times. So his expression right now is screaming at Isak.

But Isak doesn’t know what it’s screaming, and the ignorance is not willful this time.

Even walks towards him and grabs him by the waist. His colorless eyes forcefully lock with Isak’s unseeing ones. “Isak, please.”

“Even, fucking—”

“Isak, I’m not doing this, not when you’re—”


“You’re supposed to!” Isak pushes his chest again, but it’s him who stumbles back, who loses his
balance. “Fuck you, Even, you’re not supposed to ask questions, you’re just supposed to
fucking do it, that’s why we have this, right? That’s why we made this deal, we have sex to deal
with the stress, you can’t fucking back out now—”

“Isak—”

“Why won’t you just fuck me, oh my God—”

“Isak—”

“I need you—” Isak chokes on a sob. “I need you to — I need you to make me — I need you to fuck
me like—” Like he’s worthless. Like he’s useless. He needs to know. He needs to cement it. He
needs to remember it. He needs Even to understand. He needs it, he craves it, it’s such a deep part of
him that he doesn’t know anything but this, and he wants to remember. It’s all he’s ever known and
he wants to go back to it. It’s safe there. It’s familiar.

He’s worthless, and useless, and nothing but a front, an image, someone nobody knows, and nobody
will know, because he’s not worth it, and that’s why he couldn’t face his father, and this is why he’ll
let that man walk all over him, and it’ll happen again and again and again—

And he needs to remember. He needs to remember he doesn’t get to feel sad about this, because this
is something he knows, has always known.

“I need you to fuck me like you never want to see me again,” Isak pleads. “I just need you to — I
need this so badly—”

Even walks up and grabs him by the shoulders. “Isak—”

He’s not going to do it. Isak can see it. Not in his colorless eyes, nor his unreadable expression, but
in the way he speaks Isak’s name like he’s painting the most pitiful fucking picture he’s ever going to
make.

“No, fuck you,” he moves back, but Even moves with him, hands now sliding upwards to hold his
face between them. His hands are cold. His eyes are colorless.

“Isak,” Even’s voice is now soft, like a lullaby, and Isak’s heart suddenly cracks, splits right down
the middle, and he feels his tears begin to sting and the knot in his throat choking him.

He doesn’t get to do this. No, he doesn’t get to see this. No, Isak doesn’t deserve this.

“No, fuck you,” he moves back, but Even moves with him, hands now sliding upwards to hold his
face between them. His hands are cold. His eyes are colorless.

“Isak,” Even’s voice is now soft, like a lullaby, and Isak’s heart suddenly cracks, splits right down
the middle, and he feels his tears begin to sting and the knot in his throat choking him.

He doesn’t get to do this. No, he doesn’t get to see this. No, Isak doesn’t deserve this.

“Just—” Isak bites his bottom lip to keep from crying. Tears are for people who deserve them. Tears
are for people who deserve to let go. Tears are for someone like Isak, who refuses to. “Even,
please just—” he shakes his head, but Even’s hands don’t waver from either side of his face. They’re
firm and they’re rooting Isak to the spot, and they’re so fucking cold. “Just—” he chokes on a sob,
and then Even is pulling him close, wrapping an arm around Isak’s waist and bringing another one to
stroke Isak’s hair gently.

He doesn’t get to have this. He doesn’t get to have Even. But there’s the masochistic part of him that
refuses to let him go. It tells him to stay right where he is, and let the pressure lift, let the water go.

There are his fears and the voices and the truth and the lies and the person that he really is—

And then there is the person who’s clutching onto Even’s shirt, the person wrapped around his arm,
the person he so desperately wants to be.
“It’s okay,” Even whispers — but it’s not. It’s a lie, and it’s not okay, but when he says it it sounds like a fucking prayer, like the ones he used to recite to himself when he was younger, and it sounds like it might be true. Like one day it could be true. Like the hope that gradually left him is suddenly finding its way back inside him all at once, bursting with so much intensity he feels every single cell in his body light up in full color, every single one. “It’s okay,” he says again, and suddenly Isak is shaking uncontrollably, his face buried in Even’s neck.

“I’m right here,” Even mutters into Isak’s hair, arm hugging Isak tighter to his chest, like if he lets go Isak will fall.

(He might just.)

“I’m right here, Isak,” he whispers again, and God, God—

He is. He’s right here.

There is what Isak has built in his head, the things that they tell him, the walls that he surrounds himself with, there is the abstract and the untouchable—

And then there’s Even.

Real. Isak can touch him. Isak can feel him. He’s real. He’s right here. Everything else is out of reach, but Even is pressed against him, not an inch spared between them, and he’s right here.

Everything quiets.

And then—

“Fuck,” Isak chokes out, and his arms wrap around Even’s neck and he pulls him as close as he’s allowed and the tears fall. His lungs breathe. The water leaves. His heart beats. His throat speaks.

It’s speaking nothing but aimless sobs, the water’s leaving him in the form of unstoppable tears, and his heart fights again. His heart wants to stay right here. His heart wants to beat in time with Even’s.

Both of Even’s arms are around him now. It feels familiar — like his walls — except he can look through these. He can find what he’s lost, if only momentarily.

And Isak is shaking uncontrollably, but he holds on, and he holds on, and he doesn’t let go, and Even doesn’t let him go. His arms tighten around Isak, safe and secure, and they don’t let the voices (and the thoughts and the presence and the shadows) come near Isak, don’t let them find an entry. Isak suddenly doesn’t crave what he’s always known. Suddenly he craves this, and the million things he’s never known.

Even’s lips are kissing Isak’s hair, his temple, his forehead, seemingly anything they can reach, and he’s being held so tight he almost can’t breathe, but it’s okay. It’s okay.

Isak doesn’t know how or when or why it happens, but Even manages to walk him towards the bed and he’s laying Isak down and Isak clings to Even’s shirt — he almost pleads Even not to leave him, it almost leaves his lips — but Even doesn’t leave him anyway, lays himself right beside Isak, and he wraps an arm around him again and holding him close to his chest and Isak’s crying there now, too.

He feels Even’s hand rub soothingly and continually along his spine. He hears Even shush him quietly — not to quiet him, but to comfort him — and Isak is still shaking. He’s still shaking.

He’s so pathetic, but he doesn’t let go, and he doesn’t want to let go.
“I’ve got you,” Even suddenly whispers, and the air in the room carries it right into Isak’s ears and lets the words settle in his heart. They’re unshakable for a moment. He’s going to let them stay there, if only for that moment. “I’ve got you, baby, I’ve got you.”

Isak looks up, catches sight of Even’s chin — and then Even looks back down, catches sight of Isak’s gaze.

His eyes are blue.

Isak’s inhale is shaky and his glasses are pressing uncomfortably against his skin and then he’s burying his face, uncaring, in Even’s chest again and he lets Even hold him.

He lets Even hold him.

And a lullaby lures him to sleep — *You’re okay. It’s okay. I’m right here. I’ve got you. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.*

His chest lifts, his father fades, and he’s nothing but Isak Valtersen, clinging to Even Bech Næsheim, and he’s okay. Even’s right here.

Even’s got him.

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Isak’s eyes flutter open slowly, head pounding where he lies.

He’s disoriented for a moment. It’s dark around him save for the small, warm light of a lamp on the bedside table, though it’s still bright enough against his eyes to make Isak squint for a second.

He rolls around on the bed, stretching his joints, and for a moment, he thinks he’s in his room — there’s an Orion’s Belt poster on the ceiling, and the bed is comfortable and familiar, and there’s a blanket his body hugs closer to as if it’s known it for a long, long time.

It only takes another five seconds for him to realize he’s not in his own room. The bed is bigger, and so is the room, actually, and the poster taped to the ceiling is different, despite being of the same asterism. And it only takes another five for the memories to come flooding back, bringing with them wave after wave of embarrassment, fear, regret.

Isak covers his eyes with his arm, breathing deeply. Fuck. Fuck.

He’s not sure what he’s supposed to do here. Isak’s never, in his life, allowed himself to break down like that — not alone, and most definitely not in front of someone, clinging to them like a lifeline. The walls around him have wavered so much they’re virtually nonexistent at the moment, crumbled around him as if they’d been hit by a storm, staring accusingly up at Isak, faulting him for their demise.

He’s shaking slightly. Not as much as before he’d come here, but enough so that it’s bothersome, so he bites down on his bottom lip harshly, attempting to keep the shivering at bay. The room is cold — he supposes that doesn’t help matters too much, but it’s even colder without Even’s body pressed against him like it’d been when he first fell asleep. He wonders how long it’s been, and where Even’s gone.

He sits up slowly and carefully, allowing his head some time to get used to the change, and looks around. There is no light coming from the window anymore, which means he’d been asleep long enough for the sun to go down. There’s light, however, peeking through the slit underneath the
bedroom door, which means someone’s out there, at least, and very awake. Isak takes this to mean it probably isn’t too late, then; he struggles to remember at what time he’d shown up to Even’s place, though it’s not like he was too preoccupied with the time then, and when he turns to look at the bedside table, he finds his glasses have been removed and placed on top of it, and his phone is plugged into a charger.

Isak’s demeanor softens. He reaches over to click on the home button, finding the phone on the “do not disturb” mode, silencing it while Isak slept. The clock tells him it’s only a quarter past eight o’clock, so he assumes he hasn’t been sleeping for too long, then. He lets his phone lock itself again, ignoring the notifications on his lock screen, and tries to settle back into what he’s feeling.

There are remnants of anger in there, that much is true. His mind’s doing its best to make the memory of his father’s presence in Jonas’s apartment blurry, but it still remembers the parts that hurt the most, that angered him the most, so that hasn’t completely left Isak’s system. He’s still angry, and he’s still clueless about how to deal with it. He doesn’t know what to do, or what to say, but—

He’s not as angry as before. It’s as if his chest has lifted some, and he’s breathing easier. It’s as if it’s not all locked away in there, constricting his lungs, making breathing difficult. It’s as if it’s found gravity, and though it stays put, it’s all around him, not inside him.

Isak plays with the blanket some. Right. So, some anger there, but not enough to render him useless again.

There’s regret. For what, he can’t really pinpoint. Not yelling at his father? Pushing Jonas away immediately? Showing vulnerability in front of Even?

He knows it’s a combination of all three. Regret is probably the most prominent feeling inside of him, the biggest threat to his composure. Isak fears he’ll apologize about as well as his father, and his sincerity will either fall flat, or pretend it doesn’t exist.

There’s that, too. The fear. He fears he’s allowed his father entrance into his life, when all Isak’s ever wanted is for him to leave him alone. The man he faced earlier wasn’t his father at all, but someone with his same eyes, pretending to have a connection that’s never existed between them. He’s the man that dismissed Isak as nothing more than a burden, a noose around his neck, the only thing holding him back from truly living.

He’s the man that made a five-year-old boy question his worth, and he’s the kind of man you spit in the face of and piss on the grave of, without regret ever setting you back.

There’s the fear that that’s what he’ll be, too. A hundred versions of a person he truly isn’t, someone who will mold himself for the rest of eternity into a person who harbors no feelings, no love, no sympathy. He finds himself halfway there already, and he fears it’s all he’ll ever know. He fears there’s no turning back. He fears this is what he’ll always be, the ghost of his father, held back by the fear that his heart will break in two again.

Somewhere, though, deep in there, there’s serenity. It’s foreign, something Isak’s never felt before, and though it’s so slight, barely a flicker of light, it’s in there. He’s out of tears. He’s out of screams. He’s out of fights.

It’s not permanent, he knows. But when he holds the blanket up to his face and ridiculously breathes it in, he knows it’s special, anyway.

He’s a thousand different emotions pulled a thousand different ways, and yet, the only thing he worries about now is how he’s going to face the person who’d held him through the worst part of
him outside that door.

Isak drops the blanket in favor of playing with the strings of his hoodie. There’s no plan formulating here. There’s no correct way of doing this. There’s no way to express what he feels, no way to know how thank him, no way to know how to beg him to forget. There are so many Isaks in existence, all of them either slightly or extremely different, so many Isaks and so many ways of communicating with them, but the Isak Even saw tonight, the Isak the peeked outside the walls that surround him and clung to him tightly and sobbed into his chest—

That’s the closest anyone has ever come to His Isak. The closest anyone’s ever come to the person who lives locked away in his heart, regretting, hating himself, not knowing how to heal. That’s the closest anyone has ever come to seeing him completely, and that’s both invigorating and so incredibly frightening.

He thinks there are perhaps a thousand words he can say. He thinks perhaps there are none at all.

Making his way off the bed is probably the hardest part — here, he feels hidden, safe, like he doesn’t have to go and he doesn’t have to be anywhere and he doesn’t have to think. The second his feet touch the floor, he’s overcome with the realization this is nothing he can avoid. There’s only one exit here, and there’s no avoiding it. There’s no pretending it didn’t happen.

Shaking slightly still, Isak stands up and pulls the charger out of his phone. He pockets it inside his hoodie, then grabs his glasses, too, putting them on over his nose. He runs a hand through his hair, aware that it’s probably tousled and unattractive. He feels the tear streaks uncomfortable on his face, still, so he walks over to the bathroom and turns on the light, staring at himself in the mirror for a second.

He sees his father’s eyes flash at him for a second, but then they’re his, and all he sees is a broken man and a broken boy.

Isak swallows harshly and turns on the faucet, letting the water run through his hands and washing his face vigorously, over his cheeks, under his glasses, trying to get rid of the viscid streaks on it, and maybe get rid of some of the puffiness still encircling his eyes, looking like an angry red.

When he’s done, he turns the faucet off and grabs at the rag hanging beside the mirror, drying his face and his glasses off. He maybe doesn’t look too different, but he at least feels cleaner, maybe a little braver. Though bravery is a foreign concept to him, and if he were to be feeling it, Isak wouldn’t know how to tell.

He drops the rag on the sink, not thinking to hang it back where it belongs, and walks out of the bathroom, turning the light off behind him. His hands play nervously with the phone inside his pocket as he pulls open the bedroom door quietly, peeking his head out slightly and looking around. The hallway light is on, which is unsurprising, seeing as he’s sure it was the source of the light between the slit of the door, but there seems to be no one out there — the house is quiet, which Isak thinks means there’s no one but him here, and Even, most likely. But the muffled music isn’t coming from Yousef’s bedroom as it usually is and the television isn’t loud enough in the living room for Elias to be here, either.

Isak steps outside the door. His socks feel cold against the hallway floor as he steps slowly towards the staircase. When he reaches the top, his hand grips the stair railing tightly, listening for any noise. He finally hears it.

It’s whistling, and not only that, but it’s whistling in time with the lyrics of a song, the words unintelligible from up here. He hears some clanking from the kitchen, and this is when he figures this
is probably Even, and where he’d gone off to when he left Isak to sleep his mood off in his bed.

Pursing his lips, Isak walks slowly down the stairs, making the turn to walk towards the kitchen. He hesitates a moment longer before he steps in between the exit and the kitchen floor, right beneath the doorframe. Even doesn’t notice him immediately — he’s whistling along to *Strangers Like Me*, blasting it from his phone, and of *course* he is. Something stupid settles in Isak’s stomach, and it’s ridiculous, the way Even allows himself to be unapologetically himself, whether people are watching or not.

Isak opens his mouth to announce his presence, but the only sound to come out of him is a pathetic grunt — or something. Still, it’s enough to catch Even’s attention, who’s currently flipping what looks like a pancake, and as soon as he meets Isak’s gaze, his eyes brighten and his expression softens. “Hi,” he greets him, and Isak licks his lips.

“Hi,” he replies quietly. He opens his mouth again, trying to find the words that keep alluding him, but Isak doesn’t think they’ll be able to come to him if he keeps looking at Even. Instead, he starts playing with the strings of his hoodie again and looks to the floor, clearing his throat. “About—” he clears his throat again. “About earlier. Up there.”

That’s all the words that come to him. There’s nothing else. Nothing his mind helpfully supplies, nothing his lips want to say. It’s as if all he can do is acknowledge that something *did* happen up there — there’s not even the ability to beg Even forget all of this. There’s nothing. It’s all gone.

And so are his walls, and he’s never felt so naked in his *life*, and even though it was a rush to feel it under the blanket of the darkness, here, in the light, faced with Even, it’s as scary as it’s always here. Even now has one more level up in the power he has to break Isak. To use against him. This is what people feed off of — vulnerabilities, and truths they try to hide, and Even knows very little about him, but he does know there is something *wrong* with him, and he’s going to *ask*, and Isak won’t know how to explain—

Suddenly, Isak sees Even’s feet stop right in front of his own, and before he can register that the other man has neared him, Even’s cradling Isak’s head in his hand and raising his gaze. It’s hard to meet his eyes. It’s hard. It’s so scary. It’s *paralyzing*. He knows. Even knows. Even wants to know now, he does, and Isak is going to run, he’s going to run, isn’t he—

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Even says suddenly, and Isak is momentarily stunned.

He doesn’t want to know. Or, maybe he doesn’t want Isak to feel like he wants to know.

Whatever the case, Even is asking for nothing here, nothing in return, not for putting up with Isak’s anger and his fear and his resentment and his tears, nothing. He’s standing in front of Isak, expression sincere, and he’s assuring Isak he doesn’t have to know anything about him if Isak doesn’t want him to know.

And that — that helps him breathe again. He swallows, mouth no longer dry, and asks, “Really?”

Even’s laugh is soft. “Really,” he nods. “Okay?”

Isak nods right back. He feels it’s a little stilted, maybe looks insincere, but he understands. He’s grateful. He’s scared, but he can stay here. He can, because Even doesn’t *know*. He’s *seen*, but he still doesn’t know every part of him is broken and ugly, doesn’t know his tears were for his father and for himself, so Isak can stay and say, “Okay.”
Even’s smile grows impossibly wider, and Isak can only blink at him. No more beautiful sight, he decides. None more beautiful than his smile, not at this moment. “Okay,” Even repeats quietly, and then he presses his forehead against Isak’s. The touch is fiery and it renders every single nerve in his body awake.

When he breathes out, it’s shaky. He doesn’t mean to — or maybe he does — but he raises his gaze some, enough so that his nose brushes Even’s softly. “Okay,” Isak offers, a small smile trying for control of his lips.

Even huffs softly, and then he’s pressing his lips against Isak’s, and when his heart flutters, he lets it. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t have to know.

When he pulls back, Even offers Isak another small smile. “Okay,” he laughs, and Isak can’t help it anymore — the smile wins control of his lips, and he laughs once with Even, and now it’s him who leans into Even in search of his lips. They’ve gone nowhere, and suddenly the kiss is a little uncomfortable with how enthusiastically Isak is nodding against it, and Even does nothing but laugh into his mouth.

“Oh, Isak,” Isak mutters for the final time, and Even’s responding grin against Isak’s lips makes it harder to kiss him.

He thinks he can maybe let go now.

He doesn’t, still.

Isak’s hands grasp at the back of Even’s head, fisting in his hair, and he’s pulling him closer, and Even’s lips move in sync with his, and they’re so close to each other their noses brush every time their heads tilt to find breath in the middle of their kiss. Isak doesn’t know how long this goes on for — all he knows is that the kiss is comforting, strangely so, and this. This he knows. This is familiar. This, the taste of Even and the simplicity of his kiss, is something he can understand. He doesn’t worry. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t have to know. Isak can walk away from this one day, with all the strength he’ll be able to muster, and he’ll remain unscathed, because Even doesn’t know.

Finally, Isak pulls back, nose still nuzzling Even’s softly. He’s trying to catch his breath and gather his thoughts when Even’s already pulling away and walking towards the stove, turning off some of the knobs. “I made eggs and pancakes,” he announces, as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened — now, or before. “And I know that’s not conventional for dinnertime, but you looked like you needed more comfort food than gourmet food, so here we are.”

Isak huffs, amused, and when Even meets his gaze, he raises an eyebrow. “What are you looking at?” His voice is teasing, so Isak simply shakes his head.


“Can’t be an asshole without a nerd around,” Even replies, and Isak is starting to regain feeling in his legs, enough so that he finally steps inside the kitchen and makes his way to the table. When he pulls out a chair to sit, Even’s already coming over with a plateful of pancakes, setting them down in between Isak’s seat and the one across from him, then sets down a separate plateful of eggs in front of Isak. There’s another plate set right beside that one, empty, because Even’s aware Isak can’t have his food touch — this makes Isak want to reach out to him again. He doesn’t, though. Even smiles. “Are you feeling orange juice or you want to go for a soda?”

Isak shakes his head. “Orange juice is fine,” he nods, and Even clicks his tongue in acknowledgment.
as he walks over to the fridge and pulls out the jar of orange juice, pouring it into two separate glasses that he’d already taken from the cupboard. When he’s done, he puts the orange juice back in its place and closes the fridge door, walking over to the table and setting a glass in front of Isak, then another in front of what Isak now assumes is Even’s place. With one last trip to the counter and back, Even finally sets down his own plate of eggs and sits, handing Isak some utensils and placing the syrup in between them.

For a while, Isak picks at his eggs in silence, playing with them as Even eats silently. He’s hungry, he is, and even if he wasn’t, Even’s cooking is always something he’ll make himself hungry for, but there’s an uncomfortable swirl in his stomach that’s not allowing him to partake.

Finally, he looks up at Even, who’s happily chewing on a piece of pancake. “Even,” he starts questioningly, and Even looks up at him, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah?”

Isak hesitates for a moment, before finally clearing his throat and continuing. “Do you think you’re brave?”

Even frowns. “Do I think I’m brave?” He sounds like he’s clarifying, making sure the question is what he’s thinking it is. Isak nods.

“Yes.”

Even pauses, looking thoughtful. Then: “I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.”

Isak nods solemnly, playing with his eggs again. His fork moves them from one end to the other, aligning them every time. “Do you think,” he begins again. “Do you think you’d be able to do the things you thought you never could?”

He looks up at Even, who’s still looking thoughtful. “Hm,” he sucks in one cheek before answering. “It depends, I guess.”

Isak moves the eggs to the other end of the plate. “On?”

“What I was doing it for.”

Isak thinks on this. Then, quietly: “Yourself?”

Even hums, smiling slightly. “That’s the thing, isn’t it? People always tell you to do things for yourself, with yourself in mind. If you’re going to be brave, do it for yourself. Think about yourself, and how this is affecting you. Don’t do things for others before you do them for yourself.”

Isak tries to keep up. “And do you think that’s how you should be brave?”

Even shakes his head. “I think it’s stupid to think the human mind can be entirely selfish.”

“Oh?”

“Like,” Even puts his fork down. “I understand the concept of doing things for yourself, I do. But sometimes the driving force can’t be you, you know?” he looks at Isak. “Sometimes there’s not enough love for yourself to do what you need to do, to muster enough courage. Sometimes your tether is someone or something else, and that’s the only way you can find a way to be brave.”

“For others.”
“Yeah. I guess. Sometimes.” Even smiles. “Say if you were afraid of bees, and you’ve been so all your life, never once facing them head on — like, just running away from them every time. And then one day, you’re walking down the street with someone you care deeply about, and they’re maybe a little more afraid of bees than you are. Maybe even a lot more. The kind of afraid that paralyzes them. And all of a sudden you’re walking towards a couple of them right in front of you, and there’s no way to avoid them, so suddenly, that bravery kicks in,” Even explains. “The adrenaline, the will to get someone else through something difficult. And you might get stung, yeah, and it’s gonna hurt like hell, but you were brave,” he closes. “Because you thought of the impact it would have on someone else. Not yourself.”

Isak is silent for a moment. He pushes his eggs to the other end of the plate. “So — if you knew you had to face something difficult. Something you don’t think you’re brave enough to do. If you — if you thought it’d help someone else, you’d — you’d find the courage to do so?”

“Yeah,” Even nods. “If I cared about the person enough, I would.”

“But the sting,” Isak brings up quietly, still avoiding Even’s gaze in favor of his eggs. “Do you ever think about the sting? The consequences?”

“Oh, all of the time,” Even snorts. “That’s literally all I do.”

Isak looks up. “Really?”

“I’m bipolar, Isak,” Even gives him an amused look, and Isak blushes some. “If there’s anything I’ve learned throughout the years following my diagnosis, it’s that so long as I have the capability of making rational decisions, I should think about the consequences first.”

“Yeah,” Isak nods. “See? That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Even raises. “The sting?”

“Yeah.”

“Hm.” Even’s silent then.

Isak stares at him. “What?”

“I just find that — living the way I do, worrying about the sting is important, yeah, but sometimes I find that the thought of it hinders us more than helps us,” he replies thoughtfully. Isak tilts his head.

“How do you mean?”

“I like to think of the sting — or, the consequences, as the rewrites to your script. You write your script, and when you’re done, you’ve made the decision that this is the script you love, that you want to stick to,” Even shakes his head. “But sometimes, afterwards, you’re faced with the reality that maybe the script you wrote probably wasn’t the best you could have written — so you’re forced to go back and rewrite some of it, sometimes from the beginning.”

“But then wouldn’t it just be worse?” Isak shakes his head. “If the consequences are your rewrites?”

“Oh, absolutely not,” Even grins. “Sometimes they can make everything better.”

Isak shakes his head. “I don’t think they can.”

“Yes. Yes, they can, Isak,” Even meets his gaze firmly. “You learn from the consequences of your
actions. So you go back. And you write your script again. And the next time you finish it, it’s better.”

“So what are you saying?” Isak asks quietly.

“Life isn’t life without consequences,” Even tells him. “It’s not life without the fear of the sting. But if you live in fear of it all the time, you’ll never be brave, no matter who you’re doing it for. No matter what you’re doing it for. Sometimes you just have to run straight for the bees,” Even gestures forward. “And remind yourself that however many times you’re stung, it wasn’t without courage.”

Isak looks at him for a long moment. Even looks far, far taller than he actually is. His presence is larger than life, and Isak can get lost in it.

“Would kind of suck if you’re allergic to them, though.”

Even blinks at Isak, and laughs out loud. “God, you’re ridiculous,” he shakes his head. “Just ridiculous.”

Isak finally stabs at some of his eggs and lifts them towards his mouth. Before he takes the bite, however, he lowers his fork some, looking Even straight in the eyes. “Thank you,” he says quietly, and Even tilts his head.

“For what?”

Isak looks at him for a moment, then he hooks his foot around Even’s ankle underneath the table. Even smiles softly. Isak doesn’t answer, just eats his eggs, and the conversation veers away from bravery, and fear, and bee stings. The Tarzan soundtrack is still playing in the background, volume lower than before, and they talk about nothing.

Their feet remain locked together for the rest of the meal.

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When he finally leaves, Isak realizes on his way to the tram stop that the hoodie strings he’s been playing with all night aren’t his – he remembers, now, when he looks down, that it’s Even’s, and he’s been wearing it all day.

He considers turning back and returning it.

He doesn’t.

--

The house looks the same.

Isak thought it’d look different — but it’s still what it is. Still the color yellow, a brown, beaten roof, worn by the unfavorable weather of Oslo. The garden out front is well-kept, however — whereas before, it was filled with nothing but weeds and attempts at rosebushes, now there’s a burst of colors spread across the front lawn—

Purple and green and blue and pink—

A beautiful contrast to the dreary winter of Norway. They’re bushes more than they’re flowers, made to last the winter, he guesses, and Isak lets his eyes roam the rest of the lawn, realizes there is not one patch left uncovered; if you look hard enough, you might even believe there’s a happy family living inside, with a mother who tends to her garden and a son who does well in school and a father who
works normal hours and comes home to dinner and lively conversation.

You might even see the way the sun starts setting perfectly behind the house’s roof and think the family inside spends every afternoon watching the sunset from their perfectly-set backyard, and that there’s never a day spent lonely, never a night spent cold.

Isak sees the house and it looks the same, and it feels the same, but it’s not the same.

The house is made up of memories, and not pleasant ones, at that — it’s made up of quiet arguments in the bedroom next door and slamming vases and the rattling of keys very late at night — it’s made up of avoided gazes and secrets well-kept and problems avoided — it’s made up of everything Isak promised himself he’d never walk into again, it’s made up of everything Isak has ever feared coming back to, it’s made up of cement and ceramic and the color yellow and the color brown.

The yellow is faded, the brown is worn, but you can still make them out. You still know the colors.

Isak doesn’t — no — Isak can’t summon the courage to walk up the lawn and knock on the door to the house he used to walk into freely — the house that was his own only by name, never by heart. He wonders if his heart walked out with him all those years ago, or if it’s been stationed here, waiting for Isak’s imminent return.

If these walls could talk.

Isak’s hands are shaking in his coat pockets, and it can be both the result of the cold or the nerves — maybe a combination of both, if Isak’s being optimistic. The only thing keeping him warm, keeping him tethered, is the soft cotton fabric underneath his coat of Even’s worn hoodie, pressed closely to his chest, the same one he slept in last night. It reminds him that consequences are not to be feared, else he might never find the strength to be brave.

The first step towards the door feels loaded with dread — the second feels loaded with fear — the third feels loaded with regret — the fourth feels loaded with anticipation — the fifth feels loaded with wonder — the last few steps all feel loaded with what might be apprehension masked with courage, and that’s all he needs, really. That’s all he needs.

Before he knocks on the door, Isak traces the wood panelling of it softly with his fingers — not a thing about the exterior of the house has changed, from the scratch Isak had made with a rock when he was younger at the foot of the door, to the welcome mat at the door step, dirty and screaming welcome at you.

Save for the garden, it’s as if nothing’s really changed.

Isak licks his lips and swallows back fear as he closes his hand into a fist, exhaling shakily one more time before propelling forward, readying his hand to knock on the door he hasn’t touched for four years, but before he’s able to—

The door swings open, and Ram nearly crashes into him.

She blinks at him, completely taken aback. Isak doesn’t know how to tell her he’s just about as surprised as she is that he’s here, after so many years of avoiding her invitations, so many years of not seeing her. Her face hasn’t changed much — maybe it’s a little sharper at the edges, and her hair is much longer, but her eyes are still bright and her cheeks are still round. Isak remembers meeting her three times, years ago, and then leaving. He hasn’t seen her since.

“Isak,” Ram settles back onto the balls of her feet, blinking at him as if making sure he’s real. “Oh, God, you—” she laughs slightly. “You are much taller than the last time I saw you.”
Ram’s English is less broken than Isak’s is, and though she knows enough Norwegian to communicate in the house and around the city, she and Isak have always exchanged conversation in English.

Isak nods once. “Guess I didn’t stop growing.”

Ram exhales a laugh. “I guess you didn’t,” she looks back towards the inside of the house, then back at Isak. “Ah—” she looks past Isak, then back at him. “I’m going grocery shopping now, actually,” she replies, and she’s suddenly switched to near-perfect Norwegian, accent barely noticeable. His eyebrows rise.

“Hey, you got better,” he replies in Norwegian as well, and Ram laughs.

“Oslo will do that to you,” she jokes. “Sometimes I’ll speak to my parents in Norwegian instead of Filipino when I call home. They’re very happy I’m going back this year,” she says. “They’re going to try to wean me off Norwegian, you just watch.”

Isak smiles. “Not completely, I hope.”

“Of course not,” she grins right back. “But, uhm, yeah — I’m heading out right now. But — I suppose you’re not exactly here for me, are you?”

Isak shifts his weight. “Not exactly, no.”

Ram’s smile is so soft that Isak wants to tell her to stop. He doesn’t get points for showing up four years late. “I’m so glad,” she admits. “She talks about you every day, you know.”

Isak swallows. He didn’t.

“Okay, well,” Ram gestures behind her. “She’s in the kitchen making lunch out of what’s left of our groceries,” she tells him. She steps aside, allowing Isak enough room to step past the door and inside. Isak doesn’t, his heart in his throat, fear beginning to conquer him once again. Ram is looking at him, understanding and sympathetic. “It’s okay,” she says quietly. “She’s okay.”

Isak nods, not allowing the tears to sting at his eyes again. He glances at Ram and smiles in gratitude. “Okay,” he nods again. “I’ll see you later?”

Ram grins. “Absolutely,” she replies, but before she steps back down, she groans. “Fucking bees.”

Isak frowns and turns around quickly. “Bees?”

“Yeah,” she sighs. “I don’t want to dissuade Marianne from growing her winter garden, but it attracts bees when there aren’t supposed to be any,” she glares at the garden, which Isak is blinking uselessly at. “Bees,” she mutters darkly, before making way past Isak and calling out another goodbye to him.

Isak stares at the bees flying slowly from flower to flower, trying to find their place, and he almost laughs.

It’s impossible. It’s absolutely impossible. And if it’s not, then it’s extremely rare.

Then he does laugh, once, brokenly.

He turns around and walks through the door.

The entrance looks the same as Isak closes the door behind him. It’s warm, warmer than his apartment or Even’s place, enough so that he unzips his coat. He looks upwards, taking it in. It
smells of soup and honey — it smells the same.

The hallway is devoid of any pictures of his father — good riddance — and instead is filled with hanging pictures of Isak and his mom, Isak under a Christmas tree, Isak on a swing, his mother and his grandmother, his grandfather seated at a piano, his mother in the hospital holding Isak for the first time — pictures of moments that feel like a thousand years ago coat the entirety of the hallway, reminding anyone who walks through it that there was a family here, once. Maybe not the one that was meant to be here. But a family, nevertheless.

Isak’s throat is filled with every kind of knot imaginable as he reaches the living room — there’s a wide and short shelf lined in the middle of the far wall, made of cherry wood his mother used to tell Isak his grandfather had earned himself in a magical forest down south of the planet, after fulfilling a woodland fairy’s impossible request. It took a very long time for Isak to realize his grandfather couldn’t fulfill any sort of request other than a musical one, and also that fairies aren’t real, and that the shelf was store-bought. But for however long Isak had believed his mother’s fantastical story, this shelf was made of magic, and seeing it now does nothing to stop the way his heart swells at the sight and the memory.

The kitchen is down the other way, but Isak makes his way over to the shelf first — the bottom shelf is filled with books his mother loves and cherishes; Isak spots one of the larger spines at the very end of the line, familiar in its binding: a book of fairytales, ones his mother read to him every night before nighttime reading turned into the bible, ones Isak kept close to his heart but never dared delve into again. His mother knew his favorite. Isak thinks they’re the only two souls alive who know it.

The second shelf, however, causes Isak to kneel and get a better look — his heart squeezes as his eyes trail over everything he’s seeing, lined up, side to side.

For the past four years, Isak has sent his mother flowers on her birthday, and ornaments on Christmas. Anything past that has always been beyond him, and he never thought his mom would think much of the gifts — never thought his mom would think much of him, at that — but here, kneeling in front of the shelf, he reaches to touch the tough texture of a small card, the size of a business card, held up by what Isak assumes to be a placecard holder, ones you see at weddings. Isak assumes this is the card his birthday flowers come equipped with. His eyes read the first one.

*Happy birthday. Love, Isak.*

Nothing special. It never is.

And then his eyes wander to the ornament next to the card, fingers trace that softly, too. It’s of a woodland fairy, hair bright orange, wings shaped like leaves, and she’s kneeling over a mushroom, smiling. It’s small — like all the ornaments he sends over for Christmas — and well-crafted, and sat to the left of another one of the printed cards that accompany his bouquets; this one says the same as the last, the same as the other two will say.

*Happy birthday. Love, Isak.*

The ornament beside that card is one of Jesus, knelt over and carrying the cross on his back and over his shoulder. He’s barefoot and walking on a small patch of dirt, expression solemn. Isak’s never believed in Jesus — or, rather, what he represents; archeological and historical evidence points mostly towards accepting that Jesus Christ was real as a human being, but no evidence to being anything more than that. So he bought his mother this ornament as a compromise — something Isak could see and believe, and something she could feel and believe. It’s hand-crafted and hasn’t but a hint of dust, almost as if it’s been cleaned regularly. Then beside it, another small card.
Happy birthday. Love, Isak.

His gaze meets the third ornament beside the third card, and this time it’s a snow globe — but rather than the winter snow inside it, it’s outer space, and when you shake it, the globe rains stars. Isak remembers seeing it at the store and holding on to it for a very long time, walking around, not knowing whether or not it’d be a good present — in the end, he’d found nothing else, and the winter and the stars had always been a part of him, a part of his mother, so he’d bought it and he’d mailed it. This, too, is so clean there’s not one stain on the glass, so Isak doesn’t touch it, instead traces the small, wooden base holding it up. He doesn’t shake it, so the stars are all clustered at the bottom. Then another card.

Happy birthday. Love, Isak.

This ornament’s the most recent one, the one he sent last Christmas, when he’d decided to ignore Ram’s invitation once again, the first Christmas with Even as his friend. It’s a figurine, rather, small in size, but this is of a mother owl leaning gently on the smaller owl — presumably her offspring. The small owl leans back and they both look happy, and they both looks comfortable and warm. They sit atop a makeshift branch, and engraved in it is the most ridiculous line Isak could ever think of reading, but he’d bought it anyway, knowing his mother would appreciate it. “Owl always love you”, it reads, and that sentence alone did almost make Isak leave it behind, but he didn’t. He remembers his mother’s soft hand stroking his cheeks, smiling exasperatedly at him in the mornings, when he’d be too sleep deprived to say anything during breakfast. My little night owl, she’d sigh, and she always would. Every morning — until she no longer could.

He stares at this shelf as long as he’s able to without his eyes welling up with tears, and once it’s impossible to, he sniffs ridiculously and stands back up, avoiding it. Isak considers turning around and leaving, really leaving, heart racing and hands shaking, but just as he’s about to convince himself, he hears it—

Humming in the kitchen. It’s soft and pretty, an aimless melody, and it reminds Isak of the days before lunchtime, the meals spent with only his mother, it reminds him of the times he’d sneak into the kitchen and try to swipe at an ingredient, or when he’d stare up at his mom, watching her cook as Isak pulled on her apron and asked her to narrate every single thing she was doing.

And she always did. She always, always did.

It takes Isak a moment to finally find himself following the humming, knowing exactly where he’s going either way — the kitchen entryway is large, simply devoid of a wall around the living room, in front of the dining room, and when he reaches it, he finds the white of the kitchen and the dark blue of the counters the same. His mother always hated this color scheme — but it seems not enough to change it. Not yet. Isak doesn’t dare find his mother, not yet, but eventually his eyes have nowhere else to look, and suddenly, there. In front of the stove. After four years.

She hums, unaware of Isak’s presence, and his heart constricts, and his throat is in knots, and she looks — healthy. He can only see her back, mind you, but her hair is brushed and shining, pulled back in a ponytail, and her apron’s tied around a red shirt and jeans that look washed and clean, and she no longer looks like she’s all skin and bones, instead the way she looked when Isak was younger, healthy, lively, skin the same tone as Isak’s. Save for her eyes, which are a warm brown, he looks far more like her than he does his father.

It’s just that he forgets, sometimes, when his eyes are made to hate himself.

He swallows harshly. She continues to hum, stirring at a pot.
After a moment, Isak blinks back newly-formed tears, then clears his throat quietly. And then, taking a deep breath, he finally runs straight for the bees.

“Mom?”

Chapter End Notes

comments and kudos, as always, are appreciated, but not enforced!

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