Burning For Your Touch
by cuteandtwisted

Summary

“What about you? What's your deepest, most unfulfilled wish?”
Even expects Isak to go on a metaphysical rant around how insignificant wishes are. But he doesn't. Isak sits up and simply whispers, “To feel your touch.”

aka: Isak's skin burns anyone that comes into contact with it and therefore cannot be touched. Closed off and extremely manipulative, Isak transfers to Bakka and scares everyone away with his condition. Everyone but Even.

Or: the touch-starved!AU (kind of soulmate!AU) with genius!Isak—who knows everything about everything except the things that matter—and swimmer!Even.

Notes

this is for my touch-starved!anon. i couldn't stop thinking about this which I started as a little tweet inspired by that gif, and you made it very hard to stop with all your asks. thank you so much.

i promised a few of you this verse, so here you go. hope you like it <3

TW: ableism, body image issues, allusions to self-harm and pyromania
Philosophy of Fear

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Even wakes to the dubious yet pleasing sound of birds chirping. He hasn’t opened his eyes yet, but he knows there will be light awaiting them when he finally decides to, light that is currently shrouded only by his eyelids which don’t feel quite as heavy as they have these past few months. It’s a good day. It’s a very good day. He can feel it where his bones meet, where his scars hum, where his pulse throbs. It doesn’t hurt as much to breathe. It doesn’t hurt as much to be.

Still. One more minute, he thinks to himself, delaying today and its infinite possibilities, curling into his duvet and breathing through his nose. Just one more minute.

His eyes are still blue when he stares into the mirror in the bathroom that used to be his parents’. His hair is still blond. His limbs are still long. His skin is still pale. He doesn’t look that different. But he feels it.

He runs his own hands along his bare sides and bare chest methodically, as though counting his ribs, pressing his fingers to the bones and letting them linger on the softer parts of his skin. He stops when his thumb reaches his left wrist, his weak spot, where he is most fragile, and watches it brush softly against the undeniable pulse there, inhales through his nose, and repeats. It’s become a ritual now, feeling his skin with the pads of his fingers. It grounds him, reminds him that this is his, that his body is his and that he needs to treat it with as much care as his mother would wish for him to.

“You don’t hurt the things you see. You don’t hurt the things you touch. You need to see your body more in order to love it, Even.”

He’s quite happy with the results of the self-care, of the swimming lessons. His shoulders seem more prominent, more protruded. His arms are also showing some promise. He’s almost put on all the weight he’s lost during those months of utter helplessness, and he couldn’t be more proud. He smiles at himself through the mirror and says the words.

“You’re doing great, Even.”

He laughs to himself with both hands on the sink, and he lets his head fall a bit as the sweet feeling of his chuckles fills his chest. The words always feel silly when he says them out loud. But silliness has never hurt a soul. So he lets pride roam his chest for a few more minutes before putting on his long sleeved shirt.

His mother greets him with a kiss to the cheek, a cup of tea, and a plate of scrambled eggs—with a touch of sour cream, his favorite. Even wishes he could have coffee, but he doesn’t wish to give her any reasons to worry. He hasn’t had coffee or any caffeinated substance in months. He can stick to his decaf tea.

He watches his sweet mother and her blonde mop of hair walk nervously around the kitchen in her blue dress and the beige moccasins he got her for Christmas. He knows that she’s not going to work today, but she doesn’t know that he knows, hence the disguise. The piece of information was a courtesy of her colleague, good old Lars, who ingeniously called the house the previous night to ask if she wanted him to fill in for a meeting so that they wouldn’t have to cancel it, good old Lars who didn’t know that she didn’t tell Even she’d be taking the day off. And while Even didn’t consider himself to be uber smart, it didn’t take much for him to figure out that she’s staying in the house just
in case something happens and she needs to pick him up from school.

“Are the eggs any good?” she asks, bringing him back to reality.

“You mean amazing?!” he exclaims dramatically, beaming at her.

She makes her way to him and kisses his cheek again, and Even lets her, revels in the tenderness of it all. Sometimes he wonders what he would do without her loving touch, without her unwavering adoration. Sometimes he wonders.

She walks back and forth from what used to be Even’s room, and his heart pinches around the corners. She gave up her room so that he could have more sunlight, or at least that’s what she claimed was the reason after the therapist recommended more natural light. But Even knows that his mother simply didn’t wish for him to be reminded of what happened in his old room. Even’s heart pinches again. She knows most of his secrets but his most shameful one: he wishes to be reborn every night.

But given the chance, he would probably decline, too afraid he’d end up with a different mother. A gentle smile spreads across her face as the thought forms itself in his mind, but it feels more akin to a stab to the chest. She’s worried about him and she’s doing her best not to show it.

And it’s in moments like these that Even feels most guilty and unworthy, when he can feel the hurt he’s afflicted, yet cannot allow himself the luxury of apologizing for it. I must bear it.

Their eyes meet and he smiles and cracks the joke he practiced in the bathroom before joining her in the kitchen.

“What’s the word of the day?” she asks, the creases around her eyes more pronounced now that she stands drenched in sunlight in their kitchen.

“Rapprochement,” Even says proudly, recalling the word the app spit back at him earlier. “It’s French and it means establishment or resumption of harmonious relations.”

She smiles again and takes a sip of the twin decaf tea that Even knows she hates. “Resumption of harmonious relations,” she hums. “Sounds like good omen. I’m sure today will be a great day.”

“Of course it will be,” Even grins and lets her ruffle his hair. Today has to be a great day.

“Remember to use it in a sentence by the end of the day. And don’t make something up, you know I can always tell.”

Even nods and they eat while the radio plays in the background.

.

Even is nervous as he walks to school. Mutta graciously offered to meet him a few blocks away and walk with him the night before, but Even declined. He wanted to do this for himself. And so he walks. His legs feel funny, but he does his best to match his steps to the Bruno Mars song playing through his headphones.

He clutches the straps of his backpack as he nears the gates of the school. He suddenly feels his breaths shorten and heat spread through his body. He’s almost paralyzed with it, the heat. He stops walking right away. Breathe. It’s gonna be chill.

An arm wraps around his shoulders and makes him jump, the intrusion oddly comforting as it gives a
real reason to his increased pulse.

“Fuck!” he yelps just as he recognizes the laugh and its kind-hearted owner. “Mutta! You almost
gave me a heart attack.”

“Even! So good to have you back, buddy!”

Mutta, strong and reliable Mutta, in his brown hoodie and black jeans and wild dark curls. Mutta
who, if people were one of the four elements, would be Earth. Strong, stable, woody, dark soul.
Mutta who was home to all of them.

Mutta hugs him and Even takes a deep breath when his scent finally fills his nostrils, overwhelming
him. He hasn’t been held by anyone who isn’t his mother in months, and the mere contact almost
reduces him to tears.

“Look at these guns!” Mutta rejoices when he pulls back, his hands wrapped around his biceps.
“Have you been working out?”

“Swimming,” Even shrugs, a sentiment akin to tenderness filling his heart, the public olympic sized
pool by his house that no one goes to feels like home in an absurd but wholesome way.

“You look so good,” Mutta says, taking a moment to look at him from head to toe. “I’m digging this
new hair, too.”

“Figured I’d dump the hair products. Give you guys a chance with the ladies,” Even teases.

“As if.”

“Fuck. It’s good to be back,” Even says, and he smiles so wide that it almost hurts, because up until
now he wasn’t so sure. But now he means the words.

“I’m so happy you’re back,” Mutta says and he looks so genuine with it that Even hugs him again.

He wouldn’t admit it to a soul, but in that moment he hopes, he wishes from the bottom of his rotten
soul that everyone will be as kind to him today as Mutta is currently being. Maybe not everyone, he
doubts Arvid will cut him some slack.

“What did I miss?”

“Elias is still trying to ask that second year girl out,” Mutta laughs and Even joins him.

“I’ve been gone for what? Four months and he’s still trying?”

_Three months, two weeks, and three days._ Even knows how long he’s been gone for. But this bit,
he’s rehearsed as well. Downplaying or downright dismissing what happened. He knows the boys
will eventually bring it up, but for now he wishes to pretend he was just out traveling.

“Thank fuck you’re back. Hopefully, you can knock some sense into him,” Mutta says, then wraps
his arms around his shoulders. “Come on. We don’t wanna be late.”

Even spent nights going over all the ways this day could go. And he planned each and every single
detail. He rehearsed the jokes he would tell, the stories he would recount, the smiles he would offer,
and the touches he would initiate as opposed to the ones he would indulge. Even knew that as long
as he sticks to the script he meticulously wrote for this day, he would end up just fine.
The script itself isn’t very elaborate. He’d smile and laugh, stick with Mutta, Elias, and Adam, hold his head high, and make as much eye contact as possible for the first few days. Everybody at Bakka already knew about his comeback after all, so he planned for their anticipation and refuses to give them more things to talk about on his first day back.

The only blind spot in his perfect plan, however, materializes before him the moment Mutta and he step into the schoolyard. **Mikael.**

*If Mutta was Earth, then Mikael was air, for he was all over and around him, invisible to the naked eye, but imperative and indispensable as he clung to his lungs. If Even inhaled too much, he choked. If he didn’t inhale enough, he collapsed. Mikael was air. And Even needed to re-learn how to breathe.*

Mikael is the only variable in his script and he is the reason Even drafted so many versions of today. *What do you do when the air you breathe feels like poison?*

“Mikael,” Even smiles and he’s nervous with it. He hasn’t seen him since the incident after he completely pushed him away. “How are you buddy?” He pulls him into a side hug before he can think about it further. There’s only one version of the script in which he embraces Mikael before he even gets to place a word. But Even figures he can make it work. His heart is hurting in his chest the moments before Mikael finally wraps an arm around his back, and for a moment, everything is right in the world.

They embrace and this doesn’t appear in any version of the scripts, Mikael holding him like this, forgiving him and accepting him, promising to watch out for him and not tell anyone what he did, both of them too overcome with emotion to let go just yet.

“How are you?” Mikael whispers into his neck while they hug, and it’s almost a whisper.

“I’m okay. Thank you,” says Even and he means it. “Thank you so much.”

They part eventually, because Elias and Adam join their circle. And for the first time in a while, Even truly believes that everything is going to be alright.

“*What the hell happened to your hair?”* Adam jokes right after their first class.

“He said it’s to give us a chance with the ladies,” Mutta replies, laughing.

“What he said,” Even confirms, bringing his right hand to his unruly hair and running it through it lazily. It’s a bit longer than he’s ever worn it and he’s not sure how he feels about it, but he likes it so far.

“No offense, but I think it’s the blue eyes that do it for them,” Elias shrugs.

“*Bro, it’s too early to call Norwegian girls racist,”* Adam groans. “At least wait until lunch.”

“It’s never too early to call anyone racist,” Mutta laughs. “But your data must be wrong, because I don’t have blue eyes and still do well with the ladies.”

“I don’t like this cocky version of Mutta,” Adam shakes his head while one of his hands pulls at the curls sitting on Mikael’s head. “Like not at all. I liked you better when you were awkward and only placed two words in any given conversation.”
“I’m sorry I graduated middle school,” says Mutta, then they all burst into laughter and change the
topic to Elias’ second year lady friend.

Even laughs until his stomach hurts and barely notices people staring at him in the hallways. He
doesn’t care. As long as he returns everyone’s fake smile, he’ll be fine. As long as he blends in with
the mass, as he doesn’t keep to himself or draws too much attention, he’ll be fine.

He used to value his individuality. But not anymore. If being left alone requires becoming yet
another sheep in the herd, then he’ll do it. If not for himself, then for his mother and for his friends
who are all joking and tapping him on the back right now as if he hasn’t just come back from
madness, from his self-made hell. Even can still feel the flames tickling his skin.

“Earth to Even? Hello?” Mutta says and it sounds as though he’s been repeating the phrase for a
while. Earth to Even. Funny. It’s funny because Mutta is Earth to Even, but he’s never told him.

“Sorry, I spaced out.”

They all chuckle, and Even can’t help but look at Mikael who’s glued to Adam’s side but stealing
glances every once in a while. Even can tell that Mikael hasn’t spoken to the others about what
happened before everything went to hell, and he’s thankful. He’s also thankful for the care in his
eyes, for how he seems to be looking out for Even, providing him with a ready set of eyes to focus
on, to lock into in case things get too much or Even needs someone to talk to without uttering words.

There are many reasons Even fell in love with Mikael out of all his friends. And this moment is a
gentle reminder.

“But yeah I think it’s all bullshit,” Adam says, continuing the conversation.

“It’s not bullshit. Who would lie about that?” Mutta rolls his eyes.

“I don’t know? Someone who doesn’t like to be touched? Someone who’s a bit fucked in the head?”

Even flinches and Elias hits Adam in the back of his head.

“Shit, I didn’t mean it like that,” Adam mutters. “I’m sorry bro.”

“All good,” Even smiles, but it hurts. It hurts and it hurts and it hurts.

The boys keep talking about some new guy with a rare skin condition and he checks out. The words
keep playing in his mind ‘fucked in the head, fucked in the head, fucked in the head’. He wonders if
another group of friends is having a similar conversation right now about a guy who likes to play
with fire and who’s ‘fucked in the head’.

Even visits the school counselor after lunch and they talk about his day so far. He smiles, turns on his
charm, and speaks in a particularly deep and confident voice. He sits in a relaxed position and makes
eye contact. And when things get a bit tough, he digs his nails through his thighs. He’s rehearsed this
bit too. He’s had a lot of experience with his current therapist, but she actually sees right through
him.

“Is your schedule overwhelming so far?” the short-haired counselor asks.

“Absolutely not,” Even grins. “I’ve been catching up at home thanks to my friends’ notes and my
mom’s help. I’ll be just fine.”
On his way out she tells him that she and the entire school are proud of him and of his decision to come back and finish his third year at Bakka. And he thanks her before showing himself out.

“You’re doing great, Even,” he tells himself.

Even is so busy grinning at his shoes that he doesn’t notice the person he’s about to bump into. He catches a glimpse of the boy walking rather aggressively right into his chest, looking as though he’s running late, and decides that he cannot do much about it. So in the split of a second leading to their imminent impact, Even tries to think of ways to make it as harmless as possible. He could wrap his arms around his back and roll to the side. He’s seen this move countless times in movies. It could work. Or they could both fall on the ground as Even visibly towers over him. Or they could both bump foreheads. Or he could hold his ground, plant both feet firmly against the hardwood floor, and just let the smaller boy bump into him. *Let’s go with that.*

In a swift moment, however, the boy—who’s visibly sharper than he could ever be—gets out of his way, completely circumventing his body, and leaves Even wide eyed and frozen in place. He feels silly for a second. He probably looks very weird standing like that.

But the boy probably doesn’t care because he hasn’t even stopped to look at Even before running into the counselor’s office. Even, who for a moment, wonders if he sees life at a slower speed than most people, if little things matter more to him than to most.

His heart races as he leans against the wall. His skin feels hot, as though he’s just brushed against a radiator or gotten too close to a fireplace. His pulse has quickened and his blood is buzzing. Even feels energized in an odd way, like those characters in the cartoons when they get slightly electrocuted. His cheeks feel warmer too, and it’s almost intoxicating.

*Is this some sort of a euphoric panic attack?*

Even eventually calms down and decides that he’s probably been so isolated and touch-starved that any form of near-touch feels dizzying. He needs hugs and cuddles, all of them.

.  

Even sees him again later that afternoon—with Adam happily hugging his shoulders after he explained his touch-starved logic to the group—and his heart almost burns at the sight. The boy looks young, probably a first year. He’s wearing almost as many layers as Even—the most prominent ones being a black turtleneck and a large winter parka jacket—and his head is hanging so low that one can barely see his face. A snapback is sitting atop his blond curls and it’s dipped low as well. *Probably helps with avoiding eye contact*. The hood of his jacket is thrown on top of the snapback and a thick green scarf covers what remains visible on his face.

Even realizes that the only bit of skin this guy is showing is his nose as even his hands are in thick gloves. *It’s a cute nose,* he reckons before shaking his head.

“Who are you staring at?” Elias raises an eyebrow.

“Bumped into that kid earlier,” Even shrugs and tries to will away the fire that just spread inside his body again. *What the.* The boys exchange suspicious looks and he joins them almost immediately.

“What?”

“You did not bump into that kid,” says Elias.

“Uhm, yes, I did,” Even frowns. “It was right outside the counselor’s office.”
“Wait. Wait!” Adam suddenly shouts as if he’s just realized something. “Holy shit. Has the new kid been lying?!”

“What?”

“Wait. Wait,” Mutta brings a hand to shut Adam up before turning to face Even. “Did you touch him?”

“What the fuck?” Even frowns again.

“Not like that,” Mutta laughs. “I mean did you actually bump into each other. Was there physical impact? Was he wearing all those layers inside too?”

“Uh yeah. I mean we didn’t actually bump into each other cause he got out of my way. Where is this going?”

“That kid. He claims to have some sort of a skin condition,” Adam explains.

“A skin condition? You guys were talking about this earlier, right?” Even recalls.

“Yeah. And you weren’t listening. Of course.”

“What kind of condition?”

“He claims that his skin burns people,” says Elias.

“Which is bullshit,” says Adam. “I’m sure he just has social or touch phobia and doesn’t want people to go near him so he made up this whole story.”

“Shut up,” Mutta sighs again.

“What? How the hell is that a thing? I looked it up online. It doesn’t even exist. Like allergy to water? Allergy to the sun? Both exist. But allergy to touch? Nada. It’s not even an allergy. Allergies attack the beholder’s body. This is like an attack on the external party. It’s like he claims to have super powers. Like the X-men. And we would know if he was an X-men. He’d be locked up in some facility and research would be performed on him and shit.”

“Maybe the Norwegian government is protecting him because he’s a minor?” says Elias.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Adam groans. “There’s no differentiation between minors and adults in war weapons. If this guy has something in his skin that burns people, you bet your ass he’d be in some lab getting his DNA studied.”

“You need to stop watching so many superhero movies, bro,” Mutta shakes his head.

“What’s his name?” says Even.

“Hm?”

“The kid’s name. What is it? Or does everyone just refer to him as the ‘kid with the skin condition?’” Even says and a harsh truth in those words. *Like everyone refers to me as the fucked up kid.*

“Uh, I don’t know,” says Adam and it sounds apologetic.

“Isak,” says Mutta. “His name is Isak and he’s apparently a genius or something.”
“A genius?”

“Yeah, he’s a third year like us although he’s still seventeen. He got moved two years ahead.”

Later, Even learns that the kid hasn’t claimed anything, that most of the claims were made for him or followed him from his previous school, Nissen. He learns that the only reason people weren’t boring their eyes into his back on his first day back was because they were too busy boring it into the new kid’s with the skin issues on his sixth day.

“How was my favorite son’s first day back?” his mother greets him with a copious dinner, steak and veggies and side dishes that will last them for days.

“It was very good,” Even says, smiling.

“Did you use your word of the day?”

“I’m about to.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. Even and his friends are showing a sign of rapprochement already,” he grins.

“Isn’t that word supposed to be used mostly in political settings?”

“You never said the words had to be used in the conventional way!” Even groans.

They eat their roasted vegetables, Even does the dishes, then they both on the couch in front of Netflix. When she falls asleep, Even carries his tiny mother to bed, pulls the covers, then apologizes for ruining her life and chasing his dad away, the same way he always does when she’s finally asleep.

Even goes to the pool before school today. He puts on his silicone swim cap and his speedos and dives head first. He does five laps of Breaststroke, three of Freestyle, and two of Butterfly. The latter is the toughest but he needs to work on his upper body, and it’s proving to be the most effective. By the time he’s finished, he is exhausted and happy. He lets himself float before the pool starts filling up with other people and spreads his limbs in a star shape.

He floats for a few minutes, closes his eyes, and breathes through his nose, doing his very best to ignore the smell of chlorine and chemicals. He dives into the water until he reaches the bottom then comes back up again. He plays around the pool like a child and lets water heal him how it knows so very well to. Water all over and around him.

When he is in water, he is not surrounded by air. He is free from it, from him, from everything. Only in water is he completely free. Or fire, he thinks, then shakes his head.

The only reason he started swimming in the first place was because his therapist recommended to establish or at least attempt a relationship with water as opposed to fire. And while he was skeptical at first, Even ended up falling in love with it. The water. It kept his mind off of air and fire.

Fire. Isak.
Even doesn’t know why his mind flashes to the new kid and his skin condition, but it does.

They don’t have many classes together despite both being third years. Even is in creative arts and Isak is in science, he learns. He sees him running from one class to another in the countless layers he bundles himself in. He sees him running from the library to the counselor’s office. He sees him running from the counselor’s office to the entrance of the school.

Even sees him running everywhere, suddenly hyper aware of his every movement. And his body almost tingles whenever Isak walks past him in the hallways—although the boy never spares him a glance. It’s almost pathetic how he wishes the boy would spare him a glance.

Even isn’t sure why but he feels somehow connected to the new kid with the weird skin condition. He had once been the kid with the weird mental condition and weird mental breakdown after all. He had been the kid at the receiving end of ‘What if it’s just made up? What does bipolar even mean? Why isn’t he locked up?’ and all of Arvid and his group of bullies’ torments.

He notices that Isak doesn’t have any friends, that he doesn’t speak to anyone and that nobody speaks to him. When he isn’t in classes, he’s usually in the library with a book, or somewhere Even can’t see him.

“What’s your obsession with this guy?” Adam asks when they’re both smoking in the yard while Even hurts his neck trying to catch a glimpse of Isak doing his daily run from the building to the gates.

“I’m not obsessed with him,” Even scoffs, pulling his black ray bans down so that everyone could stop looking at where his eyes are wandering to.

“Dude, no offense. I know you like underdogs and stuff, but that guy is not an underdog.”

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard he’s actually pretty horrible and mean.”

Even rolls his eyes. Has Adam seen the kid? He looks absolutely harmless and adorable in his huge puffer jacket and his two thousand layers. He actually wore a beanie to school today, and Even could almost see his eyes. He can’t believe he doesn’t know the color of his eyes yet. But it’s okay, because at least he got to see his flushed cheeks. Are they always flushed? Even wonders.

“Seriously, he’s quite a bitch. Don’t go near him. I’m serious. He’s like those cute little dogs that bite you if you get too close,” says Adam. “He’ll rip you a new one.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be nice,” Even smiles.

“Shut up! God!”

Isak is not horrible and mean. He’s as harmless as Even imagines him to be. He’s worked on this script in his head the night before. He knows he can make it work. If this boy won’t meet his eyes, Even would give him a reason to.

So that Wednesday afternoon, Even waits for it to hit 13:58 right outside of the library. He knows Isak sees the counselor at 14:00 because Even’s session is right before his. Only this time, Even
faked a bathroom emergency to let himself out early and camp outside the library. Isak should be
coming out any second now.

It all works according to plan. Well, almost. The doors swing open and Isak and his twenty-one
layers nearly bump into him, nearly. It’s as though Isak’s body is conditioned to feel another being’s
presence and stop or change its route right on time. He’s like those self-driving cars that know
exactly when to pull the breaks.

Isak, however, seems shaken from the near proximity, and his eyes—green, so green, a beautiful
contrast to the red on his cheeks, so red—are wide and scared. He’s breathless and Even almost feels
bad. He feels terrible. Perhaps Isak really made this whole thing up because he cannot stand to be
touched. Perhaps Even is making him uncomfortable by stripping him of his personal freedom and
forcing him into a triggering situation.

“Are you crazy?”

Even has spent a few days imagining the first words Isak would say to him, but these weren’t on the
list.

“A little bit actually. Yeah,” Even smiles. “Forgive me if I—”

“Don’t do this again. Are you new or something? You can’t come near me.”

Even does see fear in the short moments they spend staring at each other. But it is not fear of being
touched. It is not fear of holding one’s gaze. Isak doesn’t look half as withdrawn as Even pictured
him to be. If anything, he is glowing with confidence and self-assuredness. He is glowing with it, but
he is taming it. It’s being strangled by an all too consuming fear: the fear of hurting a being, not of
being hurt.

Isak walks away after that and Even is still buzzing from the warmth and the heat that just spread
inside him. He’s smiling to himself as though he’s just been injected with a happiness serum, the
same one people who do not suffer from depression believe exist. Being near this kid is similar to
standing next to a fireplace in Christmas with a hot cup of chocolate milk, and Even’s fingers are
aching to touch, to hurt with it if it’s going to hurt.

*My body is a temple and I will not hurt it.* Even shakes his head and walks away.

---

Even swims after school when the pool empties. His local pool is closed on Mondays, and his skin is
aching with the need to be submerged in water, to not think about air, to not think about fire. He puts
on his silicone swim cap and his speedos and tiptoes his way to the smaller school pool.

He stops walking the moment he spots him, Isak in the pool, floating alone. But his discretion is not
quite enough, for Isak has already heard or felt him, immediately diving back into the water until
only his face was visible.

“Who is this?” Isak speaks and it’s cold and suspecting, but not quite scared. The question itself is
odd. The pool was for anybody who wishes to use it as it was currently open. Isak spoke of it as if he
owned it.

“Just me,” Even says from where he stands and he feels a bit silly. Isak doesn’t even know his name.

“I’m leaving soon. Could you please give me a minute?” Isak says as he turns around in the pool, his
back to Even now, and swims to the edge as if he doesn’t wish for Even to even guess the outline of
his body. If Isak had a third leg somewhere in there, Even wouldn’t know.

“Sure. I’ll go back to the locker room.”

“Thank you.”

Even is shaken with it, the politeness, the vulnerability. Even feels as though he’s eavesdropped on a delicate princess from the seventeen hundreds, her skin too precious and too treasured to be sullied by a commoner’s gaze. He feels as though he’s hurt this kid by seeing him nearly naked. Even feels a lot and he doesn’t know what to make of it.

Isak comes back into the locker room bundled up in a long towel that covers him from neck to toe. Even didn’t know such long towels even existed. Isak is blushing and if Even didn’t know any better he’d think it’s because of him.

“All yours,” says Isak as he walks past him.

“Didn’t want to kick you out.”

“I was about to leave.”

“Okay.”

Even walks back to the pool and dips a toe to test the temperature. He’s already taken a quick cold shower, so it’s not that bad. The water looks clean, too. He hopes no dumb kid got any funny idea. But then he realizes something. Isak was in the pool, swimming in the chemically treated water.

Is he okay? Does he do this often? Doesn’t this hurt his skin? Does he only burn others or does it hurt him to touch others too? Does the water somehow make it better? He did look quite peaceful before Even interrupted him. Does it feel good for him to be in the water? Does it feel as good as it feels for Even?

Even walks back into the locker rooms. He’s not sure why, but he just does.

“What time do you eat lunch?” he asks before his tongue wills its way to his throat.

“Uh, what?” Isak blurts out.

“Lunch. What time do you have lunch? I don’t see you at the school cafeteria.”

“I, uh. Why?”

“It would be nice to see you there.”

Isak is blushing and it’s killing Even that he can’t tell if it’s because of him or if it's because his cheeks are always flushed. It’s suddenly the most awful thing in the world.

“I’ll see what I can do about that,” says Isak, a shy smile on his precious face.

_How could anyone think you’re horrible?_

“Cool,” Even smiles.

“Cool.”

Even walks back to the pool and dives head first. Merely being in the same confined space as him is
exhilarating. He’s still buzzing when he gets home and hugs his mother.

“Good day?”

“Salubrious day!” Even grins. “Word of the day. It means health-giving and pleasant and good.”

“I’m not sure those two words go together,” she laughs then makes her way to him to kiss his temple.

“Let me live!”

Even is walking out of his horrible physics class, wondering why he’s forced to take it, and for the first time since coming back, he wonders if he’ll never be able to catch up before the final exams.

“I got you. Don’t worry,” says Adam, throwing an arm over his shoulder while Arvid and his friends walk down the hallways with them.

“No offense, Adam. But you have the worst grades in the whole class,” Arvid jokes while Even draws his lips into a thin line.

Even is not very fond of Arvid. In fact, he’s not fond of him at all. He was the first one to point fingers at him after he got diagnosed with bipolar. He was the first one to spread all the rumors about him and turn him into party chatter. Arvid was the textbook definition of bully and Even couldn’t stand the thought of even sparing him a glance before all of this went down.

Even isn’t fond of the idea of walking around the hallways with Arvid, but he needs to keep a low profile. He needs to blend in and not draw any attention to himself. Everything he’s built is still extremely fragile and he doesn’t wish to disturb that balance quite yet. Not when he’s still this weak and when his wounds are still fresh. Not when any mean or hateful comment would be enough to drag him back to the dark place he secluded himself into for months. Not when a flutter or a graze would be enough to make him crumble.

*Stick to the script.*

He walks with Adam, Arvid, and his friends to the cafeteria, and it takes him a moment to realize that people aren’t whispering amongst themselves because he’s in the company of the very guy he’s despised for quite sometimes. It’s not about him. Yet again.

Isak is eating lunch at the cafeteria today. And everyone’s eyes are on him.

Even smiles when he sees his side profile. He’s wearing a beanie again today. His cheeks are rosy, that perfect flush standing on his protruded cheekbones like a promise. His lips are red too, and he’s chewing at his food like he’s nervous. He’s wearing his gloves and Even wonders what it must feel like to sit in the middle of a rather warm room fully clothed in a parka and holding a sandwich with leather gloves.

He’s about to walk over to him and start a conversation when Arvid clasps his hands together as if he’s just been presented with a treat and beats him to it.

“Oh thank god!” Arvid exclaims loudly, making sure everyone could hear him. “I was feeling particularly cold today. Weren’t you, Adam?”

Adam’s eyes widen and Even suddenly understands why Isak eats his lunch in hidden places, why he avoids everyone all the time, why he doesn’t speak to a soul. Arvid must have gotten to him
during that week before Even came back. Arvid must have turned him into his new target. That’s the only reason he’s not making Even’s life miserable. Of course!

And there’s Even, walking in step with Isak’s bully. Great.

Arvid walks slowly to where Isak is sitting, Isak who hasn’t bothered looking up from his plate and who hasn’t shown any signs of emotion or of feeling particularly threatened. He continues eating his sandwich, albeit more calmly than before, as if Arvid’s sudden intrusion somewhat refocused him and took his nerves away. Isak chews, unbothered, as Arvid makes his way to him.

Even wonders what he will do and if he can stop it. Arvid is known for his vile tongue, never for his use of force. He doesn’t have a particularly strong build, but his words and his network are lethal. Even feels paralyzed. He always does when things do not go according to plan, when things stray from the original script. He doesn’t have a template for this.

Arvid settles behind Isak and brings both hands on top of his head as he engages in an odd motion. It takes Even a while to realize that he’s pretending to warm himself up, the same way a person would do standing over a bonfire or a fireplace.

“So warm,” Arvid says jokingly while he rubs his hands together above Isak’s head. “I knew there was a reason I forgot my gloves today.”

Even watches Isak’s jaw clench and that is the only indication of his current irritation. A glitch. And Even is at least relieved to see that Isak is at most irritated, not the least scared. Still, he’s scared for him. He knew Arvid’s vicious tongue all too well.

“I missed you in the cafeteria,” says Arvid. “I wonder what got you to come in today,” he chuckles. Isak’s jaw clenches again and Even hopes he hasn’t seen him walk together with Arvid. He hopes he doesn’t think he made this happen. Even hopes—

Even didn’t know a death stare until Isak turned his head to lock his eyes with his. Fuck. There goes that.

“Even, aren’t you always cold?” says Arvid. “You’re always wearing long sleeved shirts even when it’s hot as shit. Come over here. Warm up a little with this hypothetical heat. He won’t die from a few people invading his precious personal space. Don’t worry. Just—”

“Are you finished?” Isak’s voice cuts through Arvid’s speech.

“What?” Arvid scoffs.

“Are you done acting like a twelve year old or do you need some more time?” Isak rolls his eyes as he turns his chair around to face him. “I think I have nine more minutes before I gotta run to my next class actually.”

Arvid bursts into laughter, clasps his hands together and makes a show out of it like every bully does at any showcase of defiance.

“Are you nuts? Got some issues under all those curls?”

“I am and I do actually,” says Isak, now standing up as slowly and as composed as ever.

Arvid’s friends do the general stance they do when men feel threatened and compelled to put on a show of force. And Isak looks amused.
“Do you want to know what my favorite word is, Arvid?” Isak speaks slowly, pushing his chair backwards and his chin forward, so that he can be in his space. Isak is not afraid of people being in his personal space. It’s quite the opposite actually, and watching Arvid and his band step backwards and recoil is almost cathartic. “Angst,” says Isak. “My favorite word is angst. Do you know what it means?”

“What the fuck—”

“It means fear and anxiety, and its usage differs by language and country and school of thought,” Isak explains. “Did you know that the word angst was introduced to the English language from the Norwegian, Danish, Dutch, and German word Angst? We pretty much came up with this thing. I find that so powerful and it makes me proud you know? Because angst is such an important emotion and theme in Existentialist Philosophy. Sartre and Nietzsche and Heidegger all loved to talk about it. And it’s not to say that I’m a proponent of Existentialist Philosophy. I’m a pretty open guy, you know.”

“What is wrong with y—”

Isak brings his right hand up and and slowly takes his glove off while the entire cafeteria watches.

“But that’s besides the point,” Isak continues. “I like the word angst, but I don’t want to get into those intricacies, angst versus anguish versus something else. I’d rather just talk about fear which sort of encompasses those emotions, too. You know. What do you know about fear, Arvid? Do you know a lot about it?” Isak points his index finger at Arvid’s chest but doesn’t quite touch it, just draws circles an inch or so away while keeping his eyes on him.

“I bet you know a lot about fear, Arvid. I bet it’s your favorite emotion, too. You like to command it, right? You like the feeling that comes with that. Power. Elevation. You know, a lot of philosophers argued that fear is great because it allows societies to function. You fear being arrested, so you don’t commit crimes. The social contract, Rousseau. But I’m digressing again. Fear is a great lens to observe certain phenomena in our society today. Like bullying for example. Bullying is all about commanding fear because of a general lack of control and power in every other aspect of the bully’s life. A person bullies because a person wants to be feared, and a person wants to be feared because a person cannot be loved but doesn’t wish to suffer or be left out, or because a person feels threatened by a new individual, let’s say me, that does not abide by his or her social contract. Bullies are typically people who feel like they can’t be loved, so the alternative is to be feared.

It’s not always true of course. Sometimes, a bully is simply evil and apathetic and he or she thrives on seeing others suffer. But that’s a special kind of bully. And you, my dear Arvid, are not special at all. You’re exactly like every other bully on TV, in those cheesy movies that make viewers scoff and say “these types of bullies don’t even exist anymore”, and in those books and blog posts. You’re exactly like every other bully to have walked the Earth. You are the way you are because you’ve almost been programmed to behave this way. Have you watched Westworld? Those Robots have more say in who they are and what they do than you. You almost have no free will. Everything in your life has conditioned you to be who you are today: a very bland bully. You’re not original and you’re not special and your followers are either scared of being excluded and tormented or they don’t have big enough balls or free will to think for themselves. I’m guessing the latter is true either way.

“But yes, fear. Fear is exquisite and fear is amazing. Did you know that fear was the first emotion mentioned in the bible? Yes, the first thing Adam felt when he realized he messed up was fear. Of course. And grand is fear. Fear is grand but it can also limit the personal freedoms of most. Like the annoying process they put us through at the airport. The fact that they limit the liquids we can take on a plane, and in some countries they even make them take off their shoes. I don’t exactly mind taking
off my shoes or being patted down, but I do mind having the liquids I carry with me restricted. I hate having to buy shampoo elsewhere or to use someone else’s. Did you know that they introduced this regulation after they uncovered a planned terrorist attack around 2007 in London? The attack didn’t happen. Thank the heavens. But the fear that it might happen again, and that that same method might be reused just doomed all of us to limited liquids in our carry-ons for the rest of time. That fear, although warranted, strips me of my freedom of carrying my favorite giant bottle of gel douche on a plane, and it upsets me. You see? The fear that you’re imposing is not even warranted, so you’ll understand if my frustration about my gel douche is unleashed on you, Arvid.”

“You’re, you’re a fucking basket case,” Arvid stammers.

“Cute,” Isak laughs, and Even can’t decide if he’s turned on or terrified.

In a total moment of panic, Arvid clenches his fist and looks like he’s about to throw a punch. Even’s body moves of its own accord, but Isak beats him to it. He lifts his hand and cups Arvid’s face with it.

“Fuck! What the fuck?!” Arvid yelps in pain as if he’s just been burned, just as Isak removes his hand a split of a second later.

“Just in case you didn’t get it, here’s a summary: I am the threat here. The threat is me. You fear me. I do not fear you. I’ve tolerated your shenanigans for a few weeks now because I’m somewhat fascinated with bullies. But because I am not a bland bully with an unoriginal sob story, I will not touch you, I will not hurt you, I will not even come near you. That is of course, if you stay the hell away from me. Our very own version of a social contract. See? I’m even using your favorite intimidation strategy. Do you see how much I care?”

“I hope you know you’re fucked, Valtersen.”

“I hope you know that I’m the one who can give you a second degree burn,” Isak replies very calmly, and in that instant, he is fire. His flames are blazing. He’s glowing with it, powerful, and majestic, and unquenchable. “If you don’t believe me, ask why I no longer go to Nissen. Seems like your favorite type of activity.” Isak then turns around to pack his bag. “Alright, my nine minutes are up. Thank you everyone. Hope you enjoyed the show.”

And with that Isak is gone.

“I told you he’s horrible,” Adam whispers.

*It’s a coping mechanism,* Even says to himself. And he knows it. He’s burning with that knowledge. He’s seen this. He knows this.

Even has spent a lifetime wondering why he’s so drawn to fire and the last few months wondering why his fascination led him to a downward spiral into abyss.

Even has always wondered why out of the four elements—Earth, representing friendship and steadiness; Water, where he seeks calmness and serenity; Air, encompassing love and everything he yearns for; and Fire, the word for the chaos he once found himself in and the warmth he craves with his entire being—Fire has always been the one that he could never resist, the one that’s always consumed him, that he’s always burned to drown in.

Even has always known that he was drawn to fire. But it isn’t until that Tuesday at lunchtime that Even understands why.

*I will quench the fire in you and you will ignite the one in me.*
.
“What is your fear?” Even asks Isak the next time he runs into him at the school’s swimming pool.
Isak is fully clothed by the time he gets there this time, and Even guesses that he wanted to avoid
him. He half-expects Isak to leave without acknowledging him, but Isak stops to hold his gaze.
“That I’ll become like you.”
Even stares at him with wide eyes, not understanding but understanding all the same.
“That I’ll hang out with those weak-willed people just to avoid being the butt of a joke.”
Even nods and moves to his locker. Understood.
“Don’t ever talk to me again, yeah?” Isak adds, and Even notices that he’s not blushing this time.
“Got it.”
Even talks to him again.

Chapter End Notes

i know i know. "what is she doing???" I needed to get this out of my system/drafts and
the response to that tweet was mindblowing haha
I picked up my philosophy books again after some scarring fiction reading, and I'm
thriving. i figured an Isak who cannot touch, cannot become a doctor (yet) or shake
many hands. so he would be a grumpy little kitten with a thing for books and the mother
of sciences: philosophy. He's also had this for a little while and since he can't spend that
much time outside, he's been reading books and skipping grades.
i have this pretty much planned out/plotted out. the first chapter sounds angsty, but it's
not going to be angsty AT ALL. it's all about getting Isak those touches he wants SO
MUCH but i wanted to give him character and not make him weak and mopey.
everyone flinches when he's near them, but Even is almost intoxicated with it. that need
for nearness. they're both desperate for it. Even is recovering. he went through
something quite awful and he's trying to make it up to everyone and to take better care
of himself and his body.
they'll be hanging out in pools, becoming friends, talking about their scars and fears, and
Isak will keep talking his nonsense and being mean to bullies until Even teaches him
about better coping mechanisms. Jonas has a huge role to play in how closed off he's
become. this Isak also plays the drums and will grow fond of Mutta and Even's mom.
Hope you liked this. let me know if it's something you'd interested in reading more of <3
*hugsssss* Only one more NLMLY chapter left. Should be up soon, Almost done
writing it. love you thank you.
As usual, let me know if you felt something, anything. love, love, love <3


Philosophy of Deception

Chapter Summary

"Did he rip you a new one?"
"Shut up."

Even talks to Isak again and bears the consequences. They talk about truth, lies, and deception in a pool. Even wears speedos. Isak sheds a layer and suggests a deal.

Chapter Notes

hiii impulsive update because i got roasted by a guy who was reading a philosophy book on the subway.
i'm glad you liked the premise. I've never written anything like this so bear with me.
love ya <333

tw: body image issues, internalized homophobia, mentions of past SA

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘Surreptitious. Adjective: k ept secret, especially because it would not be approved of.’

Even reads the word and its definition five more times, rolling the syllables around his tongue, tasting them as if it would help make them stick. *Surreptitious. Kept secret. (Especially because it would not be approved of).*

His phone is balancing on the edge of the sink while he runs his fingers through his hair. He’s considered styling it today, the safely tucked products in the cabinet begging to be put to use. But his mother loves his hair down like this so he leaves it.

There used to be a time when Even refused to leave the house without styling his hair into a quiff. Just like there used to be a time when his father still lived with them, a time when he was allowed to be a moody teenager who didn’t have to smile all the time.

Even winces at his own thoughts.

‘Reminiscing over the past rarely leads to good things, Even.’

He taps the screen of his phone to brighten it and reads the word of the day again. *Surreptitious. Kept secret.* He thinks about sentences he could use it in and wonders if he can incorporate it into a joke and thus cross two items on his daily list. He always tells his mother jokes during breakfast and he hopes she hasn’t caught on yet. He hopes it doesn’t sound too rehearsed, like it's part of a meticulously written script he's replayed over and over again in his head.

“Even? You’re gonna be late,” his mother says on the side of the door.

“Coming!”
Breakfast is uneventful so far. Even has made her laugh twice and she’s kissed his cheek three times. He’s glad he let his hair down again because she’s ruffled his hair twice already. She tells him about Lars and he tells her about Mutta’s sudden burst of confidence.

“Well, he is very handsome. What’s wrong with being confident at your age?” his mother smiles as she munches on a pieces of fruit.

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to learn that my mom thinks he’s handsome,” Even laughs.

“What? Are you saying he isn’t handsome?” she scoffs. “Don’t you find him attractive?”

The laughter suddenly dies in Even’s throat. He’s not sure why he’s feeling uncomfortable, but he can’t quite help it. The question is simple. She’s asking him to comment on Mutta’s attractiveness, which is subjective and shouldn’t carry too much meaning. The tone is lighthearted and Even was the first one to bring up the topic. He can easily brush it off, turn it into a joke, or simply say yes and move on.

However, it still feels wrong and heavy. It feels as though his mother is asking a completely different question. Are you attracted to Mutta? Mutta who is a boy? Are you attracted to boys? Have you ever felt attracted to boys?

Even is suddenly overwhelmed because he doesn’t remember everything he’s ever told her. He doesn’t remember what he said the night words wouldn’t stop pouring out of him. He doesn’t remember if she saw the drawings before he got rid of them. He’s not sure if the therapist has ever discussed anything with his mother, or if Mikael ever stopped by to tell her what Even did.

Even is suddenly overwhelmed because he’s not sure what she’s asking.

“Even? Are you okay?” she asks gently, her hand wrapping around his bicep. Even doesn’t know when she managed to get this physically close to his chair, but he doesn’t mind. The touch somewhat anchors him, brings him back.

“Yeah, yeah,” he chuckles nervously. “It’s just. The thought of you finding Mutta attractive is a bit scarring, mom.”

“Jesus. Not like that!”

They laugh and finish their breakfast in an awkward and heavy silence. She doesn’t press him, but Even knows she noticed his breath hitching when she asked about Mutta.

Boys.

Even’s family has always been liberal and progressive. His aunt is happily married to a woman, and he’s always been the first to confront their homophobic distant family members when they were being especially awful to her at Christmas dinners.

Still. Even has never shared this part of himself with his mother or with anyone for that matter. He’s never felt the need to. He’d been with Sonja for a while before it all went to hell, so he never got to act on his attraction to boys. Well, until that night with Mikael at least.

Even kisses his mother’s cheek and walks to school with a foreign feeling in his chest. Shame. He realizes that for the first time in his life, he’s utterly ashamed of who he is.
“Shit, look who just walked in,” Adam interrupts Elias mid-sentence. He was talking about the second year girl yet again, and he’s about to throw his apple at Adam’s face when a collective gasp resonates through the cafeteria.

Even follows Yousef’s gaze and his eyes land on Isak who’s carrying his tray to a table by the windows.

He’s wearing a black parka with the hood pulled on top of a green snapback and gray gloves. He has his headphones on and hasn’t stopped to glance at anyone. His walk is confident and nonchalant all at once. Even is almost envious.

“The balls this kid has,” Adam laughs.

“His name is Isak,” Even blurs out, sounding slightly annoyed.

“Huh.”

“You keep referring to him as all these things. But his name is Isak.”

“Yes, Adam. Say the guy’s name if you’re gonna talk about the size of his balls!” Elias jokes and Even’s skin is suddenly crawling. He doesn’t want to be here. He loves his friends, but not right now.

Even stops paying attention after Elias makes the second consecutive joke about Adam being secretly gay. He grinds his teeth and does his best to focus on the food on his plate. He considers throwing a tantrum, lecturing them on how harmful these little jokes actually are, educating them on microaggressions, maybe. But he isn’t sure how to start this discussion without having to answer other questions, without sharing why it bothers him so much, without perhaps making Mikael uncomfortable too. Mikael, whose brown eyes are on Even, as if he knows how hard this is for him.

“What about you, Even?” says Adam, bringing him back to the current conversation.

“What about me?”

“You think the new kid is gay? Wait, sorry. I meant Isak. You think Isak is gay? He looks gay.”

“What do you mean he looks gay?” Mutta rolls his eyes. “He dresses exactly like you do. Also, who cares? Fuck off!”

“You, fuck off! I didn’t mean how he dresses,” Adam scoffs. “Someone from second year heard stuff about his time at Nissen or something. And he’s always blushing and shit.”

Even suddenly pushes his chair back and stands up.

“Where are you going?” Adam asks, and Even is not sure he can answer his question without somehow leaking or shattering.

“I can’t listen to this anymore,” says Even as he grabs his tray and walks away from their table.

He doesn’t really think about this next bit. He didn’t exactly know he was going to do this until about a minute ago, so he hasn’t had time to think about all the plausible scenarios, about how this could potentially go down.
He stops in front of Isak’s table with his tray in his hands and waits. He feels nervous and he’s not sure what he’s waiting for. Acknowledgement would be nice, even if Isak ends up asking to be left alone.

For a moment, Even wonders if his presence isn’t strong enough, if his aura doesn’t alert one of his presence, because Isak hasn’t reacted at all. He’s still eating and bobbing his head to the rhythm of whatever song he’s listening to.

Even feels inadequate with the entire cafeteria’s eyes on him. He thinks about nudging him with his foot but remembers the whole touching ordeal. He can’t even gesture to him with his hands because they’re busy carrying the tray. He doesn’t exactly have a choice, so he sets his tray on the table right in front of Isak’s.

“I don’t recall inviting you to join me,” Isak’s voice is cool and detached, and Even suddenly realizes how stupid his decision to come to him was.

“Assumed you wouldn’t say no to some company,” Even tries on his best smile.

“What exactly was the basis of that assumption? When I specifically asked you to never talk to me again in the pool a few days ago?”

Even stares down at him and Isak finally meets his gaze. His eyes are green and his cheeks are flushed. Only this time, Even knows that it isn’t because of him or because he’s feeling flustered, because there is no hint of nervousness in those eyes. Isak looks somewhat annoyed, as if Even stopping by hasn’t been on his list of things to deal with today.

“Hoped you would have changed your mind,” Even replies.

“See. Assumptions, I can work with. All reasoning starts with assumptions. There can be no philosophical reasoning without assumptions. But hope? That’s the wild west for me.”

“Do you always need to use big words?” Even finally tears his eyes from Isak’s and pulls a chair to sit down.

“I’m guessing you and I have different definitions of the word big.”

“What were you listening to?” Even asks as he settles in his seat, completely ignoring Isak’s previous jab.

“I wasn’t listening to anything,” Isak shrugs, his headphones still sitting on top of his head. Even realizes that he hasn’t pressed pause before addressing him. He was pretending to be listening to music while Even stood there.

“You ignored me for a full thirty seconds,” he says.

“Twenty-one actually,” Isak corrects him, not even meeting his gaze.

“Why?”

Even knows why Isak ignored him, but it’s the only word that makes it past his mouth. It seems to have surprised Isak has well, because he finally looks up, studying him. His stare is cold but his cheeks are flushed. It’s driving Even nearly mad. Isak’s face is an oxymoron.

“I assumed you’d take a hint and leave me alone,” Isak finally replies, but Even isn’t convinced.
“You really like assumptions.”

“You really like assumptions.”

“Basis of all reasoning. I literally told you five seconds ago.”

“Fifty-four,” Even decides on a random number. And it makes Isak blink again, as if he wasn’t expecting Even to play his game, as if most people he subjected this to usually gave up by now. “Do you want me to leave?” Even adds, almost positive that Isak won’t ask him to. He’s not sure why he’s convinced, but he is.

“You can stay,” Isak shrugs.

They eat in silence, barely talking. Even is trying to hide it, but he feels smug. He’s about to try the carrots when loud music starts blaring from Isak’s headphones.

He’s listening to some angry rock, and it takes Even by surprise. People in the neighboring tables can hear the music as well, and every self-preserving cell in his body is urging him to pick up his tray and leave. But he stays. He stays because the remaining cells insist that Isak is testing him.

They’re right.

Isak stops the music a few minutes later. He takes his headphones off and places them on the table. Soon, the hood comes off as well, followed by the green snapback. Even tries not to watch, but he fails. His eyes follow each of Isak’s hurried yet delicate movements, such as the way he runs his hands in the gray gloves through his curly blond hair, setting it free. Even wonders if it would hurt to touch his hair.

“Better?” he asks, feeling suddenly confident after watching Isak shed a few layers in front of him. He’s only allowing him to see the top of his head, but it feels like a privilege, like a sign of trust.

“It’s hot as fuck,” Isak shrugs, still not meeting Even’s gaze.

“You feel it? Heat?”

Even smiles and Isak meets his gaze for a moment. He sees it then, the slight hitch in his breathing, the deepening of the precious flush on his cheeks. He’s affected by their exchange, too. Isak can predict his words and come up with witty retorts in milliseconds, but Even’s smiles seem to always take him by surprise.

“What changed your mind? About letting me eat with you?” Even asks.

“Everyone is staring at us. I find it exhilarating. Don’t you?”

“You’re weird,” Even laughs then watches Isak’s face flush even more.

“You’re weirder.”
Even laughs again then watches Isak finish the food on his plate in comfortable silence.

“Are we like friends now?” he asks when Isak starts putting his layers back on. “I feel like I just passed a couple of tests.”

“Depends on your definition of friendship,” Isak shrugs. “Cause I don’t think I’d be interested in being another one of those people you hang out.”

“What’s wrong with my friends?” Even frowns.

“Nothing,” Isak says as he stands up and picks up his things. “I’m sure they’re great. It just feels to me like you lose sight of who you are when you’re with them.”

Even winces and a smile tugs the corners of Isak’s lips. *Touché.* He can almost hear him say it to himself.

“And you know who I am?” Even holds his gaze.

“Of course I do, Eivind. You’re just like me.”

“It’s Even,” Even replies and hopes he doesn’t sound too annoyed.

“Sure, my bad,” Isak offers him a smug smile. “I’d love to continue entertaining the cafeteria, but I have places to be right now.”

Even sits there alone for a few moments before Adam comes over and takes over Isak’s chair.

“Did he rip you a new one?”

“Shut up.”

.

.

Even decides to ignore him, to stop thinking and caring about his existence. Isak clearly isn’t interested in being friends with him and Even is starting to worry that his fixation is a symptom of something more worrisome. So he tries. He lies on his bed at night and plans his days down to the tiniest details. He fills his free time with activities and decides to pick up reading again.

But Even quickly finds that he can’t get him out of his system, that it’s becoming a physical weight pressing against the outer walls of his mind. And it’s Thursday morning when he realizes that he can feel Isak’s presence before he even sees or hears him. It’s almost intoxicating how his body tingles whenever the bundled up ball of sass walks by his table or his classroom.

He tries to convince himself that it’s in his head, resigns to the idea that he might be experiencing hypomania and that he’s hallucinating. But it grows stronger and Even can now tell that Isak is in a building when he’s two classrooms away. He even tests his theory a number of times, running down the hallway to check. He’s never wrong. He can always tell when he’s there.

On Sunday night, Even starts wondering if other people can feel Isak’s warmth like he does. But he doesn’t know how to bring it up without sounding like a lunatic. So he keeps it to himself. *Surreptitious. Kept secret.*

.

They’re in physics class and Even is doing his best to ignore it, to muffle it, the urge to switch seats with short-haired Olivia and get closer to Isak who seems completely oblivious to his presence. He’s
wearing several layers, his signature blue puffer jacket, and seems utterly uninterested in whatever their teacher is talking about as always.

However, Even starts noticing things, because about twenty-five minutes into the lecture, Isak answers a question rather brilliantly—judging by their teacher’s face, at least—and is suddenly immersed in the content of the class. He’s sitting upright, nodding at everything Mr. Eriksson says, raising his hand to contribute, and smiling throughout.

Even frowns at the sudden shift in his attitude. He feels slightly inadequate for noticing in the first, because it can only mean that Even has been paying too much attention to his every move. But he also feels like this is the most interesting Physics lecture he’s ever sat on.

Isak answers a question using Newton’s third law—something about how for every action in the universe there’s an equal reaction—and Even wonders if the pull he’s feeling towards Isak has an equal opposite reaction. He realizes that metaphors are making physics easier to grasp and he doodles something on his notebook.

Five minutes later, Isak asks to be excused from the classroom with a grimace. He’s clutching his stomach, and Even has trouble with physics but he can tell Isak is faking it. But Mr. Eriksson doesn’t seem to mind and dismisses him with a smile. A smile! Even can’t quite believe it.

Even realizes that Isak has done this before, participated in their boring physics lecture and given Mr. Eriksson the validation he so desperately craves, before asking to be dismissed while feigning physical discomfort.

The boys were right. Isak is a genius.

Even doesn’t follow him. He wants to, but he doesn’t. He figures that he’s done enough stalking and watching for the day. So much for getting him out of his system.

He’s walking into the library with Mutta, Mikael, and Adam when he sees Isak sitting by himself on one of the tables with a book. He doesn’t gasp or flinch like his friends because he could tell he was there before even walking in.

“What is he doing here?” Adam whispers, mostly to himself.

“What do you mean?” Mutta frowns. “He can’t use the library now?”

“No, shut up,” Adam rolls his eyes. “I mean we have English together right now. He’s supposed to be in class.”

“Uh, then why aren’t you in class?” Mikael laughs.

“Well, I’m not a genius. Okay? Non-geniuses skip class sometimes,” Adam explains.

“I feel like geniuses are the ones more likely to skip class though,” Mutta muses. “They’re geniuses. They don’t need to attend classes.”

Even smiles to himself. He doesn’t know why, but he does. Isak probably already knows everything these sad teachers are trying to teach him. He’s probably bored out of his mind, which is why he stages being interested in whatever they’re saying during the first half of the lectures, then excuses himself to come to the library and learn something he actually doesn’t know. Isak is fascinating.
“Hello? Earth to Even?” Mutta says and it never fails to put a smile on his face. One day he’ll explain to Mutta why he likes it so much.

“He literally ripped you a new one like two days ago. Are you perhaps a masochist?” Adam says in a very serious tone.

“Shut up.” Even shoves him then makes his way to the electronic media section. He needs to check out an old CD for one of his projects.

“Who even uses CDs anymore? Do you even have a CD player?” Adam complains behind him.

Even is about to tap himself on the back for managing to ignore Isak and not embarrass himself in front of his friends. But then his eyes stop on the cover of the book he’s reading.

‘How To Die’

The words are undeniable and they make Even stop dead on his tracks. There is no ignoring this, ever. He doesn’t even care that his friends are whispering among themselves behind him because he stopped right in front of Isak’s table right now. He doesn’t care about his decision to ignore this kid and his intoxicating presence.

Isak is reading a book titled ‘How To Die’ in an empty library at 11:00 in the morning. Isak who goes to the counselor’s office every day, Isak who has no friends, Isak who’s always bundled up even though he feels hot, Isak who listens to angry rock music just to be left alone, Isak whose brows are currently drawn together as he reads this book, looking alone and sad and—

“I’m not trying to die,” Isak says without looking up from his book, surprising him and the boys.

“Relax.”

“Uh.”

“It’s a book by Seneca. Roman stoic philosopher. As in, you know: Philosophy. You should look it up,” Isak adds and Even suddenly feels like the most self-absorbed person in the universe.

“Sounds like a cool book,” Even says sheepishly.

Isak doesn’t bother answering. Even gets ushered toward the exit by Mutta who’s doing his best to keep himself from bursting into laughter while Adam is openly cackling and being dragged away by Mikael.

“Shut up!” Even groans as soon as they’re outside.

“Dude, you have like three assholes now!” Adam bursts into laughter again.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Even scoffs but ends up laughing, too.

The boys don’t let him live it down. Sounds like a cool book. He keeps replaying it in his head. He writes it down on a notebook. He tries to write a film based on the five words in Math class, but fails. He pays attention to the teacher for a few minutes before losing interest again.

He has a cheese sandwich for lunch and watches the boys tell Elias and Yousef about his third asshole. He’s in the midst of defending himself when a warm feeling spreads at the pit of his stomach, curling his insides and extending to the tips of his fingers. Isak. He doesn’t even need to pay attention to people’s whispers or follow their eyes to know that Isak is standing behind him.
“Here,” Isak speaks beside him as he places a book on the table. *How To Die*. “I’m done with it. Seemed like you really wanted it.”

Rumors are strange things, Even decides. He’s not even sure this qualifies as a rumor. It’s probably what some would consider a general misunderstanding or a misconception. Except Even isn’t sure how to contain it or handle it, because no one is even talking to him about it.

It’s strange how Arvid hangs onto the misunderstanding like he finally has a purpose in life again, how he makes it his mission to spread it and sustain it. Even wonders if Isak knew a simple action would have such reactions.

“Is it true some new kid told you to go die?” Sonja asks him one Wednesday afternoon at her place.

“No,” Even sighs and lets his head fall on her stomach, lets her play with his hair like she used to when they were together. “He gave me a book titled ‘How To Die’ which he was reading.”

“Sounds like he told you to go die.”

“No, he didn’t.”

Even knows Isak didn’t, because when he opened the book later in History class, a small piece of paper fell off.

*Eivind, meet me at the pool Wednesday after school.*

It’s Wednesday and Even is buzzing with anticipation.

Isak is in the pool when Even gets there. He’s wearing a swim cap but he’s also fully clothed, which can’t be right. No one is allowed with their clothes on in the pool. He’s about to ask, when Isak beats him to it.

“I get to swim with my clothes on because of my skin thing,” he says and his words echo against the pool’s walls. No one else is around.

“You weren’t wearing clothes last time,” says Even.

“I wasn’t expecting you last time.”

“Shy?” Even teases, hopes he can get whatever thing they have into comfortable territory.

“No, just careful.”

“I won’t touch you.”

“We both know that’s not what I’m worried about,” Isak replies cooly.

Even considers recording his answers, because everything he says is quick and witty and perfect. And Even’s brain is melting with envy and fascination.

“How do you manage to always sound so confident?” says Even because he figures the best way to get answers out of Isak is by simply asking him.
“‘Sound’. That’s the keyword. It’s all about projecting self-confidence. You don’t even have to be it.”

“You’re literally the most confident seventeen year old I’ve ever met.”

“Sixteen year old,” Isak corrects him. “And I’m not nearly as confident as I want to be.”

“And how confident is that?”

“Confident enough to take a dump in a public bathroom,” says Isak. “I don’t think I could do that.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Even laughs as he crouches down to sit on the edge of the pool.

“What?” Isak laughs with him. “Isn’t it just the most terrifying thing in the world? Like just in general. I’m never as anxious as I am sitting on the toilet. Don’t you agree?”

“Uh, no?!” Even bursts into laughter this time. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I mean, imagine if an earthquake hits and you die taking a dump. Isn’t it terrifying? What kind of death?”

“Why are you so weird?!” Even is clutching his stomach by now.

“Or even taking a shower. I’m always wondering how many people died taking a shower or taking a crap and had to be found naked or with their pants around their ankles. It must have happened. Just statistically speaking, right?”

Even waits for Isak to take it back, but he doesn’t. “I have no idea what to say.”

“Just say that I’m right,” Isak grins.

“I feel like you just keep saying the weirdest shit to me to test me or scare me or whatever.”

“Is it working?”

“I’m not sure. All I know is that I’ll never be able to take a shower or take a dump without thinking about you from now on.”

“That’s the most unsettling thing anyone has ever said to me,” Isak grimaces.

“Right back at you. I guess,” Even grins before getting back up on his feet and stretching.

“Nice speedos, by the way,” Isak snorts, making him slightly self-conscious about his swim trunks.

Except not really. Isak is always playing games, and Even knows that the only way to take him by surprise is to welcome his little jabs with open arms.

“Like what you see?” Even replies, bringing both hands to his hips and grinning. “Wore these just for you.”

Isak immediately averts his gaze and frowns. “Don’t be weird.”

“You started it.”

“Are you just gonna stand there? My neck is hurting already from looking up,” says Isak.

“Are you like gonna electrocute me when I get in or something?”
Isak glares at him and Even holds up both of his arms, surrendering with a smile. He considers the pros and cons of his next move. Then before he can think about it further, he takes several steps back and jumps into the water like a child on a hot summer day who doesn’t care if his mother reprimands him later.

The water feels good all over and around his skin. It always does. Even is only happy when he is submerged in it, water. He is only free to be himself when he cannot breathe. And it is both terrifying and exhilarating.

When he finally comes up, there is a deep frown settled between Isak’s brows and he has obviously endured Even’s jump. They’re floating close to one another but Isak maintains a safe distance.

“You’re a child,” he says.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Even smiles.

“Being a child implies being impulsive and unreliable. And that’s not exactly what I need right now.”

“What you need right now,” Even repeats, his smile dimming.

“You thought I summoned you here to bond over the joys of floating in my clothes and taking dumps in public bathrooms?”

Okay. First of all, you didn’t summon me.”

“I quite literally did.”

“Fine,” Even sighs then swims closer. “Second, what did you tell the school for them to allow you in with your clothes?”

“I said that my therapist, Edvard, recommends swimming and that my skin hurts because of all the chemicals. So they can either accommodate me by using less chemicals and thus spending more money, or they can let me swim in my clothes.”

“You mean you lied,” Even deduces then thinks about how curious it is that his own therapist is named Edvard as well. He doesn’t tell him, however. He doesn’t want Isak to know about his bipolar just yet.

“Depends what you mean by lying,” Isak shrugs, swimming further away.

“Uh, not telling the truth?”

“What even is the truth?”

“Ugh, here we go,” Even laughs.

“What? I’m serious. Lying is a huge topic in philosophy. Kant used to get huge boners talking about it. He was convinced lying was the worst thing you could do, which in my opinion is a bit dramatic, especially given how truth can never be absolute,” Isak shrugs. “I mean, the chemicals used for this pool do hurt us on the long run, whether it’s me or you. It’s not a lie in that sense. It is a truth. I gave them two options which had nothing to do with my truth, but I never implied that they did. They made that cause and consequence relationship all on their own. It’s like I said I have a headache, either buy me a car or let me swim in my clothes. I never implied that either of these solutions would cure my headache, but they made that assumption themselves. That’s not on me.”
Isak smiles and Even has to take a moment to process all of his gibberish.

“It may not be a lie. But you did deceive them,” Even challenges. “Also, you’re like terrifying.”

Isak laughs.

“Well, you could argue that I deceived them if my intention was to get them to make that causal relationship. But you can’t prove that that was my intention. Also the false truth I’m trying to get them to buy into might actually be an absolute truth. Who knows? Maybe swimming in my clothes is protecting my skin after all?”

Even can’t keep up and it must show on his face because Isak is smiling and floating around in lazy circles. He almost looks euphoric.

“You don’t give these weird speeches very often, do you?” says Even.

“I must admit that it does feel nice.”

“Nice. Hm,” Even muses. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“Why would you think that I’m not?” Isak frowns.

“You tend to do that a lot,” says Even. “I know what you do in class, for example. Pretending to be interested only to fake having a stomachache or whatever and leave class. I’m also almost positive that your Arvind speech wasn’t exactly factual.”

Isak frowns. “Well, I do admit that the bit with my shower douche was borrowed. I read that in Lars Svendsen’s introduction to Philosophy of Fear. I mean I never actually got to go on a plane. But who cares? It did get my point across, no?”

“You never flew on a plane?”

“You seriously tend to focus on peculiar things,” Isak teases. “Also, I’m literally an actual inflammable material. How do you expect me to board a plane?”

“You’re what?!” Even blinks, his eyes widening.

“See?” Isak snorts. “Now that was a lie.”

“Wow, fuck off!”

Isak continues laughing. “Also what’s the harm in fucking with the teachers?” Isak asks, and Even is surprised because he realizes he doesn’t quite have an answer to that.

“The harm is you’re being dishonest.”

“Yes, but does it matter? The teachers get the validation they want and need. And I get to go actually learn something. It’s a win-win situation for everyone involved,” Isak shrugs.

“Yes, but if you operate on a win-win basis, then all your relationships are ultimately fake. You’re not really bonding with people if you’re constantly manipulating them. You will never get that validation.”

Isak snorts. “Bonding with people,” he then muses.

“Yes. What’s wrong with bonding with people?” Even frowns. He’s feeling suddenly very annoyed,
as if their recent exchange of words carries an ominous promise.

“What exactly is your obsession with right and wrong anyway?” Isak challenges him.

And it finally truly dawns upon Even that Isak doesn’t want to be friends, that Isak has indeed summoned him. Not because he wanted to watch him in his speedos and weird him out with stories about going into cardiac arrest while “taking a dump”. Not because he wanted to share some of that philosophy nonsense with him. No. Isak simply wants something.

“You want something,” says Even.

“I knew you were smart, Eivind,” Isak smiles and Even suddenly feels like the most stupid person in the universe. That's not my name.

“The book thing was on purpose,” he realizes.

“You were ignoring me. I needed something that would catch your eye. Make you do a double-turn,” Isak shrugs.

“How To Die,” Even says bitterly and it hurts. You could have just talked to me.

“I heard about you,” Isak says in a quiet voice, and it makes Even swim away. He suddenly cannot stand being near him.

You mean about my suicide attempt.

“I heard about how you started working in a suicide prevention center,” Isak says louder this time, as if he’s heard Even’s thoughts. Even who’s suddenly feeling paper-thin and transparent and very stupid for following this lethal kid around when it’s probably what he’s wanted all along. When Isak has probably calculated all of their encounters and rehearsed that weird joke about taking ‘a dump in public bathrooms’ the same way Even rehearses the jokes he tells his mother every morning. Because Even is just as predictable as everyone else, because Isak probably has him safely pigeonholed into a category.

“What do you want?” says Even and his heart feels worn out.

He’s so tired of everyone taking him for granted. He’s so tired of always being disappointed when all he wants is some sort of human connection to someone. Someone who doesn’t know the old him. Someone who claims to know the real him. Someone he doesn’t have to keep things—like who he is—from.


Isak looks surprisingly remorseful, as if he’s guessed how much he’s hurt Even just now.

“I’m sorry, Even. I didn’t mean to pry or stalk you or anything,” he says with pink cheeks and wide eyes.

“It’s fine,” Even says coldly, remembering that he’s done the exact same thing—and not dwelling on the fact that it’s Isak’s first time using his actual name. “What do you want?” he repeats.

“I’m serious, Even. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Isak repeats and there’s a hint of pleading in his voice. It would make Even feel something if he didn’t know any better. “This isn’t gonna work if you’re upset.”
“What’s not gonna work?” Even frowns, realizing that they’re floating the furthest apart since they got into the pool.

“My request. What I need you to do for me.”

Even stills and breathes through his nose. His mind is racing with all the possible things Isak might ask of him. He realizes that he doesn’t know anything about the kid other than the fact that he’s unpredictable, jaded, terrifyingly smart, a bit odd, and of course, the fact that he cannot be touched.

Even doesn’t know what to expect.

So he stares at him through wet eyelashes. Isak looks ridiculous in his dark gray shirt and his black leggings (leggings!). His eyes are green and big and hopeful, and Even knows that this is all part of the game, that Isak can probably use Even’s emotions to get what he wants the same way he does with his teachers, that Isak is probably the scariest person he’s actually ever had to deal with. Even knows that he should probably scoff and leave the pool and never speak to him ever again. Even knows that he’s been desperately trying to escape and not crave and want by submerging himself in water every time he hears it calling his name. Even knows fire, knows how good its flames feel against his skin, knows how it drowns out everything else in its vicinity. Even knows it. But he cannot look away.

Fire is staring into his soul and it has green eyes.

“What do you want?” Even repeats.

“I want you to touch me,” Isak blurts out before immediately covering his mouth with his own hands, as if he hasn’t expected himself to actually utter the words. And it feels as though he’s never said them in his life before, because Even doesn’t miss the shiver that goes through his tiny body, because the fire constantly hugging his cheeks is burning brighter now.

Even can only stare.

“I need you to touch me,” Isak continues, corrects, shyly this time, like he’s found courage somewhere. Even wonders if it’s in his own eyes.

The vulnerability in Isak’s voice—like he’s letting him see a side of himself that he’s never shown anyone before—leaves Even flabbergasted. Isak is asking him to put himself in danger, to flirt with fire, to burn himself, simply because he needs it.

The shameful part of him wants to ask Isak why me? Wants to ask him what it is about him that screams I do not value myself nor my body. He grips his left wrist which is carefully covered by his plastic watch and wonders if remnants of his own self-hatred are showing, if Isak can see right through him or if Even is simply transparent, translucent. He wonders what it is about him that’s made Isak choose him.

But once again, Isak beats him to it.

“I know you feel me, Even. I feel you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

dun dun dun.
i know this sounds angsty but it's not. i promise sighh. the urge to write this from Isak's
POV is strong, but I need to push through. i've never written a multi-chaptered fic from
Even's POV because we knew so little about him in the show that i felt i'd always be off
if i tried to be in his head for too long. but i'm trying and i hope you stick with me. i rly
want to explore his psyche in more than a couple chapters this time. he's not OUT and
proud in this verse, and it's related to what happened with Mikael and how everything
went down. he feels ashamed. which i feel is something he went through in canon right
after being rejected by Mikael (to the point of wanting to /cure/ himself. break my heart
why dont you.)

Isak wants to experiment, but he's rational and he's not going to try and put Even in
danger. it's going to be mild. he just wants to know why it feels so good when Even is
around, why he can /feel him/ too. he's been testing him all chapter because he doesn't
know if he can trust him with this. obviously, he's very calculating and cunning in this
verse. but he is not immune to marshmallow ray of sunshine deep!voice giraffe Even in
Speedos. and soon Even will be able to tell the Even!blushes from the regular ones.

why do you think they /feel/ each other so strongly? Why is Even's presence so soothing
whereas Isak's is intoxicating?

in Ch3, they talk about Isak's condition, what's up with it. how. the technicalities + get
closer. that should be up after NLMLY

hope you liked this. let me know if you did. And I apologize for not being around as
much anymore. i started swimming again (im so vain) and i'm holding prayer circles for
this cold harsh terrible winter to finally end so i can stop feeling so down.

hope you felt something, anything. <3
Philosophy of Catharsis

Chapter Summary

"What is your theory?"
"That you're an exception. That I won't burn you if you touch me."

Or Isak shares his theory with Even along with the science behind it. Isak gets sick and Even has no choice but to finally touch him.

Chapter Notes

4:12am. unbeta'd

tw: mentions of ableism, allusions to SH

the lovely dearenæ is rec'ing songs for this verse and helping me put a playlist together. thank you much bub <33333

Ch1 : The Heavy - Be Mine
Ch2 : Amy Shark - Sink In
Ch3 : BANNERS - Holy Ground

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I know you feel me, Even. I feel you, too.”

Even is processing Isak’s words. There is so much to process, right here, right now, in this pool, in lukewarm water, both of them panting because floating can be physically challenging. Especially when one is pouring their heart out.

’I know you feel me, Even.’

Even holds onto the way Isak says his name, first. He finds that focusing on small, manageable pieces of information helps him stay on track, stick to the script. So he focuses on how Isak calls his name. Carefully, the way a person utters a word in a language they’re not perfectly fluent in, prodding, hoping they’re not mispronouncing it and therefore perhaps embarrassing themselves. Even’s mind flashes to how Sonja’s cheeks would always flush when she spoke English around Mutta—who had the best pronunciation thanks to hours of binge-watching TV—, afraid of mispronouncing a word. He recalls how proud and stubborn she is and how Mutta couldn’t care less. He wonders if that’s why Isak is so careful with his name right now, when he’s been calling him ‘Eivind’ for days now. He wonders if it’s a peace offering gesture. He wonders if he knows how badly he’s hurting him right now.

Even’s brain is on overdrive. He’s conflicted. He can’t focus. He hates the way his skin is crawling right now. But he likes the way his name sounds on Isak tongue, between his lips. He almost wants him to say it again. And he quickly realizes that not many people call him by his name. His mother
calls him ‘my son’, with a different adjective occupying the space between the two words depending on the occasion, *My precious son. My darling son. My favorite son.* And the boys call him Bech Næsheim, ‘bro’, or ‘dude’. 

“Even—”, Isak says, bringing him back, again, yet again, and it’s a whisper, a careful one. His eyes are shining with something akin to satisfaction.

*He knows,* Even realizes. Isak knows that Even likes the way he says his name. Isak knows yet another secret of his. It’s defeating, humiliating.

“I know you feel me,” Isak repeats, floating still. His voice is neutral but his words are cruel, final, arrogant.

He’s revealing to Even that he knows another one of his secrets, that he *feels* Isak. And he’s not asking. He’s *telling* him that he *knows.* There’s a sense of finality in his tone, and Even knows that there’s no use denying it. He suddenly comes to the realization that Isak can actually convince him of anything with his self-assuredness alone.

Even is angry. He’s this close to diving underwater and swimming away. But then he remembers the second part of Isak’s claim. ‘*I feel you, too.*’

“How?” he blurts out and the word burns on his tongue.

“It was just a hunch at first,” Isak speaks like he’s been waiting for a verbal cue from Even to start his speech. “All based on observation, of course. You were turning around before I announced myself. And even when I tried to make no noise, you kind of seemed to know I was there. It was just random occurrences, however. Events, phenomena if you’d call it. Not enough to ascertain any claims. So I came up with this theory. The theory that you could feel me, and like any scientific theory, I had to test it and—”

“Can you spare me the pretentious bullshit?” Even snaps and he’s shaking with feelings he’s not used to exhibiting. Anger, fear, doubt, insecurity. These are Even’s best friends. They keep him company in the dark, almost as if they know just how lonely he is, how he’ll take anything. He usually keeps them bottled up, only unleashes them when he is in the dark, in the confines of his sheets. But Isak infuriates him, makes his thoughts race, makes his chest heave, makes him go off-script. And Even cannot pinpoint why this boy is both making him want to pounce on him and embrace, and maybe punch him in his perfect face.

*You don’t punch people.*

“Sorry,” Isak says and it’s quiet, surprised. He swims a little bit further away, and Even wonders if he heard his thought about wanting to punch him. Or maybe it’s the one about wanting to embrace him that drives him away? “As I said,” Isak continues. “I thought you could feel me, so I started testing that theory. Walking by your classrooms to see if you’d be on the lookout because you felt me enter the building or something. Trying to get in your face to see. I don’t know. I just tried different things to have enough empirical evidence.”

Empirical evidence. This kid.

“And? That was your conclusion? That I could somehow feel you?” Even grimaces. He’s trying to be mean, but he doubts his face is corroborating his tone. “Do you do drugs or something?”

“Don’t lash out on me like some hurt little boy. I’m being serious,” Isak says with dark and unphased eyes, and the words cut through Even. *Am I this easy to read?* “Anyway, every time I looked at you,
you were already looking at me. And whenever I walk past you, you get incredibly tense, your jaw just clenches.”

“You’ve been treating me like a lab rat these past few weeks,” says Even as the realization washed over him.

“Nothing personal. I’ve been observing you and trying to make sense of all of this,” Isak bites back.

“How could it even cross your mind? Has this happened to someone else other than me? Can other people... *Feel* you?”

“No. Not that I know of at least,” Isak shrugs.

“Then how could you even come to this conclusion?!”

“Because *I* feel you,” says Isak, and it seems like he’s just let out a breath he’s been holding in for a long time. “Been feeling you since my first day here.”

They both fall silent after that, Even trying to process Isak’s words and Isak trying to will away the blush on his face, maybe. Even wonders if it’s a problem for Isak, the blushing, if it’s directly related to his emotions, to which emotion exactly.

“Feel me, how?” Even asks.

“Like you feel me, I guess.”

“You don’t know how I feel you. I haven’t told you,” Even says, mostly to himself. He realizes then that Isak is probably trying to understand but that he refuses to asks Even directly. He wants to pry it out of him. “You want me to tell you.”

“I would appreciate that,” says Isak.

“What do I get out of,” Even gestures between the two of them. “This.”

“You’re not the type of person who does things in exchange of other things, Even,” Isak replies and it guts him in the stomach, again, always. His words.

“You don’t know me,” Even tries weakly.

“I do. I’ve been doing my homework these past few weeks. Why do you think I dipped on all those boring classes?”

Even isn’t sure if he’s mocking him right now.

“I can’t tell if you’re mocking me right now,” he admits, and for some reason it seems to dissipate the lethal stare Isak’s eyes are bearing. Even can’t read him and sometimes he feels like Isak can’t read him either.

“I’m, uh. I’m not,” Isak replies calmly. “I wasn’t exactly stalking you all this time. I’ve been reading about this, trying to base my theory on something concrete. I don’t know. Physics, maybe. I guess.”

“Physics.”

“For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Newton’s third law.”

Even recalls Isak’s answer in Physics class that day. Was Isak trying to give him a hint that he was
feeling him, too?

“I was trying to be subtle in physics class the other day, but you didn’t get it,” Isak says and answers
his thoughts yet again.

“I thought you were a Philosophy guy, not science,” Even blurts out because he’s run out of things
to say. He feels exhausted simply talking to Isak.

“Philosophy is the Mother of all Sciences,” says Isak. He then pauses, as if he’s remembered Even’s
request to ‘spare him the pretentious shit’.

“What do you mean?” says Even when he notices. It’s almost like a peace offering. He suspects that
these ramblings make Isak very happy, so he lets him.

“Well, uh, before Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato, no one ever questioned nature or why things were
the way they were,” says Isak, and for a moment, he looks happy. “As more and more philosophers
started asking questions, disciplines like physics and geology and biology were born. Newton, for
example, considered himself a “Natural philosopher” because scientist wasn’t even a term back then.
Aristotle was a pioneer in Biology, Psychology, Zoology, but most remember him as a philosopher.
He also wrote about Dramatic Theory. Did you know that he coined the metaphor Catharsis in his
work Poetics? He basically made a comparison between the effects of tragedy as a genre on the
human mind to the effects of an actual medical cathartic on the human body. I just read this like last
month actually. I was very surprised. I thought Catharsis would be something more recent. But
anyway. My point is that back then, it was all about asking the right questions, not about finding the
answers.”

Even hums, suddenly feeling ridiculous for floating in his speedos in an empty pool with a fully
clad kid talking about dead men who spoke dead languages.

“But you’re looking for answers,” says Even.

“I’m just trying to prove that I’m asking the right questions.”

“Is that why you want me to touch you? What does it have to do with me feeling you? You already
have your answer for that.”

“No, the touching is to test another theory of mine,” Isak says and he looks both unphased and
embarrassed. Even can’t stand it. The duality, the ambivalence. He cannot read him.

“What theory is that?”

“I can’t tell you until I’ve validated it. It would be too embarrassing otherwise.”

“So let me get this right. You’re asking me to touch you and therefore burn myself. I already have
exactly no incentive to do that and you won’t even tell me why?” Even asks then bites his tongue
when he realizes how harsh he’s just been to him. How Isak probably doesn’t need to be reminded
that nobody ever wants to touch him. “You won’t even tell me what my presence feels like to you.”

“I have reason to believe that you will not burn yourself if you touch me,” Isak mumbles with a
frown between his brows. Even can’t tell if it’s because of how harsh he’s just been to him or if it’s
because Isak has been forced to give him a hint, a piece of his theory.

“How? Do you only burn specific people? Can you control it?”

It’s back. The lethal glare. Isak’s eyes are dark and angry. And Even almost feels like ducking. He’s
just hit a nerve. *Shit.*

“No. I don’t control it, Eivind! If I did, I wouldn’t walk around in seven fucking layers sweating like a dog and riding in the back of my fucking dad’s car every day!”

Even is both regretful and elated by Isak’s reaction. He’s called him Eivind and yelled in his face. If anything, it’s probably the first *real* reaction he’s gotten out of him.

“I’m sorry—” Even tries.

Isak brings a hand to his own face and the gesture takes Even off guard. He must have really hit a nerve for Isak to require touch to anchor himself. Suddenly, he wonders if Isak burns himself, if Isak only burns others, if he’s maybe burning inside. He wonders if Isak burns animals, if he can burn objects. He wonders when was the last time Isak’s been held, really held. If he’s ever burned someone close to him, his *fucking dad*, maybe.

“It’s fine,” Isak breathes. “It’s a legitimate question. You’re right.”

“I didn’t mean to be insensitive.”

“It’s fine. I played you with the ‘How To Die’ book. You get to push me, too.”

Even winces. He’s forgotten about that for a second. He doesn’t like this arrangement.

“Just because you hurt me, doesn’t mean it’s okay for me to hurt you,” he blurts out before he changes his mind.

Isak gives him that look again, the ‘*shit, you just surprised me again*’ look. And Even revels in it. *Be kind, always.*

Even doesn’t know what he expected for there to occur next, but it’s not a couple of horny first years barging into the pool while making out. He panics for a second then realizes that he’s not doing anything he should hiding. He’s allowed to access the pool after school and Isak is authorized to swim in his clothes.

But Isak probably disagrees. Because by the time Even comes to his senses, he has already dived underwater, leaving Even seemingly floating by himself.

Even doesn’t know if Isak does it out of fear of being seen with him, or simply of the school knowing that he likes to swim which could make this leisurely activity a bit tougher in the future. But he takes a hint this time and puts on his best mean voice.

“You can’t be here!” he shouts at the first years who look like deers caught in headlights from the pool. “You can’t come in here unless you’re wearing a swimsuit and a cap!”

The couple, obviously embarrassed, maybe a bit intimidated because Even is a third year, stumble and immediately make their way out of the pool.

Even waits a few more seconds for Isak to come back up, but he doesn’t. He panics for a moment and immediately ducks underwater. And that’s when he sees him.

**Him.**

Isak underwater. Even is probably imagining things but Isak looks like he’s smiling, eyes closed, blissful, happy, free. Underwater, Isak is not an impending disaster. He is not on fire. He is not a
threat. Underwater, Isak is free. Isak is beautiful. Even wants to touch.

It overwhelms him in a heartbeat, the heat, the need to touch, to seize, to grasp, to pull him by the arm and crash into him, to melt into him, to inhale him, to become one.

Underwater. Isak opens his eyes like he feels it too, and for a moment they look at each other.

It’s so intense that Even almost mirrors Isak when he chokes on the water. Even comes up for air first, and when Isak emerges from the water, his eyes are bloodshot and he’s coughing. Even can’t even tell how long he’s been down there. They’re both heaving.

“You okay?” Even asks.

“Droplet went down the wrong pipe,” Isak explains, coughing still. If it were anyone else, Even would have reached out to tap him on the back and make him feel better. He’s aching with it.

“Just say you can’t hold your breath underwater and go.”

“Are they gone?” Isak asks, ignoring Even’s attempt at banter.

“Yeah.”

“I should go,” says Isak as he makes his way to the edge of the pool, still struggling to regain his breath.

“What? What about the experiment?”

“Not right now.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. We’re both wet and worked up,” says Isak.

“So what?”

“In an experiment, you have to recreate the right conditions or like where you’re trying to prove its validity.”

“And now in Norwegian, please?” Even says and it feels like a small victory when Isak smiles.

“I don’t spend my life in a pool and neither do you. I’m trying to prove that your touch won’t burn you in your regular state, as in dry and not wearing speedos or thinking of murdering me.”

“I’m not thinking of murdering you.”

“You really do focus on the most peculiar things,” Isak sighs as he climbs out of the pool.

“What if I touch you right now though?” Even says, making his way to Isak and folding his arms on the edge of the pool. “It might prove another theory? That it’s okay in water? I don’t know.”

“It won’t prove anything. If you don’t burn, I’ll just get too excited and maybe end up disappointed if you do burn when dry. And if you do burn, it might deter me from trying the full experiment.”

“You have nothing to lose. I’m the one volunteering to get burned.”

“Hope,” Isak says before removing his swim cap and setting his curly hair free. “I’d lose hope. I’ll
Isak walks away and Even spends a full minute underwater. His whole body is buzzing with want and confusion.

“How was my son’s day?” his mother asks later that night.

He’s just cooked pasta and she’s made the salad, their ritual.

“It was good. How was yours?”

“It was alright. Lars asked the wrong question in this meeting and I had to do a lot of damage control. The usual.”

“Is there such a thing as a wrong question?” Even muses.

“Depends on the setting, I guess,” she smiles and brings a spoonful of pasta into her mouth. Even wonders why she insists on eating certain foods with a spoon.

Her face is soft as she chews and it makes Even feel defeated. He’s already tasted it and it’s undercooked and bland. And yet, here she is pretending it’s the best thing she’s ever eaten. It’s killing him that she won’t be honest with him, that she keeps babying him. It’s killing him.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“Nothing,” he smiles, does his best to, at least. “How’s the pasta tonight?”

“Perfect.”

“I’m glad.”

“What’s the word of the day?” she asks a bit later.

“Catharsis,” he lies, recalling the word he’s learned so much about today from Isak. “The release and purging of repressed emotions or emotional tensions, especially through art.”

“Oh. That’s a good one,” she says with her smile and her faux-enthusiasm. Even feels drained.

“Yeah, a good one.”

In nights like these, Even wishes he could lock his bedroom door. Not that his mother or anyone else would try to come in. He simply wishes it were an option. He wishes he had the option to lock himself in his room and brood and maybe browse some porn freely, maybe even chat with strangers around the world, or maybe cry, just cry to his heart’s content. Even can’t recall the last time’s he’s cried. His chest feels heavy with it, the need for some sort of release.

Hope. I’d lose hope.

Even wonders if Isak’s sadness is as great as his own. He wonders if Isak would appreciate knowing that the thought alone is comforting to Even. That someone else might feel the sadness and loneliness he feels.
‘I’ll message you.’

Where. When.

*Instagram (22:19) - Heraklit started following you.*

Even glances at the notification then upon seeing that the account is private and that it doesn’t have any followers, he navigates back to the group chat with the boys.

---

**Heraklit**

**22:23**

Tomorrow after school

Gym at 15:15

Don’t be late

? Isak?

Who?

Uh?

Of course it’s me. Who else?

What do you mean who else

Who else would create an insta and name it Heraklit?

Is that some sort of famous philosopher?

I’m going to block you

Didn’t think you’d have insta

I don’t

Didn’t

Just created it

For me?

15:15

If you’re late i’m leaving

? You’re just not gonna respond?
Even is almost giddy with it the next day, feeling Isak in the building and knowing that he can feel him, too. It makes no sense and it stretches the logical and rational strings on his mind, but he finds that he doesn’t mind. It’s scary but it’s less scary than being convinced that it was in his head, that he was alone in feeling this, imagining this.

Even knows that the fear will eventually come back because it isn’t a connection that can be explained using science and theory. But he feels a little less alone knowing that he’s sharing it with someone else. By noon, he’s smiling to himself when he feels Isak come into the cafeteria. He can’t quite help it. He wonders if they can do something with this connection, if he can maybe nudge him, if he can feel his thoughts, maybe.

“Why are you grinning to yourself?” Adam asks.

“I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You’re like giggling.”

“Leave him alone,” Mutta warns. And something in his protectiveness over Even always feel demeaning in the oddest way. Even knows that Mutta only wants what’s best for him, but he feels paper thin when he shuts the boys down, when the boys do leave him alone.

He feels fragile. They still haven’t talked about his time away. He doesn’t know how much they know. And it’s in moments like these that it eats at him. He wishes Mutta would let Adam and Elias tease him like they used to before he lost it. He wishes they didn’t have to treat him with so much care. He wishes he could afford a day of looking grim without worrying that they’ll mistake his occasional frown for the beginning of a depressive episode. Even has a lot of wishes.

He nearly chokes when he feels it. The warmth, the familiar and sweet heat. It overwhelms him, fills his lungs and settles in his bones, finds a home there, hugs his joints, and cradles his heart. Even feels like he’s listening to his favorite song or having his favorite food. He feels good, like something has physically taken away his earlier sorrow. Even feels elated with it.

He doesn’t have to turn around or look at the boys’ faces to know that Isak has just settled on the table behind him. He feels him. All over and around him.

“You’re smiling again,” says Elias but he’s smiling too, like he knows why Even is suddenly so happy. He’s not even sure he knows himself.

“Why is he here?” Adam whispers and earns himself a slap to the head from Mutta. “Fuck off!”

Mutta throws his leg this time and Even catches a few girls giggling in their direction, mostly at Mutta who has grown a stubble and whose features are more pronounced than last year. His tacit confident self and the easy way he carries himself also help. Even smiles.
Mutta. Earth. Stable. His protector. He winks at him, and Even returns it although he’s not sure what they’ve just secretly talked about.

Yousef keeps an arm around Adam’s shoulders to shut him up every time he feels like saying something stupid, and they all eat with no particular incidents. The heaviness Even felt at the beginning of lunch before Isak arrived is simply no longer there. And when he picks up his tray to leave and finally gets to glance at him, he wonders if Isak has taken it and borne it instead. He looks miserable, with sweat collecting on his forehead and his skin pale.

“You okay?” he stops and whispers, because he can’t help it.

Isak pushes his seat backwards, stands up, grabs his tray, and storms out of the cafeteria without sparing Even a glance, nearly running.

“Wow, he really fucking hates you,” Elias bursts into laughter.

“When will you take a hint, bro?” Adam laughs, too.

Even eventually joins them and tries not to take their jokes too personally. He’s not sure what just happened, but he’s not too happy about it. He’s not too happy about Isak treating him like this when they’re in public, like he’s nothing. So far, he’s done nothing but humiliate him in front of everyone.

He can’t read him. He’s both delicate and brutal. Careful and unpredictable. Caring and mean. Even almost convinced himself that Isak sat behind him to comfort him. But how could he? He doesn’t even know how Even feels when he’s near.

*He only talks to me when he needs something from me.*

---

**Heraklit**

15:17

You’re late

Hurry up

I’m not coming

?

You can’t just treat me like garbage every time i try to check on you then expect me to show up when you summon me

Are you serious right now?

Yes

You need to give me something
why won't you tell me how it feels when I’m around you?
How do you ‘feel’ me?

You’ll come if i tell you?

I’m not sure

I know you’re like right outside
I can feel you remember?

Fuck

I’m gonna give you another minute

Even grits his teeth as he makes his way into the gym. If he’s ever doubted that Isak was lying about feeling his presence, he has his proof now. He blames himself for being weak-willed. He tries to tell himself that he would have never acted this way before, before this perpetual sadness impaired him.

“You’re late,” says Isak. He’s in a green puffer jacket and dark jeans. His hair isn’t covered by the usual snapback and hoodie combination. It’s a nice change, despite the dark circles underneath his eyes and the yellowish undertone of his skin. He almost looks sick.

“You already said that in your text.”

“Perhaps we should reschedule since you’re this angry,” Isak suggests in a very cold and emotionless tone.

“I’m not angry.”

“Agitated. In a mood, if you will.”

“You drive me crazy!” Even blurts out and the words bruise him. He hates that word, crazy. He hates it.

“Emotions! Your amygdala seems to be just fine after all,” Isak smiles, but there’s nothing friendly about the way his mouth curls. “Why don’t you exhibit such lovely reactions around your friends?”

“God, fuck you!” Even hisses and he cannot recognize himself. His hands immediately fly to his mouth to cover it, as if he no longer has any control over what escapes it.

“Yeah, we should reschedule.”

“No. Forget it,” says Even and he sounds as hurt as he feels. “I don’t know what kind of research you did on me or why you think I’m willing to literally burn myself for you and your needs. But I won’t do it.”

Isak crosses his arms and leans against one of the lockers, unimpressed.

“Are you surprised? Was this not in your plans?” Even asks and his chest is heaving.

“Your ability to say ‘no’ did not show up in my preliminary research, no. You’re right.”

He’s pushing your buttons.

“You don’t know me.”

“And you don’t know me,” Isak replies, uncrossing his arms. “And yet here we are. Stuck in the same school with some weird connection neither of us can explain and that we’ll probably have to live with until at least the end of the year.”

Even stills. He hasn’t thought about this. The fact that he literally cannot get rid of this attraction towards Isak. He wonders if what Isak feels for him is even remotely similar to what he feels, if it can qualify as attraction.
“I’m not fond of this arrangement either. But it’s killing me and I’d really like to get to the bottom of it,” Isak continues and Even notices how his face falls a bit at the words ‘killing me’.

If Isak had texted him, he would have assumed that it’s the intellectual curiosity, the need to understand. But his face suggests that he’s actually in physical pain. And Even suddenly wonders if his presence isn’t as pleasant to Isak.

“So what do you say? Tomorrow after school, same time?” says Isak. “Unless you want to keep acting like a child because you can’t possibly emote or be yourself in front of your actual friends and close ones.”

Even’s jaw clenches and he watches Isak’s green eyes widen at the sight of it, a blush creeping its way to his cheeks again. Even is starting to think that Isak blushes when he’s simply taken off guard.

“I think I finally get you,” says Even and he’s doing his best not to sound hurt.

“Hm?”

“You find people’s weaknesses and exploit them until you get what you want.”

“Did you get that from watching Criminal Minds or?”

Even doesn’t react. He does his best to psychoanalyze him as well. Isak is just a hurt boy who cannot be touched and who’s trying to make sense of the world as much as he can.

“You can’t use my pain against me if I don’t let you,” says Even. “You constantly bring up the stuff with my friends because you know it hurts me. And I let you because I’m embarrassed. Just like Arvid, you put me in a category and you know what gets me riled up. You have an entire profile for me. You think you know me inside and out. But you don’t. I won’t play your game. I don’t care that it feels great when you’re around. You can just be like the breeze. It feels good on my skin, but I don’t need it to function. And at the end of the day, it’s your loss. Because unlike you, I’m not dying to understand this. I’m fine with just asking the right questions. I don’t need answers, especially if it involves putting myself in danger and touching you.”

_Catharsis._

Even feels mean but he doesn’t wish to take back his words. Isak is not blushing this time. He looks taken off guard, but he’s not blushing. Another theory down the drain. Even doesn’t know what to expect. Isak will probably try to make a case for it, try to manipulate him some more, maybe laugh, maybe wince. He’s not sure. But he’s expecting a fight.

“Fine,” Isak says and he sounds defeated, depleted. “If that’s what you want.”

He turns around and Even feels suddenly cold. He shudders with it, the cold. Isak has been nothing but a source of warmth so far. So the chill that spreads through his skin leaves him at a loss for words.

It takes him a moment to realize that it’s the loss of the overwhelming heat that leaves him trembling, like a warm blanket being pulled away on a cold Sunday morning in bed.

“Where were you?” Mutta asks when he meets him outside the library where he’s been catching up on homework.
“Forgot something at the gym lockers,” Even shrugs, unable of hiding the frown on his face. He hates that Mutta always asks about his whereabouts.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Mutta doesn’t ask again. And for some reason, it infuriates Even even further, the way he’s too careful with him. The way he drops things out of fear that it might cause Even to snap, the way he won’t tell him the truth the same way his mother won’t tell him that his pasta tastes awful when it tastes awful.

“I saw Isak at the nurse after lunch,” says Mutta without looking at Even. He shakes his head and his curls rattle with no sound around his face. He’s quite the sight.

“You did?” Even muses, trying to feign indifference.

“Yeah, he looked pretty out of it. He was throwing up everywhere. And the nurse was trying to get him to a hospital because of his temperature.”

“Wait what?!?”

“It was right after lunch. When he ran out of the cafeteria after ghosting you. I’m guessing he really needed to vomit or something.”

Even stops walking to process the words. Guilt and shame suddenly wash over him. He recalls how bad Isak has actually looked all day.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You seem to care a lot about him,” Mutta says with a smile and a shrug. “You have a thing for people who seem to be hurting.”

Even doesn’t feel like challenging that claim even if he hasn’t quite thought about it yet.

“So do you,” he says instead. And he both means Isak and himself. How Mutta always feels compelled to take care of him.

“He likes you better.”

“Right. He’s only destroyed me publicly about four times,” Even laughs.

“He follows you on instagram.”

“How do you know his instagram?” Even frowns and laughs at the same time.

“Adam did some stalking.”

“Of course.”

“Anyway, just thought you should know,” Mutta smiles as he starts to walk again. “I don’t think he meant to be a dick in the cafeteria today.”

“Okay,” Even nods then pauses for a moment, considering what to say next. “Why didn’t he go to hospital?”
“He said he had somewhere to be after school around 15:00 and that he couldn’t miss it.”

Even’s chest falters a bit at the words. He’s really chosen the best day to say no and exhibit his most private emotions. *Great.*

“You chill?”

“Yeah.”

---

**Heraklit**

**18:20**

Hey i just heard you weren’t feeling too good  
Hope you’re feeling better  
Didn’t mean to be a dick

Isak doesn’t answer and Even doesn’t blame him. Their conversation did feel quite final. Especially with the harsh words Even ended up uttering. Isak probably resents people for reminding him of his inability to bear touch without hurting others. He probably didn’t need a reminder. He probably flinched the same way Even does when someone calls him crazy or even utters the word. Even probably hurt him deeply, inflicting a wound he would never be allowed to see with his own eyes but could only imagine. Isak probably hid his wounds better than Even did his own.

He wants to apologize. And he tries. His palms feel damp when Isak walks into a building. His heart gets stuck in his throat. And it beats loud and clear. It hurts, but in a way that makes him feel alive, real, like he actually exists. He wants to apologize, to offer his services again, to try and tame his emotions around Isak. Isak who knows how to bring them out, how to make him leak and shake with anger and irrational tenderness.

But Isak feels small. His presence isn’t as overwhelming in the sense that it doesn’t find Even and assault him with its inevitability. It’s almost as if Isak is trying to make himself feel small, tries not to spread his warmth, or aura, or whatever it is that’s poisoned Even’s blood and thoughts.

But Even can still feel him when he seeks him out. He recalls Isak’s talks about the third law of Newton. If he applies a force, an action, he’s more than likely to get an equal reaction. And it works. Isak is there. He tries to make himself feel small, but he’s there. He ducks his head and doesn’t come to the cafeteria anymore. He doesn’t leave in the middle of his classes anymore. He doesn’t bother anymore.

‘Hope. I’d lose hope.’

Even is smoking cigarettes with some other third year boys early in the morning when he sees Isak hop off the backseat of a car a block away from school and sprint to the entrance. He recalls Isak’s words the day he snapped in the pool and watches the man who’s just dropped him off.

His father. No one is sitting in the passenger seat. This man makes his own son sit in the back. Even wonders if he’s afraid Isak might hurt him. His heart aches at the thought.

He’ll apologize today.
They’re in gym class and Isak doesn’t look like he’s doing any better. His skin is pale, his movements slow and pained, and he doesn’t seem like he’s gotten a good night of sleep in a while.

“Why is he even here?” Adam whispers to their group then yelps when Mutta throws a basketball on his face. “Will you stop?! I meant he has a medical excuse! If I were him I’d use it and skip this shit.”

“You could use your mental problems, maybe?” Elias jokes then immediately bites his tongue. “Shit man, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Even’s heart pinches and it hurts, but he refuses to think about it or let it sink in. “I know. It’s fine,” he smiles then turns his attention to Isak who’s about to pass out.

Arvid said something about Isak getting special treatment and getting to opt out of gym. So the stubborn mop of curls started showing up to physical education classes, with gloves, longs pants, long shirts and a winter jacket.

He looks ridiculous, but Even admires his tenacity and how he refuses to be a pushover, even when he looks sick and on the verge of falling over. Even almost claps when Isak challenges Arvid during a basketball match, very well aware that the brute won’t try to touch him, having gotten a firsthand taste of how lethal Isak can be.

Even watches the game, watches Isak dribble past a few helpless classmates who can’t quite believe how good he is either. Even wonders if he, himself, could play in so many layers, how fast Isak would be if he could just wear a t-shirt and shorts like everyone else.

He watches unashamedly, feeling weirdly proud. He can’t quite pinpoint why he cares for Isak, but he guesses that it’s out of solidarity. They’re both impaired, though in different ways. Granted, Even has substances that help him control the symptoms of his brain’s imbalance, and he can still enjoy hugs and cuddles. But they both deal with the stigma, with the reality that they are different and that people don’t really like different. That people stay away from different or try to shame and break and get rid of different. They both seem broken enough, both living behind masks, only letting them fall when one pushes the other’s buttons. Even isn’t sure why, but he is proud of how brave Isak is. Isak who’s playing a basketball game and ignoring how nobody will actually approach him and treat him like a real opponent.

He watches him, dismisses Adam when he asks why he’s watching him, then starts noticing how Isak is now wincing. His breathing is labored, rugged. His legs look heavy. He’s just stopped in the middle of the court and brought both hands to his knees, catching his breath.

Even watches when Mutta nudges him to ask if they should make their way to him. Even shakes his head. He knows Isak would hate it if they drew attention to him. Even sure hates it when all his friends do. Isak probably just needs a second to breathe.

It happens in a blink. Arvid picks up the basketball and throws it on Isak when their instructor isn’t looking. And it shouldn’t be a big deal. It’s just a mean little jab probably out of frustration because he cannot actually touch Isak and has been losing at this match very embarrassing so far.

But Isak is probably tired, exhausted, probably on the brink of shutting down. Because the moment the ball reaches him, Isak crumbles on the floor under everyone’s stunned eyes.

There’s a second of silence and stillness before a number of them make their way to him, their instructor being the first and Arvid second. Even and Mutta are now pushing through the crowd to get to him as well.
Isak is curled around himself and he looks small and fragile. Even is overwhelmed so he tries to focus on the good part: Isak hasn’t lost consciousness. However, he looks like he’s in a tremendous amount of pain that is paralyzing him.

“Someone get the doctor or the nurse!” Olivia shouts.

“What are they gonna do here? Their office is like down the hall. We should get him there!” says Elias.

“And how do you suggest we do that, genius?!” Arvid snaps. He’s agitated and he looks like he’s actually worried about Isak.

Isak whose eyes are shut tight—Even wonders briefly if it’s out of pain or embarrassment—his curls a damp mess sticking to his forehead while he hugs himself, as if trying to stop something from pouring out of his stomach.

“Do we have a stretcher in the Doctor’s office? I’m sure there’s one,” says some other girl.

“I’ll go get it,” says Yousef before running out of the gym.

*A stretcher.* Even tries to picture collapsing on school grounds and having everyone brainstorm ways to get him to the Doctor’s office. It kills him. The shame. He immediately thinks about *after.* How people would look at him *after.* At Isak. He peers into his thoughts. Tough, lethal, mysterious, mean Isak. On the ground, split in half with pain.

“It’s not here,” Yousef says as he comes back inside. “They think it’s in the old nurse’s office. In the other building. I can go run and get it.”

“Or we can carry him?” says Mutta.

“You’re gonna burn! Don’t be dumb,” Adam scoffs.

“I’m sure it’s fine! We can just wear our jacket. Plus he’s wearing big layers,” says Elias.

They’re all debating how to get Isak to the doctor’s office. And Even is paralyzed with it: the uselessness. He can’t look away from Isak’s face. Isak who is in a fetal position now, both arms wrapped around himself as if he’s trying to protect himself. He’s ashamed. He’s embarrassed. He probably wishes he could disappear. Even’s heart breaks. And then he sees it. A single tear about to spill from Isak’s eyes. His eyes which are shut so tight like he will die if something peers into them.

“Move!” Even suddenly shouts, using his arms to get to Isak. “Out of the way!”

“What are you doing?” Mikael frowns.

“I’m getting him to the Doctor’s office,” Even replies as he crouches to Isak’s body on the floor.

“Are you out of your mind?!” Adam shouts. And this time it doesn’t hurt. They don’t even register. Adam’s cruel words. ‘*Are you out of your mind? Are you crazy? Are you insane?’* Even doesn’t even compute it.

Even doesn’t because he’s suddenly found some strength that was unknown even to himself as he hoists Isak into his arms. Isak who gasps but doesn’t move. Even wonders if he’s still conscious. Isak is two years younger, so he’s smaller, and Even is suddenly extremely grateful for the swimming sessions. He feels stronger in his upper body.
The layers, however, make it difficult. And it’s not until Mutta steps up to help Even stand on his feet with Isak in his arms, that he can finally start walking, or in this case running, to the Doctor’s office.

Even has an intricate relationship with physical pain. Unlike most, he does not fear it. It does not paralyze him, or particularly haunt him. For the longest time, physical pain was an outlet, an escape, an emergency exit when things got too much. For the longest time, Even opted for physical pain over mental and emotional pain. Physical pain anchored him, allowed him to stay here, to focus on now, to focus, to function, to breathe, to feel without feeling too much.

Even has an intricate relationship with physical pain.

So when he starts feeling it, the sting, the burn, the sweet pain Isak is inflicting upon him right now by simply being pressed against him, wrapped around him, arms around his neck like he’s never been held, like he never wants to get to the Doctor’s office, like he wishes he could drown in him, ready to bear this insupportable pain for all eternity if it means being in his arms like this, Even nearly loses himself in it, in him.

The pain. It’s numbing, overwhelming. It sets him on fire and soothes him all at once. Fireworks have just been set inside him and they’re reaching all of his nerve endings, all of him, where he begins and where he ends. His limbs, his bones, his fingertips, his knuckles, his eyelids, his heart, his soul.

Even is on fire. And he never wants to let go.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Mutta yells when he comes into the small room where Even has just deposited Isak’s body on the bed, still holding him.

They’re both shaking, panting, sweating. Even’s eyes are wide but Isak’s are shut. It feels as though they’ve yanked them apart, because Even doesn’t remember letting go and he can still feel Isak’s arms around his back, his fingers digging into his skin through his gloves, holding onto him desperately, so desperately. Every rugged breath begging “please don’t let go” without saying the words, his lips parted and delicate and perfect. Even’s head is spinning. Even can’t breathe.

He goes back outside as everyone else ushers in and tries to get a glimpse of the circus. He hopes from the bottom of his soul that Isak is unconscious and that he won’t have to bear this. His heart hurts and he doesn’t understand why it felt so visceral. His entire body is on fire. And when a nurse finds him and takes him to the a room a bit further to examine his chest, Even breaks down and cries. *Catharsis.*

When Even wakes, it hurts to move a bit. His chest is bare and slightly burnt. His mother has just applied some ointment to his skin like when he used to be a child and get too sunburnt. He doesn’t recall falling asleep, but it’s dark outside and there’s a few messages from the boys that he’s not ready to read or reply to.

His phone buzzes again and something within him urges him to check it. So he reaches for it.
I’m sorry I burned you
I’m so sorry my theory didn’t work

What was your theory

That i won’t burn you

Why not?
what would make me special?

Forget it. It was unfounded

… ok

Don’t sleep on your stomach

Nobody sleeps on their stomach

I do

i feel like it's the first honest thing you said to me so far

Even closes the Instagram chat. He pictures Isak sleeping on his stomach with his head turned to the side, golden curls falling around his face, lips slightly parted. The image burns itself into his mind and makes him ache with something akin to tenderness. He recalls how it felt to have Isak in his arms, completely latched onto him, curling around his body, aching to belong, to make space for himself there, in his arms. It felt so right. Isak held onto him so tight. Like he could finally breathe, finally stop hurting, finally stop burning.

What the fuck.

Even sits up then checks Mutta’s earlier texts.

Mutta

19:18

Dude i had to go to the hospital
they put me on antibiotics
Are you sure you’re okay?
I barely touched him and it hurt like hell
You carried him all the way to the office

For real?
I’m fine
Like sunburn

wtf?

Even sits up and thinks and thinks and thinks. Then it hits him.
Carrying Isak might have started a fire in his chest, but it isn’t the burn he normally inflicts on people.

His theory. Isak's theory. Perhaps they’ve been looking at it the wrong way. Perhaps they’ve been looking for answers when they should have been looking for questions. The right questions.

---

**Heraklit**

21:39

What does it feel like when I’m near you?

Like I can finally stop hurting

---

Chapter End Notes

Note: will update these end notes when I wake up

They're trying to get to know each other and Isak is infuriating because he Wants Even to show these emotions. He wants him to be real. He needs to be able to trust him.

Isak is a snake but he's a precious snake. He just wants to be held. Even realizes that Isak didn't Burn him as much as he usually burns people. That he's somewhat of an exception. But Isak doesn't know this. He's lost hope. Even also realizes that Isak is actually in constant pain and that when he's around him, he actually feels soothed and better.

Next chapter, they become friends and it's halloween. And Even tries to convince Isak to come to a party despite his fears of hurting someone. Even's suggestion for costumes makes Isak blush a lot. It's v cute.

I'm writing NLMLY but since it's the last chapter I'm having trouble saying goodbye. Thank you for waiting <3

Hope you liked this. Let me know if you did. I'm having a hard time sitting down to write lately. Idk why. I feel like people don't read as much anymore. Like I should move on? Which I know isn't true. But oh well haha.

Love you thank you <3
Philosophy of Guilt

Chapter Summary

"You're nice when you don't hate me."
"You're beautiful when you don't lecture me."

featuring Isak the cunning mastermind, Isak's sister, drummer!Isak, Sana, 'Jonas', Isak's first time smoking weed, Even trying his best to forget, and Isak and Even developing a friendship.

Chapter Notes

your reaction to the previous chapter was so sweet and amazing ily thank you. Isak is Snake level 2939398 in this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Like I can finally stop hurting.”

Even is a film person. He connects with fictional characters through subtle—or not so subtle—changes in the expressions of the actors portraying them. He considers dialogue an essential part of any script or movie. But it’s rarely what brings him to tears as a spectator, what makes his heart clench and burst, what puts stars in his eyes and makes his chest heave. Words are just words after all, and Even relies on how they’re spoken and acted out to attach meaning to them when they’re not his own.

Even is a visual person. Even spends more time searching for emotion in people’s faces than understanding words and metaphors, which brings him to his current dilemma: he cannot sleep. He feels stuck all night after Isak’s last message.

‘Like I can finally stop hurting’

He feels awful. And not because Isak seemingly deleted his instagram account right after typing out those words and thus before Even could ask him what he meant. That’s something to worry and wonder about later. What’s currently keeping Even from sleeping right now are the words themselves.

‘Like I can finally stop hurting’

Even is not good with metaphors that aren’t his own. He’s not even sure if this qualifies as one. Even writes. He’s not a writer, but he does write. He’s convinced himself, however, that he speaks and masters a language that no one else around him speaks. He’s convinced himself that nobody in his immediate environment can or would even want to understand the way his words fit together on a blank page, for his language is one only broken people can decypher.

‘Like I can finally stop hurting’.
Are you speaking my language?

Even blames himself for not reading others’ words nearly enough growing up, always glued to the television as a child and reciting movies he’s already watched countless times. His reading and comprehension skills feel too meager as he struggles to wrap his head around the mystery that is Isak Valtersen.

Even never knows if he can trust the words coming out of his mouth. And with these ones being typed, Even is stripped of context and of visual aids. Isak could be laughing or crying right now. Even has no clue.

He tries applying basic logic and comprehension techniques to the problem. ‘Stop hurting’ implies that hurting has started and has been occurring. ‘Finally stop hurting’ implies that hurting is constant and that it hasn’t stopped in a while. ‘Like I can finally stop hurting’ implies that Isak has been in pain for a certain period of time and that being near Even makes him feel like he can finally stop hurting.

What if it’s a metaphor? Or like a joke? Is he in constant physical pain? Why? His skin condition? Or maybe it’s mental pain? Like the one I’m stuck with?

Even groans and pushes the covers off of his bare chest. It’s still inflamed but it’s not causing him that much discomfort. At least not as much as the uneasy feeling that’s spread inside him. He cannot sleep. He checks his phone again to see if Isak has perhaps reactivated his Instagram. He hasn’t.

Even falls asleep with his phone on his chest, right above his heart.

Even wakes up to the familiar sound of his mother humming in their apartment kitchen. It’s one of his favorite sounds, his comfort sound. It fills him with warmth and ease. It feels like a kiss to his heart, always. His mother only hums tunes when nothing is weighing on her mind. She only hums when she stops overthinking and worrying about everything and everyone but herself and allows herself to be happy.

Even knows this because he’s caught her several times stopping herself when she suspected that she sounded too happy, too cheerful. It hurts Even’s heart to know that his mother has doomed herself to a life of unhappiness for him—because of him—out of an irrational sense of solidarity that he never asked for.

‘In a state of perpetual sadness, my soul is incapable of experiencing and settling for happiness.’

Even remembers the words he wrote in the green notebook, the one that burned the brightest that one warm night. He remembers that notebook the best. The one he filled in less than a night. One night was all it took him to fill every corner. He remembers the words. He also remembers the ones his mother added right below them. How could he forget.

‘If my son’s soul cannot experience happiness, then neither will mine.’

Sweet selfless words that now make Even try hard to show happiness, to exude it, to flaunt it, every day—every minute of every damn day—so that his mother can hum in the kitchen without guilt overwhelming her. His sweet mother who doesn’t know how much it hurts to hide the hurt in him, how much it hurts to not be able to offer the world and her anything more than a rehearsed smile and a rehearsed joke and bland pasta for dinner. Everything Even does is fake. And it hurts.

But not right now. Right now, his sweet mother is humming in the kitchen and filling his heart with
warmth and joy. His chest suddenly feels too big for his heart, for his soul. It’s a good feeling. He feels like he can breathe, like someone is holding his hand, like someone is playing with his hair, clinging to him, tracing his collarbones with the tips of their fingers. Even feels good. Even feels—

**ISAK**

The feeling hits him without warning, a punch to the gut, a slap on the wrist—the bad one. One moment he’s smiling to himself in bed, and the next he feels as though the world has tilted, like a rug has been pulled from under his feet, like he’s on a plane that’s just taken off. Even feels dizzy and breathless again.

**Isak.**

Even closes his eyes and wonders why he’s thinking of him, wonders if the sound of his mother humming is now forever connected to the thought of Isak. He sits up then remembers his flushed chest. *Sunburn.* He realizes he hasn’t inspected the rest of his body and leaves his bed for the bathroom.

Even stares at his own reflection in the mirror for a while. His hair is a mess and his chest is sunburned. His cheeks, however, have more color to them than usual and the bags under his eyes are not there. He’s glowing, he realizes. The flush sitting on his cheekbones is a healthy one and his skin looks good. He’s *glowing.*

It’s ridiculous given his internal turmoil before falling asleep, so Even snorts. He’s not sure why he’s smiling, but it he can’t quite help it. Even realizes in the midst of chuckling that he woke up feeling good, feeling lighter, well-rested, energetic even. It makes no sense. He can’t even recall the last time he woke up feeling this *serene,* this *whole.* He prods at his chest with his fingers and watches the skin whiten where they press.

Even suddenly remembers that Isak wrapped his arms around his neck and turns to the side to examine his back. The skin there is flushed as well, undeniably so. And it fills Even with an odd and contrary feeling. Isak has left his mark everywhere their body connected, and it’s both demeaning and comforting.

Isak has marked his body, an undeniable—though perhaps momentary—evidence of their contact, of their chests touching, of their bodies colliding. Even smiles to himself.

*Does he mark people he has sex with?*

Even chokes at his own thoughts. Isak having sex. How—? Why is he thinking about this? He frowns and shakes his head. Isak obviously has other things to worry about. He can’t even shake another person’s hand. Having sex is probably the equivalent to flying to him.

The thought makes him sad, causes a deep frown to settle between his eyebrows, feeling heavy on his face.

“Breakfast’s ready!” his mother calls from the kitchen, as if she’s felt him getting tense in the bathroom all by himself.

“Coming!”

“So,” she hums, clearing her throat as she pushes a plate of fresh eggs in his direction. She’s smiling and it’s a bit mischievous.
“So,” Even repeats, narrowing his eyes though still smiling. “What’s up?”

“You tell me,” she replies, falling back into her chair and crossing her arms. She’s wearing an orange dress today. She looks like a piece of the sun.

“What would you like me to tell you, mom?”

“Why the nurse called yesterday and instructed me to rub cream on my nineteen year old son’s bare chest.”

_Fucking Eili._

“I got into a thing during gym,” Even shrugs. “I hurt myself.”

The words make him wince. _I hurt myself._ His mother can probably tell because her smile falters for a moment.

“How could you possibly get sunburned during gym class?” she asks, her smile back in place. It makes no sense that she’s currently smiling. She probably doesn’t wish to seem threatening, but it fills Even with unease.

“Uhm. It’s a bit complicated.”

“You can tell me,” she encourages.

Even doesn’t want to lie to his mother. She already does so much for him, and the last thing he wishes for is to deceive her. But he doesn’t know how to explain that there’s a new kid at school with a mysterious skin condition and that he jumped in to help him. He doesn’t know how to explain it without disappointing her, without her suspecting that Even might have put himself in danger on purpose. Even can’t bear disappointing her.

“I don’t know how to explain,” Even mumbles, stabbing at his eggs with his fork.

The silence is heavy, but his mother eventually breaks it.

“The school sent me an e-mail. They explained things,” she says, and even though it’s gentle, it makes Even’s head snap.

“What? What things?”

“The new student. They explained that he experienced discomfort that resulted in him fainting and that he had to be taken to the doctor’s office,” she spoke as if she were reading written words. Even wondered if she also rehearsed their conversations before breakfast. “They explained that Mutta and you volunteered to transport the new student there.”

Even doesn’t know how to interpret his mother’s tone. He keeps expecting her to express her disappointment but she almost sounds proud. And when Even lifts his eyes, she’s smiling at him.

“I’m proud of you,” she says and Even loves her with all his heart. “You’re so selfless and wonderful. My brave boy.”

She leans in and grabs his chin, giving it a little shake. Even’s eyes are still wide, but he manages to smile. He loves his mother the most.

“I take after my mom,” he says when she lets go of his chin. She then walks over to kiss his face and he lets her.
It’s a good day.

Even wonders if Isak will be coming to school today. Mutta informed the groupchat earlier that he’ll be skipping for the day because he’s still in pain and the doctors at the hospital told him to get some rest. And Adam went into conspiracy theory talk when Even told the group that he was actually feeling fine.

‘What if he can control who he hurts? What if he spared Even? Holy shit, what if Even also has superpowers? What if Even lost sense of pain?’

‘Shut the fuck up Adam’

Today was going to be interesting.

Walking to school felt good for some odd reason. Even played the Romeo + Juliet soundtrack through his headphones and found himself weirdly entranced when he got to Radiohead’s ‘Talk Show Host’.

‘I want to be someone else or I’ll explode’. Me too.

He was about to google the rest of the lyrics when Adam and Yousef ambushed him a few blocks away from school.

“Wait! Sorry, bro. Did I hurt you?!” Adam exclaimed as Even winced and jumped away from the arms suddenly smothered him. “How are you? Are you sure you’re okay?!”

“I’m fine. You just startled me. That’s all,” Even laughed then removed his headphones. “How are you, guys?”

“Good now that you’re here,” says Yousef, sighing. “Mutta ditched today, so I had to listen to this psycho talk the entire way here all by myself.”

“Who are you calling a psycho, you psycho!” Adam retorted while Even could feel himself wither inside, yet again.

‘Psycho’ ‘crazy’. You’re gonna have to talk to them about this, eventually.

“How’s Isak doing? Heard from him?” Yousef asks after a while. He’s been bickering with Adam—well, Adam has been complaining and Yousef ignored him most of the time—and Even has missed a good five minutes of it despite laughing and nodding along, his mind only snapping back into focus at the mention of Isak’s name.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Even replies, suddenly embarrassed.

He never bothered asking Isak how he was doing yesterday. All he thought about was himself. He’s not as selfless and wonderful as his mother thinks. He feels ashamed.

“I wonder if he’ll show up today,” says Yousef.

Isak doesn’t come to school, and a few more people stop by to check on Even and tell him that he “looked cool, yesterday”. It’s mostly girls, and Even smiles and chats with them for a while. Even likes making people feel important and giving them the time of day when they approach him. It’s
fake for the most part, but he does it out of politeness and kindness.

Still, he strains his neck staring at every door and every window in the classes he sits through, hoping to see Isak running down the hall in his seven layers. But when he remembers that he would physically feel Isak if he were to come to school, he falters. He can’t feel him at all.

*What if the connection is broken?*

For some odd reason, this thought scares him even more.

“What are you daydreaming about?” says Elias, snapping his fingers in his face.

“I’m just wondering if you’ll ever realize that that second year girl is never gonna say yes to you,” even replies with a smirk then watches the rest of the boys burst into laughter. He loves it. For a moment, he loves it.

By the end of the day, Even feels worn out, tired, frustrated, restless, listless, like a piece of him is missing. He pulls out his phone and navigates to ‘Heraklit’s instagram profile. ‘*User does not exist*’. He frowns again.

He goes to the Doctor’s office to ask about what happened with Isak the previous day after he left. His favorite nurse, the one that took him away to examine him, Eili, smiles up at him and invites him to sit down.

“You know I can’t tell you that,” she replies softly, her dark hair in a perfect ponytail as always.

“You can tell me what everyone else saw. The part that’s not confidential,” says Even. “I just want to know if he’s okay.”

The admission surprises him as well. He sounds like he cares. And he probably does. He just doesn’t know how to interpret it yet.

“He’s okay,” she smiles again, resting her elbows on her desk and propping her chin on her hands. “He felt better as soon as we kicked everyone out. We gave him some basic painkillers.”

“What was wrong with him? Why was he feeling ill?”

“I can’t tell you that, I’m afraid.”

“I understand,” Even replies though frustrated. He starts standing up when she speaks again.

“I can’t tell you but I might know someone who can.”

“Hm?”

“You can always ask him directly,” she says, tilting her head to the side, her dimples prominent on her face. “I’m sure he’ll appreciate it.”

Even flushes a bit at the tone. He’s not sure what she’s implying, but he feels nervous.

“You don’t know him, then,” Even chuckles, hoping his joke translates and lets him off the hook.

“Oh, but I do,” she says. “Isak might seem like a tough little guy, but he’ll be very happy if you reach out to him. Trust me.”

“Uhm. Okay.”
Even leaves her office with an odd feeling roaming his chest. He’s confused and almost positive that Eili knows something he doesn’t. He pulls out his phone and searches for Heraklit, again. Nothing. He sighs, goes on google and types ‘Heraklit’, hoping to find another social media account, maybe a Facebook. All he finds are articles on a pre-socratic philosopher. Of course.

He locks his phone, frustrated and stuck. He didn’t even get to tell Isak that his touch didn’t burn. That if anything, it’s keeping him warm right now, that later that night when Even can’t sleep, all he’ll have to do is bring his hand to his own chest to feel him, his warmth, his touch, his strength.

Even falls asleep hugging himself that night.

Isak doesn’t come to school the following day, nor the one after that. And Even starts to wonder if the discomfort he’s experiencing is related to the physical loss of him or is simply out of guilt.

“I heard he’s transferring out,” says Adam one morning as they enter Bakka.

“Huh?” Mutta is the first one to frown. “Because of what happened at the gym?”

“Yeah, some parents made a fuss about him being too dangerous to be around the rest of us,” Adam shrugs.

“Wait what!!” Even blinks. “Where did you hear this?”

“My dad is on the school board, remember?” Adam says, rolling his eyes. “They had a meeting about this and since Mutta had to go to the hospital, Arvid’s parents made a huge deal out of it.”

“What the fuck? This is because of me? Because I went to the hospital?!” Mutta almost shouts and it’s a little bit out of character for him. “And since when do Arvid’s parents care about what happens to me?”

“Well, it’s not really about you. I guess they’re arguing it could have been anyone or whatever.”

“How did they even find out?” Even huffs.

“School contacted the parents of people directly involved,” Adam shrugs. “Arvid was there, I guess. I mean he threw the ball at Isak. We all saw it. Maybe he wanted to finally get rid of Isak?”

“Why are they contacting our parents when we’re fucking adults?” Mutta groans again, his brows still furrowed. He looks angry but in an attractive way. ‘Do you find Mutta attractive?’ Even remembers his mother’s question and flushes. I guess I do.

“Well, I don’t know about that part,” says Adam. “I guess they just don’t want to bear responsibility if something happens.”

Even’s hand is in a fist by now. They’re kicking Isak out and they’re using Mutta and Even to justify it. Just like that. Kicking one of the most brilliant kids out of school just because he’s different. The same way they tried to get rid of him.

“This is fucking bullshit. We have to do something!” he exclaims.

“Yeah, like what?” Adam snorts.

“I don’t know. We could go talk to the administration or the board or something? Explain that it was my decision to carry him and that he didn’t do anything?” says Even.
“We can make a video about and post it on YouTube and go viral,” Elias jumps out of nowhere.

“Yeah, there must be a law somewhere that says you can’t discriminate against students because of their illnesses. No?” Yousef adds.

“Yeah. We can probably figure something out,” says Mikael, his kind eyes on Even’s, always. Even knows that he can suggest the most absurd things and that Mikael will always be there with that kind look, supporting him, out of pity.

“Uhm, not to burst your bubbles or anything, but you’re missing something here,” says Adam with a smug smile.

“Huh?”

“Well, Isak was perfectly happy with the school’s decision, according to my dad.”

“What do you mean?” says Mutta.

“I don’t think he wants to stay here.”

Even makes an appointment with Eili and crosses her threshold with a new script, one that he rehearsed earlier in the morning. It’s not exactly polished, but he’s willing to improvise a bit. He’s going to ask her about Isak, and judging by the look on her face, she already knows that.

“How can I help you today, Even?” she smiles from behind her desk.

“Is it true that Isak is getting kicked out?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say kicked out,” she winces, leaning back on her chair. “He’s not too upset by it if it makes any difference to you.”

Even can see how upset she is by it. He imagines that she probably put up a fight for Isak. He imagines that she’s just as disappointed.

“I need to tell him something, but I don’t know how to reach him,” Even admits the real reason he’s here, surprising himself by rushing through the script and cutting to the chase. “Can you help me?”

“Help you how, Even?”

“By maybe telling him? I don’t know if you keep contact with him or if the school counselor does, but I’d appreciate it if you could just tell him something.”

“I’m not sure—”

“Just tell him that his theory was right,” Even blurts out, keeping it vague because he doesn’t know if Isak wants other to know that he didn’t burn him. “Tell him that I’m okay and that his theory is right, that he deleted his account before I could tell him.”

“Even, what—”

“I know it sounds weird and that you probably can’t talk to students or ex-students, but it’s very important.”

Even speaks and he’s not sure why he’s so worked up, why the words feel so heavy on his tongue,
why he’s out of breath, why it means so much to him. *It’s important.*

‘*Hope. I’d lose hope.*’

He pictures a guilt-ridden, hopeless Isak unable of falling asleep because he thinks he’s hurt Even too much. He pictures an Isak who’s constantly hurting and who is now convinced that he can never be touched without hurting others. An Isak who just got kicked out of his new school after hurting another boy without ever meaning to.

It *is* important, he decides. Isak needs to know.

“Please,” he repeats with as much emotion as he can muster in his voice.

Eili watches him, her thin lips tightly pressed together. She’s roaming his face. She’s thinking. A moment later, she pulls out a piece of paper from a drawer, takes out a pen, and starts scribbling words down as Even watches.

“How,” she says, sliding the folded piece of paper to him. “I might get fired, but I care too much about that kid anyway.”

Even reaches for the paper and pulls it into his lap to unfold it. It’s an address.

“It’s an address,” Even says, looking up at Eili who simply shrugs.

“I think you might find some answers there.”

Even walks home with the tiny piece of paper burning a hole through his back pocket, its presence undeniable. Isak’s hypothetical address. Eili didn’t confirm nor deny that it was his. It was up to Even to figure it out.

“What’s the word of the day?” his mother asks later that day over dinner.

“Meander,” says Even. “To follow a winding or intricate course.”

“Hm. Interesting,” she says, squinting her eyes a bit and drawing invisible circles with her fork while chewing on the slightly better pasta that Even made tonight.

“Yeah, interesting indeed.”

“What are you doing this weekend? Wanna watch a movie with your old mom?”

“Mom, you’re forty-six,” Even laughs.

“How dare you tell a woman her own age,” she scoffs.

“That’s sexist!” he scoffs right back.

“How is it sexist?”

“You’re perpetuating stereotypes on how women act and behave, like feeling ashamed of their age.”

“So a woman can’t be ashamed of her age without being a stereotype?” his mother shakes her head. “Really, my darling son?”
“That’s not what I meant,” Even laughs. She’s too good at this. There’s no use trying to win an argument.

“Tell me more about how women should be, darling.”

“Ugh, I give up,” he says, holding up both of his hands.

“So, that movie? Tomorrow? Yes, no?”

“I have to go do something tomorrow. But when I get back? Or maybe Sunday?”

His mother watches him and Even blushes a bit under her gaze. Can she tell? She can always tell. She doesn’t ask him where he’s going because he’s nineteen years old and because she never wishes to overwhelm him. But he knows that she would feel better knowing. He comforts himself with the thought that he didn’t lie by saying that he’s going to spend the day with the boys. He left it vague because what he’s thinking of doing is vague.

He’s going to see Isak tomorrow.

Even rounds the corner and wonders if he’ll be able to feel Isak once he gets to the house. It’s a silly thought, but he thinks about how convenient this would be when trying to fetch Elias and figure out if he’s in his house in the first place.

Not funny.

He wonders if Isak will be able to feel him, if he’ll be upset, if he’ll ask him to leave, or if he’ll run away before Even gets to him.

Even wonders about a number of things, and he can’t help the disappointment that overwhelms him when he gets to the door and realizes that he cannot feel Isak’s presence. Perhaps, it’s not his house.

HER BOR
Terje og Marianne Valtersen
Isak og Lea

Lea. Does Isak have a younger sister? Even stares at the house plate for a moment before resigning to the fact that Isak isn’t home.

He thinks about walking away, but then convinces himself to at least leave a message with one of his family members, or ask for a phone number.

And so with his heart in his throat, he rings the doorbell.

“You’re not Jonas,” a girl with perfect blond and wavy hair greets him at the door with a curious expression. She can’t be older than twelve years old, and she’s cute as a button.

Isak’s sister?

“I’m afraid I’m not,” Even replies with a smile and a wave of his hand, feeling a bit sheepish. “Sorry to disappoint.”

“You didn’t,” she replies dryly before Even can catch a breath.
“Thank you?” Even tries, still smiling.

“What for? For implying that you’re not horrible to look at? You probably already know that.”

Even chuckles, assuming it’s a joke, but his heart is beating fast. It must run in the family, the snark and wit. This girl can probably destroy him using words alone.

“Well, I’m Even—” he starts, extending his right arm awkwardly before catching himself. What if she’s also—

The girl, Lea, grabs his hand just as he starts withdrawing—cutting his thoughts short—and shakes it.

“He’s the only one with the curse. Don’t worry,” she says. “Nice to meet you. I’m Lea. And I get to touch.”

The curse. Even winces. He wonders if she says this to Isak often, if that’s how they refer to his condition. He’s always been an only child, so he has no idea how sibling banter works. Still, he wouldn’t bear it if he had a sister who referred to his bipolar as ‘a curse’.

They shake hands as she looks him up and down. And it’s awkward because she doesn’t even know who he is, yet she’s already assuming that he knows Isak.

Even is about to ask when he realizes that the loud drumming is not in his head and that it isn’t attributable to own heart’s. The entire house is vibrating with the loud sound: somebody is playing loud drum-heavy rock tracks.

Isak. He’s here.

“Is he expecting you?” she asks, her green eyes cool and piercing.

“I, uh, I don’t think so.”

“Are you the guy who took him to the doctor’s when he passed out at school?”

Even blinks. How did she know?

She smiles faintly before he gets to say anything as if she’s read his mind. Does this run in the family too?

“I’m glad to see you’re okay,” she says. “Isak said you’d probably show up.”

“Oh, what?”

Did Eili tell Isak that he was coming? Did Isak ask her to give Even his address? Even forgot that Isak was cunning and calculating. He forgot that Isak always got what he wanted, that if he wanted to remain in the school, he would still be there.

“He said to kick you out if you turned up,” Lea shrugs, her hand on the door handle.

“What?”

“But see, because of my brother’s shenanigans, we had to give away my dog. And I just realized that I’m still not okay with that. So I’m going to ignore his request and let you in. How does that sound?”

Even blinks down at her, overwhelmed by how much she reminds him of Isak despite being half his
size. Her eyes are green and void of emotions twelve year olds typically exhibit—at least in comparison with Mikael and Mutta’s younger siblings. Even can’t imagine how their parents must be like for both of their children to end up this hardened.

“Sounds great,” says Even.

“Follow me.”

Lea invites him inside and closes the door behind them. Even’s first impression of the house is that it’s **sterile** and almost sinister. The walls are white and clean and the furniture is somewhat old-fashioned. There is no art anywhere, not even a painting of nature or fruits. Even’s skin is crawling. The only decorations are Christian crosses and statues of Jesus or the Virgin Mary—an odd contrast with the loud angry drumming coming from downstairs.

Even almost shivers, wondering if it’s actually cold inside or if it’s just the odd vibe.

“Brace yourself,” Lea says as they get to a set of stairs leading to the basement where the loud music is seemingly emanating from.

Even is about to ask what she means when he feels it. Warmth. Heat. Overwhelming heat. Even is suddenly caught in a fire and all of his senses are opening up to it. He feels him now, Isak, all over and around him, consuming him.

Even doesn’t realize how frightened he’s been of having lost their odd bond until he could feel him again.


His blood is singing.

“You okay?” Lea turns around and gives him a look as they go down the stairs.

“Yeah. I’m good.”

Even finds inspiration everywhere. It can be a word or a gesture or a song. Even can find inspiration in the most mundane things—or at least, he used to. But not too many sights have inspired Even to write pages and pages worth of script, to make films and build universes just to honor that one frame, that one shot.

The few he can name are that time Mikael fell asleep on his bed while they were working on a project together—which also happened to be the day Even realized he was in love with him—; the time Yousef danced in Mutta’s backyard like no one was watching, completely immersed in the music, the beat and him, one; the time he caught Elias and his sister Sana sitting on a pair of swings by their house and talking to one another with a sense of companionship Even envied with all of his being; and of course the time his mother dressed up for a date, then came back home ten minutes later after changing her mind to watch a movie with him on the couch in black heels and a red dress.

There aren’t many sights that made his heart catch in his throat, that made his chest burst and his brain catch fire. But this, right now, just flooded his mind with countless ideas for countless movies.

Even’s brain is reeling and his heart is drumming in his ears, tripping over itself in his chest and matching the beat Isak is setting.
Isak is a drummer. Even feels weak in the knees.

Even feels like he’s intruding because Isak’s eyes are closed and he has a headset on, probably oblivious to Even and Lea’s presence. His drum kit is massive, with cymbals, and drums, and toms, and Even probably has no idea what the other parts are called.

He watches, amazed, flabbergasted, can’t quite believe his eyes. Isak’s hair is a sweaty mop of wild curls, his face is flushed and drenched in sweat as well, and he’s wearing a drenched grey RAMONES t-shirt—t-shirt! Even has never seen his bare arms before. They’re impressive arms for a seemingly frail boy.

Isak is so lost in the music, in the drumming, in the beat, his face twisting, his eyes shut like he was elsewhere right now, his arms moving fast but never messing up the rhythm or the tempo, and Even is blushing. He knows he is. He can feel it. The sight sets him on fire and Even is suddenly reminded of how it felt to hold this boy in his arms, to carry him, how right they felt, how they clicked, skin to skin, heart to heart.

Even’s skin is crawling, his blood buzzing. He suspects that his eyes are wide, that he looks as wrecked as Isak right now, Isak who still hasn’t noticed them.

Open your eyes, Even thinks.

He nearly falls over when Isak does. The following seconds are a blur. Even doesn’t remember how he regained his breath, but when he does, Isak is staring into his soul, panting.

He watches as surprise and shock transition into something else. Anger, shame.

“Lea, what the fuck!” Isak groans then puts his drumsticks down and removes his headset, his eyes barely leaving Even.

“What? Didn’t you say to escort him all the way down to you in case he shows up?” Lea replies with both arms crossed, clearly unimpressed.

“That’s the exact opposite of what I asked.”

“I’ll tell dad you cursed.”

“You literally had one job!” Isak shouts again in a way that seems too out of character for him, nothing like the ice cold Isak who barely budges when provoked.

“Do you need some room or?” Lea sneers.

“Leave!”

Isak quickly hops off his stool to grab a black sweater and put it on despite his t-shirt underneath being soaked in sweat.

“What are you doing here?” Isak asks, his tone a little bit more composed, calmer, not nearly as annoyed as Even expected him to sound.

“I heard you were expecting me,” says Even, hoping he doesn’t seem or sound too shaken.

“Fucking Lea,” Isak mutters under his breath.

“Did Eili say I was coming?” Even asks because he feels a bit ridiculous and silly. He can’t believe he actually thought Isak was going to be pleasantly surprised to see him.
“Huh?” Isak blinks. “Why would Eili tell me you’re coming?”

“She gave me your address.”

“You got my address from Eili?” Isak smiles, making Even feel even smaller.

“Uh, yeah. Who did you think gave me your address?”

“Your friend Mutasim perhaps?” Isak replies, reaching for a towel to dry himself, then moving to a couch nearby and gesturing for Even to join him.

They sit several feet away from each other, but Even can still feel the warmth he’s exuding.

“Mutta?” Even grimaces. “How would Mutta know where you live?”

“Because I gave him my address?”

“What?!”

Isak snorts. And if Even wasn’t too busy feeling confused, he would have appreciated the sight.

“Yeah, I went to see him a few days ago. Gave him my address in case his parents wanted mine to pay for his medical expenses,” Isak shrugs.

“This is Norway. We don’t pay for medical expenses like that.”

“I know,” Isak raises his eyebrows. “I just needed to give him my address.”

“Why?” Even frowns before it dawns on him. “Because you thought he’d give it to me.”

“You’re so smart, Eivind.”

“Why did you want me to come here?” says Even, ignoring the ‘Eivind’ comment.

“I wanted to know if you were okay and to say that it’s not your fault I’m leaving Bakka.”

“What?!” Even scoffs. “Are you for real?”

“Yeah, why?”

“You could have literally messaged me that or asked me.”

“Let’s say I wanted to check on your physically, I guess,” says Isak, his green eyes detached, cool, disinterested.

“You could have messaged me to meet you somewhere.”

“That wouldn’t have served my purpose.”

Even stops to catch his breath, realizes he’s out of it in the first place. It hasn’t even been a full minute and he’s already reeling from talking to Isak. He blames himself for fostering this image of poor broken Isak crying in his room after being kicked out of school, of this version of Isak who was waiting for him to come to the rescue. *You’re so stupid.*

“Which purpose?” Even asks, not nearly smart enough to figure him and his plan out this time around. “And why would you tell your sister to send me away if you wanted to see me.”
“Maybe I wanted her to see you.”

“What?”

Even thinks until it starts making sense. Isak wanted Lea to know that Even, himself, the guy who carried Isak at school, was okay physically. Not only that, but also that the same guy took it upon himself to come check on Isak, not the other way around.

“Why? Why do you need your sister to know I’m fine?”

“Maybe it’s not her who needs to know,” says Isak.

“What?” Even pauses. He needs to stop saying that word and think. Oh. “Your parents?”

“Bingo,” Isak says, holding his hands up to make finger guns. Even is not amused.

“Why? I don’t get it.”

“Let’s say they’re not too happy with me fainting at school and causing a lot of trouble, and that they don’t believe me when I say it was an accident,” Isak shrugs. “They’re also convinced something horrible happened to you and that your parents will sue us and the school.”

Even processes his words. Isak always says that he focuses on peculiar things, but he can’t help it.

“How did you know that I was okay? What if I showed up to your house with third degree burns?” says Even.

“I can’t inflict third degree burns. You’re giving me way too much credit.”

“Still,” Even insists, not really sure what he’s asking. “What if it was bad?”

Isak stares at him for a few seconds like he’s wondering if he should say his next words or keep them to himself.

“I knew you were okay,” says Isak.

“How?” For a moment, Even wonders if Isak knows he didn’t hurt him, if he knows his theory was right all along. But then he remembers that he spoke with Mutta. “You asked Mutta?”

“No, I asked Eili later that day,” says Isak. “She said you were in a lot of pain and that you must have been wearing an extra protective layer, which would explain why the burn wasn’t as bad as for Mutasim who was wearing a tank top,” Isak says like he’s revealing his deepest secret. “I asked around after that and stuff. Again, I’m very sorry it had to be you. And if you want my parents to cover some costs, I’m sure they’ll say yes.”

“You were checking on me?” Even says dumbly.

“I checked on Mutasim as well. I don’t need more things on my conscience.”

“Where? When did you speak with Mutta?”

“Night it happened like I did with you. And then I went to see him,” says Isak.

“You went to see him, but not me.”

“He didn’t carry me. He barely touched me.”
“Exactly! Why check on him in the first place?” Even doesn’t understand anything.

“I needed to convince him to go to the hospital.”

“What? Why?” *That trip to the hospital is the reason you’re getting kicked out.*

“I needed one of you to end up at the hospital, but it couldn’t be the person who actually carried me. That’s too big. My parents would get sued and my sister would actually kill me.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Even snaps. His brain hurts. Isak makes no sense.

“God! Do you need a drawing?! I needed to stage an incident that would show I’m dangerous and that I needed to be transferred out for the sake of the rest of the students. And by incident, I mean me touching someone and hurting them, but with them initiating the contact in front of several witnesses so that my parents don’t get ruined. It needed to look genuine but it couldn’t be too big. I had it all figured out: Arvid was going to try to help out of guilt. I was going to touch him when he got too close, just a light touch, and his dad was going to flip a shit and get me expelled. I even misplaced the stretcher for my plan. But then you ruined everything by jumping in and literally *carrying me* and making Mutasim help you. It totally threw me off guard. It eventually worked out after I convinced Mutasim to go to the hospital where Arvid’s dad works, and it set the plan in motion after all. But it still caused a commotion because I didn’t expect anyone to actually *carry* me.”

Even sits for the few moments that follow, simply watching him and letting it all sink in. He cannot believe him. He doesn’t know what to say or do. He can’t wrap his head around any of it. Isak is terrifying and Even has no idea how to respond to these revelations.

“You must think I’m crazy,” says Isak. *Crazy.* There it is, the magic word.

“Why did you want to get expelled?” Even asks instead, focusing on small bits, always.

“Because my dad won’t give up on this idea of normalcy he has for me. He won’t give up on trying to convince his friends that I’m fine. He won’t just let me be a freak in my damn basement instead of having to go through all of that shit and bear people looking at me like I’m a fucking alien. He won’t leave me alone. So I have no choice but to get myself kicked out of every place he puts me in.”

“You got expelled from Nissen?” Even asks. He’s not even looking at Isak anymore. He’s too disappointed, too crushed.

“Yes,” Isak replies and his jaw clenches.

“Did you burn someone there?” It clenches again, harder this time.

“Yes.”

“Why did you think I’d show up to your house?” says Even.

“Because I made sure to be unreachable.”

“Why were you so convinced I would try to reach you in the first place?”

“Because you’re a good guy, Even. And good guys cannot bear guilt,” says Isak. His words are patronizing and once again, Even feels like he’s been put in a box. He’s been played at the expense of his feelings, his guilt, his main motivator.

“Guilt,” Even repeats. It’s his cue for Isak to start his philosophy gibberish, and Even realizes that
despite being total opposites, they both rehearse their sad speeches. Isak has probably been rehearsing this one for days, waiting for Even to show up at his door.

“Did you know that guilt is not really regarded as an emotion in existential philosophy? That it’s analyzed through the structure of existence itself?” Isak muses. His eyes meet Even’s, and for a moment he looks unsure, as if Even is throwing him a curve-ball, as if his reaction doesn’t match what Isak was expecting. He averts his gaze, then continues. “Nietzsche said that guilt is the way bad conscience manifests or materializes. And he said that bad conscience develops due to internalization, which is how strong instincts that are muffled by society’s rules, eventually curb inwards, towards the self, thus creating: Guilt. Also known as the legitimation of self-punishment.”

“Okay,” says Even, because he’s tired and he doesn’t wish to hear more of this. Self-punishment. Fuck you.

“You don’t care,” Isak observes, his brows furrowing. Even might have been lured into his home, but Isak was wrong in assuming he would show up out of guilt. It feels like a small victory.

“I didn’t do anything to feel guilty about,” says Even.

“Then why are you here?”

“To tell you something I thought was important.” You didn’t hurt me.

“What thing?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Even shows himself out and doesn’t stop to wonder if Isak is actually confined to this basement by choice. He doesn’t wonder about him, because he’s disappointed. He had made up this whole film about the two of them in his head these past few days. And it turns out that he’s been played, yet again, by Isak Valtersen, the mystery. Even feels defeated when he reaches the main floor and barely reacts when he bumps into a man. Isak’s father.

“You’re not Jonas,” he says and Even doesn’t know who this Jonas person is, but he decides that he hates him.

“I’m afraid not, sir,” he replies politely despite feeling exhausted.

“A friend of Lea’s?”

“No,” Even replies, feeling very weirded out that Isak’s father assumed he was friends with a twelve year old.

“Are you here for Marianne’s treatment?”

What treatment.

“No. I’m Isak’s—Isak’s friend,” says Even, very reluctantly.

“He has friends now?” Isak’s father muses, and Even doesn’t like it one bit.

“Hey Pappa. Did you meet Isak’s new friend?” Lea pops out of nowhere from behind her father and asks in that same monotone voice.
“I just did.”

“He’s the guy who helped get Isak to the nurse at school,” she says while shooting Even a private look, as if she’s asking him to play along.

“Really?!” Terje exclaims.

“Uhm, yes. It’s true,” says Even.

“And you’re okay?”

“Looks like I am,” Even offers him his best smile.

“Oh well that’s good to know. Glad the cursed boy somehow spared you,” he sighs in relief.

“I’m fine,” Even repeats, not quite sure why he insists when this is probably only helping Isak’s plan of leaving school. He’s suddenly overcome with anger. “There’s no reason for Isak to leave the school. It was all my fault. The instructor clearly asked us to stay away from him and I still went for it.”

Isak’s father is shorter than Even, but he feels bigger, larger, and his eyes are hard where they land on Even’s.

“What are you saying, son?”

“I’m saying that if anyone has to be kicked out, it’s me. I ignored everyone’s instructions and put your son in danger by touching him. I even incited another student to do the same. Isak is not dangerous. He’s a very smart kid and it would be a shame if he stopped going to school.”

Lea walks him to the door. And once he’s outside, she catches up to him.

“Was that your version of revenge? You’re trying to sabotage his plan?” she asks.

“All I did was tell the truth.”

“He’s going to lose it if they force him back to school,” she says, her voice dull and quiet.

“That’s his problem,” Even shrugs.

“Are you still going to be his friend?”

Even looks into her green eyes for a moment. And despite the lack of emotions there, he can see how much she cares about her brother.

“I don’t think so,” says Even.

“Why not?” she says, looking and sounding disappointed.

“I—”

“I know he’s horrible, but what more can he do? He’s really trying so hard! What more can he do?!”

Even realizes that Isak isn’t the only smart one in their family, that twelve year old Lea is probably smarter than Isak thinks she is, that she probably knew what Isak was doing asking her to keep Even
away.

“Maybe not pretend to faint in the middle of gym class and manipulate everyone and make some of us worried sick? Maybe he can do that,” says Even.

“He didn’t pretend!” she bites back. “He can’t act. He didn’t pretend to feel like crap.”

“What are you saying?” Even squints his eyes.

“He stopped taking his medication and his painkillers to feel like that. He staged the incident but the pain was real. He fainted because he was in too much pain. He’s always in pain.”

Even looks into her eyes again. They’re green and shining with tears now. He wonders if Isak looks like an angel too when he cries.

_His always in pain. ‘Like I can finally stop hurting’._

Even recalls the day Isak sat behind him in the cafeteria, the day he looked awful and stormed out when Even tried to speak to him. He wonders if Isak sat next to him to dull the pain he was feeling. He wonders how long Isak had been off his medication for before the gym incident.

Isak might be awful, but Even admires his resilience at least.

_His always in pain._

“He said you make him feel good,” says Lea and it makes Even blush. It makes his heart jump. It makes his thoughts race.

_I make him feel good. I make him feel good. I make him feel good._

“He told you that?” Even asks, feeling flustered.

“No, of course not. But I saw it on his posts.”

“His posts? Like on social media?” Even thought Isak deleted his Instagram.

“I stalk him online because he’s my baby brother, yes. He doesn’t know that though. Don’t tell him.”

“He’s five years older than you,” says Even. Isak is right. He does focus on peculiar things.

“Four years and a half.”

“He writes about me?” Even asks when the thought settles in his mind.

“Yeah, I mean not exactly about you. But yeah, he mentioned you. Not by name obviously. But I figured it was you.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“Descriptions were quite detailed. Blue eyes, deep voice, naive smile, stupid lips—”

Even can’t believe he’s having this conversation with Isak’s sister right now. _Naive smile? Stupid lips?_

“Anyway, I know he can be awful, but he’s doing his best. And it would be cool if you could convince him to fight for his spot at Bakka.”
“What? Have you been paying attention? He started this whole mess cause he wanted to be kicked out.”

“He wanted it to be on his own terms,” says Lea. “He wanted to leave before something really bad happened again. He thinks he’s doomed to always hurt people around him. He thinks he’s bad for everybody.”

Even pauses to think, and then it clicks. “What happened before Bakka? Something bad happened, right?”

Lea nods. “You’re smart.”

“Was it Nissen? What happened at Nissen?”

“Jonas happened.”

Even goes swimming on Sunday morning at the pool by his house to clear his mind and will away the clouds shrouding his heart. He couldn’t really sleep last night, his thoughts in a jumble, his emotions contrary and pulling in opposite directions.

On one hand, there’s this boy who’s cunning and deceiving and manipulating and who treats everyone like they’re chess pieces. A boy who knows his weaknesses and keeps using them to get what he wants. A boy who couldn’t care less about him and how he feels.

On the other, there’s the boy who held onto him like he could finally breathe, like he had never known air until they embraced. The boy who’s constantly in pain and who stopped taking his medication to set a plan in motion. The boy who sat behind him that day in the cafeteria probably to seek comfort, to soothe his pain, to breathe again.

Even’s heart is caught in a torrent. He cares too much and he cannot bear it.

He’s about to dive back into the water when his chest catches fire. It’s warm and comforting and quiet, and Even feels him before he sees him. Isak.

He’s wearing a dark blue swim cap and a long white robe is hugging his frame as he makes his way inside the pool. He halts by the door—he felt me—and Even considers leaving the water and the building altogether. He really does.

They stare at each other. Even in the water and Isak by the door leading to the pool, neither of them saying a word. Even can hear his own heartbeats and he convinces himself that he can hear Isak’s as well.

What it is going to be? Fight or flight?

The door reopens and Isak disappears into it.

Flight.

Even tries not to take it personally. He dives into the water and does two angry freestyle laps. He holds his breath for as long as he can, not inhaling every three strokes the way he usually does. For some reason, Isak’s words about self-punishment are playing in his head again. This fucking kid.

He stops his angry swimming session, through his heart is still on fire. And when he finally looks up
around the pool, he sees Isak floating on the opposite end in a surfing suit covering him from neck to ankles.

Uh.

Isak went back inside to get changed. But he’s here. Why? Even wants to ask when Isak joined this swimming pool, then comes to the horrifying conclusion that Isak probably knows where he lives and goes swimming and that he’s here for a reason.

He wants something from Even.

Even resigns to the idea by the time Isak swims closer until he reaches him. His cheeks are flushed, as always, and his eyes are green and glassy.

“What do you want?” says Even and it comes out harsher than intended.

“Good morning to you, too.”

“How did you find out I swim here?”

“I went to see you just now,” says Isak. “Your mother said I could find you here. And before you lose it, your friend Mutasim gave me your address.”

“You saw my mother?!” Even groans.

“Very beautiful woman. Gorgeous eyes. She offered me tea,” says Isak and it throws Even off guard because he has his mother’s eyes.

“Did you touch—” Even catches himself, bites his tongue. That’s not nice, but Isak has caught anyway.

“I’m not a psycho. Of course I didn’t touch your mom,” says Isak. “I told her my name and she seemed to know all about me already.”

“Don’t you dare bring my mother into your twisted plans,” Even warns, his blood buzzing.

“I—I won’t. I wasn’t. I just—”

“You just what?”

“I wanted to see you and apologize about yesterday,” says Isak and his eyes are suddenly big and round and sincere looking. Don’t trust him.

“No, you want something,” Even replies dryly. “You want to know what I came to tell you, don’t you?”

“No. I don’t,” Isak challenges him. “I don’t want anything from you. I just wanted to apologize about using you and manipulating you and your friends. I forgot to say that yesterday.”

“You’re not the kind of guy to feel guilty and go to someone’s house to apologize.”

Isak doesn’t reply and it takes Even a moment to realize that he’s just implied that Isak isn’t ‘a good guy’. He wants to add something but Isak gives him a smile then swims away.

Even considers leaving the pool. He has already spent over an hour here and lunch should be ready soon. But for some reason, the warmth in his chest feels too good to voluntarily walk away from it.
Isak drives him mad, but the warmth his physical presence brings is undeniably soothing and it spreads all the way to his toes.

Even wonders if Isak feels as good as he does right now. He glances toward him, three lanes away, and watches him float on his back with his eyes closed. He looks at peace. He looks—

*Beautiful.*

Even realizes that Isak looks beautiful when he’s not speaking.

He does a few more laps, then curses himself when he crosses to the second lane, one closer to Isak’s. He does two more laps, butterfly this time around, the toughest, then stops in the middle of the pool to rest and catch his breath. He’s out of breath while Isak remains motionless in the last lane, floating on his back in a star shaped position with his eyes closed.

There’s something almost poetic about how they’re the only two people in the pool on a pale Sunday morning, floating in the water while fire connects both of their hearts, pulling, pulling, pulling.

Even’s chest aches for him, and it’s killing him how he wants to both drown him and drown in him.

*Do you feel this? Are you feeling this shit?*

Even crosses to the following lane at same time as Isak. And he’s just as disheveled, just as distraught, his chest heaving just like Even’s. Him keeping his cool and floating on his back was probably just an act.

“This is killing me!” Even blurts out because he cannot take it anymore, the contrary feelings, the need to just hold him.

“I couldn’t sleep last night,” Isak pants and Even wishes he could capture this right now. “I couldn’t do anything this morning. I just had to come near you again. Does it make sense?”

“Are you fucking with me?”

“No! I’m not. I hate this, too. You keep fucking up everything."

“What did I do this time?” Even groans. “Showed up to your house? That’s literally what you wanted. That was part of your plan!”

“Yes, but I didn’t expect it to be—you just ruined everything!”

*Oh.* Perhaps, Isak is referring to what he said to his dad. Perhaps he’s forced into going back to school.

“The plan was for you to show up, for Lea to let you in even if I told her not to, for me to give you the shitty Nietzsche speech about guilt, and for you to hate me forever and never bother me again. That was the plan,” says Isak, his breathing heavy. “I wasn’t supposed to want—”

“To want to be near me,” Even finishes his sentence for him when he finally understands.

Isak is here because he craved his presence just like Even craves his when he can no longer feel him. Isak is here to simply be near him and he hates it.

“You want to be near me. And you can’t stand it.”

“I—I have to go,” Isak stammers and Even watches his face flush even deeper all the way to the tip
It's overwhelming, the longing Isak is projecting right now. It's almost suffocating. He can feel two opposite and conflicting currents tearing Isak apart right now. He can feel his turmoil, can see it in his eyes, can hear it in how his breath hitches.

Isak longs for him.

*You long for my touch.*

Even wants to grab him, to wrap his hand around his wrist and pull him in until their chests are flushed together again. He wants to watch Isak surrender and squirm, only this time with his eyes open and not on the brink of fainting. He wants to feel Isak curl and wrap himself around him again. He wants to feel him go pliant in his arms and part his lips and beg him to hold on.

Even wants to embrace him, hold him, give him the touch he so deeply craves. It's madness but Even wants to give Isak everything he wishes for.

He lets him go instead. He watches him hop on the ledge and run back to the lockers. He doesn't even follow him. He lets him go.

"Your friend Isak stopped by earlier," says Even's mother when he gets back home.

"I know," says Even.

"He's so cute! You didn't mention that he was that cute."

"Mom!"

"What?" she laughs. "And he was so polite and considerate. You should invite him over for dinner sometime."

"I haven't even invited the boys over yet."

"Well, you could invite all of your friends. How about that?" she suggests. "Is Isak going to join you guys for the Halloween party?"

"What Halloween party?"

"I saw you got an invite on Facebook," she grins.

"Mom!"

Isak goes back to school the following week and Even is back to feeling lost. Not only because of that, but Isak is also now seemingly friends with Arvid and his crew. It hurts his brain to even think about it. Only Isak could pull this off.

"I think he brainwashed them," says Adam. "I think he has legit superpowers, like the X-men or something."

"Shut up," Mutta rolls his eyes and throws a fry at him.
“How do you explain him not only claiming his spot back at school but also becoming friends with the very guy who was trying to get rid of him?!”

“He has his ways,” Mutta shrugs, flipping a page of the book he’s currently reading, something about the art of tidying up.

Even realizes that he hasn’t spoken to Mutta about the ‘Isak manipulating him’ incident. He doesn’t even know where to begin or if it’s worth it.

“Do you think he’s blackmailing Arvid?” says Adam. “Like maybe Isak said he would burn him if he tried something funny?”

“Do you ever shut up, bro?” Yousef groans, phone in hand as he actively texts someone.

“I’m trying to solve a mystery here. How is no one freaked out by this? Isak did something to Arvid. Why does nobody care?”

“Maybe he fell for him,” Mikael says in a quiet voice and that makes everyone look up from their books and phones.

“Uh, what?” Elias blinks.

“Maybe Arvid has feelings for Isak or something. Maybe that’s why he was so mean to him at first. To get his attention. Like we did in kindergarten to the girls,” Mikael shrugs.

They all stare at him in disbelief, Even included. Mikael has always held conservative views when it comes to homosexuality, never wishing to even get into it. He’s always gotten upset and angry when it got brought up, and it always broke Even’s heart, the idea that his best friend would never accept him. It was particularly hard after what happened, and Even had worked on accepting Mikael’s pity and being thankful that the anger was no longer there, at least.

Still, this is new, Mikael speaking of a guy having feelings for another guy like it’s nothing. And Even can’t do much but stare and hold his gaze when Mikael finally meets his.

Air. It’s an odd feeling. A few weeks ago, Even would have probably choked on air if Mikael had looked at him like this. But it’s nothing. It’s nothing compared to the fire Isak is setting to his heart from across the room.

He’s giggling. Not only is he sitting with Arvid and his friends for lunch but he’s giggling. Even cannot stand it. He cannot stand him and his games. He doesn’t understand why he came back to school after all that commotion, why he decided to befriend Arvid, why he’s flaunting that friendship, why he’s messing with Even’s head.

He doesn’t understand it, but he knows that Isak has a new plan and that he’s part of it. He knows it. Just stay away from him.

.

Even gets high with Adam at Sonja’s place, and he regrets it after the second joint. He regrets it because now they’re on their fifth and it’s Even himself rolling. He knows it’s not good for him, but once he takes a hit, he can’t stop, he can’t turn it off.

“Aren’t you swimming later tonight?” Sonja warns him with a gentle yet fake smile on her face. She’s always been so controlling. And now that they’re broken up, she’s been trying to add a smile
to her patronizing comments.

“I am.”

“Wanna drown yourself or something, speedo boy?” says Adam. And if Even wasn’t this high, he would have considered kicking him and finally exploding. *Stop joking about me being fucking crazy or fucking drowning myself you piece of shit!*

Even ignores him then lies back down on Sonja’s stomach.

.

Even makes it to the pool a little bit behind schedule. Isak is already there in his wetsuit and dark blue swim cap. He looks worried, like he’s been waiting for Even to show up.

It’s been happening for a little while now. Them meeting at the pool early in the morning or late at night to simply be next to one another. It’s a tacit deal. They don’t talk. They just swim. Both of them acknowledging the fact that these swimming sessions have become somewhat of a necessity.

It feels like their dirty little secret, like meeting up to help each other shoot heroine or for quick anonymous blowjobs. The latter thought makes Even swallow water and cough for a good minute.

“Are you okay?” Isak materializes in front of him, having traversed the several lanes separating them. *He’d burn my dick. Fuck.*

Even chokes again until it turns into nonsensical giggling.

“What are you laughing about?” Isak frowns. They haven’t spoken in weeks and Even is thinking about Isak burning his genitalia. *I deserve it.*

“Nothing. God! I’m an asshole! Forgive me,” Even blurts out, still laughing, still smiling, and when he turns to properly face Isak, he notices the blush on his cheeks. Even can now tell the difference, or at least he thinks he can.

“Forgive you for what?”

“Things,” Even shrugs.

“Are you high?”

“Maybe,” Even smiles. “Have you ever been high?”

“No.”

“Why not?”


“Wanna get high right now?”

.

They end up on their backs in a park near the pool, their hair wet and their blood buzzing. It’s cold outside and his mother is probably wondering where he is, but he couldn’t care less right now.
“You’re only wearing a shirt,” Isak observes quietly while Even rolls them a joint. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Isak, you know damn well that I’m not cold right now,” says Even. And he doesn’t mean much by it but he watches Isak’s eyes widen and the color on his cheeks deepen.

*Cute. So fucking cute.*

“Can you light it?” Even asks, mind blown by his own sudden realization.

“What do you mean?”

“The joint. Can you *light* it?”

Isak squints his eyes, contemplating his answer, probably.

“Of course,” he replies and Even drops everything he’s doing to watch Isak light a joint with his fingers.

“Holy shit! Do you press your fingertips to the head of the joint or?”

“No,” says Isak. “It’s even better. Watch this.”

He watches with anticipation as Isak fetches something from Even’s bag.

“I use this,” Isak whispers, holding up a lighter, Even’s green lighter, then bursting into laughter.

“Oh my god!” Even groans, feeling extremely stupid and silly.

“What the fuck did you think? That I’m a dragon or something? You think I can set things on fire with my hands?” Isak says, but he’s still laughing. His voice sweet, so sweet, to Even’s ears. The fire in his chest grows bigger and it’s warm, so warm.

*Fuck.*

“I don’t know,” Even laments. “I’m so high already. Don’t hold this against me!”

“There’s no way I’m letting this go,” Isak laughs again and Even is so busy watching his beautiful face shine with joy to be mad.

Isak does end up letting it go because his first attempt at taking a drag is a disaster. He coughs and coughs and coughs until Even considers calling him an ambulance, his hands feeling extremely inadequate when he realizes that he can’t even pat Isak on the back.

“This is all my fucking fault, oh my god!”

But Isak eventually gets the hang of it after Even talks him through it. He has been there for all of the boys’ first times smoking weed after all. He’s somewhat of an expert now. And Isak isn’t that bad at it. If anything, the only difference is that he’s wearing gloves to keep from hurting Even as they pass the joint back and forth.

Even wants to ask him to remove it, then remembers that he hasn’t even told Isak about how his touch didn’t burn him.

“Why did I agree to this?” Isak mumbles next to him. His limbs are sprawled around himself in a star shape. And Even had to move and lie on his back opposite Isak’s head so that he could still hear him.
It’s almost poetic, the way they’re lying horizontally and facing opposite directions but with their heads almost touching.

“Agree to what? To me graciously giving you your first joint?” Even snorts.

“Do you know how fucked my thoughts are right now? This stuff is for people who aren’t used to thinking and questioning things, I am sure.”

“Questioning what?”

“Everything! Shit, Even. Just look at the stars! Isn’t it fucked up? Like how big the universe is?”

“You don’t sound half as pretentious when you’re high,” Even jokes. “Where are your big words, Valtersen?”

“No, but look at the sky, or like us right now. Isn’t it weird that yesterday we were going to murder each other and right now I’m having my first joint with you?”

“It’s not as weird as you being friends with Arvid or coming back to school when you created a whole movie about being kicked out.”

There is a pause. Even regrets his words instantly. He ruined it, whatever light breezy talk they were having for once. It almost felt real this time.

“You know damn well that I’m not friends with Arvid,” Isak replies and his voice is several octaves lower.

“What about me? Are you friends with me?” Even blurts out because he’s feeling brave.

He wishes he could see Isak’s face right now. Isak who is bundled up when he is in a white long-sleeved shirt with his hair still dripping into the grass.

“I don’t think I’m made for friendship,” Isak answers and it’s both mean and heartbreaking. "Aristotle said that there are three types of friendship. That of pleasure, utility, and virtue. I don't think I fit any of the types."

Even doesn’t know what to say, so he starts rolling another joint.

They’re both properly high, and Isak is talking about freaking Immanuel Kant and how much he hates him like he’s actually known him in real life. Even is both amused and endeared. He doesn’t know if anyone else goes on similar rants about men who died four hundred years ago simply because of what they considered moral or immoral. It’s cute. Isak is cute when he’s high.

“So you’re more of a Nietzsche kind of dude?” Even asks him when they’re on their fourth joint. His hair doesn’t feel as damp anymore.

“No. No. No,” says Isak. “I mean I love existential philosophy but Nietzsche can be full of shit too sometimes.”

"So who do you like? Sartre?"

"Too recent and contemporary for me,” Isak snorts. "I'm a Heraclitus kind of guy."
"Heraklit in Norwegian."

Isak winks at him and it's absolutely awful and precious all at once.

"So you like really old dudes then," Even teases. "I don't know why I thought you were into Nietzsche. I guess I always think smart people are into Nietzsche. Probably cause I don't know many other philosophers."

"Well in your defense, he's pretty solid," says Isak. "It's just his Eternal Recurrence talk that annoys me to no end."

“What’s that?”

“It’s the theory that the universe and all of our existence has been recurring, and will continue to recur and happen, in the exact same form, for an infinite number of times for all eternity,” says Isak.

“What does that mean?”

“That there are infinite Isaks and Evens lying around in a park at 23:20 smoking weed and talking about Nietzsche exactly like we are right now.”

“Is it really that awful spending time with me?” Even asks before he can stop himself. He realizes that the idea of infinite versions of himself always ending up with Isak like this doesn’t bother him that much.

“It’s not about you,” Isak replies. "It's not the infinity that bothers me. I'm all about the infinity. I don't mind chilling with infinite versions of you."

“What is it about, then?”

“The idea that in every universe, it always happens exactly like this. That in every variation of the universe, I’m always like this. That's too cruel for me to handle.”

Even sits up. He doesn’t know why, but his body moves of its own accord. He sits up and watches Isak’s face as he speaks.

“What do you mean ‘like this’?”


“A curse can always be a blessing. It depends on how you look at things,” says Even.

“And how exactly can I look at things?”

“Well, you could see it as having super powers or something? I mean you can literally burn people. That’s super cool. How many people can say they can do that? You’re like an X-men. I’ve always wanted to be an X-men.”

“You’re so ridiculous,” says Isak, but at least he’s smiling.

“You’re like Rogue. She also thought it was a curse until she learned how to control it,” Even continues. “Maybe you’ll learn too. Just like you learned the drums. It can be cool! If you look at it that way, then being stuck in the same life for eternity isn’t so bad, no?”

“Really?” Isak rolls his eyes. “Do you expect me to be okay with me being a ticking bomb over and
over again in every variation of the universe for all eternity? Isn’t there something you wish could be
different about you in another life? Are you willing to experience everything the same way and make
the exact same mistakes every time the universe resets itself? Isn’t that depressing?”

Even is too high for this, but he knows that the words will stick with him later when he can see clear.
He lies back down and feels sleep pull at him.

“My dad is probably furious with me right now,” Isak mumbles.

“Did you leave him waiting for you by the pool or something?”

“Yeah,” Isak snorts and Even joins him.

They both laugh hysterically until Even falls asleep.

When he comes to, Isak is lying on his side next to him, looking at him, studying his face. He’s in a
sweater, his jacket discarded. Even would jolt from the proximity, from seeing him and feeling him
this close, but he’s too tired. His limbs feel heavy.

“I’m so fucking high,” Isak tells him like it’s a secret.

“That’s nice.”

“I feel like I’ve been saying stupid things all night.”

“You haven’t. You still sound very smart. Smartest high guy in the world. I promise,” Even insists
then yawns again.

“Don’t make fun of me!” Isak pouts and it’s adorable.

“I’m not!” Even smiles.

“You’re nice when you don’t hate me,” says Isak, his obscene eyelashes casting beautiful shadows
on his cheeks. The words make no sense, but somehow they still do.

“You’re beautiful when you don’t talk.”

Even sees how Isak’s breath hitches, how his eyes widen, how his lips part. He’s sleepy and
exhausted but he sees it all. The longing, the need, the want. He doesn’t know how to interpret it, but
he sees how his dumb words managed to take Isak’s breath away. He feels it.

“I should get back,” Isak says, looking down, but not really budging.

“Want me to talk to your dad?” Even asks, and it’s quiet but his voice sounds ridiculously deep. He
watches Isak almost squirm. “I can tell him you were with me?”

“I’ll be okay.”

Isak doesn’t acknowledge him the following day at school, and it shouldn’t hurt or annoy him but it
does. He understands the purpose of duplicity. He understands that everything is harder on Isak, but
he does not appreciate being taken for granted. He does not wish to be a secret. And he even starts
doubting how real their time in the pool is. Perhaps, Isak simply needs that physical proximity and
keeps him entertained with philosophy talk and bats his eyelashes at him from time to time, who
knows.

But trying to figure him out is exhausting. Even is exhausted.

“Bro, what are you wearing for the Halloween party?” Elias asks with one arm around his shoulders. Even wonders if the boys can tell that he’s miserable, that Isak giggling with Arvid and his friends drives him up the wall.

“I don’t know,” Even replies. “I haven’t thought about the Halloween party yet.”

“ Heard Isak is coming,” says Mutta.

“What?” Even blurs out.

“I was in German with him earlier. He said he was coming.”

Even stares at himself through the mirror. He looks ridiculous and his mother winced when she first realized what he’s dressing up as.

“It was a last minute thing,” he reassures her although it’s a lie. “I called up Lars cause I knew he had one.”

“Why are you explaining yourself to me?” she smiles and snaps yet another picture. “You can do whatever you want, Even. And you look very good in this.”

“Which part of ‘dress up as something scary’ did you miss on the invite?” says Arvid when he greets him at the door.

Even lets out a breath because at least Arvid didn’t say something along the lines of ‘you could have just dressed as yourself’.

“It is scary,” Even argues. “Being in the costume feels scary because of what it entails.”

“I don’t actually care, Bech Næsheim. I’m just giving you shit. Half the girls showed up with cat whiskers again. You’re all good,” says Arvid, smiling. What the hell. Since when did Arvid smile at him?

Perhaps Adam was right. Perhaps Isak really did mind-control him into becoming a better person.

“What is he supposed to be?” Elias asks and Even doesn’t really care until he sees him.

Isak.

He’s in a corner by the window, dressed in black from head to toe, and someone who looks like Elias’ sister, Sana, is standing beside him, looking almost like she’s shielding him and keeping everyone at an arm’s length.

“Wait, dude, is your sister at this party?!” Yousef suddenly yelps. He’s dressed as a pirate and he looks on the verge of a panic attack.

“Uh, you mean Sana? Yeah, I told you she was coming,” says Elias.
“No, you didn’t!” Yousef frowns.

“Yeah bro, I told you!”

“No, you told me,” says Mutta.

“Why do you never share information?!” Yousef groans, and yes, why don’t you, Mutta?!

“Wait. Is she talking to Isak?!” Adam finally notices.

“Yeah they know each other from Nissen,” Elias shrugs.

“Why didn’t you say that earlier?!” It’s Even’s time to jump.

“Geez! Why are you all on my back about Sana! She does what she wants! Piss off! Where’s the beer?!”

Elias leaves, followed by Yousef and Adam. Mutta plays with Mikael’s fangs while Even struggles to look anywhere but at Isak.

“What is he supposed to be?” Mikael repeats Elias’ question. It’s a legitimate question. Except for the black clothing and the lack of layers, Even can’t really tell what Isak is dressed up as.

That is until Sana moves to the side and he can see him clearly now.

Oh.

Even smiles to himself. Isak hasn’t lifted a brow since Even came inside, but he knows he can feel him. He can see how a smile is curling at the corner of his lips. He knows Even is watching him and that he understands his costume.

And when Isak finally looks up and realizes what he is dressed up as, Even feels giddy.

“What are you smiling about?” says Mutta.

“Rogue,” says Even, pointing to the silver strands of hair on top of Isak’s head. “Isak is dressed as Rogue from X-men.”

Isak is Rogue. Even is a firefighter.

They don’t really talk at the party. Isak spares him glances from time to time, and Even is always already staring at him when he does. It’s electrifying, their connection. How Even can tell every single one of Isak’s movements from across the apartment, how the alcohol isn’t doing anything to dull it, how Even feels him everywhere in his bones.

Some song is playing through the speakers and Even is doing his best to not attach any meaning to it, to not make it about himself, about him, about them.

(Bobi Andonov - Smoke)

You could be the dealer, I could be the stash
You could be the fire, I could be the ash
I could be your first babe and you could be my last
And we could make it last ’cause I can’t say no
But i'm scared of getting burned if I get too close
And now you got me where you want me cause i'm on the ropes

Baby, don't make me rush
'Cause I only wanna save you slow
And breathe you in like smoke

Even feels dizzy, his blood is buzzing, his heart is drumming, his body is moving. His body is no longer his own. And his eyes can no longer look at anything else.

Even is drunk and he wonders if Isak can tell. Isak who’s drinking juice with Sana near the balcony.

*I’m going to talk to him.*

Even takes several steps until he’s inside the room, then stops when he’s a few feet away from the small terrace to think about the words he’ll use. Going in without a script is never a good idea. So he tries to rehearse a bit. A group of drunk guys, however, decide to stumble into the room to take shots and Even can’t even focus on his own words.

“I can’t believe that guy showed up though,” says one of them.

“The freak?”

“Yeah dude. Why is Arvid suddenly all weird about him. It’s like this kid turned him into his bitch.”

“Maybe he did,” some faceless guy snorts.

“Don’t be dumb. He’d burn him. He can’t be touched.”

It’s sobering.

“Fuck, dude. Can you imagine? If I were him I would just kill myself. What’s the point of living if no one will ever want you? If you can’t be touched like imagine not having your dick sucked and—”

Even has never felt such a strong urge to hit someone in the face than he does right now.

“Fuck off!” the words leave his mouth, except not really. He isn’t the one who spoke them. It was Sana. “As if anyone would want to go anywhere near your dick right now!”

“Who are you?”

“Sana Bakkoush. Who the hell are you?!”

Even could kiss her head.

.

“Where is he?” Even asks Sana after he breaks up the fight Elias starts with the guys who went after her.

“He left,” she says.

Even doesn’t exactly have a plan. He tells Mutta that he’s leaving and blames his rash decision on the fact that he’s clearly intoxicated. Alcohol has always enhanced his emotions and feelings. So he blames it on the alcohol.
He’s not sure what he’s heading to Isak’s house for. Perhaps, he wants to see hurt on his face. Perhaps, he wants to check for himself if Isak is capable of expressing hurt and pain in the first place. But that’s probably inaccurate, because Even finds himself wishing for Isak to simply not care. He hopes those boys’ comments didn’t get to him, that when Even finds him, his green eyes will be cool and detached and unphased.

He finds him before he reaches his house, beneath a giant tree currently losing all of its leaves. Isak is a slow walker, apparently. He’s also surprised to hear Even calling his name, at least judging by his face right now.

“What are you doing here?” Isak asks, and Even realizes that Isak probably didn’t see him by the terrace, that he doesn’t know that Even heard those words. There’s no emotion on his face. And Even is both relieved and disappointed. Does he ever cry?

“You left before I got to say something about your costume,” he lies.

“My costume.”

“Rogue,” Even tries. “I’m not making shit up, right?”

“You’re not,” Isak gives him a smile, but it’s fake, like the smiles Even has mastered so far. “And you’re a firefighter.”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“You know damn well why, Isak.” Even wants to reply.

“My mom’s colleague Lars had a firefighter kit lying around from back in the day when he used to volunteer,” says Even. “I forgot about this party and it looked cool enough. So I borrowed it for the night.”

“It’s real firefighter gear,” Isak says, like he can’t believe it.

“Yeah.”

“That’s cool.” The words feel strange. Isak doesn’t seem like the type of person to say ‘that’s cool’. And Even can tell that he’s exhausted, that he’s putting on a show, that he just wants to be in his bed already.

“Did you have a good night?” Even asks.

“Yeah. It was fun.”

“That’s cool.”

Even watches him. He’s still feeling slightly drunk and he can’t be that perceptive right now. But he notices the way Isak’s head is hanging low, the way his voice sounds dull and discouraged, the way his arms are wrapped around himself like he’s closing down. It’s probably all in his head, but he can see and feel Isak’s walls going up. He can see it happening again.

Isak has spent the last few weeks trying to live like a normal teenager, smoking weed, going to parties, making friends with the mean guys at school. And it has backfired. Even can already picture what Monday will be like. Isak won’t cry, but he will set a plan in motion to obliterate those guys.
Not for what they said about him, but probably for what followed about Sana. He will strategically make sure Arvid is on his side, and he will ignore Even and his whole entire existence except for when it’s time to go to the pool.

Isak’s walls are going up and Even needs to make sure there’s room for a window, for him, maybe. Maybe. Please.

That feeling is back and it's singing in his blood, clinging to his bones. The need to protect this boy, to shield him, to give him the world. It's back and it's nearly suffocating.

*How to keep him from shutting down. How to keep him from shutting down. How to keep him from—*

“Well, I’m gonna go home now—”

Even moves before he can talk himself out of it.

One moment he is drowning in air, and the next he is submerged in fire, surrounded by it, floating in it, shining with it. His limbs feel lighter. His chest feels larger. His soul feels cleaner. His heart is whole. It is whole again.

Even is on fire. And it hurts. But it hurts so good.

“Even!” Isak shouts—helpless, like he cannot believe it—against his shoulder, and it burns there, too. It burns. It hurts. It hurts so good. “Are you insane?! What are you doing!”

“I am holding you.”

“Let go of me!” Isak demands but his words are empty, empty, empty.

Because the moment Even brings his hand to the back of Isak’s head to pull it into his neck, the moment his other arm links around Isak’s waist—finally covered by only two layers—and pulls him in so close that he nearly lifts him off the ground, the moment their stomachs press against one another and sets fire to their insides there, the moment Even holds him like he’s been dying to hold him, Isak melts into his embrace completely, wholeheartedly, and undeniably.

*This fire in my heart.*

When Even puts him down, Isak is broken. Isak is crying.

Chapter End Notes

dun dun dun
guyss. thank you so much for the response to the last chapter. made me so happy and made me want to wrack my brain for this next update. this is the most complicated Isak i’ve ever written and it’s such a challenge trying to keep from revealing everything all at once because we're in Even's pov.

he's so strong and so tough and he feels like it's him against the world. he plots things in his head and never asks anyone for help. there's a lot going on for him: he Jonas incident, his relationship with his sister and parents, his new 'friendship with Arvid', how he kind of played Mutta as well. The fact that he voluntarily went off his painkillers
isn't only because he wanted to stage the fainting incident. he is constantly sedated which means he's always numb. being around Even allows him to feel everything without hurting. it was exhilarating to him to feel so free for the first time in a while.

Even is all up in his head, always. he hasn't told Isak that his touch didn't burn him yet because he didn't trust him. and now he'll hesitate because he wants Isak to feel like someone would be willing to put themselves in danger even with the knowledge that they might get hurt just to be near him. Even doesn't live for himself and Isak touched upon his insecurities a bit earlier. how he internalizes everything. they're both guilty of this but Even is living this completely fake life just to make sure everyone around him is okay.

We dive into Heraklit next. And Isak and Even develop guidelines for their 'scientific experiments' involving touch.
	hank you thank you for still being around. sorry for sounding down last update and saying that i didn't feel like writing anymore because everyone was leaving. i'd still write even if it's for 10 of you, as long as it feels good. let's keep the magic alive for a little longer.

got any theories? hope you felt something, anything <3
"We need to do more of this."
"This. Yes, experiments."
"Yes, for science."

featuring Even LOSING it, a group retreat in the mountains, misunderstandings, burns, Isak's opinions, bed-sharing, experimental cuddling, Mikael, scheming, Heraclitus, and touching.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Don’t you dare say anything to me right now,” Even mutters as soon as Mutta joins him under the tree that’s been shielding him for over ten minutes now.

Mutta’s curly hair is sticking to his forehead and he looks cold in his costume that consists of nothing but blood-stained sleeveless scrubs and flimsy pants. Even would feel bad for making him leave the Halloween party and run to him in the middle of the night if it weren’t for the look on his face.

“Don’t even—”

“You touched him!” Mutta exclaims, his wide eyes now on Even’s right palm. “You—You said you were going home. You— What the fuck, Bech Næsheim!?"

“I didn’t call you out here to lecture me,” Even groans, still holding his right wrist in his left hand as if it was about to fall off his body.

“Why did you call me here then?!!”

“Do you know how to deal with this?” Even asks, holding out his hand and trying to stop wincing. “Do you still have antibiotics and bandages and ointments? I don’t want to go to the hospital or freak my mother out.”

“What even happened?” Mutta is frowning now. “Did you run into him or something? Are you drunk? I knew I should have followed you!”

“Mutta!” Even groans, trying to conceal his embarrassment by feigning annoyance.

“Ugh, fine! We can go to my place and look into it. But you’re answering all of my questions there.”
“Deal.”

“What did you do?” Mutta asks him later when he’s done bandaging his hand and cooling down his skin.

“How do you know I did something?” Even raises an eyebrow, too drained to even show emotions.

Mutta gives him a look and Even realizes how stupid he must sound. It’s obvious that he’s the one who did something. It’s his hand that’s bandaged after all.

“You followed him,” says Mutta, but there’s no judgement there.

“I did,” Even admits, his eyes looking down at his severed hand. He tries to convince himself that it doesn’t hurt too much.

“Then what happened?” Mutta asks.

“I touched him when I shouldn’t have.”

“And he burned you.”

“And he burned me.”

Even takes painkillers and tries to fall asleep once he’s home. But it’s all in vain.

His hand is throbbing with an acute but oddly comforting pain sensation. Mutta explained earlier that it was a first degree burn—after seemingly becoming a burn expert upon getting burned himself—so Even’s not too worried. It will pass, he tells himself. At least he gets to feel this, to feel something, anything.

The guilt, the anger, the devastation, however, keep him up.

*Isak’s face* keeps him up.

“Let go of me!” Isak’s voice was strained and weak, like it took all of him to utter those words. And Even somehow heard him ask for the opposite, somehow interpreted it as ‘keep holding me’.

Madness—Even doesn’t know how else to refer to it—took over him as he wrapped his arms around Isak’s back, around Isak’s entire body, and brought it to his own.

He felt it then, every muscle in Isak’s being relaxing and unwinding against his flesh, against his heartbeat, like a rubik’s cube magically solving itself. He felt it in the way Isak stopped fighting within moments, in the way his breath stuttered and hitched, in the way his arms went to his sides, in the way he surrendered entirely and nearly whimpered..

Even isn’t sure how long they stood there under the ridiculously big tree whose shadow felt like a hug in and of itself. Even isn’t sure how long he held Isak for, isn’t sure how long the fire burned in his chest. Even isn’t sure.

But when they eventually parted, Isak was shaking. Isak was crying.
What have I done?!

Even panicked up until he looked into Isak’s eyes. His face was filled with tears, but there were no emotions in his eyes. They were still glassy, still green, still empty. And if it weren’t for Isak’s short breaths and actual shaking, Even would have assumed that he didn’t feel anything, that the tears were caused by a physiological malfunction rather than an emotional release. Catharsis.

But Isak felt something. Even knew that he did. Isak looked shocked, unaware of the tears streaming down his own cheeks, like someone who had long given up on the concept of crying, like someone who had cried for so long that the idea itself became absurd.

Even felt his own heart crack.

“Isak—” he tried.

Isak took a step back, recoiling. “No!” he hissed, bringing his own hand to his face to touch his tears, like he couldn’t believe he was crying.

“Isak—”

“Don’t fucking come near me!” he shouted this time.

Even could tell that Isak was trying to make sense of the situation, of his tears and of how Even wasn’t hurt or burnt. He was probably attributing it to the firefighter gear. He was probably shocked by his own reaction to the embrace, by how he had completely surrendered in Even’s arms.

“Oh my god!” Isak yelped, mostly to himself, making something catch in Even’s chest.

“Isak, I’m sorry—”

The rest was a bit of a blur. Even reached for Isak with his right hand to cup his left cheek, not giving it too much thought. He wasn’t wearing gloves but he didn’t think he would need them. Isak wouldn’t hurt him. Isak couldn’t hurt him. They had already established that, or at least Even had. He had yet to share his findings with Isak. And he would, right after this. Right after caressing his face. Even wondered if anyone had ever caressed Isak’s face. Even wondered—

Isak burned him.

Well, he didn’t actually burn him. If anything, Even burned himself through Isak. He was the one who did the touching. Isak didn’t bring his cheek to Even’s palm. He wasn’t to blame.

Even let out a cry, immediately taking his hand back and jumping in place. Isak’s eyes were wide now. And he looked both sad and angry.

I guess he can burn me.

“Fuck! What is wrong with you?!” Isak shouted, no longer shaking and looking frail, as if the incident snapped him back into focus. He stepped back and started fetching something from his bag while Even shook his hand and groaned.

Isak took out a cold bottle of water and immediately emptied it over Even’s hand without touching him. And Even couldn’t do much but try to stay put. It hurt, but what hurt even more was the realization that he was wrong.

Isak burned him. He wasn’t immune to him. Isak burned him.
“You’re so fucking stupid! Are you trying to ruin my life? Are you trying to get them to lock me up?!” Isak continued shouting after taking out another water bottle and soaking a small towel that he was seemingly carrying in his bag as well.

For a moment, Even wondered if Isak carried these items all night, if he brought them with him to the party expecting he’d end up burning someone.

“I wasn’t— I, I didn’t think—”

“Well, no shit!” Isak hissed, then started gently padding Even’s palm with the towel. The touch was too gentle, too out of place compared to Isak’s tone, to the poison in his voice.

Even was starting to feel dizzy, so he decided to focus on something to drown out his own self-loathing.

“Do you always carry this stuff around?” he asked, referring to the bottles of water and the towels in his bag.

“Yes, just in case some idiot like you tries to touch me,” Isak replied and he was harsh. He was being way too harsh considering the amount of pain Even was in.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” Even mumbled.

“What exactly were you hoping would happen? That I’d be magically cured because you so graciously offered to touch my cheek? What do I need to do for you to keep your distances? I already wear twenty layers. Do I need to wear a face mask too now?” Isak muttered without looking up from Even’s hand.

His brows were furrowed in concentration and his words were venom. But the gentleness of his ministrations betrayed him. And when Even noticed that tears were still spilling from his eyes, the tenderness he bore for him felt reinvigorated.

“Stay still,” Isak hissed when he felt Even move a bit, sway a bit.

“You’re still crying,” Even told him dumbly, lifting his left hand instinctively and making Isak jolt and step away from him.

“What the hell? Are you trying to touch me again?” Isak scoffed. “Are you suicidal or something? Do you enjoy hurting yourself?”

Oh.

That’s not nice.

Even was stunned at first, but it quickly morphed into something stronger, brighter, more fiery. He felt tears sting in his eyes at the words. He felt rage in his chest. He felt the stab at his heart.

How dare you.

For a moment, Even was thankful for the physical pain, because he could focus on that instead. And when he suddenly took a step back, it made Isak jolt. Isak who looked taken aback by Even’s reaction, as if he hadn’t expected his words to even warrant one.

Of course. To most people, words like these were just words. Isak had no way of knowing. How could he. He was just lashing out.
“Believe it or not, but I just wanted to make you feel good,” Even confessed and it was quiet. He was sure there were tears in his eyes right now. But he hoped that Isak would attribute them to the physical burn.

“Well, don’t!” Isak hissed, though weakly, visibly shaken by Even’s admission. “I never asked you to do any of this!”

“People can be kind without being asked to, Isak.”

“There’s a difference between being kind and being entitled, Even! And you know it!”

“Could you please stop yelling at me?” Even suddenly blurted out, because he was in too much physical pain already. He could not bear this.

“Well then could you please stop following me around? And asking about me and carrying me and dressing up as a firefighter for me? Could you please stop touching me? Could you please just stop trying to save me?”

“I’m not! I’m just trying to be nice!”

“No, you’re not! You’re only doing this because you have this image of me being this poor little disabled boy who needs your help. I don’t need it. I don’t need you! And it’s not on you to comfort me after some douchebags said that no one will ever want me. It’s none of your business!”

Even focused on the odd bit of his speech, yet again. Isak was in fact upset about those boys’ comments and he knew that Even heard them as well.

“I can physically feel you, remember?” Isak said as if he read his mind. “Of course I knew you were there when those guys said that!”

“Okay.”

“Stop putting yourself in actual danger and giving me more things to feel like shit about just because you have a savior complex!”

Isak’s words started feeling harsh for no reason. Even understood that Isak disliked having his agency removed and being treated like a damsel in distress. He understood all of it. But his attacks were vile and mean, and Even did not have the stomach for it.

He wasn’t as strong and emotionless and rational as Isak. He knew that he was just lashing out, he could see that his tears were still falling and that composure was no longer there. And a calmer Even would probably pride himself in inciting such reactions from stone cold Isak. But Even wasn’t that good at compartmentalizing and rationalizing. And every word Isak said felt like a stab to a wound that won’t close.

“Understood,” said Even, looking at the ground now and sounding depleted. His hand still hurt, but he barely felt it, drowning in the pain he was more familiar with, the one that lived in his joints.

“Okay,” Isak breathed, his yelling finally coming to a halt. He sounded shocked by his own tantrum and even a little bit remorseful.

Even felt him come closer and stepped back.
“Let me just look at it—” said Isak.

“Don’t bother,” Even replied coldly, still looking at his own feet. He was embarrassed, he realized. He was beyond embarrassed. Isak was right about everything. Even had no right to touch him. He had no right to feel so entitled to save him. He couldn’t even save himself. “You should go home. This is my mess. I can take care of myself.”

“But—”

“Just go,” said Even. “I’ll call up a friend. Go home.”

“Don’t be stubborn. The longer you wait, the worse it gets. I have stuff in my bag—”

“Isak, can you please just go?!” Even nearly begged, his voice cracking, the look on Isak’s face punching him in the gut. He looked remorseful, taken aback by the desperation in Even’s request. At least, he can feel guilt.

“Even—”

“Please!” Even whispered. “I get it. I’m a fucking idiot and I’m embarrassed enough. You don’t need to take care of me on top of that. Please.”

Isak left after that, or at least he pretended to. The game worked both ways, and Even could feel him hiding behind that wall around the corner. And he knew that Isak knew that as well.

Perhaps it was his way of apologizing for being so harsh. Even had no idea, so he pulled out his phone and called Mutta.

“I won’t say anything,” his mother says in the morning when she notices his bandaged hand.

“Thank you,” Even replies, feeling a bit silly cooking breakfast with his left hand.

“I mean I’m worried, but I won’t say anything because I trust that you’ll tell me when you feel like telling me.”

“You just said a lot of things, mom,” Even chuckles weakly.

“Did I? I mean I’m doing my best to be mom of the year and give you space, but honey—” she pauses and Even braces himself. “Is it a coincidence that you ended up with a burn when you went dressed as a firefighter?”

“No,” Even sighs. “I mean I don’t know. It was an accident.”

“Honey—” his mother laments this time around, and he can hear it in her voice, the patronizing tone. *Did you start a fire? Did you do this?*

“It was the new kid, alright?” Even blurs out, his heart now hammering in his chest. “It was Isak.”

“Oh.”

“It wasn’t his fault. I had a few drinks and touched him when I shouldn’t have. It was my fault.”

Even feels dizzy, his appetite suddenly gone. He finishes making scrambled eggs for his mother, then excuses himself to his room. He can’t bear the way she’s looking at him right now. He simply can’t.
He can’t go swimming on Sunday—recommendation from Doctor Mutta which was backed by his paranoid own mother—so he goes to Sonja’s house.

He couldn’t bear remaining confined in his room, his thoughts suffocating him, his loneliness eating at him. So he ends up on Sonja’s bed, her long and thin fingers massaging his scalp, soothing him.

He needed this, someone playing with his hair, calming him down, making him relax and feel safe. A thought suddenly overwhelms him.

*Has Isak ever felt this? Has anyone ever played with his hair?*

He sits up and frowns, making Sonja scoff and push him off. She’s wearing those shorts that used to drive Even to the edge. And it’s not even that warm in her room. She wore them on purpose.

“What’s up with you?”

“Nothing,” he replies.

“Are you gonna tell me about your hand?”

“I already told you. It’s the new guy, Isak,” Even shrugs.

“Yes, but why did you touch his face in the first place? Do you like him or something? Is that why you broke it off with me? You’re into boys now?” she laughs playfully but Even doesn’t.

He doesn’t even know if he actually feels attracted to Isak or if it’s just their bond. He doesn’t know where he stands with his overall attraction to boys. He hasn’t stopped to think about it because it always makes him panicked. He hasn’t told anyone about it. He doesn’t even know where to start or if he wishes to.

Sonja’s face goes from a playful smile to a light frown. She’s thinking. He knows what she’s thinking. She’s thinking that Even does indeed frown. She’s thinking that her worries about his closeness with Mikael were warranted. She’s thinking that Even is disgusting for lusting after his own best friend. She’s questioning every single night he spent at his friends’ houses. She’s questioning all the nights he couldn’t “get it up” when he was too down to even think about sex. She’s thinking. And Even feels ashamed.

He lunges forward and kisses her before he can think about it.

“What was that for?” she laughs when Even takes his severed hand back from where he buried it in her short hair and winces.

“I forgot about this. Shit!” he groans, shaking his hand.

He lies back down on her legs, and she plays with his hair and tells him about her russbus and how the girls are driving her mad. He chuckles and laughs with her. Then his heart starts to feel heavy.

Sonja still loves him and he knows it. Yet, there he is seeking comfort on her legs and leading her on when he’s the one who broke it off.

“I should go,” he says.

She walks him back to the door and Even is afraid that she might try to kiss him. She doesn’t.
“I have a new rule for you,” she says with a smile, her legs crossed in those shorts Even loves so dearly.

“I’m listening,” says Even, beaming at her. Most exes aren’t on friendly terms like they are, and it’s mostly thanks to their rules.

“Don’t kiss me again unless you want to get back together, okay?” she says.

“Okay.”

.

When he gets home, he finds a tote bag with some bar’s logo—Blue Ruin—carefully placed on his bed.

“What is this?” he asks his mother.

“Isak stopped by while you were at Sonja’s,” she replies with a grin. “He left you some painkillers and products he says are useful. How sweet of him.”

Even feels two very opposite urges overtake him: to roll his eyes and to fawn over Isak’s thoughtfulness. He’s playing.

“He apologized so many times. What a sweet kid,” his mother sighs. “He feels so bad when you said it wasn’t even his fault.”

A sweet kid. Even wonders what kind of act Isak puts on in front of adults or people who don’t know him. He also wonders how differently he would have acted if Even had indeed been at home. Perhaps, he was counting on Even being at the pool and simply wanted to get on his mother’s good side. This is the time they usually go swimming on Sundays after all.

Isak is always scheming after all.

He opens the bag and sees products that look somewhat expensive. Isak also included pieces of paper with instructions on how to apply each one along with their order. At the bottom of the bag, he finds two post-its: one with a phone number and the second with the words ‘I’m sorry - Isak’.

Even enters his number into his phone under ‘Heraklit’, then takes the one with the apology and sticks it on the wall next to his drawings.

You’re not sorry. You just need me.

.

“So are we gonna talk about it, or?” says Adam, earning himself a smack to the back of his head from Mutta. “What?! I didn’t even say anything!”

“It’s a pre-emptive hit,” Mutta shrugs.

“You don’t even know what I’m about to say!”

“Yes, I do. We all do.”

Even knows, too. He wants to talk about his hand.

“I’m not talking about it,” Even says as he gets up and throws his backpack over his shoulder.
“Did you get into a fight with Isak?” Adam asks then gets smacked by Yousef this time around.

“I’m walking away now,” says Even, reaching for the cigarette behind his ear to bring it to his lips. He flinches when he takes out his green lighter. It’s an odd feeling, touching something that Isak has touched.

Isak sits at the other end of the cafeteria during lunch, and Even pats himself on the back for not falling prey to temptation and texting him. He wouldn’t have been able to deal with it if Isak had ignored him after that.

Even can hear people whispering about them, speculating about Even’s burn. But what bothers him even more is the fact that Isak is smiling and joking around with the very guys who called him a ‘freak’ at the Halloween party then proceeded to be horrible to Sana.

Elias is also seething beside him. “Is this guy for real? Sana stood up to these guys for him and he’s befriend them now?”

“They’re Arvid’s friends. Maybe he’s just trying to keep it lowkey so no one tries to get him kicked out again,” says Mutta.

“It doesn’t matter when people hurt your friend!” Elias bites back. “When someone hurts your friend, you stop talking to them. Simple as that.”

“I heard he joined their Russbus,” says Adam. “Maybe he’s just trying to keep the harmony in the bus.”

“What?!” Mutta and Even both exclaim at the same time.

“I know. I don’t know how they let him join. But since Arvid is the bus leader, they didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Why the hell is he joining their bus when they don’t stand him?” Elias frowns. “This guy makes no sense.”

_His scheming._

“More importantly, how did he manage to get on the most popular bus at school when he started the year fighting with its leader?” says Adam.

“Most popular bus?” Mikael rolls his eyes. “Dude, do you hear yourself? You sound like a girl.”

“What’s wrong with girls?” Yousef chimes in.

Even cannot stand talking about Isak and buses any longer, so he puts on his headphones and browses random tags on Instagram. Who cares if Isak wants to suddenly join a bus.

Even has a plan for today’s physics class. He spent some time on the script last night thinking about every single detail, rehearsing looking away, rehearsing not staring at the back of Isak’s head, rehearsing not yearning for him and his warmth and his closeness. Even’s plan is perfect and he will get through this class without feeling awful.

And it’s working so far. He’s finishing a random doodle he started last night with his left hand and
occupies himself with the details that usually drive him mad in a drawing, the ones that bring out his perfectionist side. He left that part for this class to occupy himself with something else rather than the magnetic pull he feels for Isak and the negative feelings that follow.

He could try following whatever their professor is saying, but this is physics and his right hand hurts. He can doodle with his left hand, but he cannot actually write anything intelligible.

His plan is working for the most part. But then the instructor asks him a question, and Even admits that he doesn’t know the answer. This was in his script. He expected it would happen and he knows that it’s better to tell the truth than to embarrass himself in front of his classmates, in front of Isak.

The bell rings and Even’s plan in a success. He can finally breathe. He’ll wait for Isak to run out of class before joining Yousef in the lab. He remains in his seat on his phone, checking his notifications and the group messages.

But Isak’s warmth never leaves the room. Even refuses to look up. He waits but Isak is not moving. *Don’t give in.*

Isak gives in for him. He walks towards him in two quick strides and places papers on his desk.

Even looks up.

“What is this?” he asks, trying to sound cold and not too shaken.

“Notes for today’s class,” says Isak. He’s bundled up as always and he’s wearing a black turtleneck that covers his chin and a green snapback. He looks cute.

“What?”

“Notes,” Isak repeats and he sounds nervous. “I took notes of today’s lecture. You can have them.”

“Why?”

“Your hand is hurt. You can’t take notes.”

“What about you?” says Even.

“You know very well that I don’t need notes, Even.” *Right.* He’s some kind of genius. Even forgot about that.

“Are you manipulating me right now?” Even squints his eyes.

“How would I manipulate you by taking notes for you?” Isak scoffs.

“I don’t know. Just two days ago, you were telling me to leave you alone. And now here you are being unnecessarily nice to me.”

“I’m not manipulating you. I’m trying to ease my own guilt. I overreacted that night and I shouldn’t have.”

“No. You still need me,” says Even.

“That’s not—”

“I hope you don’t think it’s rude, but please stop paying my mother visits when I’m not home.”
Isak blinks at him, visibly offended.

“I was there to see you, not your mom,” he says.

“It was during our swimming time.”

“But you didn’t go swimming. You’re not supposed to with a burn that fresh,” says Isak. “I just didn’t expect you to go do something else.”

“How do you know I didn’t go swimming?”

Isak’s face flushes. Right. Of course.

“Did you tell Mutta to convince me to stay home by any chance?”

“I didn’t tell him what to tell you. I just—”

“You just casually dropped it in the middle of a conversation and planted that idea in his head,” says Even. “You just manipulated him.”

Isak looks down and Even has to run his left hand through his hair to calm himself down.

“See? This is why I doubt everything you say and do,” says Even.

“The chlorine and chemicals are really bad for a skin that vulnerable,” says Isak. “I did that for your own good.”

“It doesn’t matter, Isak. The end doesn’t justify the means and you really need to stop playing Mutta.”

“Fine, but—”

A few students from the next class start rushing in, making Isak take several panicked steps back to his seat. It would hurt if Even wasn’t so used to it. He leaves the classroom altogether and doesn’t bother looking back at Isak.

.

Later in the afternoon, while walking home, Mutta hands him the notes Isak took for him that he left in the classroom.

“Where did you get these?”

“Isak gave them to me. We’re in a few classes together,” says Mutta.

“What’s your deal with Isak, anyway?” Even frowns.

“We’re buddies. I don’t know.”

He’s using you, Even wants to say. But he doesn’t.

“He apologized about manipulating me or something,” Mutta laughs. “How cute is that?”

“Huh?”

“I mean I obviously knew he started talking to me about the dangers of swimming with a burn so that I’d terrorize you about it. I’m not dumb.”
“And it doesn’t bother you that he thinks you are?” says Even.

“I don’t think he thinks I’m dumb, Even. I think he knows that I know what he’s playing and we’re both okay with it.”

“That makes no sense.”

“I think he speaks his own language and lives in his own world and abides by very different rules than our own, you know. I think that in his world, you never say or do things directly. You do everything to make things look like an accident, like you’re not involved. In his world, caring for a person isn’t really allowed. So you go around using that person’s friends and family to make sure they’re okay.”

“Caring? You think he cares for me?” Even scoffs.

“I know he does,” says Mutta and he smiles. “It’s just hard for him to show it or even admit it.”

“You need to stop watching those romance movies, Mutta,” Even laughs and it feels nice.

“I’m serious!” Mutta shoves him, laughing. “I think that maybe he once cared a lot for someone and that it didn’t end very well. I think he’s just trying to protect himself.”

“And you got all of this out of talking to him once in German class?”

“No, we text sometimes.”

“You what?!”

“What? He texts me sometimes,” Mutta snorts, amused by Even’s reaction. “I don’t know what happened between you two for you to carry him like that in the gym and touch his face, and for him to try and move mountains to make sure you’re healing the right way. But you need to give him a break. He’s not that bad.”

Even feels his face get hot at the words. He never really stopped to think about how others would perceive his tumultuous relationship with Isak. He doesn’t know how they interpreted the burn. He’s not sure he wants to get into it.

“Well, you called. So.”

Let me guess. You’re gonna warn me about going,” says Isak.

“Anyway, did you hear Arvid and his bus are going on a retreat in the mountains?” says Mutta.

“They always go on those,” Even shrugs.

“Yes, but Isak is going this time.”

“What?!”

Even waits for him by the pool entrance. He’s not sure what he’s doing. He knows that Isak only told Mutta about going so that he’d tell Even. He knows he’s being played, but he can’t help it.

“You came,” Isak smiles when he sees him. His cheeks are rosy and he’s bundled up and warm, so warm.

“Well, you called. So.”

“Let me guess. You’re gonna warn me about going,” says Isak.
“Yes.”

“You have a list of well-prepared arguments.”

“I don’t actually,” says Even. “I was in my room and I ran here on impulse because it happens to me sometimes.”

“I think I’ve been exposed to your impulsiveness a few times already. No need to explain,” says Isak.

“You’re being rude again,” Even blurts out, surprised by his own bluntness.

“I’m sorry.”

They both take a moment to breathe.

“Those guys don’t like you,” Even says after a few moments. “They could hurt you on the retreat. They’ve done it before. They’re famous for these stupid retreats.”

“I know,” says Isak.

“Arvid’s cabin is in the mountains in a remote area. If something happens, it’s gonna be hell getting help or medical assistance.”

“I won’t burn anyone if that’s what you’re worried about. But thanks for reminding me I’m a danger to everyone.”

“I meant to you! If something happens to you! Gosh!” Even groans, annoyed.

“Oh,” Isak gasps, his cheeks coloring a bit more. “Well, nothing’s gonna happen to me.”

“Those guys are gonna be drunk the entire time. And they can get rowdy and try to push you and actually do something to you. Last year, they threw a guy in a frozen lake and he was in a coma for a few hours.”

“Even, I’m gonna be fine.”

‘Even.’ Even wishes he didn’t love the way Isak said his name. With so much care. So much care.

“Don’t worry about me,” Isak adds, but he doesn’t sound angry and patronizing this time. He doesn’t tell Even that he’s entitled and awful. He sounds almost grateful for Even’s nonsensical worrying.

“I can’t help it,” Even admits.

Isak looks at him for a second too long, his eyes big and green and full of something Even can’t quite decypher. **Hope? Gratefulness? Fear? Sadness?**

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” says Isak and it takes Even off guard.

“I— I touched you. I hurt myself. It’s not on you.”

“I’m not referring to the physical burn,” Isak says, and it’s quiet, a secret.

“Oh.”

Isak is referring to the harsh words that followed.
“Don’t worry about me. Trust me, okay?”

Trust me.

“Okay.”

Even smiles during the entire way back home.

“Okay, guess what, losers?!” Adam greets the group at the cafeteria with too much excitement this early in the morning.

“Uh, what?” Elias winces.

“Guess who just got invited to Arvid’s cabin retreat?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Mutta groans. “Why are you so obsessed with Arvid’s group? Don’t you have anything better to do other than check on everyone who joins their retreats?”

“Ugh! You make me sound like a creep! Let me speak!”

“Speak, then,” Elias rolls his eyes.

“Arvid just personally invited us to the retreat. The whole group. All of us!” Adam cheers.

“What the hell got into this Arvid guy. Is he okay?” Elias grimaces.

“Yeah we’re not going,” says Yousef.

“What?!” Adam groans.

“What do you mean what? Half of those guys got into a fight with Sana, then Elias and me last weekend. Where’s your loyalty?!”

“But! This is such an opportunity for us to do stuff! Like have you heard of any other group of muslim boys being invited to cool rich activities like this?” Adam insists.

“What the hell are you talking about?!” Elias frowns. “Also Even is not even Muslim.”

“You know what I mean! Think of all the videos we can shoot up there. I heard Arvid’s place is huge.”

“We’re not going!” Elias bites back.

“I noticed something today,” Mikael almost whispers.

Even is sitting on the floor while Mikael lies on his bed on his back, his head thrown backwards. They’re both high out of their minds. But Even still insists on keeping his distance, physically. It’s the first time they’ve hung out—just the two of them—after the incident after all.

“What did you notice?” says Even, taking a long drag.

“That you don’t speak very much when we’re in group.”
Even meets his gaze for a moment, wonders if he looks as naked as he feels right now.

“You don’t either,” says Even.

“Yes, but I never really used to,” says Mikael. “I never really had anything interesting to say. You, on the other hand, used to always speak when we were all together. And now it’s like—”

He pauses.


“It’s like you’re only there physically. Like it’s no longer you.”

Even averts his eyes, doesn’t wish for anything to spill out of him. He feels vulnerable. He’s high and vulnerable, so he looks away.

“I’m still me,” he says and the words burn in his throat.

“I know you’re still you inside,” says Mikael. “But it’s like you’re afraid of being yourself with us.”

Even goes to school the following days and tries not to think about Isak going on a retreat with thirteen other guys who hate him. He does his best not to care.

He accepts the notes Isak hands him and focuses on tending to his wound. The burn wasn’t that bad, so he starts feeling better within a week. In a few days, he can go back to the pool.

He can now stop waiting at the playground by the pool for Isak to casually show up and pretend to hang out on the swings as well. It feels silly, how they need this proximity to function. It feels like recharging batteries or getting his dose of a drug they can no longer be without. It’s ridiculous. And tonight is no exception.

He stands up to leave when Isak blurts out, “five more minutes!” then adds “please.”

It makes Even chuckle as he sits back down.

“Are you gonna be okay in the snowy mountains without me?” Even jokes and it makes Isak blush.

“I’ll be fine.”

Even pulls out a cigarette. And after taking the second drag, he realizes that he hasn’t asked Isak if he’s okay with it.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” he says.

“Because secondhand smoke is bad for you? Most people aren’t fans.”

“I’m not most people.”

“You smoke actual nicotine?” Even asks, raising an eyebrow and making Isak laugh.

“No. I just think we’re all gonna die anyway.”

“Morbid.”
“Realistic,” Isak shrugs. “The media is crazy about health and fitness now. But it’s all just a big corporation that shames the weak and enriches the rich. Superfoods, Yoga, organic ingredients, and yada yada yada. It’s all a big scam. And it works because humans are social beings by nature who don’t like to go against the flow.”

“Here we go again.”

“I’m serious. Ever wonder about cults? Ever wonder how people can be so weak mentally and spiritually that they’re willing to give some scammer who takes a vow of silence all of their money and join his cult? Ever wonder how broken they have to be inside to be brainwashed by some guy with a beard? People wonder about them and look down on them all the time.”

“I don’t follow.”

“People love to look down and others and laugh at the poor souls who end up in cults. But they don’t see that they do the same thing every day multiple times a day. Hive mentalities are everywhere, from the opinions that spread like wildfire because one person with some credibility forms them, all the way to the groups of mean people at school who follow some leader blindly because they think it makes them safe or popular. Everybody is brainwashed. It's just that nobody thinks about it when the thing being followed is labeled 'healthy' or whatever.”

“So you're saying people who do Yoga are high school bullies who are actually in a cult?” Even snorts.

“No! Don't patronize me. I'm serious,” Isak frowns and it makes Even hold up his hands and chuckle. “What I'm saying is that the latest fad is this "healthy" movement that shames people who enjoy drinking coca-cola or Fanta or smoking a cigarette. Just let people drink their damn Fanta. Maybe it fills them with joy for a moment. Perhaps your disgusting protein shake fills you with happiness. Same thing with people who love Fanta!”

“So you like Fanta,” Even laughs.

“I fucking love Fanta,” Isak joins him.

“I fucking love smoking. Moderately of course.”

“Then do it if it makes you happy.”

“But it might kill me,” says Even.

“Anything might kill you.”

“Is this why most philosophers smoke cigarettes?”

“Where did you get that statistic?”

“I just made it up.”

They laugh for a bit after that. And Even can feel the easiness they had before Halloween make a comeback. It feels right. It’s comforting.

“Why Heraclitus?” Even asks.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Curious,” Even shrugs.
“You can google it, you know?” Isak rolls his eyes.

“But I want to know why you like him.”

“He kept it real,” says Isak. “He was a pre-socratic philosopher and he was borderline a misanthrope. He kept to himself and wrote a lot of very complicated and contradictory things that people struggled to understand.”

“So he changed his mind a lot?”

“No. He claimed that the contrary states of things are what makes the world unified. He says that everything is both the same and not the same over time, that opposites are interconnected and make up the energies that govern our world. That sort of thing.”

“That makes no sense,” Even winces, bringing his free hand to his head.

“No but think about it. We’re either asleep or awake. We can’t be both at the same time and we can’t be neither at once.”

“That’s bullshit. You can be dead.”

“Well now you’re getting into the state of not being alive,” says Isak. “But when you’re alive, you’re either asleep or awake.”

“So you like this philosopher because he said something very obvious about being awake and sleeping and pointing out binary states?”

Isak glares at him and Even holds both of his hands up and laughs. “No offense.”

“Obviously, I also like him for other reasons but whatever. I’m not going to share what I love with you just to be made fun of.”

“I’m not making fun of you,” Even laughs.

“Whatever.”

.

Even types ‘Heraklit’ on Google later that night when he can’t sleep. And when he reads that he’s nicknamed ‘The Weeping Philosopher’, his heart pinches.

.

Even is in the locker room after gym when he hears two boys talking about how they’ll throw Isak in the frozen lake to check if he’ll cool down. It makes his blood freeze in his veins. It makes all of his senses start tingling, his need to protect and shield Isak being back in full swing.

He can’t control it. He runs to Isak’s next class.

“You can’t go,” he says in front of Isak’s classmates.

“Excuse me?”

Even gestures for him to come closer so others can’t hear.

“I just heard Vegard and David talking about how they’re planning to throw you into a lake!”
Isak looks at him but doesn’t show any emotions.

“Yes, so?”

“What do you mean? How are you gonna defend yourself if it’s you against all those dudes?” says Even. “Especially if it’s frozen water.”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“Have you ever been thrown into cold water before? You don’t even know how your body will react. You might go into thermal shock.”


“Isak, I’m serious. This is bad. I’m just trying to look out for you. These guys are messed up. They get into fights all the time and they even got into a feud with the Yakuza gang once.”

“Even,” Isak interrupts him by raising his index finger. “Breathe with me. Can you do that for me?”

“What?”

“Let’s count to ten together, okay?”

“You’re patronizing me,” Even frowns.

“You’re not giving me a choice here,” Isak rolls his eyes.

“Fine! Don’t say I didn’t try to warn you!”

“Cool.”

“Cool!”

“Okay, what the fuck? Say that again,” Mutta squints with furrowed brows.

“I said I’m going to Arvid’s retreat,” says Even, feeling extremely embarrassed sitting on Mutta’s couch.

“Uh, and why the hell would you do that?”

“Adam is right. We can get good b-roll footage from the mountains for the vlogs and other projects than span the winter,” says Even.

“Adam is not even going,” Mutta reminds him.

“Because you guys promised to kill him if he did.”

“Yes, which is why he will kill you if you go.”

“Well, I can just tell him and he can come along,” says Even.

“We already made plans for those three days to get his mind off the retreat.”

“Shit,” Even sighs. “Well, I already told Arvid I was going.”
Mutta shakes his head then resumes the Fifa game they were playing.

“You’re not gonna say more?” says Even.

“What do you want me to say? That you’re being dumb right now following Isak on his weird and risky mission and that he’s going to be angry at you?”

Even flushes. Mutta can always see right through him. He doesn’t bother denying it.

“Just make sure you have back-up. Okay? Those guys can be jerks.”

“Okay.”

Isak is not angry when he sees him at the door of Arvid’s cabin. In fact, he’s smiling. His delicate face and rosy cheeks looking even softer with a smile.

“You came,” Isak beams at him as he holds the door open. He’s wearing gloves indoors as well as a full jacket and a hat.

“Uh, you’re not mad?” Even asks tentatively.

“Why would I be?”

Even squints his eyes.

“You knew I was coming,” he realizes.

“I had a hunch.”

“Fuck!”

“Well, believe me or not but I didn’t do anything this time around,” says Isak. “Except of course convince Arvid to let you come along if you decided to.”

“What about the invitation to the rest of my friend group?”

“I wouldn’t have wanted them to feel excluded,” he shrugs. “And speaking of your friends. Mikael is already here.”

“What?”

“What are you doing here?” Even asks after dragging Mikael to a corner.

“Uhm. I’m joining the retreat?”

“You hate this stuff. You hate these people.”

“Aren’t I allowed to change my mind?” Mikael challenges him.

Even’s frown deepens as he turns on his heels and walks toward Isak who’s unpacking in one of the rooms.

“I thought we established that you wouldn’t mess with my friends?” he hisses. “Or was that just
“Mutta? Do I have to make a request for all of my friends?”

“What are you talking about?” Isak blinks at him, puzzled.

“I’m talking about Mikael. What did you say to him to get him to come? What’s your plan this time around?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about! I didn’t do anything!” Isak bites back, his defensive frown back between his brows.

“God! Did you ask Vegard and David to say that while I was changing? Is this all a ruse to get me here? Or is it so that you can have me near you physically?”

“Even! Stop yelling at me. I didn’t do anything!”

“You’re lying!”

“Even!” Mikael interrupts them, standing awkwardly under the doorframe. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Mutta told me you were coming,” says Mikael. “So I thought one of us should have your back. You know.”

“So you’re saying—”

“Isak didn’t have anything to do with me being here. If anything, he looked kind of annoyed,” Mikael chuckles.

“Shit.”

.

Even finds Isak outside in the snow. He’s wearing the same number of layers as he does indoors, and he’s holding a warm cup of coffee between his gloved hands.

“Can we talk?” Even asks, remorseful.

“I don’t think we should,” Isak replies.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m angry, and I say things I don’t mean when I’m angry at you”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

.

They don’t interact much on the first day after that. Isak sticks with Arvid or is seen reading a book somewhere around the cabin while the boys drink and break things. Even smokes weed with Mikael and a couple of other boys outside, his eyes wandering back to the window by which Isak strategically sat to read, just to check on him.
He moves from the bench to the fire they started in the back-porch, to the kitchen, then the attic. He moves with the flow, but never goes far enough to stop feeling Isak. He plays cards, sits too close to the fire, and pretends to take shots.

At one point, some guys decide to look up escort services and see if they can have strippers show up to the cabin. After it proves vain, they start messaging random girls the address of the place.

Even won’t admit it, but he does have a few good laughs. He lets go a bit, he smokes a bit more than usual, drinks a bit more than usual, indulges in stupid conversations a bit more than usual. Even hates what these guys stand for. He hates their hatred and their sexism and their homophobia and their ableism and their sense of entitlement. He hates that they don’t have to worry about the things he has to worry about. But he puts his views aside for a moment and focuses on having a good laugh, on having a good wholesome weekend with no drama and no restrictions.

Before he knows it, Even is drunk. He’s drunk and he’s slightly out of control. He looks for Isak and finds him watching something on his laptop in the tiny room that only fits a bed.

“Why are you hiding?” Even asks, a dumb smile probably stretching his face right now.

“You’re drunk,” Isak observes, visibly annoyed.

“I’m not. I’m fine,” he replies, walking to the bed to sit next to him, then frowning when Isak recoils into himself. “What are you— I won’t hurt you.”

“You might hurt yourself,” Isak explains and Even notices that he doesn’t look very good, that he looks a little bit sick. “You’re drunk. Odds are that will increase your impulsiveness and spontaneity, cloud your judgement, make you forget about my condition, and make you want to reach for me.”

Even pauses to think about the words Isak just blurted out.

“Is this why you’re hiding? So that you don’t hurt the drunk people in the house right now?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Is that why you don’t drink? Because you’re afraid your judgement will get clouded?”

“Yes,” Isak replies, closing his eyes for a bit as if he’s dizzy. “Is that it or do you have any other questions?”

“Why are you the only one with a private room?”

Isak glares at him.

“Right,” Even slaps his own forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“See my point? You’re already forgetting.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You should go back to the party.”

Even feels sad and disheartened. Isak does what Even has been doing lately. He puts walls between himself and others to protect them, to make sure they don’t get hurt. Isak conceals parts of himself and of his true desires to feign normalcy, to fit in, to not upset the status quo and how things are
currently going. And he never complains about it. He just isolates himself.

Even feels sad. And when Mikael comes to find him later, he reaches for his hand and squeezes.

“You’re drunk,” says Mikael, amused. A less drunk Even would probably feel self-conscious right now.

“I am.”

“Wanna head back to the room?”

Even nods.

“Do you think it’s a coincidence we get to room together without anyone else?” Even asks on their way to it.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean do you think we’ve been excluded?”

Mikael laughs and Even laughs with him. He’s missed Mikael’s laugh.

“What did you think I was referring to?” Even teases as Mikael drops him on the big couch they’re supposed to be sharing.

“Nothing. I don’t know. But definitely not exclusion talk.”

“What? The Muslim guy and his bipolar friend. Of course we’d be excluded,” Even laughs, feeling the room spin a bit.

“I just didn’t deem you sober enough to go into deep talk. I thought—”

“You thought I meant something gay?” Even says before he can change his mind. They’ll eventually have to talk about it. And he’s drunk now, so why not.

“No, that’s not—” Mikael stammers, visibly uncomfortable, and it makes Even want to push.

He sits up and scoots closer to Mikael who’s playing with his own hands.

“Why are you here Mika?” says Even.

“What do you mean?” Mikael looks up at him with big doe eyes and it makes Even’s stomach drop. He used to love those eyes so much, so damn much.

“Did Mutta just ask you to come or did you volunteer?”

“Even—”

Even grabs Mikael’s hand into his own and squeezes. He feels like crying. It makes no sense, but he wants to bawl his eyes out until he can no longer breathe. Until there’s no more air. It’s all coming back to him now. The heartbreak and the pining and the rejection and how much it hurt and how much it burned. How it burned so much that Even needed to make everything else burn with him.

“Please tell me!” he begs and his voice cracks. “Please.”

“Of course I chose to come, Even,” Mikael replies, his eyes kind and gentle, squeezing his hand right
back. “You’re my best friend. If you go on a stupid retreat, I go on a stupid retreat.”

Even doesn’t think. Thinking isn’t on the list of things he is capable of right now. His heart feels like it’s about to burst and tears are already spilling, so he doesn’t think.

He cups Mikael’s face and kisses him.

He kisses him like he did the night it all burned, a hand on his jaw, his heart at his fingertips, moving lips on unmoving lips.

Even kisses him and breaks his own heart all over again.

Mikael doesn’t shove him until his back hits the wall this time around. He doesn’t shout in his face and call him names. He doesn’t but his lips remain tightly shut together.

It’s a pity kiss. And Even can feel every muscle in Mikael’s being clench, how repulsed he is by him, how he’s forcing himself to stay still, how he probably thinks Even has lost his mind again. He thinks about how Mikael will look at him when he finally pulls back and stops trying to pry his mouth open and to maybe awaken something within him. Even thinks about it and his heart feels too heavy for his poor depleted soul. Even doesn’t know how to break this one-sided kiss.

So Isak does it for him.

“Oh shit!” Isak yelps at the door, making Even and Mikael pull away from each other and jump a few feet apart. “I— I didn’t mean to. Uh sorry! I’m sorry!”

Isak closes the door behind himself and Even holds his head between his hands.

“God! Fuck! Shit. I’m so sorry!” he pleads. “Mikael, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay. Even—”

“Oh god!”

“Hey. It’s okay. I promise! Even, look at me!” Mikael asks, using his hands to make Even look up. “It’s fine. I won’t hold this against you. You’re a little drunk. It happens.”

*He will never want me.* Even thinks to himself. Mikael is the only person who knows of his attraction to boys, having been at the receiving end of his affections twice now. His second reaction is much better than the first, but it’s not any less heartbreaking.

Mikael will never want him. Even will have to accept that and move on.

“I don’t even think you like me like that anymore,” Mikael jokes.

“I literally just kissed you.”

“Yes, but it felt different.”

“Different how?”

“Like you were thinking of kissing someone else.”

Even finds Isak brushing his teeth in the bathroom. His face is abnormally flushed, even more than
usual. His eyes are droopy and his hair is sticking to his forehead. He looks sick. Sick and flustered.
The sink is large enough for both of them, so Even makes himself some space to brush his teeth as well. He wonders what Isak will say about what he’s just witnessed. He wonders if he’s surprised, if he’s thought about Even kissing guys before, if it has crossed his mind. He wonders what philosophers have said about gays and the LGBTQ+ and which old guy Isak will use in his speech.
Even wonders what Isak is carefully practicing in his head.
“I didn’t know you were—” Isak starts, startling him, then pauses.
“I was what?”
“Like that,” Isak finishes, spitting into the sink and running some water.
“Like what?”
“You know,” Isak swallows, nervous. “Homosexual.”
Homosexual. Even doesn’t know why, but the way Isak says it makes him snort. It’s almost too pure. But at the same time, the phrase fills him with anxiety. Like that. Homosexual. As if he’s engaging in something deplorable. He has never had this conversation with anyone before, not even with himself. And he doesn’t wish it to be with Isak his first time. He hopes he doesn’t ask him what he identifies as.
“Well, just so you know. Whatever it is that you do in your free time, I’m not like that,” Isak says, snapping him out of his trance. What.
“What?”
“Homosexual,” Isak says with a straight face, not even sparing Even a glance. “I’m not a homosexual. And I want to make that clear.”
“Uh, okay. I never said that you were.”
“Just in case you get the wrong idea with this physical pull we share,” says Isak. “It’s science, not homosexuality.”
Science. Not homosexuality.
Even is torn between bursting into laughter and storming away after slamming the door.
“Understood.”
“Cool.”
Even is about to leave the bathroom when he decides to add one more thing.
“For a guy with a brilliant mind, you sure are narrow-minded.”
Isak looks like he’s just burst into flame after that comment.

“Someone needs to room with Isak,” says Vegard, the tall smug red-haired boy who looks in his mid-twenties.
“Uh, why?” says Arvid. “We got the headcount right and the house is big enough for everyone.”

“David just threw up on a bed and a couch and we’re tight on space. We don’t have enough covers for everyone to sleep on the floor.”

“What the fuck, dude. Just sleep on the damn floor. You do that at every party anyway,” Arvid snaps and Even wonders why Arvid cares so much about Isak’s comfort in the first place and how this odd friendship or partnership even developed.

“Why do we have to sleep on the floor and he gets a king sized bed all to himself? Makes no sense,” someone whose name Even can’t remember speaks up.

“Because you might get burned while sleeping, you dumbass!”

More protests emerge around the room and Isak looks annoyed, but at least he’s not panicking. He’s thinking. Even knows what Isak looks like when he’s thinking.

“Sure, I don’t mind sharing,” says Isak after making up his mind. “I’ll stick to my side of the bed and I’ll sleep in my jacket. I’ve done it before.”

“I don’t think your cooperation is the issue here, buddy. We need someone who’s willing to put themselves in that risk,” says Vegard and Even hates him, sees the way Isak’s jaw clench.

“I’m sure that won’t be a problem,” he replies calmly. “Right, Even?”

_Huh._

“You don’t mind sharing my room, right?” says Isak, his eyes now boring into Even’s. It feels like a challenge.

_It’s science. Not homosexuality._

Even wants to stay away from him but also feels his knees give out at the thought of sharing a bed with Isak, at the thought of being wrapped in that heat all night.

“No problem,” says Even.

“Don’t be silly. You’re sleeping on the floor,” says Isak as soon as they get to the room and close the door behind them.

“Excuse me?”

“I move a lot in my sleep. I will literally disfigure you. You better stay away,” Isak shrugs.

“Why don’t you sleep on the floor?”

“Excuse me? I had this room first. I planned this whole retreat!”

“You suggested this rooming situation,” says Even.

‘Yes, just to get the spotlight off of me. I don’t want my efforts going to waste when I got this far.’

“What efforts?” Even squints his eyes.
“Nothing,” Isak shrugs him off then gives him some pillow. “Here, I’ll give you my covers since I don’t need them.”

“I have a bad back,” Even tries.

“I don’t care! We’re not sharing a bed!” Isak groans.

“Why? Because you’re not a homosexual?”

“Fuck you!”

“Jesus. You really do feel strongly about this topic. Don’t you.”

“Shut up!”

.

Even is on the floor for barely five—very agonizing—minutes before Isak groans then invites him back to the bed. He can’t really blame him. Even was this close to getting up and making a case for himself. He’s not sure why, but the closer they are physically, the stronger the need to be even closer becomes. Even felt it all over his being and he suspects that Isak’s labored breathing is due to that as well.

“The pull is strong tonight. Gotta love Science,” Even jokes as he climbs into the bed and pulls the covers on himself.

“No talking!” says Isak after he puts on his puffer jacket and gloves, and gets back to bed.

“What are those for?”

“So I don’t burn you. I told you I move a lot in my sleep.”

Even feels a bit bad after that. Isak had to bundle up and sleep uncomfortably to accommodate him. Even wants to tell him that he only burned him once, but he’s not sure if he’s right. He doesn’t want to give him more burning incidents to worry about. So he turns to the opposite side, their backs facing each other, and tries to doze off.

.

Even dreams of orange flames and orange skies. He dreams in high saturated colors and soft hues. He dreams of warmth and safety. He dreams of dimpled cheeks and soft blonde curls. He dreams of bare arms and drums and sweat and a Ramones t-shirt. He dreams of tears that weren’t meant to be spilled, and of arms around his neck and his back. He dreams of green eyes fluttering shut in pleasure, and of lips opening up to his own like they’ve never been claimed. He dreams of hands aching to be held and of skin begging to be kissed. Even dreams of warmth and safety.

Even dreams of him.

Even wakes up to Isak moaning softly beside him, setting his whole being on fire.

Holy shit.

The soft whimpering makes his blood rush to uncomfortable places and it’s taking all of his might to stay put, to not turn around, despite his heart beating right out of his chest.

Am I dreaming.
Isak’s moans accentuate and Even’s brain is flooded with thoughts he shouldn’t be having. Is he having a wet dream? Does he usually have those? Is it because he’s sharing a bed with Even? Does he even have sexual thoughts? Can he touch himself? Is he awake right now? Will he kill Even when he wakes up?

Isak probably has no idea Even is beside him in this state. He’s probably dreaming of some girl who’s into heavy metal, or perhaps who’s into Manga characters. Who knows. This has nothing to do with Even. Absolutely nothing.

“Even—,” Isak moans and Even’s brain melts. Blood rushes south and Even is going to have trouble explaining this to Isak if he wakes up.

_Fuck._

“Even, please!”

_Oh my god!_

“Even—”

Even turns around.

And he’s not sure what he expected, but it’s not this.

It’s not fully conscious sweat-drenched Isak who looks like he’s about to actually collapse. It’s not actually sick and burning up Isak.

“Isak!” Even sits up, his arousal making this his most outrageous worried look yet.

“I can’t breathe!”

“Shit!” Even scoots closer on his knees to remove the covers. He reaches for Isak’s hands, then frowns when Isak flinches. “You’re burning up! Let me remove these layers!”

“No,” Isak protests weakly. “No! I will hurt you.”

“No, you won’t,” Even insists, just as he moves to straddle Isak, forgetting about his aroused state for a second.

“What the fuck!” Isak yelps and Even chooses to believe that it’s because of the straddling, and not because of the visible mass between his legs.

“Sit still,” Even instructs then starts removing Isak’s gloves. “How can you even sleep like this?”

“Shut up!” Isak groans, but it comes out as a whimper and Even feels weak. So weak. “Get off of me, you perv!”

_Right. So it was the boner._

Even moves to the side and starts unzipping his jacket.

“Stop!”

“Don’t worry. You won’t hurt me.”

“No!” Isak protests, but his lips part and his back actually arches.
Wow.

Even stops his ministrations but keeps his fingers on the zipper. It’s silly, but he wonders if anyone has played with his zipper before.

“Please—” Isak moans again and it makes Even want to burst into flames.

“Please what?”

“What the fuck do you mean? You think I’m calling you ‘sir’ or something?”

“What?! I meant what do you want me to do!” says Even, and if Isak wasn’t in obvious pain, he would have laughed at where his brain went.

“Oh gosh!”

“I’m gonna remove your jacket now, okay?”

Isak nods, his eyes still closed and his right arm over his face.

Even does his best to unzip the jacket as swiftly and quickly as possible, but the sounds Isak keeps emitting make everything impossibly more difficult. Even cannot concentrate, and his hands are shaking by the time the jacket is unzipped.

“I’m gonna free up your arms now, okay?”

“Hmm, yes.”

*He’s in pain. This is NOT fun for him.* Even reminds himself. But every time, he touches Isak’s body, whether it’s his wrist, his arms, his stomach, his sides, his chest, Isak arches his back, and his lips pop then part in the most obscene way.

Is he enjoying this?!

Even gets to the sweater underneath it and debates whether he should remove it as well. He sees that he’s wearing a t-shirt underneath it, so he opts for it. He frees up both of Isak’s arms, then when he finally gets the sweater over his head and tries to lift his back to discard the puffer jacket he’s lying on, Isak throws both of his arms around Even’s neck and brings him to his chest, hugging him.

It’s warm. It’s electric. It burns in his heart, but it does not burn in his body. Even knows the difference now.

Isak isn’t burning him right now. He’s welcoming him into his heat, making room for him, enveloping him in his warmth, begging him for comfort and relief and release.

Isak is holding onto him for dear life and Even wants to give him the world.

“It hurts! It hurts so much,” Isak whimpers. “Hold me, please.”

Even’s heart breaks at the admission, the vulnerability, the total giving up of control. Isak would never ask to be held like this unless stripped to the bone of the very ability to breathe, to be.

“Fuck—” Even grunts, before wrapping his arms around Isak’s back, lifting him, then rolling him into his side so that he’s now lying on Even. The last thing he wants to do is crush him.

And so he holds him. He holds him so tightly and so hard that his own bones hurt. Even throws his
legs over his and sighs when Isak curls around him, shaking and whimpering still.

“Please—” Isak begs again and Even doesn’t know what he wants, doesn’t know what he needs so he runs a hand over Isak’s back to soothe him, to massage away whatever pain has taken over him.

Even holds him and touches him and rocks him until Isak’s breathing evens out, until the only one left shaking is Even.

Disturbed by his own arousal and his lack of self-control, Even rolls Isak onto his side when he falls asleep then goes out for a walk.

Even comes back in the morning for breakfast. He’s cold and he feels like an idiot for falling asleep against a tree.

When he enters the cabin, the few who are already awake are either grinning at him or simply look disturbed.

“What?” he frowns.

“Dude, did you fuck Valtersen last night or what?” says Vegard, making the two guys behind him burst into laughter.

“What?!” Even chokes at the words.

“What was all that moaning, bro? And how the hell? Did you two watch porn together or what? Did you use gloves to touch him?” Vegard sneers.

“What the fuck are you talking about? He was sick, you asshole!” Even hisses then leaves the living room to actually go check on Isak.

“Okay, what the hell are you doing?” Mikael ambushes him while Even puts his shoes back on by the door.

“I’m going down to the nearest town to get stuff from the pharmacy,” says Even.

“Ask one of the guys to drive you.”

“It’s snowing like crazy. They can’t drive in these conditions.”

“And what makes you think you can walk?”

“It’s not a big deal,” Even shrugs.

“No! What’s not a big deal is Isak feeling like shit right now. He literally just told you he can wait for whoever’s bringing him the medicine he forgot at home.”

“That kid lies like he breathes. I slept next to him yesterday. It is a big deal. He’s in a lot of pain.”

“But why is it on you to move mountains to get him painkillers? This is stupid. What if you fall and hurt yourself?!?” says Mikael. “At least let me come with you.”

“No, you should watch over him. I don’t trust these douchebags.”
“Even—”

“Mikael. I’ll be fine. I’ll be back in a couple of hours, okay?”

It is a stupid decision, Even reckons twenty minutes into his hike down the mountain. He can no longer feel his fingers, his face, nor his legs, and he’s starting to feel in actual pain. What’s even more alarming is how the snow reaches his calves and how there’s no visible path to walk through, not to mention how he can barely see where he’s going.

Even walks through the snow, drags his long and frail legs, and keeps moving, one stride at a time. He walks and walks and walks, until breathing becomes hard and his thoughts become tangled and messy.

Even thinks about how long it would take people to find his body if he were to just stop walking and lie in the snow. He thinks about how long it would take for people to even notice that he’s gone. He thinks about Mikael who wouldn’t let him go. Perhaps he’d be relieved to know that Even is finally gone, that it worked this time. He wouldn’t have to pretend to be okay with being groped by his supposed best friend who won’t respect his boundaries. He wouldn’t have to pretend to care about him.

Even thinks about his mother, about how unhappy and stuck she currently is. About how her husband—his father—left them because of him. About how his mother never blamed him, not even once. About how she loves him unconditionally but won’t even love herself. Even thinks about her. He thinks about his friends who joke about him being crazy and who babysit him like he’ll break, who treat him like he’s porcelain. He thinks about how he thinks so lowly of himself that he braved a snowstorm to get a boy who probably loathes him some medication. He thinks about his scars and the lines where his skin throbs for more lines. He thinks about how weak he is, about how his brain won’t let him live. About how fake he is, about how he feels alone and unloved. About how he doesn’t think anyone could ever love him for who he really is, about how he’d have to keep that mask on until he reaches the grave.

Even doesn’t like the cold for a reason. It always brings him down. It always reminds him of all the things that aren’t okay, of all the things that are wrong with him.

_The weeping philosopher._ Even wonders who broke Isak’s heart and if it’s the same entity that broke his own.

Even is on his knees in the snow. Tears have crystallized on his cheeks, around his eyelashes, and it hurts. He shouldn’t cry when it’s this cold. He shouldn’t. But it feels good. A sweet release.

Even entertains the thought of giving up for one more minute, then gets back on his feet. His mother and his friends wouldn’t survive it if something happened to him. And Isak needs his medicine.

Even makes it to the town with a splitting headache and is offered a ride back to the cabin with the medicine.

He doesn’t get to give it to Isak, however. And he doesn’t even get to check on him. Because the moment, he reaches the house, he falls face first to the ground.
Even wakes up on the couch he was supposed to share with Mikael, and he’s shaking. It’s likely hypothermia, Mikael explains. And he should take a bath.

“How’s Isak?” he asks.

“Who gives a shit, Even?! Why didn’t you turn around when you saw how bad it was? What the hell?!”

Even asks Mikael to run him a bath. He’s still shaking when he leaves it. His head is still split in half. He still feels terrible. But when Arvid tells him that what he did for Isak was cool, he takes some pride in it.

Even sleeps it off. And when he dreams, it’s of white skies, and white mountains, and the cold between his bones. Even dreams of his demons, of his deepest fears. Even dreams of giving up, of letting go.

Even feels himself sink and sink and sink. And he hopes, prays to whatever divine entity is overlooking his world that it’s fleeting, passing, that this isn’t a depressive episode, that this isn’t a bad one, that this is simply a side effect of hypothermia.

Mikael brings him dinner then tries to get him to facetime with his mother, but Even refuses. He doesn’t wish for her to see him this way.

He gets moved to Isak’s room because he needs sleep and everyone is hanging out around the couch he was occupying. And he doesn’t think about it or about Isak’s whereabouts. He focuses on shutting down his own thoughts.

Isak finds him, however. He sits by the bed sometime in the evening and just watches him.

“Why did you do that?” he eventually asks.

“You were in pain,” Even mumbles.

“For fuck’s sake, Even!” Isak groans but he looks almost shy, almost happy.

“What’s the nicest thing anyone has ever done for you?” Even asks, pulling the covers to cover his chin. He feels too cold.

“Someone went down a mountain to get me painkillers.”

Even smiles.

“Good. I’m competitive,” he says, though weakly.

“You’re also reckless and impulsive and dumb and complicated and I can never tell if you want to punch me or hug me,”

“Probably both most of the time. Unity in opposites, right? Your man, Heraklit.”

“He’s not my man!” Isak rolls his eyes.

“Tell me why you like this Weeping Philosopher.”

“You looked him up.”
“Yes,” says Even. “So tell me.”

“Because I feel like he’s like me.”

Even falls asleep and when he comes to, a warm body is pressed against his back, warming him up.

ISAK.

Even’s chest is bare and Isak is fully dressed, bundled up, warming him up, running his gloved hands up and down his arms.

‘You won’t hurt me.’

Isak isn’t hurting him. Isak is warming him up, touching him, setting him ablaze from the inside out and comforting him.

“Isak.”

“I know. I know. But I’m pretty sure I won’t burn you if I keep wearing gloves and layers, and concentrate hard enough. Besides, you’re still very cold and anything to bring up your temperature is —”

“Isak—” Even repeats, this time to stop his train of thought.

“Yes?”

“Take off your gloves.”

“What?”

“Trust me,” Even mumbles. “You won’t hurt me. I know it. Just take them off.”

Isak does, albeit hesitantly. And when he realizes that the light touch from his index finger doesn’t make Even wince in pain, he gets excited and starts touching him with more purpose.

“How is this possible?!” Isak asks and he sounds like he’s hyperventilating.

I think I’m made for you and you’re made for me.

Even dozes off again and when he wakes up, he’s sprawled on Isak’s chest, his face in the crook of Isak’s neck, breathing there softly. It doesn’t hurt. Their disposition is nothing but comforting and soft. But Isak is sleeping too, and Even wonders if he was conscious when they rearranged themselves into this position.

It’s late, at least judging by how the house has gone quiet.

“He said that fire is the Arche,” says Isak when he comes to again and they move apart. “Heraclitus. He said that fire is the origin of everything, the one element that rules everything. That’s why I like him so much, I think.”

“Yeah.”

“I feel like him too,” says Even. “Just the weeping part, though.”

Isak laughs then turns to his side to look at Even. His eyelashes are ridiculously long in the soft moonlight peeking through the windows.

“We should sleep,” he whispers, smiling shyly like he knows how much Even wants him right now.

“Yes. We should.”

They wake up again in the middle of the night, both of them burning up in each other’s arms. Isak is in a t-shirt while Even’s chest is bare. Isak’s face is in Even’s neck like he’s inhaling him, and Even’s hands are running up and down Isak’s back, eliciting the faintest and softest sounds from Isak who reacts to everything, every little thing. He’s so touch-starved, Even wants to scream.

“I don’t understand this! I’m going mad!” Isak whimpers into Even’s ear, digging his bare fingers into Even’s side.

“You don’t always burn me.”

“But why?” Isak asks and his nose traces the side of Even’s jaw, making him hold onto him even tighter.

“Science,” Even says because he doesn’t know what else to say, too consumed by the proximity, but the sheer lust and want and tenderness he’s feeling. “We need to do experiments.”

“Yes,” Isak sighs, running his lips now along Even’s collarbones but without ever puckering up or kissing them. He simply traces them with his mouth and wriggles in Even’s arms the entire time like he can’t believe it. Even can tell that all of this is new for him. “We need to do more of this.”

“Of this,” Even repeats. “Science.”

“Science,” Isak says as he buries a hand in Even’s hair, and almost yelps when Even wraps his arms around his waist and pulls him closer. “This is science, not homosexuality.”

Even bursts into laughter, and they hold onto each other until they both doze off.

When they finally come to in the morning, their limbs are entwined and Even’s heart has never felt fuller. Isak looks beautiful in the morning, simple but heart-pinching. He’s almost smiling in his sleep, facing Even. Even who doesn’t wish to wake him and thus end this.

So he watches him for a little longer, boops his nose, and brushes strands of hair behind his ear. Isak is breathtaking when he’s not scheming, and Even is blushing like a boy with a crush.

Isak moves closer, and it’s not until their bodies flush together that Even notices.

_Oh._

_Is that. A boner?_

Isak’s eyes flutter open just as the thought settles in his mind, and Even can see the mortification and embarrassment reflected in his green eyes. He can see the frustration, the pain, the confusion, the bottled-up and contrary emotions. He can see his shame. He can see his doubts. He can see his fears.
‘I’m not like that. I’m not a homosexual.’

Isak looks terrified, like a secret has just been forced out of him. He looks like he might burst, like he might sob.

Isak. The weeping philosopher.

How lonely are you? How lonely do you feel?

Even wants to reach for him, to calm him down, to tell him that it’s okay, that everything is okay, that he has nothing to be ashamed of, that he’s going to be fine, that his father won’t run, that his mother won’t be unhappy, that his sister won’t stop loving him, that his friends won’t abandon him, that it’s okay.

But Even can’t even convince himself of that.

And this time when Isak cries, right there in bed in his arms, his eyes are not empty. His eyes are devastating.

The weeping philosopher.

Even is about to touch him when Isak shoves him in the chest then leaves the room in strangled and repressed tears.

And so he lies there on his back, stunned and out of breath, with Isak's hand imprinted and red on his chest.

It hurts. It hurts even more than when Even touched him on Halloween.

Even didn't burn himself this time.

This time, Isak burned him.

Chapter End Notes

dun dun dun.

i love how much you guys love this. it makes me so happy thank you. Sorry i couldn't write much this week. I was dealing with so much crap at work sighh.

i'll probably update this later but Isak is plotting something big hence the friendship with Arvid and torturing himself with going on a retreat and being so scatterbrained that he forgets to bring his own meds (or did he).

they're trying to figure out why isak burns him sometimes then doesn't other times. Even doesn't know if it's when Isak is angry or ashamed or sad. and their momentary moments of 'yay we can touch as much as we want' kind of stop because there's doubt now.

Even is still in the closet here and so is Isak. and while Even does acknowledge his attraction to men, Isak doesn't even want to think about it. it's not happening. it's "science, not homosexuality". it has a lot to do with his mother and Jonas which we'll explore soon. we'll also go over how isak grew up and if he was born with this
condition or if something else happened.

next chapter features Jonas, scientific experiments with rules and templates, Even coming to terms with his internalized homophobia, Lea, shotgunning, rumors about isak and even getting it on during the retreat, and some jealousy

thanks for sticking around and for leaving comments. let me know what you think. thank you love youuuu <3<3
Chapter Summary

"Sit on my lap."
"Have you lost your mind?!"
"Just for a second, yeah? For an experiment. For science."

Ft Isak and Even and their experiments, scientific cuddles, rules, documentation, punk bars, Jonas, a hint of jealousy, drunk!Isak, Lea, Marianne, Isak being ADORABLE, science!, full bladders, Nietzsche, System of a Down, selfies, and snapchat filters

Chapter Notes

sorry i'm MIA. I'm hunting for an apartment and drowning in life. i just spent the last 6 hours writing this and i hope it's decent. i didn't even re-read it so forgive my mistakes.

<3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Breakfast is painfully awkward, and Even does his best to keep his eyes from following every single one of Isak’s movements around the house. He chews on his cereals and doesn’t wince, not even once although it stings—the literal and figurative burn on his chest demanding a certain type of attention he’s not quite ready to accept, let alone deal with.

Halfway through Vegard’s speech about some second year girl’s magical breasts, Even gives up and starts staring rather blatantly at Isak who isn’t paying him any attention right now. Isak who’s cracking jokes and throwing his head backwards while hiding behind Arvid.

Arvid.

Even hates him. He’s not sure he’s ever hated anyone before, but he suspects that this is quite close. He doesn’t understand when the school’s designated bully got this close to Isak, both figuratively and physically. He doesn’t understand why he’s standing this close to Isak. Why he isn’t flinching. Why he’s no longer afraid of him. Why he’s making him laugh. How he’s making him laugh.

Even doesn’t understand what their deal is and why he cares in the first place. His brain spirals with all the possibilities because he can’t figure out what could have possibly brought together two guys who clearly despised each other and even got into a very public altercation. None of it makes sense. Unless—

What if he shares the same connection with Arvid? What if I’m not the only one?

The thought makes his blood run cold in his veins. It draws his eyebrows together and breaks his heart. It fills him with sadness and a foreign feeling akin to jealousy, maybe. It’s absurd, but Even feels betrayed and heartbroken, his disappointment probably showing on his face, because Mikael
has just put an arm on his shoulders, squeezing a bit, and asked him what’s wrong.

“Nothing,” Even shrugs then takes a deep breath because he’s being ridiculous.

And when his eyes land on Isak’s across the room—because he cannot help it, because Isak’s gaze demands a counterpart, science and all—he’s met with rage.

*Why are you pissed?*

They’re glaring at each other now. Even knows that he should probably drop it, that they’re bringing unwanted attention to themselves, that people are already talking about them and their moaning incident. But he can’t look away, can’t tear his gaze from Isak’s, can’t help but hold it, cling to it, like an attention-starved and lovesick fool willing to let the object of his affections stomp over his self-esteem over and over again if it means being acknowledged.

Even wouldn’t call Isak the object of his affections, but the yearning he carries in his heart for him is maddening. Isak has just left him in a sorry state in bed, with an actual burn and with no explanations and no apologies. And instead of being upset, Even is worried, worried, and jealous and heartbroken for him, making up stories about how sad and damaged he is.

Even romanticizes everything and Isak is right. He does have a savior complex.

Mikael touches his shoulder again, this time with more intent. And it brings him back, anchors him, Mikael’s strong scent filling Even’s senses as he leans in to whisper in his ear.

“Why are you and Isak glaring at each other?”

Isak’s brows furrow even closer.

*Oh. He’s affected.*

“We’re not,” Even replies, his eyes never leaving Isak’s. It’s strange, having a whispered conversation with his best friend while staring at someone else, someone who won’t look away either after refusing to look at him all morning. Someone who cuddled him all night, then left the bed in tears.

“Even, I don’t wanna pry or pressure you. But you can, you know, talk to me about anything,” Mikael says awkwardly. The honesty and nervousness in his voice makes Even look away from Isak and finally meet his gaze, the faint rap music blasting from the speakers barely registering now. “I know I’m not the best at this stuff and you’d rather talk to Mutta. But I hope you know I can listen too.”

Even feels terrible, because a few moments ago Mikael had almost ceased to exist to him. When he was staring at Isak, Mikael was nothing but background noise, nothing but a two-dimensional supporting character who didn’t have a story of his own.

Mikael, his best friend who barely feels like an acquaintance now. Mikael who came along on this trip to have his back. Mikael who he feels like he owes him something. Mikael who doesn’t understand what’s going on with Isak and who simply wants to help.

“I know,” says Even, offering him a gentle but genuine smile. “I’ll tell you later. Promise.”

“Okay.” Mikael smiles back, a sheepish grin now stretching his face. “I mean both of you did keep the whole house up the other night when you were getting it on. So it’s the least you could do—”
“Oh, shut up!” Even laughs then shoves him.

“I mean it’s quite impressive!” Mikael snorts. “I’m pretty sure if you were to join this Russ bullshit, you’d win all the challenges. Actually hooking up with someone who literally can’t be touched? That’s next level.”

Even’s laughter dies down in his throat and he feels his heart shrink in his chest. He doesn’t stop laughing abruptly. He keeps chuckling until he can no longer stand how fake he sounds. Then when two other people join their conversation, Even starts watching Isak again, hoping that he didn’t hear what Mikael just said.

He probably didn’t, at least judging by how he’s laughing with Arvid across the room right now. He’s not glaring at him anymore either.

Isak didn’t hear.

Even is laughing at some ridiculous meme with Mats—a guy he can actually stand—when Isak brushes past him without sparing him a glance and meticulously trails his index finger over his shoulder without anyone noticing.

Anyone but Even, who muffles the urge to jump out of his seat and wince and maybe scream.

*Did he just?!—*

Isak burned him. He actually burned him on his way to the room. And it was on purpose too. Isak would never just let his index finger wander. *When did he even take off his gloves?*

“You okay, dude?” Mats asks, amused by the baffled look on Even’s face, perhaps.

“I, uh. I’m—”

Mats laughs, throws his shaved head backwards and cackles, making Even feel self-conscious and slightly annoyed.

“What’s so funny?” he asks, feigning amusement too.

“Are you gonna join him in there or what?” says Mats.

“Huh?”

“Dude, Isak literally just cut you with his finger and you didn’t even budge. He’s clearly requesting your services. And he must be desperate if he did it this sloppily in front of all of us.”

Even turns around and sees a few more guys laughing either on the floor or the couch. *Great.* Isak wasn’t that subtle after all.

Even doesn’t know what to expect going into the room. He wonders if Isak will ask him to leave him alone and never come near him again or if he’ll come up with some ridiculous scientific explanation to his arousal earlier in the morning. He wonders if Isak will ask him to stop looking at him or to forget about their two nights spent cuddling. He wonders why Isak is summoning him or if he’s summoning him in the first place or if he just wanted to burn him.
He’s angry. I guess he burns me when he’s angry.

Isak’s back is turned when Even goes into the room, so he awkwardly stands under the doorframe and waits.

“Sit,” Isak orders as he fumbles through a backpack with the same “Blue Ruin” logo that was imprinted on the tote bag he left with his mother.

“Huh?”

“Sit on the bed,” Isak explains, his voice detached, emotionless, cold, as if he hasn’t just burned Even in the living room.

“You just burned me.”

“You can’t take a hint to save your life,” Isak sighs. “I didn’t know what else to do.”


“Bed,” Isak repeats, dismissing him. And as much as it annoys him, Even does as he’s told and sits on the foot of the bed.

Isak turns around and walks towards him with plastic gloves, bandages, and creams, and other wound treatments.

“What are you—”

“Take off your shirt,” says Isak, his eyes half-lidded and disinterested.

“What?”

“Lift your shirt, Even. I want to see how bad it is.”

Right. The burn.

Even lifts his white shirt begrudgingly, his brows furrowed and his breaths curt. Then when Isak starts crouching in front of him, the frown between his brows dissolves and is replaced by a flush high on his cheeks.

“Shit,” Isak mutters, now on his knees on the floor between Even’s legs. If anyone were to come in right now, they’d have enough material to fuel rumors until the rest of the year.

“What?”

“My hand is imprinted on your chest,” Isak sighs and there’s finally a hint of emotion in his voice, a hint of remorse. “Does it hurt?”

“What do you think?” Even snaps then regrets it immediately. He regrets it because he’s not sure it hurts that much. It’s comforting in a strange way.

“I’m sorry,” Isak mumbles in a small voice, looking down at his own knees. “I didn’t mean to burn you. I didn’t know I would.”

“And did you know you would burn me just now? When you summoned me?”

Isak looks up, his green eyes locking onto Even’s and somehow melting away his resolve because
Even’s mouth is this close to hanging open right now. Green on blue. Blue on green. They’re standing too close and this position isn’t helping, Isak literally on his knees between his thighs and looking at him with so much intensity.

“I thought about it and my theory is that I burn you when I’m angry,” says Isak, looking away again. “I wanted to test it out, and while I can’t say for a fact that it’s the reason behind me burning you, I can at least say that the theory still stands.”

Even doesn’t know what to say, so he remains silent. Isak thinks so little of him that he’s willing to burn him left and right to prove his theories.

“Take off your shirt,” Isak requests nervously, then proceeds to put on plastic gloves.

“Why?” Even asks.

“I’m gonna treat your burn.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to,” says Isak. “I don’t like owing people things. I don’t like feeling bad and having a guilty conscience.”

“Maybe don’t go around burning people next time and you won’t have to feel guilty about anything. I don’t know.”

Isak stops, visibly affected by Even’s harsh words. And they are harsh. Even feels mean and he doesn’t like it. But Isak resumes his work a moment later, asking Even to pull the shirt over his head again.

His hands hover over Even’s burn and it causes him to jerk backwards almost on instinct. He doesn’t really think about it. His body flinches on its own, reacting to Isak’s hands on its own.

The look on Isak’s face is heartbreaking as if he’s seen this before, people developing reflexes to his proximity, as if he hasn’t expected Even’s to betray him like this.

“I’m sorry,” Even blurts out because he can’t bear the sadness Isak is exuding right now.

“You didn’t do anything to be sorry about.”

Isak’s hands are soothing and comforting through the medical gloves. His fingers are precise and whatever he’s rubbing on Even’s chest has miraculous effects. They don’t talk while Isak works his magic, still fitting between Even’s legs, his knees digging into the floor.

They don’t talk. They don’t mention the ‘boner’ incident, and they don’t mention Isak deliberately burning his shoulder to get his attention, and they don’t talk. The air is thick and heavy between them and Even’s heart is beating in his ears, in his throat, by his wrist. He can’t bear it, the closeness, the tension, Isak’s silence, Isak’s quiet rage.

“What were you angry about earlier?” Even asks and it comes out like a whine. He feels feverish and cold all at once.

“What? When?”

“When you touched my shoulder to make me join you here,” says Even. “You said you think you
burn me when you’re angry.”

“I don’t know. I tried to think about things that make me angry,” Isak shrugs as he applies a large bandage over Even’s pectoral muscles, blushing a bit.

“So your anger doesn’t have to be directed at me?”

“Not necessarily. I don’t think so.”

“You were glaring at me earlier during breakfast,” says Even.

“I was trying to get your attention, but you’re too dense,” Isak retorts, meets his gaze for a moment before looking away again. “Drove me nuts.”

“You could have literally just pulled me to the side.”

“Well, you were kinda busy with your friend Mikkel,” Isak huffs then turns to the side to grab something from his bag.

“Uhm, it’s Mikael. And you know that.”

“Right. Your boyfriend Mikael,” Isak rolls his eyes. “That’s the one.”

“What the fuck?”

Isak stands up and straightens his close while Even blinks at him in confusion.

“What?” Isak shrugs.

“Mikael is not my boyfriend.”

“Oh, so you just stick your tongue down everyone’s throat?”

What the hell.

Isak removes his gloves and throws them into the bin by the desk. He’s feigning nonchalance, but Even can tell from his body language that he’s annoyed and irritated, that he’s not following the script, that he’s not being himself.

“I don’t— I was just drunk,” says Even, feeling small for even needing to justify himself.

“Of course you were,” Isak sneers. “Were you also drunk this morning when you were touching each other in the kitchen?”

“What?” Even grimaces. “What is this? Are you jealous or something?”

“Excuse me? Jealous? Me?! What makes you think I’d want your tongue down my throat? Did you miss the part about me not being a homosexual like you?!”

Even snorts at that. And his chest vibrates with it, the laughter, the nonsensical joy. He can’t really contain it. Every time Isak utters the word ‘homosexual’, Even feels like combusting.

“Why are you laughing at me?!” Isak groans, his face flushed even more than usual now.

“You really need to stop saying it like that,” Even replies with a smile, his anger no longer there. Isak might be playing him right now, but his childish jabs fill Even with tenderness at the most importune
times. Like right now.

“Saying what?”

Even moves a bit more towards the end of the bed so that Isak is standing between his legs again. He
then pulls his knees together and traps Isak there. Part of him wondered if it would burn to entwine
their limbs like this, especially after Isak’s most recent tantrum. But it doesn’t. It’s comforting,
intimate, and Isak nearly loses his balance, both hands flying up to Even’s shoulders to steady
himself.

“Shit,” Isak mutters, taking his hands off immediately. “Stop it.”

“It didn’t burn,” Even says, looking up and smiling. “And this doesn’t either,” he adds, his eyes
looking down between their legs.

“I told you—”

“I think you burn me when I let you,” says Even, squeezing his knees together again and making
Isak’s legs bend and seek balance by placing his hands on Even’s shoulders once more. “I think that
as long as I expect you not to burn me, you won’t burn me.”

“Your logic is flawed,” Isak mumbles, his cheeks red and his lips cherry. He sounds a little out of
breath. “You’re not making any sense, as always.”

Even squeezes his thighs again without warning and pulls Isak closer by the legs until he nearly falls
on top of him. He revels in how Isak squeals in his arms, in how he has him trapped, both hands on
either side of his waist.

“We already established that I hurt you when you anger me. So I suggest that you let go right the
fuck now,” Isak pants as he struggles to remain standing without falling on top of Even.

“But you’re not angry right now,” says Even, and he smiles because he can see how affected Isak is,
how his chest is heaving and his breaths are stuttering. Isak is not angry. Isak is flustered.

“Even, I swear to god—”

“Sit,” Even orders before he gets to change his mind. It’s probably madness that takes over him, but
the way Isak is looking at him suggests that this is what he wants to hear, that he wants this.

“Excuse me—”

“Sit on my lap.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Isak huffs, but his legs are quivering and his fingers are making their
way from Even’s shoulders to the hair at the back of his neck like he doesn’t want to let go.

“Just for a second, yeah?” Even adds. “For an experiment. For science.”

“Science,” Isak blinks at him, no longer thrashing about.

“Yeah, this is science. Not homosexuality. Remember?” Even laughs.

“Shut up!” Isak groans. He tries to free himself from Even’s hold, but he pulls him in by the waist
until he’s comfortably settled on his lap.

It feels nice. Isak looks like a deer caught in headlights, but he doesn’t seem angry. He seems
surprised—maybe by how nice it feels—but he’s not angry. They stare at each other for a while, both of them panting faintly and roaming the other’s face with their eyes.

Hungry. Even is hungry. And Isak is melting in his embrace.

Even watches Isak unravel and unwind on his lap. He watches his pupils grow larger. He watches his face gets redder. He watches him overthink and breathe heavily and question everything. Even watches Isak’s walls go down one by one until they’re face to face with nothing standing in between them. Even watches him silently until the meanness in Isak’s gaze is no longer there. Until there’s nothing but vulnerability and tenderness there. Until he’s sure he can touch him like he’s dying to be touched.

“Hi,” Even whispers with a smile, bringing his right hand to cup Isak’s cheek, Isak who just leans into it like a kitten and closes his eyes for a moment. It’s so cute. Even wishes he could capture this moment on film.

“Hi,” Isak replies and it’s shy. It’s almost as though Even has a completely different person sitting on his lap.

“Is this okay?” Even asks, his thumb brushing over Isak’s cheekbone and his heart bursting at how he’s nearly purring at the touches.

Isak nods and it’s Even’s cue to embrace him fully, pulling him into his bare chest for a warm hug and disregarding his own burn.

They hug. Even runs his hands up and down Isak’s sweater while Isak pulls at his hair a bit. It’s a sweet hug. It’s an overwhelming hug. And halfway through, Even remembers that Isak had an existential crisis over waking up with a boner. He remembers and holds him the way he wishes someone would have done for him back then.

Even hugs him until Isak’s breathing evens out.

“I’m sorry I burned you,” Isak blurts out in the crook of his neck and it’s quiet and soft. “I’m sorry you keep getting hurt because of me.”

“It’s okay,” Even says and he means it. “We’re okay.”

“You don’t hate me?” Isak asks, pulling back from their hug while still straddling Even.

“I don’t hate you,” Even says, endeared by how Isak looks like he truly means the question. Then without thinking, he cups Isak’s face again and caresses his cheek as tenderly as he can, making his eyes widen and his hips jerk.

Oh.

They both sit there awkwardly while the stirring in Even’s pants becomes increasingly pronounced. Even is suddenly overwhelmed by the fear that Isak might burn him again, even if Even is the one with the problem between his legs this time around. He’s afraid that he might run and burst again. But he doesn’t. He sits there and thinks and thinks and thinks while Even braces himself.

“Nocturnal penile tumescence is a natural physiological phenomenon that happens three to five times a night, usually during REM sleep, to men that don’t suffer from erectile dysfunction,” says Isak, his cheeks flushed and his eyes looking down.

“You mean boners in the middle of the night?” Even laughs.
“Yes, whatever. It contributes to penile health and it’s not necessarily related to sexual thoughts,” Isak continues. “Furthermore, some researchers believe that it’s related to having a full bladder because both phenomena stimulate nerves in the same region.”

“So you ran away and burned me cause you really needed to pee?” Even summarizes with a grimace.

“Yes.”

“Do you always cry when you need to empty your bladder?”

Isak shoves him and leaves his lap, but he doesn’t burn him this time.

“Fuck you, Bech Næsheim,” he hisses, half-smiling.

“Well, at least we can cross out a theory for this whole burning business,” says Even as he laughs.

“What theory?”

“I was wondering if arousal had anything to do with you burning me.”

“Arousal? What the fuck?! I told you—”

“Yes, yes, you’re not a homosexual,” Even chuckles. “I meant my arousal. Me, I guess.”

Even then grins. He watches Isak’s face flush and flush and flush and doesn’t regret it one bit. He was aroused. In fact, he is aroused right now. Isak already knows about his attraction to the same gender. So it’s no use concealing it.

“You can’t— You can’t say shit like that to me,” Isak stammers.

“Shit like what? Arousal is a natural phenomenon that can be linked to a full bladder. Maybe I really need to pee right now.”

“Shut up!” Isak huffs then turns around to put his first-aid kit away, still blushing furiously.

“Or you know,” Even stands behind him until he’s close enough to his ear and whispers. “Maybe having hot guys on my lap does things to me physiologically. I don’t know. Who knows.”

“You’re the worst and I’m leaving!”

Even is still smiling on the ride back to Oslo. He rides with Mikael, Mats, and two other guys and tries not to think about Isak being in Arvid’s car and riding shotgun. He tries to focus on how it felt to have him in his arms, on his lap, how it felt to make him blush and squirm. He focuses on the fact that Isak prepared some speech on boners to justify his own. Even focuses on that.

His mother makes him pasta that night and he omits the ‘Going down the mountain to get Isak his meds’ incident to spare her heart. He knows in his own that he did it for the right reasons, but he wouldn’t blame her for thinking that he did it for others, that perhaps he simply wanted to get close to not existing anymore once again.

Even spares her the details. He tells her about Mats and Mikael and getting closer to Isak and it makes her happy.
“You should invite him over someday,” she suggests with a toothy smile. And when he dismisses it and blushing a bit, he catches her looking and is instantly filled with shame.

“Yeah, someday.”

“What’s the word of the day?” she asks, adjusting the glasses over the bridge of her nose.

Even shuffles awkwardly to get to his phone and open the app. He then stops rather abruptly.

“So? What’s the word?”

“Unrequited,” says Even. “Word of the day is unrequited.”

Heraklit
21:23

**Experiment 1: Gym Incident**

Where: School.
When: Day
Conditions:
- Isak: Sick, sweaty, post physical activity
- Even: regular condition, ? *(please elaborate)*
Nature of contact: full body, Even carried Isak from Gym to Doctor’s office (~40 meters)
Results:
- Isak: significant decrease in pain levels, soothing effects
- Even: Burn *(Even, please elaborate on this section)*
Conclusion: ?

What’s this?

Documenting our experiments so far

What’s so funny

? of course i am
We need a template and we need to write this down
To be able to come up with results/conclusions

Results for what

For why i burn you sometimes & sometimes i don’t

Does this mean we can do more experiments

We’re stuck with this thing so we might as well

Can i suggest experiments

I’m not doing THAT again
What do you mean? What’s ‘that’

Earlier
In the cabin

??

You can’t order me around again ok?

When did i??

“Sit on me”

Want me to come over rn?

NO I MEANT EARLIER WHAT ARE YOU

Lol jk jk
That was for science
not homosexuality

You’re an idiot

I know you’re a genius or whatever but
you need to stop hurting my feelings

I’m using the word idiot in the context
of playfulness, not as an attempt to
undermine your intelligence

How are your reading/comprehension skills?

Now you’re just being rude

Rudeness is subjective
To you, an emotional being, I might sound harsh
But to me, I’m just being logical

Me? An emotional being?
I’ve literally seen you cry 3 times already

Fuck you

Who’s emotional now

goodnight bye

See you at school tomorrow?

I’m obviously going
And you’re going
And you have eyes that work
So unless you go blind tonight or I somehow become invisible
I guess you will

Why are you like this?
Even is giddy when Isak makes his way to Physics class in his green puffer jacket and a snapback and a shy smile curling his lips. He’s giddy when Isak turns around and waves in his direction for a fraction of a second, acknowledging him and his existence for the first time ever and eliciting a few reactions from their classmates. He’s giddy when Isak keeps turning around like he knows he’s looking at the back of his head.

Even is giddy until their teacher asks him a question he doesn’t have the answer to, and he has to scramble and admit that he has no idea yet again.

“The kinetic energy is the greatest at position B because it’s the lowest,” says Isak in his usual detached and cold voice. “By the time the bob reaches point B, the original potential energy has been fully transformed into kinetic energy.”

“That’s correct, Isak,” says their teacher, Mr. Eriksson. “Although next time, I would appreciate it if you raised your hand before answering.”

“Noted, Mr. Eriksson,” Isak replies. “Although next time, I would appreciate it if you asked questions relevant to the material we’re studying, especially since we won’t be going into kinetic energy of Pendulum Motion until next week and we barely covered force analysis.”

The back row bursts into laughter while Even’s mouth hangs open before him. Old man Eriksson doesn’t look too pleased with Isak right now. It looks like that hard work giving him validation has gone down the drain because the look on Eriksson’s face is spelling ‘How dare you’.

“Valtersen, can I speak to you after class?”

“Yes sir. I’d be more than happy to refresh your memory and walk you through what you taught us so far.”

“Why did you do that?” Even asks him later in the pool. His chest doesn’t burn that much, but Isak is still angry that Even is subjecting his skin to chlorine.

“I didn’t do anything,” Isak rolls his eyes and floats in his black bodysuit. They’re alone again and it’s nice.

“Eriksson is a very annoying prick. You don’t wanna be on his bad side,” says Even.

“But did I lie? This man gets paid to teach all of you something, not to pick on people who don’t give a shit about physics.”

“Hey now. Who said I don’t give a shit?” Even frowns.

“Excuse me? I could feel your eyes piercing holes through the back of my head. You were staring at
“Huh?” Even scoffs. “Don’t flatter yourself. I was looking at the board which happens to be at the front of the class. And so does your head.”

“Right,” Isak snorts. “So tell me about the Sinusoidal nature of Pendulum motion. I’m listening.”

“You’re being condescending again,” Even warns him, splashing him with water.

“Excuse me? Is this how you treat someone who saved your ass today?”

“Who said I needed saving? I was just gonna tell you to kiss my ass with his pendulum motion,” Even laughs.

“See? You don’t care.”

“But I do. I do care about physics when it’s about real stuff,” says Even, swimming closer until they’re floating face to face.

“Real stuff. Huh. I didn’t realize physics was witchcraft.”

“You know what I mean! Ugh,” Even groans. “Stuff like that force stuff. How there’s always an action and reaction.”

“Newton’s third law.”

“That one.”

“Well, consider kinetic energy and extension of that,” says Isak.

“I don’t think I’m gonna be swinging from a pendulum bob anytime soon. So it’s safe to say that I don’t care about kinetic energy.”

“But it’s not just Pendulums. You have kinetic energy, too.”

“Can we please stop talking about Physics. My brain hurts,” Even sighs. “I know your bladder gets full talking about Physics, but it doesn’t do it for me.”

“Oh my god!” Isak groans then proceeds to splash Even with water, making him laugh and turns to the side to protect his face. “Enough with the bladder talk!”

“You started it,” Even laughs and laughs and laughs, then dives underwater to pull him by his feet.

Isak goes down instantly and without resistance, as if his muscles gave out. Even wonders if anyone has ever been playful with him underwater, if anyone has ever touched him like this. Probably not. Because when they come up for air, Isak is choking and coughing and looks completely taken off guard.

“What the hell, Bech Næsheim?!” he shouts.

“What?” Even smiles, swims closer until he’s in Isak’s face. “I don’t think you can burn anyone underwater.”

“You don’t know that.”

“But we could,” Even raises an eyebrow and gets even closer, trapping Isak against the edge of the
“What do you mean?”

“That’s time for experiment number five. What do you think?” says Even.

“And what would that be for? What do you want to test?”

“If you’ll burn me underwater.”

“We already know that you’re an exception and that I don’t always burn you when you’re dry,” Isak shrugs, looking slightly flustered by how close he’s floating next to Even.

“So? We should at least try in water. Maybe you won’t burn me at all. I can try pushing your buttons and making you angry and we can check if you burn me.”

Isak looks at him through wet lashes like he’s considering it. He’s cute like this, Even thinks. His eyelashes are long and obscene and his eyes look somehow greener. He wishes he could see him with wet curly hair. Maybe in the summer. Maybe.

“What do you have in mind?” Isak asks, his detached look back on his face, his walls high.

That won’t do.

“Something like this,” Even says before pulling him by the waist away from the walls of the pool.

Even realizes that this is the closest he’s come to touching his naked body, the bodysuit being nothing but a thin layer separating them. Isak probably comes to the same realization, because he yelps and flushes instantly when Even places both hands under his thighs and settles between his legs.

“See? You’re not burning me,” Even smiles up at him, locking both arms under his buttocks and trying to remain cool and composed.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” Isak stammers, both arms by his sides, looking the shiest Even has ever seen him, but insisting on keeping his front.

“Touch me,” says Even then watches Isak’s eyes widen. “You should touch me too. Otherwise, it’s not a real experiment.”

“What are you talking about?” Isak rolls his eyes. “What do you know about real experiments?”


Isak does as he’s told. He brings both arms to Even’s neck and links them there, hesitant at first then not so much when he sees Even smiling up at him.

“How does it feel?” says Isak.

“It feels great,” Even grins. “How do you feel?”

“I feel— I feel good,” Isak replies and it’s so cute that Even wishes they could get even closer.

Isak surges forward and hugs him then, knocking the air right out of his lungs. Isak just hugs Even for no reason, buries his head in the crook of his neck and hugs him tight and close, both legs wrapped tightly around his waist.
Isak hugs him like someone who’s finally allowed to hug, wraps himself around him and smothers him like a big dog who’s too excited to see his human after a long day.

Even is overwhelmed. Even can feel Isak’s happiness and it’s contagious. Even is happy.

“I feel so good,” Isak mumbles into his neck again, making Even hold on tighter.

“How good?” Even asks. “‘Homosexual’ boner good or ‘bladder full’ boner good?”

Isak groans and shoves him away. Then their hugging session turns into a drowning session, with Isak wrapping both arms around Even’s neck and dragging him underwater. Even is so surprised by his strength that he swallows water and is left panting once they come up for air.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, wow. Were you a wrestler or something in your past life?” Even laughs, but Isak doesn’t.

“I did martial arts when I was younger,” says Isak.

“Martial arts—”

Oh.

What.

How could Isak do martial arts and practice with people without burning them? Was that even allowed? How younger? Was Isak actually born like this? Even realizes once again that he doesn’t know much about Isak and his condition.

He would ask, but the light seems to have gone off in Isak’s eyes. This experiment is over.

Isak hangs around while Even smokes his last cigarette of the day after the pool. He’s limiting himself to three now for his mother’s sake.

Isak’s father is supposed to pick him up from the school’s pool, so they both wait by a bench. Even smoking and Isak waiting. It’s comforting despite the cold. Even realizes that he doesn’t even realize it’s cold when he’s with him, Isak, his presence a constant source of warmth and comfort.

“Are you sure your dad is coming?” Even asks when he’s finished with his cigarette and the urge to take out a new one kicks in.

“He would call otherwise. He’s very anal like that.”

“Anal.”

“God!” Isak groans, shoving Even with his backpack while he laughs. “You’re a child!”

“Says the guy who needs his dad to come pick him up.” Low. not nice. “Sorry. Shit.” Even stammers. “I’m such a piece of shit. It’s like I’m on autopilot when I’m with the others and I don’t even think.”

“It’s okay,” says Isak. “I say mean stuff to you all the time.”

“It’s not okay. Just because someone hurts you, doesn’t mean you have to hurt them too.”
Even starts his fourth cigarette while Isak watches, unashamed this time. He just watched him, studying his side profile and making him self-conscious.

“What?” Even asks, with a raised eyebrow, trying to conceal his nervousness.

“I want to say something but I don’t know how,” says Isak.

“You shouldn’t bite your tongue. It ruins it. Just say it however it comes out.”

“It’s stupid, but I’m very glad we have this thing,” Isak mumbles.

“This thing?”

“This physical pull. This thing. It’s annoying that I want to be with you all the time. But it’s the closest I’ve felt to being happy in a long time,” Isak shrugs. “So I’m glad. I guess.”

Even looks at Isak until he meets his gaze, all shy and precious and all. Something catches in his chest, something, tenderness, maybe, probably, most definitely. Even reaches with his free hand and cups Isak’s cheek, brushes his thumb over his cheekbones and watches his eyes flutter close. It’s instant. It’s magical. The way Isak fold into himself whenever Even touches him like this. Skin to skin. Even wonders how Isak would react to kissing, to nakedness, if he would combust from simple foreplay. Even wonders what he would look like in his sheets, wonders what his skin looks like when it’s kissed and licked, and suddenly he can’t breathe.

Isak opens his eyes like he heard his thoughts, and for a moment there’s no more air around them. It’s absurd how Even can’t tell if it’s a metaphor or if the universe is actually conspiring to get them to touch and take care of one another. Even doesn’t know.

“It’s like the universe wants this,” Isak whispers, echoing his thoughts, and gluing himself to Even’s side. “It wants this so bad.”

Even wraps an arm around Isak’s back and brings him into his own body for a hug. He throws the cigarette bud on the ground and stomps on it. He’ll remember to dispose of it later, when Isak’s father shows up and he can finally breathe again. When Isak is no longer here pressed against him and staring at him with stars in his eyes.

They hug again, harder and messier this time. It’s sad and desperate and their winter jackets are separating them. But the way Isak throws himself at him breaks his heart. Everything about Isak breaks his heart. It’s Science, he reminds himself. This is an experiment and Isak is trying to push the limits of his theory. That’s all. It’s all this is. Isak is not a ‘homosexual’. He’s explained it very clearly. But this heat, this proximity, this want is eating at Even from the inside out.

“Why did you stand up to Eriksson earlier?” Even asks because the thought just popped in his head and he needs to know why Isak bothered. He needs to know.

“He always picks on you,” Isak replies with his eyes closed and his arms still around Even’s neck. “I don’t like it.”

“You’re looking out for me?” Even feels warm inside, so incredibly warm.

“You look out for me too.”

“So we’re like friends?” Even asks, feeling giddy for some odd reason, his arms tightly locked around his waist still.
“Well, I wouldn’t—”

“Isak? Isak, is that you?!”

A woman’s voice suddenly interrupts their odd hugging session, causing both of them to jump a few feet apart. Even is startled and confused, but Isak is nearly hyperventilating. Isak looks like the world is ending.

“Is—” Even tries to reach for him, but the woman beats him to it, now firmly standing between the two of them.

“What in the world is this, Isak?! Who is this? What is happening? Why was this young man touching you?!” she shouts, making Even’s heart sink.

“Mom—”

Oh no.

“What were you doing to my son?!” she turns around to direct her wrath at Even who feels cornered and ashamed. “Who are you? Why would you touch my son like that? How can you even touch him?”

“Mom, please!” Isak begs and Even has never heard or seen him this way, utterly defeated.

“Stay away from my son, do you hear me?!” she warns with her index finger in Even’s face. “Don’t you ever come near my son again. Have I made myself clear? Isak is not a homosexual. I will not stand for such blasphemy!”

I guess that's where he got his terminology. 'Homosexual'.

“Mom, let’s just go home. Please,” Isak tries again and Even notices how he can’t touch her, how he has to beg while hovering, how she’s flinching.

“Of course the devil would do this to you, my darling son! Curse you and ruin you for anyone’s touch except for the degenerates’ themselves,” she says, clasping both hands together as if she’s had an epiphany. “Isak, my son. Can’t you see that this is a test? This is the devil tempting you, allowing another soul just as rotten to touch you. But it’s a trap. And you have to stay strong. Okay, darling? If you’re good, the curse will lift. I am sure of it. Okay?”

Even watches the entire scene from the ceiling. Or at least it feels that way. He’s somehow left his body, watching everything unfold from above. The experience feels surreal. Being called a degenerate by a woman who’s his mother’s age, being told to stay away, being associated with the devil. Even feels dirty and ashamed. Even wants to disappear.

But what brings him down, what keeps him from floating away and leaving his body for good is Isak’s face. It’s emotionless and carries no emotion whatsoever for someone being humiliated by his mother. It’s void and blank for someone called an abomination, a cursed child, a blasphemy.

Isak is probably dissociating too. Maybe. Is this why? Is this why you’re not ‘a homosexual’?

Even doesn’t remember how he got home, but he remembers Isak mouthing for him to leave, asking him, begging him. And so Even left. He turned on his heel, apologized to Isak’s mother and ran home. And when he rounds the corner to his house, he cries.

He cries for himself and for Isak. Even cries.
Isak doesn’t come to school the next day and he doesn’t the day after that. Even calls him Wednesday evening and is surprised when Lea picks up.

“He’s not feeling too good,” she explains over the phone. “Mom relapsed again, so it’s a bit crappy at home right now.”

“Relapsed?”

“My mom is not too well mentally, so.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway. Don’t come over, if you were thinking of coming over or something.”

Even goes over because he is Even. And when Lea opens the door, she does a quick adorable dance before asking for a high-five.

“You’re so easy,” she says.

“What?”

“I say don’t come, you show up under a minute. Reverse psychology 101.”

“I don’t follow—”

“Isak is downstairs. He hasn’t left in days. Something about being so embarrassed he wishes he could disappear,” says Lea. “His words, not mine. According to his secret Reddit at least.”

“You still stalk him.”

“Oh course,” Lea shrugs. “I couldn’t ask you to come directly cause he will kill me. Now please go cheer him up or something. He thinks you never want to see him again.”

Isak is already dressed when Even makes his way down the stairs and he doesn’t even look the tiniest bit surprised to see him. He simply looks ashamed and remorseful.

“Uh, surprise?” Even tries awkwardly.

“We don’t have much time. Come on,” says Isak as he shoves things into a small backpack that looks like it’s about to burst.
“What?”
“We have to go.”
“Go where?”
“To a bar,” says Isak as he makes his way to a large window by his bed.
“Huh?”
“I’ll go first to check if anybody’s around,” Isak tells him before climbing his own window to escape. He looks around then ushers for Even to follow. “Come on!” he whispers.
“What the fuck?” Even whispers right back.
“Do things now. Explain later.”
Isak makes him run for a few streets, and Even can barely compute what just happened, so he runs. They run until they’re out of breath, until it hurts to move.
.
“I texted you,” says Even. They’re sitting next to each other at a Kebab place and Isak is eating like he hasn’t had food in days.
“My mom took my phone,” says Isak.
“What? You’re not twelve.”
“Sometimes she thinks I am,” says Isak. “She’s, uh, she has these, uh, psychotic episodes. Hasn’t been lucid in a while.”
“Oh,” Even gasps, his heart clenching in his heart. Isak hasn’t said anything bad about mental illness but it still makes his heart race. “I see.”
“It’s no use fighting her or explaining things when she’s this way,” Isak shrugs. “She took my phone and locked me down there. And if she saw me leave she would have flipped a shit and called the police. She did that once.”
“Isn’t she gonna notice that you’re gone?”
“Lea thinks you’re staying over so she’ll guard my door and make up excuses for me,” says Isak.
“You knew Lea would say that to me and make me show up?”
“I planned for it, I guess. Wrote some fake posts on social media cause I know she stalks me. I knew she’d make something happen.”
“You manipulate your own sister?!” Even scoffs while Isak eats his fries.
“Well, I guess that’s how we operate in this family.”
“You could have planned something together.”
“Don’t want her to get in trouble if I get caught,” says Isak and that seems to pacify Even. Isak manipulated her, but for her own hypothetical good.
“What did you write in your posts?” Even asks.

“Get me drunk and maybe I’ll tell you.”

.

They end up at a bar, and Even recognizes the logo and the name—Blue Ruin—the moment they step inside. It’s a punk bar, with loud angsty music playing over the speakers, and Isak is walking around like he’s home, high-fiving most waitresses and staff members through his thick gloves while Even hides behind him and wonders where they are and what’s going on.

“Where are we?” he asks.

“Blue Ruin.”

“I can read, yes—”

Even’s witty comeback is interrupted by two older men coming to greet Isak who offers them a blinding smile and fist-bumps. They don’t touch him but they don’t make a fuss about it either, and Even quickly realizes that these are Isak’s people.

“Isak, glad you could make it, buddy.”


“Well, Even. Your tab is on the house tonight!”

Even smiles and shoots Isak a look.

“Make sure to grab a good seat,” Isak winks.

.

Isak is a drummer. Even knew that already. What he didn’t know is that he actually plays in an actual band. Nothing too big, an amateur band doing mostly covers with two forty-somethings with managerial jobs, a female tattoo artist on the keyboard, a twenty-five year old medical student on vocals, and Isak on the drums.

Even is in disbelief for the first two songs. Isak is in the back with his drumset and his snapback and his arms are actually showing this time. Even doesn’t understand rock, or punk, or metal, or whatever angry music they’re currently playing, but he loves it.

He loves it because Isak looks happy. Because his eyes are closed and his curls are wild and he’s smiling so wide. Because Isak is not stuck in his basement feeling sad and small and insignificant. Because there are things that make Isak smile this big and love life this much. Because Isak is a real person with dreams and aspirations and because he’s sharing this with Even.

.

“How the fuck?” Even laughs, still in disbelief, when Isak finishes his set. He hands him a bottle of water and a towel.

“You’re gonna have to be more precise than that if you’re expecting an answer,” Isak grins. “‘How’ implies that you want to know how something works, but the following two words don’t carry much meaning, I’m afraid.”
“God, shut up! My bladder is already full. If you start being condescending to me, I might pop a real homosexual boner,” Even laughs.

"Oh my god, stop it!” Isak flushes.

Even proceeds to help him dry his hair, only stopping when he realizes that Isak has stilled too. “Sorry,” he says, peering at Isak under the towel.

“It’s okay,” Isak replies, looking around them a bit. “They’re chill here.”

“How do they even let you in? You’re like a child.”

“I’m Seventeen, Even! And I’m a performer. There’s different rules for performers.”

“How did you even meet these people?”

“Uh, the Internet?”

Even buys him a drink at the bar and Isak blinks at him once or twice.

“What is this?” he asks, both arms folded on the counter, his chin resting on his hands.

“You said to buy you a drink,” says Even.

“I told you I don’t drink.”

“You said it’s to avoid hurting people.”

“Last time I checked, I still burn everybody else,” says Isak.

“Yes, but I’m with you now. I won’t let it happen.”

“How?”

“I’ll stop you if you feel like touching other people,” Even grins. “And I’ll keep strangers from touching you as well. How does that sound?”

“You’re gonna act like a possessive douche for the night while I get sloppy?”

“Yes.”

They make their way to the bathroom so that Isak can have the three drinks Even ordered for him. He doesn’t wish to anger Helga, the bar owner, and he knows she has eyes everywhere.

Isak chugs most of the first drink by the sink while Even films him on his phone and laughs. Isak shoves him through most of the videos. And by the third drink, he actually reaches for Even’s phone to take selfies.

“Selfies?” Even snorts.

“Yes!” Isak cheers and he’s an adorable drunk, Even decides. “Do the filters. The snapchat filters!”

“What? Who are you?!” Even bursts into laughter while Isak pouts and glares at him.

Isak wins whatever argument they were having because they’re both sitting on the windowsill in the
bathroom, side to side, and taking pictures with the dog filter on Snapchat. It’s not even funny, but Isak is about to fall over from clutching his stomach and laughing to his heart’s content. It’s a beautiful sound, Even tells himself. Isak laughing.

“Do another one,” Isak demands, and they’re so close that they’re nearly on each other’s laps, nothing separating them but their t-shirts. They’re both in t-shirts. So close.

“I gotta admit I never thought I’d take dog filter selfies with you,” Even snorts. “Like you didn’t strike me as that type of guy.”

“Do the one with the weird mouths,” says Isak. “No not the flower crown. That’s so girly.”

“No, it’s not,” Even scoffs.

“Yes, it is. Look at the makeup and the mascara and stuff. I want to one with the big mouth.”

“Jesus, who are you?” Even laughs while Isak makes a ridiculous face at the camera and wraps both arms around his chest. They take perhaps fifty pictures and Even saves all of them to his camera roll.

“You asked who I am, huh?” Isak mumbles when they start making their way back to the dance floor at the bar. “I guess I’m someone who never got to take stupid pictures like these with people.”

Oh.

“It’s stupid but I want to do everything while I can,” Isak says with a smile as he walks backwards. 

While he can.

“I don’t want to have regrets again,” he adds before turning around and starting to jump to the music.

Again? What is he regretting?


Even doesn’t really know how to dance to punk music so he just bangs his head to the rhythm. Isak tells him the names of the bands playing, then stops to give him the history of System of a Down, whose song he was apparently playing the first time Even visited his house.

Isak is drunk and happy and he jumps around and dances, and the night is young and the night is his. Even watches him until his heart starts to swell in his chest, until it starts to feel heavy and full, so full. This boy, with his anger and his knowledge and his talent and his big heart. This boy, who’s deprived of everything he so desperately yearns for.

Some girl in a leather jacket and high heeled shoes approaches Isak on the dance floor, and it springs Even to leave his seat and meet him halfway. He wraps his arm around Isak’s shoulders and brings him to his side, feeling the way Isak melts against him, flushed face and all.

But his idea doesn’t work because another girl joins the previous one and they’re now a foursome. Some people are gay, Suzanne.

Isak turns in Even’s arms and laughs against his collar and it gives him an idea. He wraps an arm around his neck and leans in to press a quick kiss to Isak’s forehead while the taller of the two girls talks about some band Even has never heard of.

Oh shit.
Isak nearly melts in his arms, his legs almost giving out. He completely latches onto Even after the kiss to his forehead, completely and unapologetically, and it makes Even weak in the knees.

*This boy.*

Isak has never been kissed. Even knows it. He knows it in his bones.

Even has to excuse both of them, because Isak looks like he’s trying to merge with Even and become one person, like he’s trying to hide inside his body, like he’s trying to fit inside him. Isak is drunk and out of control, and Even wants to know how he would react to a kiss on the mouth. He just wants to know. An experiment. The thought is maddening and all too consuming. And Even is dying to know.

*Isak would never forgive me.*

Isak dances, drags Even by the hand and dances. Women and men alike gather around them and Even remembers his mission, the sole reason he’s here.

Isak chats with an older woman by the bar, so Even settles behind him and wraps both arms around his waist, hooking his chin over Isak’s shoulder. And perhaps the one drink he had is clouding his judgement a bit, because Isak never asked him to act like his actual boyfriend. He never asked Even to nuzzle against his neck from behind and tell him jokes and make him laugh. He never asked Even to hold him this tightly. He never asked Even to stand this close and play with his hand. Isak never asked for this.

“I’m going crazy,” Isak grabs Even’s face in both hands and tells him. “You drive me crazy.”

“I hate the word crazy. I can’t stand it,” Even replies, his own hands coming up to cover Isak’s.

“When I no longer have this,” Isak gestures between them at the word. “I think I will really lose it. I won’t bear it.”

“This.”

“You know what’s the worst feeling in the world, Even? Do you know?” Isak asks, his fingers spreading wider on Even’s face, holding his gaze, his touch so warm, so tender.

“What?”

“The worst feeling in the world is when you lose something you thought you would have forever. Something you always took for granted.”

“What are you talking about?” Even asks, his brows furrowed now because Isak is holding his face like he will die without the touch, like he’s on the verge of sobbing, of breaking.

“You know, Nietzsche said that the reason heartbreak is so colossal isn’t because of the suffering itself, but because of the *senseless suffering* we put ourselves through,” says Isak, his eyes big and green and teary. “The pain itself is surmountable and it can propel people to greatness and give them drive. Senseless suffering, however, has no end because it makes no sense. It has no purpose. It’s a never-ending cycle of *Why am I like this? Why did this happen to me? Why can’t I be happy? Who’s ever going to want me? Who am I if I can’t be touched? Am I human if I can’t be seen or heard? Why me? Why am I never good enough? Is there a purpose to my existence? Who’s ever going to touch me like I want to be touched? Who’s willing to burn just so I can feel alive? Who’s going to kiss me? Can somebody please kiss me?! Can somebody fucking touch me?!”
“Isak—”

“And so I’m stuck in my senseless suffering because nothing about me makes sense. Because my heartbreak doesn’t have a purpose. Because I thought my heartbreak had a face, a face with kind green eyes, and big bushy eyebrows, and wild curly hair, and a golden heart, but my heartbreak doesn’t have a face. How I wish my heartbreak had a face! Someone I could mentally throw darts at. How I wish I could have just gone through shit at the hands of someone. I wish, Even. I wish! But I’m in a perpetual heartbreak with no face, and I don’t know how to deal with it. I don’t know shit except this!”

Isak squeezes his face as he pants. This.

Isak throws up twice on their way to Even’s home and he’s already thinking about what he’ll tell his mother the next day. He hopes Isak’s hangovers aren’t too bad and that he’ll be able to get home before noon. He hopes Lea won’t get in trouble. He hopes Isak won’t throw up on his bed.

Even keeps a hand on Isak’s mouth to keep him from waking his mother when they home, and he nearly trips and falls when Isak kisses his palm. He actually kisses it. He kisses it two more times, and Even’s heart is full from the tenderness in everything Isak does when he’s not being calculating.

Even helps Isak out of his clothes, lends him an oversized t-shirt, gets him a new toothbrush from the other bathroom, helps him brush his teeth and wash his feet, then drops him on the bed and lets him curl around him in nothing but a shirt and his boxers.

This boy. It's like he’s trying to kill him.

“Even,” Isak mumbles in the dark.

“Yes?”

“I want to do something but I don’t want you to be offended,” he says, slurring every word while playing with Even’s hair and holding on tight, so tight.

“As long as you don’t wake my mother, I won’t be offended.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

Isak sits up a bit on his elbows, both of them still in quasi-darkness, Even on his back and Isak towering over him with one hand gently caressing his forehead.

“What?” Even chuckles.

“I want to say thank you,” Isak says and it’s adorable, Even is writhing beneath him.

“What for?”

“For being you,” Isak whispers and Even can make out his features now despite the darkness, his eyes having adjusted to it. He keeps stroking Even’s forehead with his thumb, his touch unhurried, but so generous for someone who’s starved for this his entire life.

“I’m nothing special.”
“But you are,” Isak smiles. “Trust me.”

Even finds courage in the words he’s always wanted to hear. You are special. You matter. From someone who knows the real him, from someone who doesn’t just see the act he puts on. Even finds courage in those words and cups Isak’s face, brushing his thumb right below his left eye and feeling him melt. It’s dark but he still smiles. Isak is too sweet for his fragile heart.

Then it happens.

Isak leans in, and Even holds his breath and closes his eyes.

But he doesn’t kiss him on the mouth.

Isak kisses him on the cheek. And it’s sweet and tender like him. Sweet and conflicted and confused and raw and gentle, like him.

“Oops, I missed,” Isak blurts out once he’s lying on his chest, making Even burst into laughter.

“Shh!” Isak puts his finger over his mouth. “Julie is sleeping!”

“You are not on first name basis with my mother!” Even scoffs.

“But I am. I have her as ‘Julie heart emoji’ on my phone,” Isak mumbles.

“You text my mother?!”

“Yes, she’s so nice.”

“Isak!”

“You can check,” says Isak, reaching for his phone from under the pillow. “Here.”

Even doesn’t mean to look but there are about eight texts on his lockscreen, all from someone named Jonas. Jonas. Jonas.

‘You’re not Jonas.’ Even remembers Lea and her father’s remarks. Who is he.

“You have texts,” says Even. “Do you want to check them?”

“Is it my mom or Lea?” Isak mumbles, settling on his stomach on Even’s bed and starting to doze off.

“It’s from Jonas.”

“Can you unlock it and read them for me? Please? My head is spinning.”

“Are you sure?” Even asks.

“Yes.”

---

Jonas

23:03

Isak what the fuck are you plotting? Are you trying to get expelled from every school in Oslo? I was at a party just now and Penetrator Chris was telling William about you pulling something with
Even finishes reading the texts out loud and he feels anxiety settle in his bones. What is Isak up to? Why is he involved with the penetrators and the Yakuza and Arvid’s bus when they’re all actively fighting all over town? What does this Jonas guy mean by ‘experimenting’? What does he mean by ‘like last time’? Is there someone else? Has Isak gone through this before? With someone else?

‘The worst feeling in the world is when you lose something you thought you would have forever. Something you’ve always taken for granted.’

Isak had this with someone and lost it.

Even is not special. Once again he’s number two or number three. Once again Even is no one’s priority. Even is a set of arms to take everyone’s pain away but his own. He’s the hollow supporting character nobody sees or truly cares about. He’s the friend that picks up phone calls at five in the morning and doesn’t have a single soul to turn to when he needs to scream into the void. Even is the butt of every joke. The guy with the perpetual empty smile on his face. The guy with perpetual and faceless heartbreak. The guy who has to calculate every interaction and make sure he has enough energy to smile for the day. The guy who lies to everything and everyone to feign normalcy. The guy who cracks dick jokes with a closeted guy when he’s not even able of loving himself, when he’s ashamed himself. The guy with the senseless suffering. The guy with the unrequited love.

Even is not special.

Once again.

‘Who’s Jonas?’ he asks when Isak barely reacts to the texts themselves, feeling a sharp tug at his heartstrings.

‘My friend since childhood,’ Isak mumbles, half asleep. ‘But we barely talk anymore.’

‘Why not?’

‘I burned him. I sent him to the hospital for a long time.’

Oh.

‘He sounds like he’s over it though,’ Even tries, despite the hurt in his own heart.

‘Yes, but I’m not,’ says Isak, snuggling closer to Even until he’s lying on top of his chest, one hand over his heart, right where the burn from the cabin is. ‘I have to stay away from him.’

Even knows why, but he still asks.

‘Why?’

‘Because I love him.’
dun dun dun. misunderstandingsss
.
i think it's important for me to explore the whole 'you only like me because i'm capable of touching you' side of the story which is Even's self-made angst.

Isak is constantly plotting here even when he's having tender moments with Even. Even starts doubting him a bit after his doubts get confirmed. but he's seen how his mother treats him and Isak breaks his heart overall. this chapter was really about them getting to spend some time together without being at each other's throats constantly fighting. it's also about Even falling for him a bit and allowing himself to be openly attracted to another guy in front of that other guy.
.
Im excited to post the next chapter (it's a bit wild. Isak is WILD and he's a master SNAKE) when i have time to write it pls keep me in your thoughts haha. i'm looking for an apartment but i'm trying to avoid moving on my birthday.

thank you for your comments and messages and art. you guys are amazing. i'll post a playlist with your recs as soon as i have 2 seconds.

THANK YOU FOR ALT <3333
what do you think Isak is plotting? wink wink.
hope you felt something, anything. let me know <33 *hugsss*
Philosophy of Jealousy

Chapter Summary

"I can't function. I miss you."
"Science. Science is so strong tonight."
"Shut up."

ft Even trying to push Isak away, scientific cuddling, scheming, Jonas, Isak ending people, the Penetrators, a party, ankles, shotgunning, hugging, Isak in other people's clothes, and undeniable h-o-m-o-s-e-x-u-a-l-i-t-y

Chapter Notes

hi hi hi this week was a nightmare but writing this helped me focus on something. thank you for the love <33
Song for this chapter: Wyatt - Attention (Thank youuu for the rec in the comments!!!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Even doesn’t sleep. His chest feels too tight, too small to bear the havoc inside him.

Isak is fast asleep in his arms, his cheek over his heart, his lips parted and brushing against his collarbones, his breathing deep and even like he’s in the darkest of slumbers.

Even can barely breathe, let alone think, the ambivalence eating at him.

The heart versus the mind. The mind versus the heart. His mind advising him to move away and let Isak roll into the pillow, and his heart urging him to hold on tighter, to roll him on his back and maybe kiss him on the mouth until he wakes and kisses him back.

The heart versus the mind. The mind versus the heart.

Even doesn’t sleep. Not a wink. And when he tries to move, barely an inch, Isak wraps a hand around his wrist in his sleep, trapping him with his touch—a metaphor for how Even feels around him, cornered, mesmerized in spite of himself, completely under his spell.

Even starts questioning if Isak is even drunk or asleep, if he knows how much power he has over him, if this is all an act, if he’s trying to kill him softly. But he decides that Isak wouldn’t go as far as making himself throw up just to end up in his arms like this. Heart to heart. His thumb over Even’s pulse, right over his scars. He wonders if Isak has noticed, if he cares at all.

Isak stirs and brushes against Even’s wrist again in his sleep, pressing a kiss to his collarbone like he’s dreaming of putting his lips on his skin, on his bones. And it makes Even shiver. Not from the cold in his body, for his skin is ablaze, but from the cold in his heart, for he can feel it break.

I barely like you. But why does it hurt so much to know that your heart belongs to someone else.
Even rolls Isak on his back—gently, always gently despite his frustration and anguish—and hugs him until he feels two arms wrap around him, two strong and clingy arms reciprocating his desperation, his need to hold and be held. Isak’s body is firm and strong. Even tends to forget sometimes.

Isak starts making the neediest sounds in his sleep. If he’s faking this, then he has no soul. But Even doesn’t care, not right now. He can have this, just this one time. He holds him and breathes him in and tries to commit how it feels to have him in his arms—like this, this close, so close—to memory. He squeezes his eyes shut until he no longer feels like crying and holds Isak until he forgets how lonely and alone he is.

*I’ve never felt as lonely as I do with you here in my arms.*

Even sleeps.

Even awakes to soft and hesitant touches, to a thumb tracing his eyebrow, to a palm gently cupping his cheek, to a fingertip brushing the outline of his face. Even awakes to tender and careful touches that spread warmth in his heart, in his limbs. Even awakes to Isak touching him like he’ll bend and break if not treated with care. Even awakes to Isak looking at him like these touches mean something to him.

“Hi,” Isak whispers, tucking both of his hands under his chin and looking smaller than he’s ever seen him.

He’s blushing, and Even almost wants to touch him, to roll him on his back and make him whine and say ‘please’ again, and again, and again.

*Get your shit together.*

“Hi,” Even says in his groggy morning voice before bringing a hand to his own hair and yawning.

He feels strangely well-rested although he can’t remember when sleep got the best of him the previous night. He feels strangely numb, empty, like he’s recalibrating and trying to figure out how he truly feels.

“Did you sleep well?” Isak asks and his voice is careful, sweet. He’s still looking at Even like he matters to him.

Even nods then rolls on his back and yawns again. He feels strange. He can’t tell if he’s sad or happy. And when Isak scoots closer to press himself against his front, Even gasps and forgets how to breathe.

“Can we sleep a bit longer?” Isak asks softly, his cheek on Even’s chest, and the ‘we’ throws him off.

He doesn’t reply right away, and Isak doesn’t think much of it because he’s wrapping himself around Even again and burying his face in his neck, smothering him until it finally settles in his chest: that feeling of helplessness, of heartbreak.

“I love him. Jonas.”

*He’s using me. I’m a science experiment.*
Isak tilts his jaw and looks up at Even like he wants a kiss, a real one, like he can’t ask for it but hopes Even will make that decision for him, like he doesn’t want to miss this time, like he’s ready.

And Even almost gives in, almost. But he doesn’t. He watches Isak’s cheeks go from flushed from shyness to flushed from embarrassment and quiet anger instead. He watches Isak’s face go from dazed and soft, to focused and hardened.

*If I kiss you, I will break my own heart.*

Isak sits up.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asks, and his voice is back to sounding detached and cold. It catches Even off guard, his ability to put up walls so quickly.

“No.”

“Did I do something weird last night?” Isak frowns as if Even’s answer was positive.

“No.”

“Okay.”

Isak leaves the bed to reach for his jeans then for the rest of his discarded items except for the sweater he threw up on. Even remains on his back in bed, trying to ignore Isak’s loud and angry breathing as he rummages through the room.

“I’ll give you your shirt back on Monday,” says Isak, his voice void of emotions like he’s trying to show Even that he doesn’t care that he’s being cold to him.

“Okay,” Even replies. He feels cruel, but he prefers to call it self-preservation.

“I’ll see you at school, then.”

“Yeah.”

Isak doesn’t get very far because Even’s mother ambushes him in the kitchen with a look between disbelief and giddiness. Even wishes he could somehow evaporate.

“Isak!” she exclaims happily. “What a nice surprise!”

“Julie,” Isak smiles warmly, his earlier coldness gone in the blink of an eye, the deep frown between his brows now replaced by a blinding smile probing genuineness. The sight sends Even into a frenzy. It terrifies him, how good Isak is at muffling his emotions. He strangely reminds him of himself. “It’s so good to see you again. I hope I didn’t wake you last night.”

“Last night,” his mother repeats Isak’s words, shooting Even an amused look before turning her attention back to the guest. “I had no idea you stayed over. I would have prepared breakfast.”

“Oh please,” Isak chuckles. “It’d break my heart to inconvenience you any further. Even has already been kind enough to let me stay over after it got so late.”

“He is kind, isn’t he?” his mother grins, making Even bring a palm to his face where he stands behind Isak. “Since when do you hang out so late?”
“We were doing experiments,” says Isak, making Even choke on the tall glass of water he’s just poured himself.

“Oh? What kind?”

“Chemistry. Even and I are chemistry partners,” says Isak.

Isak stays for breakfast after his mother insists, and Even reluctantly makes eggs for three. He wonders if his mother can tell that something’s wrong, that people who have people over the previous night don’t act like this in the morning, that Even didn’t pull out his sofa or use extra covers, that they shared a bed. He wonders if she can feel the tension. But then he figures that she has no idea Isak is putting on a show.

“You don’t have to,” Isak smiles at Even like he wasn’t ready to leave and never speak to him again just moments ago.

“It’s just eggs,” says Even. “Plus, they’re good. I make good eggs.”

Even’s mother asks Isak more questions about how he’s enjoying Bakka so far and if it’s painful to attend a regular school when he’s so smart. And Isak replies politely and humbly, winning her over with each word he utters.

It’s almost dizzying how good he is. Even has seen him interact with many different people with completely different personas. And he starts wondering which one is the real Isak, if he’s met him at all so far. He remembers Isak telling him that he’s never shared this connection with anyone before and realizes that he’s been lied to and played. It makes him grit his teeth.

Even decides to push him away for good, that he can’t wait until he get irreversibly burned to find out if Isak’s intentions are pure. He’s still frowning and listening to his mother’s interrogating questions when he notices a gentle flush spread on Isak’s face. It’s subtle, almost undetectable if he weren’t so attuned to him. Isak’s eyes widen and his lips part ever so slightly. Like he’s just experienced something he hasn’t before.

Isak is eating Even’s eggs and blushing.

Even’s heart swells in his chest.

“Are you okay?” Even’s mother asks Isak after he fails to answer one of her questions.

“Uh, yeah,” Isak chuckles. “They’re just really good.”

“Hm?”

“The eggs, I mean. They’re good. You’re right,” he tells Even without looking at him.

Even walks him to the building’s entrance, his mother having insisted. It’s a rather strange turn of events. Even kicked him out by dismissing him then made him eggs. He wonders how Isak feels right now.

“I would have left, but I didn’t want to make it awkward for you and your mom,” says Isak, unprompted.
“I appreciate that. Thanks,” says Even, and he watches Isak’s jaw clench.

“You helped me out last night. It was the least I could do.”

It feels final. They’re awkwardly polite and cold to one another. Even should let him go. He’s made himself clear. Isak is visibly hurt—whether it’s his pride or his feelings, Even doesn’t know. He should let him go. But he can’t. Isak looks too upset. And while he doesn’t know if it’s an act and he’s simply being manipulated, Even thinks about the slim chance of the hurt on Isak’s face being genuine.

“Wait,” he blurts when Isak reaches the street.

“What?” Isak turns to give him a cold look.

“I had fun last night,” says Even, and he feels cruel for saying that, because he knows he’s sending mixed signals.

“I’m having a hard time believing that,” Isak replies coldly.

“I did though. It was fun.”

“But?”

“Huh?”

“You’re trying to tell me something. You started with something nice and now you’re about to say something negative to ‘let me down’ gently,” says Isak. “You tried being direct and kicking me out this morning, but your conscience and your guilt got the best of you. I obviously did or said something that caused you to do a 180 degree shift on me. And while I can use this to argue that I was right and that I should stay away from alcohol, I’m simply going to ask you to be honest with me so I don’t have to wrack my brain for lost memories that probably don’t matter in the first place. So what’s the ‘but’, Even?”

Even takes a deep breath, both amazed and frustrated by Isak’s ability to whip out rants on the fly.

“I think we should chill with these ‘experiments’,;” says Even.

“Chill,” Isak repeats.

“I don’t think we should do sleepovers and stuff anymore.”

“Okay. So I did something when we were sleeping. It wasn’t the puking after all,” Isak muses like he’s crossing theories off of a list.

“It’s not that,” Even lies. “I’ve just been thinking.”

“About what?”

“About myself in this whole equation. I think we’re taking too much risk just hanging out like this.”

“Risk?” Isak frowns. “I won’t burn you.”

“Not you. I didn’t mean you,” says Even.

“What risk, then? I won’t let my mother fuck with you if that’s what you’re worried about. I can handle her.”
“That’s not—that’s not it,” Even sighs and he’s not even sure what he means in the first place.

“Then what is it?” Isak blinks at him, until something seemingly clicks in his mind. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

Isak takes a step back. “I get it now.”

“What do you get?”

“It’s me. You don’t want to be seen with me,” Isak laughs, but it’s not laughter. It’s bitter and sad. “You don’t want people knowing you can touch the freak.”

“What? No, that’s not—”

“Don’t worry. I get it.” Isak huffs out a dry laugh again. “I mean I would think that way, too. You know. The fact that you can touch the freak makes you a freak too.”

“Isak—”

“I won’t bother you in public anymore. I’ll also stay away from your home.” Isak finally looks up. He looks utterly disinterested, detached. “You should have said this was a worry of yours sooner. I wouldn’t have made you share a room with me in the cabin.”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“Now you’ll excuse me, but I have to go. I have yet to explain to my mother how I somehow got my phone back after she confiscated it and come up with a story for my whereabouts last night.”

And with that, he’s gone. And Even feels like the worst person in the world.

.

Even tries not to think about Isak for the rest of the day. He tries not to think about how calm and sweet he was with his mother, and how cold and raw he was with him outside his apartment.

Even doesn’t speak much for the rest of the day. His mother tries to make him laugh and tease him about Isak coming out of his room wearing his t-shirt. But Even doesn’t have the energy for banter or for her clever ways of asking if he likes boys. He barely puts on an effort to dodge her questions about Isak touching him.

“He has a skin condition,” Even repeats.

“Yes, I know. So you don’t touch at all?”

Even feels bad, but he lies. “No, of course not. He would burn me.”

Then it sinks in, Isak’s thought process. The fact that he came to the conclusion that Even didn’t want people to know because it would make him ‘odd’ as well. He never even realized it before, too blinded by his need to understand him. But right now, he does. His mother asks if he touches Isak, and he rushes to deny it because he doesn’t want her to think that he’s different, that something else is wrong with him.

“He’s very sweet. You can have him over whenever you want,” she says as she sips on her tea, her soft tousled hair shining in the sunlight.
“There won’t be a need for that. We’re just—” Even pauses. “Chemistry partners. Nothing more.”

“I’m just saying that it’s okay if you are,” she says, her fingers locking around his chin and tugging softly. “Something more.”

Even gapes at her, feeling completely floored. He can’t quite believe it. It’s the most forward she’s ever been. She smiles then kisses him on the cheek, before leaving him in the kitchen to stare at his own feet.

The uneasy feeling never goes away. It stays with him, wraps itself around his bones. He feels lonely today. Lonely and alone. He ignores Mutta’s texts about Isak and mutes the groupchat with the rest of the boys.

He considers calling Sonja but remembers her words about not wishing to be led on unless he means to get back together. He knows he’ll end up pressing her against a wall and trying to quench his need for lips against his own if he sees her today. But it’s not her lips he’s aching to taste. So he doesn’t reach out.

Even takes a shower to wash Isak’s scent off of him—sweet and cozy scent, the scent of untouched skin aching to be touched—then sleeps for the rest of the day after clicking on a random Seinfeld episode.

Later in the evening, Even thinks, and thinks, and thinks. He stares at his instagram chat window and thinks. He wants to check on him, to apologize, to explain himself. The heart versus the mind. The mind versus the heart.

The minds wins.

He won’t get caught up with Isak Valtersen. He won’t let him have a piece of him. He won’t kiss him. He won’t give him a piece of his heart. He won’t get tangled up in this. He won’t have feelings for him. He won’t try to save him.

Even decides to stay away, to keep his distances, not because he doubts Isak’s motives at this point, but because he’s starting to doubt his own. Because Isak didn’t ask for love. Isak asked for a kiss, for an experiment. But a kiss is never just a kiss to Even. A kiss is anything but just a kiss to Even, Even who has only ever kissed people he’s been in love with.

Even is not in love with Isak. He isn’t and he doesn’t wish to be.

Even’s skin catches fire when he feels Isak near him at school. It’s stronger today, the fire, the electricity between them. It’s stronger and more overwhelming, and Even wonders if it’s because he’s been feeling numb since Isak left his bed.

Isak doesn’t wave in his direction in Physics class. He doesn’t turn around to look at him. He doesn’t spare him a glance. And Even tries to convince himself that he doesn’t mind. He’s initiated this coldness after all. Isak is simply respecting his wish by staying away. And if Even aches for him right now, then he has no one else to blame but himself.

“Did you hear Arvid is kicking Vegard out of the bus for fucking with Isak’s meds?” Adam tells the group in the cafeteria, making Even look up from his sketchbook.

“No, we didn’t hear. Unlike you, we don’t really care about Arvid’s damn bus,” says Elias.
“What do you mean he fucked with Isak’s meds?” Mikael jumps and startles Even. He hasn’t heard Mikael contribute to a conversation in a while.

“Since when do you give a shit?” Elias laughs.

“Shut up,” Mikael laughs.

“You were there when Isak went nuts in the cabin!” Adam groans. “We still need to talk about the rumors around Even taking Isak’s virginity during the trip. Fucking insane!”

“What the fuck. Shut up!” Mutta shouts.

“We can talk about it later. I still hate you two for stabbing me in the back like that, by the way,” he gestures between Mikael and Even.

“You’re so dramatic,” Mikael rolls his eyes and laughs again, though nervously this time.

“Anyway, as I was saying. Vegard stole Isak’s meds during the retreat thing to fuck with him and see if he was just pretending to need them.”

“What?” Even frowns, folding his legs and turning to the side to finally join the conversation. He’s heard the rumors about Isak and him countless times by now. He’s gotten used to it.

“What do you mean what?” says Adam.

“Isak said he ‘forgot’ his meds,” Even explains, catching Mikael glancing at him out of the corner of his eyes.

“Yeah well, he probably assumed that he did at the time,” Adam shrugs. “But apparently the other guy, David, admitted that Vegard hid Isak’s meds.”

Even can feel anger gather at the pit of his stomach, his fists clenching, anger and something akin to remorse—remorse for doubting Isak, maybe, the thought of him perhaps pretending to be in pain or to have forgotten his meds having lived in his mind for a while.

He recalls feverish and sweaty and needy Isak in his arms, moaning ‘please’ after ‘please’ and melting under his touch. Even shivers, then shakes his head. These guys put Isak through pain deliberately. They did that to him on purpose and never even once thought of returning the meds when he was split in half in bed or when Even risked his own life to get him some.

Even is suddenly seeing red and when he looks up and instinctively searches for him across the room, Isak is staring right back.

They both stand up at the same time and it makes for interesting chatter in the cafeteria, his group gaping at their synchronized actions as well.

“Where are you going?” Mutta asks.

“Bathroom. Be right back,” Even replies, never breaking eye contact with Isak.

“Oh my god!” Adam shouts. “Are the rumors true? Did something happen between Isak and you? Is he actually gay? Did he ask you to do things to him with an object? Did you agree because you felt bad for him?”

Mutta’s entire notebook flies over the table to land on Adam’s face, and Even does his best to ignore all of his infuriating questions. He marvels at how it never even occurs to his friends that he might be
attracted to boys. He marvels at how it doesn’t even cross their minds.

“I’ll be back.”

“What is it?” Isak asks point blank the moment Even steps into the bathroom.

“Hello to you, too.”

“We’re greeting each other now? On school grounds? Is that okay? That’s not too risky?” Isak sneers.

“Vegard stole your meds back in the cabin?” Even ignores his petty jabs and watches his expression harden.

“Where did you hear that?” he frowns.

“Adam was talking about how David told Arvid which means whole school knows.”

Isak snorts and it takes Even by surprise.

“What’s so funny?”

“Remind me to send Adam a fruits basket or something,” says Isak.

“What?”

“He’s doing all the hard work, honestly.”

“Uh, what do you mean?” Even frowns, slightly irritated by now. “Is it not true? Did you spread the rumor?”

“No. Well, yes about the spreading part, or at least planting the initial seed. But it’s not a lie. Vegard did take my meds. It’s true,” says Isak.

“You found out and want to take revenge by telling everyone?”

Isak laughs again and Even wants to wipe that smug grin off his mouth, preferably with his own.

“No, I’m not that petty. Who do you think I am?”

“I honestly have no clue.”

Isak’s face falls after that, and Even clings to the thought that this is a glimpse of who he really is, that underneath all the scheming there’s a boy who wants to be real, who wants Even to know that he is real.

The bell rings and Isak starts gathering his things after peeling his eyes off of Even’s.

“Will you be at the pool tonight?” he asks with his back turned to Even.

“Do you want me to be there?”

“Do you want to know what happened with Vegard?”

“
Isak doesn’t swim. He comes into the pool thirty minutes into Even doing laps by himself to muffle how anxious he feels over being stood up. He’s wearing his regular clothes, his feet bare, and his jeans rolled up high. He has pretty ankles.

Isak walks over the edge of the pool until Even finally looks up. He forgets that they can feel each other’s presence sometimes, that Isak knows he’s actively ignoring his presence by not looking up.

He does four more laps to get used to Isak’s warmth and to make sure he doesn’t pounce on him the moment they’re close enough. He then makes his way to the edge of the pool where Isak is about to sit, rolling his jeans even higher to dip his feet in the water.

“I thought you weren’t coming,” says Even once he’s close enough for Isak to hear him, moving his swimming goggles over his head.

“What does it look like I’m doing right now? I’m currently talking about it,” Isak rolls his eyes.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“I’m currently talking about it,” Isak scoffs.

“What does it look like I’m doing right now? I’m currently talking about it,” Isak rolls his eyes.

“Ugh,” Even groans, splashing him lightly with water.

“How dare you!” Isak scoffs.

“It was just a little bit of water. Chill.”

“You chill!”

Even laughs and Isak joins him. Suddenly, it’s easy like before.

“What happened with Vegard?” Even asks, wrapping his hands around Isak’s ankles and trapping his dangling feet there. It makes Isak jolt and shudder. It’s a sweet reaction. Too sweet. “Isak? Hello? Focus.”

“Fuck you,” Isak tries to shove him with his feet, but Even holds on tighter, laughing still.

“So feisty today,” Even grins.

“I just didn’t expect you to be nice. I guess.”

Even’s heart hurts. He’s hurt him. He feels naked, but somehow Isak feels even more bare than him. He moves closer between Isak’s legs, his hands either side of him on the edge of the pool. He’s soaking his jeans, but he doesn’t care.

“I’ll be nice,” he whispers, his bare chest rising and falling an inch away from Isak’s.

“Promise?” Isak whispers right back, a hesitant hand coming up to cup Even’s face, making both of
them close their eyes and sigh deeply.

“Promise,” Even replies, bringing his wet hand over Isak’s. It feels like an apology.

“Okay.”

Even wishes Isak were in his swimsuit because he wouldn’t have hesitated to wrap both arms around him and pull him into the pool. But he can’t. He probably has his phone in his pocket.

“Why aren’t you swimming today?” he asks.

“Because I didn’t want to get too close to you.”

Even’s heart clenches again. “Well, I guess you failed,” he jokes. “This is pretty close.”

“But somehow, not nearly enough,” says Isak, brushing his thumb over Even’s cheekbone.

Even almost pulls him into the pool with his clothes on. Almost.


Even smokes in the spot where Isak’s mother found them the other night. He smokes while Isak watches silently. It’s nice, comfortable. It’s comfortable silence.

“Vegard stole my meds,” says Isak.

“We’ve established that already.”

“Yes, but I kind of gave him the idea.”

“Huh?”

“I knew that he and David were trying to fuck with me during that trip. So when I was unpacking in my room, I pretended to drop my meds on the floor by accident and to freak out over the idea of compromising them.”

Even nods, waiting for Isak to blow his mind yet again. “Okay.”

“I said something like “I’ll die without them and I don’t have any alternative. It would be a bitch if I were to lose them in the mountains right now”. Or something like that,” says Isak.

“So they stole them?” Even scoffs. “Just like that?”

“Yup. All I had to do was dangle it in front of them. They’re like dogs,” he laughs, but Even doesn’t.

“Why did you do that? To prove that they’re like dogs?”

“No. I wanted Arvid to kick them out of the bus,” Isak shrugs. “I gave them a chance but they wouldn’t leave me the fuck alone.”

“So you manipulated them into stealing your fake meds? It was all a scam?” he asks, feeling another stab to his back. “You being in pain and stuff. It was all fake?”

“No, I’m not that fucked up,” says Isak. “It was all real. Those weren’t my fake meds and they did put me through pain deliberately. I didn’t manipulate them into doing that to me. They were planning on doing it anyway. I just gave them the idea and the means to hurt me. If they were good people,
they wouldn’t have proceeded with it. So you could say they had it coming. My conscience is clear.”

“That’s not how it works, Isak.”

“Yes, it is, Even. If I give you a knife and tell you that if you stab me with it I will die and you do it, it’s on you, not on me.”

Even throws his cigarette bud on the floor and steps on it, furious.

“Why are you so pissed?” says Isak.

_I went fucking hiking in the snow to get you meds, remember? Couldn’t you have hid an emergency stash somewhere? Couldn’t you have told me? Why would you put yourself through that much pain?_

“Something could have happened to you!”

“I wasn’t trying to put myself in actual danger,” says Isak and his voice is suddenly soft, like he’s happy Even is worried about his well-being. “It wasn’t pain I couldn’t handle. I’ve been through it before.”

“You infuriate me. You have no idea!” Even mutters.

“You won’t understand, but I needed Vegard and David to leave. They kept undermining me in front of Arvid and they were gonna ruin everything,” says Isak.

“What are you planning? Why do you need to earn Arvid’s trust? Why are you doing all of this?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want you to get in trouble,” Isak says, standing up to stretch his legs. Even recalls Isak using the same words about his sister. How he manipulates her for her ‘own good’. _Bullshit._ “Got more questions?”

“Only Vegard is out,” says Even. “You said you needed to get rid of David as well.”

“David ratted him out today after I implied that I knew who stole my meds,” Isak explains, still stretching. “Manipulation 101. David knows that he didn’t do it, but he starts feeling anxious because he was there with Vegard when I explained how important those meds are to my functioning. He knows that Vegard did it and starts feeling worried that I’ll associate him with it. Later, he worries that Vegard will frame him after he sees how close I’m getting to him. I chill with Vegard early in the morning enough for David’s anxiety to go through the roof, and by noon he loses it and tells Arvid that Vegard did it. By tomorrow, Vegard will have heard—thanks to your friend Adam—that David threw him under the bus, and he’ll reveal some of the shit he did, to get back in Arvid’s good graces.”

Even doesn’t even know how to react, so he just nods. It all makes sense.

“Some people are so predictable, so easy. It’s like they have no power of will, no depth. They’re two dimensional, plain, binary. They can’t think out of the box. Some reviewers and tough crowds give writers shit for writing plain characters. But they fail to see that they have equivalents in real life. That it’s simply representation. That not everyone is interesting and clever and deep. Some people’s existence is just fucking pointless because they never bothered developing a personality, simply following the mass and what’s ‘cool’, seeking validation like oblivious fools. It’s a shame,” Isak
sighs dramatically while Even tries to wrap his head around how Isak thinks, around how he has everybody in boxes and categories.

“Following your logic, these people can’t quite help it. Isn’t it a dick move for you to take advantage of their ‘simple’ minds?”

“Not when they’re shitty people in the first place. No,” says Isak.

“And you’re the authority on shitty people? How do you determine a shitty person?”

“It’s someone who hurts others to get what they want.”

Even snorts and Isak’s face flushes like he didn’t realize what his words entail.

“I know you think I’m a shitty person. But I’m not doing any of this for myself,” says Isak.

“Are you manipulating Arvid?” Even asks because Isak seems to be here to answer his questions tonight.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you,” says Isak. “I’ll tell you when it’s over.”

“Is that why you came back to Bakka and stopped your previous scheme to get kicked out?”

“Yes.”

Even opens his pack of cigarettes to pull out a new one. He needs another one for this.

“Are you manipulating me? Am I also predictable and two-dimensional and weak-willed to you?”

Isak smiles and it throws Even off guard. He can’t bear it. He can’t stand it when Isak throws him curveballs and messes with his head.

And when Isak puts a hand on his thigh and moves closer, Even’s breathing stutters into a halt. It’s painful, being this close and this hurt.

“Are you even listening?” Isak whispers, his thumb on his cheek. Even can’t even tell when he reached for his face.

“What?”

“You’re the one person I can’t figure out. The only one.”

The stirring in his heart. It’s back in full force.

“How do I know you’re not lying to me, too?” Even asks, and he feels exhausted and spent.

“Because I’m giving you the power to destroy me.”

“Why? Why are you telling me all of this?”

“Because I want you to trust me. I know you don’t trust me.”
They meet at the pool the following day and the one after that. Even swims like he’s training for a competition while Isak floats on his back, waiting for him to rest so he can join his lane and put his hands on him.

Even gets used to it, this silent agreement, Isak becoming more and more comfortable initiating touches. The first time Isak presses against his back from behind, his breathing stops for a moment. And the first time Isak wraps his arms around his stomach, it feels like being swept under a wave.

Nothing about them makes sense. They’re physically in a loving relationship, exchanging warm and tender touches whenever it’s just the two of them. Sometimes they laugh and sometimes they glare at each other and exchange angry words. Sometimes Even feels the happiest he’s ever been, and others he feels helpless, used, worthless. None of it makes sense.

They don’t interact for three long days—a mutually agreed upon abstinence period, an experiment—and overwhelming joy takes over Even when he comes home one night from Mutta’s to find Isak waiting by his apartment building.

He doesn’t even bother asking Isak what he’s doing there. He knows. And when Isak’s body collides with his in the staircase, both arms locking around his back, Even doesn’t fight it. He drops his bag on the floor and buries his hands in Isak’s hair.

“I can’t function,” Isak mumbles into his neck, needy, desperate, urgent. “I miss you.”

I missed you, too.

“Science. Science is so strong tonight,” Even pants, sliding his hands into Isak’s back pockets, reciprocating Isak’s sweet and bold words through not so sweet but bold touches.

“Just shut up and touch me.”

“You can stay,” Even tells him when they’ve both come down from their high, when they’ve both calmed down, when they’re no longer dying to touch and ravage and unravel the other. It’s around midnight and they’re both in Even’s bed, panting like they’ve just had sex.

“No sleepovers, remember?” says Isak before sitting up on the bed. “I should get back.”

“We can have a sleepover tonight.”

“Three hours of scientific cuddling wasn’t enough for you?” Isak laughs.

“I’m starting to think we shouldn’t be apart for too long. It just makes it worse.”

“Well. We can pace ourselves some other time,” says Isak, now on his feet and gathering his things. “I’d like to avoid our morning fights from now on.”

“Morning fights?” Even snorts.

“Why are you laughing? It’s true. Shit always hits the fan in the morning. I either burn you or you kick me out.”

“First of all,” Even sits up and reaches for Isak by the end of the bed, pulling him back down by the arm. “That was only two instances of mornings. Don’t generalize.”

Isak giggles in his arms and lets himself be dragged down. It’s sweet how playful he is.
“I’ve only woken up next to you twice in my life, and both times were shit. That’s a hundred percent shitty morning rate. So I’m not generalizing. It’s literally a fact,” Isak explains, still laughing in Even’s hold. “Also, you started your intervention with ‘first of all’ but never followed up with ‘second’. Did you know that it’s one of my pet peeves?”

“Do you ever shut up?” Even laughs, wrapping both legs around Isak’s waist and keeping him on a headlock. “I’m getting to my second point.”

“Can you get to it faster. I literally don’t have all night.”

“I feel like we just fucked and I’m begging you to spend the night.”

Well. That wasn’t in the script. The truth is Even doesn’t really have a script when he’s with Isak. Isak is unpredictable and wild and cunning. And Even can’t keep up with him.

Still, the words didn’t even get to sit in his mind and organize themselves into a coherent thought. They just came out of his mouth. ‘I feel like we just fucked’

Isak’s reaction is instant and perhaps Even’s as well. He’s holding him. He’s wrapped around him so he can feel every twitch in his body. And this twitch is sizable, undeniable. Isak is writhing in his arms.

“You can’t say shit like this!” Isak protests weakly a second too late. ”I’m not—”

“A homosexual? You’re not a homosexual. I know,” Even whispers into the back of Isak’s neck and feels him shiver. “You’re a scientist experimenting. This is purely physiological. You spend hours cuddling a guy you can’t function without for research. I know.”

“Even—”

Even turns him around just to see, just to look at his face, to see how flustered he is, to perhaps catch a glimpse of him uttering the word ‘please’. Maybe. Who knows. Even is drunk on lust.

“Yes?” he whispers then dips his head until his face is nuzzled in Isak’s neck, making him whine. He hopes his mother can’t hear this.

“I’m not—”

“I know,” Even mumbles. “But why are you so— how come you’re—”

“How come I’m what?”

Even considers his next words. He thinks about them this time. It feels like crossing a line he can’t recover from later. This is it. This is a turning point. He knows it. Isak might send him to the hospital tonight.

“How come I’m what, Even?” Isak whines, his voice breaking on his name, and he’s gorgeous like this on his back in Even’s bed.

“How come you’re so fucking hard right now?”

Isak stops breathing under him, and Even tries to think about what he’ll tell his mother when he ends up with a burn he can’t explain. He tries but he can’t focus on anything other than Isak’s shallow breathing and flushed cheeks and stubborn eyes. The heart versus the mind. The mind versus the heart.
Isak’s words are saying ‘fuck off’ but Isak’s body is saying ‘fuck me’.

Even is losing his grip on reality.

And that’s when Isak’s phone starts ringing and they both jump apart, Isak with a tent at the front of his pants and Even with a knife in his heart.

**Incoming Call -- Jonas**

Isak scrambles to silence his phone while Even looks away. It feels like a cold shower, like a hard slap to the face. *Jonas.* The object of Isak’s affections.

“I have to go!” Isak stammers.


“No, it’s okay. I’ll just. I’ll see you. Okay?”

“Okay.”

.

Isak approaches him at school after Physics and Even doesn’t have the heart to deal with him, with any of this. Arvid kicked both David and Vegard out of the bus as planned, and there are rumors that Mr. Eriksson is getting fired for incompetence after Isak schooled him a few more times. Another reminder of how manipulative and cunning he is.

Even cannot deal with Isak smiling sweetly like he didn’t leave his bed the previous night to go meet another man, like he didn’t cuddle him for hours only to leave him high and dry and run to the actual person he wants. Even can’t bear the thought of sustaining this arrangement, but he doesn’t know how to quit it. He can’t bear being a body to someone who loves and pines after someone else. It’s humiliating. Even can’t bear it.

So when Isak instinctively reaches for him without his gloves on, Even flinches and watches disappointment spread on his face.

“We’re at school,” Even says, and it’s cruel, so cruel.

“Oh,” Isak gasps. “Yeah, of course. I forgot.”

He walks away with a polite smile, but Even can feel his resentment. Isak is too proud to show that Even keeping his distances in public is hurting him. He’s given Even the power to ‘destroy’ him socially, but he won’t give him anything beyond that.

And everytime Even is cruel, Isak’s walls go up and their conversations feel transactional. They swim together, hang around the restrooms at Blue Ruin, sit on the bench while Even smokes, cuddle for an hour or two, then walk in separate directions.

*I just don’t want to get hurt.*

.

Even meets Jonas for the first time at a random party Elias and Sonja invite him to at the last minute. He doesn’t know he’s *Jonas* until later, however, and the boy only catches his attention because of the bruises around his eyes and his jaw—later Even will think about how the curls, and the eyebrows, and the green eyes fit Isak’s drunken description of heartbreak perfectly.
The party is packed and Even’s heart jolts when he feels Isak’s presence in the house. He wasn’t expecting to see him—or in this case feel him—here. Arvid and the rest of his Bakka bus are not even here. So who could possibly have his back.

He frantically scans the rooms for a mop of blonde curls or a snapback, and he finds him quickly. Even folds both arms and smiles at the sight of Isak surrounded by Sana and four other girls he’s never seen before. He can’t help but think that they’re quite the eclectic group and he can’t imagine how they know Isak, but he looks comfortable around them. He’s laughing. He’s sweet. He’s wearing his green puffer jacket and his black gloves and Even wants to undress him.

Even feels drunk.

“Shit! Adam was right,” Elias mutters beside Even while looking at Isak.

“Huh?”

“Isak knows the Penetrators? This is so weird!”

“The Penetrators?” Even’s heart jolts. He remembers Jonas’ texts to Isak.

“Yeah, that guy over there,” Elias points to an attractive boy who’s suddenly materialized by Isak’s side. “They call him Penetrator Chris. He goes to Nissen. Third year as well. He’s William’s right hand.”

“Whose right what?”

“William Magnusson. Some rich asshole who goes to Nissen, too. Chris is his right hand.”

“Since when do you keep up with this shit?” Even laughs.

“I don’t! But Adam won’t stop with his conspiracy theories.”

“What is he on this time?”

“Well, you know how Isak is on Arvid’s bus now. They’re actually rivals with the Penetrators and Adam thinks that Isak is working with them to fuck with Arvid,” says Elias.

“That makes no sense,” Even grimaces.

“I know, but he does look close to them. To that one at least,” Elias snorts.

Even turns his attention back to Isak and sees him leaning awfully close to the presumed “Penetrator Chris”, whispering in his ear. He’s not jealous. He’s merely concerned. Isak seems to be drinking and a burning incident would probably ruin his night. He’s not jealous.

But then he sees Chris poking Isak with his fingers over his jacket and his layers and making him laugh, like he’s tickling him. And it makes his blood boil in his veins.

“Stop it!” he hears Isak giggle and it almost brings him to his knees. He wants that, too. He’s aching for it. And Isak can probably feel his yearning from across the room.

You’re ruining me.

“You okay there?” Sonja asks him as she reaches for his cup, sounding amused. “You’re drinking a bit too much.”
“I can binge every once in a while, yeah?” Even snaps.

“Oh. I— I didn’t mean it like that,” she stammers in apology and makes Even feel terrible. “I’m sorry —”

“No,” Even sighs. “No. I’m sorry. God, I’m such a dick. I’m sorry. There’s just so much on my mind. I just—”

“Hey, hey, Even,” she interrupts him, her soft hands coming up to cup his face. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it, okay? It’s fine. I get it.”

Even melts at the tenderness of her touches. Sonja knows each and every spot in his body that makes him unwind and relax. Sonja knows his body like the back of her hand. And when she presses her thumbs under his ears, he closes his eyes and wraps both hands around her wrists, sighing deeply.

“You good?” she asks softly. He nods and feels her hands slide to his cheeks, holding his face gently, her touch unhurried and generous. “You can talk to me if there’s stuff on your mind. You know that, right?”

“I know. Thank you.”

And it’s only then that he notices that she’s stumbling, that she’s not holding herself upright, that she’s a little bit drunk.

He’s a bit slow, however. Because by the time he gets to the realization, she’s already pressed their lips together, already slid her warm tongue into his mouth.

Another day, Even would have pushed her away. Another night, maybe.

He lets her. He kisses her back. Not as ardently as he used to. There’s no passion there. They’re just two sad and horny people who know each other’s bodies like the back of their hands. They kiss, make out drunkenly against the wall like no one’s watching, until Even feels a sharp breeze overwhelm him and his senses.

Suddenly, it’s cold, ice cold.

He opens his eyes, and finds Isak’s locked on his. He looks furious.

Great.

Even is drunk and he doesn’t remember how they ended up here, like this, in someone’s bedroom. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t care. He followed Isak’s curls around the house. Or perhaps Isak followed him, Even isn’t sure.

They’re both angry and drunk, and the simple fact that Isak is drunk drives him up the wall. It means that he’s letting his walls down for someone, that he trusts someone in this house, someone who’s not him.

“I didn’t know you were like that,” Isak says as soon as he shuts the door behind them, and it makes Even want to laugh at the throwback.

“Like what?”

“Like that. Like. Both,” Isak hiccups.
“Both?”

“Yes. Both. Boys and girls. I didn’t know,” Isak shrugs as he removes his green jacket and folds it over a chair. “Or were you pretending?”

“I don’t pretend, Isak. I’m not like you.”

Isak shoves him and they both stumble, nearly falling into the bed. “Fuck you!”

They stand in the middle of the room, chests heaving, heads spinning, and Even hates how they go from being tender with one another to this animosity. He absolutely dreads it.

“I don’t want to fight anymore,” Even mutters, feeling defeated. “I hate it.”

“You don’t get to decide when we fight and when we don’t!”

“I never—”

“You’ve been treating me like shit since I slept over. You don’t get to tell me not to be angry when I finally let myself be angry!” Isak barks in his face, and it’s sobering, getting this bit of honesty from him. Isak admitting that he’s been feeling hurt because of Even. It’s sobering.

Even takes a step closer to touch his shoulder, maybe, to give him something, anything, to apologize, to make amends. But Isak flinches and takes a step back, looking vulnerable and exposed for once, his walls crumbling around him for once.

“Isak—”

“No!” Isak shoves him again. And he’s angry, but he’s not burning him. Later, when they’ve both calmed down, Even will bring it up. It’s not anger that makes him burn him. It can’t be.

Even reaches for him the third time, and this time he succeeds. He hugs him, half-expecting it to burn then sighing when it doesn’t. He apologizes. His vision is blurry but he apologizes and hugs him tight.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I’m sorry.”

“What did I do?” Isak asks. They’re both lying on the stranger’s bed. Even on his back and Isak sprawled on his chest. “Just tell me what I did. It’s killing me.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Isak warns. “You completely changed after that night. What did I do?”

Even sits up a bit higher on the bed until Isak’s head rolls onto his lap. He shuffles until he can get his stash out of his back pocket.

“What are you doing?” Isak blinks at him.

“I’m about to roll us a joint,” says Even. “And after that I’m gonna tell you.”

“Who’s Jonas?” Even asks when they start their second joint. Isak’s head is still on his lap and he’s
still towering over him, carding his free fingers through his hair.

“My best friend. Why?” Isak raises an eyebrow. “Didn’t we already have this conversation?”

“You remember?”

Isak frowns and concentrates like he’s trying to recall that night.

“It was something I said. I said something?” Isak sighs. “Fuck, I said something about Jonas?!”

Even nods.

“What did I say?”

“It doesn’t matter,” says Even. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It matters to me!” Isak sits up. “Did I tell you what happened? Is it— Is it because of, because I burned him? Because you finally realized what happens when someone dares to get too close to me?”

The look on Isak’s face breaks Even’s heart. He thinks it’s because of his condition. He thinks Even is pushing him away because he’s scared. He isn’t.

“Did you use to be able to touch Jonas?” Even asks him point blank, hoping Isak will understand. “Has Jonas ever touched you without burning?”

Isak blinks at him like he’s realizing things, like it’s all clicking. And Even doesn’t know what he wished for, but he regrets asking the moment Isak replies.

“Yes,” he says. “I used to be able to touch Jonas. But I don’t anymore.”

*So you lied to me. You lied to my face. You made me think I was special.*

“Okay.”

He drops it. They both do, right as the weed kicks in.

“Who was the girl you were kissing?” Isak asks. His eyes are droopy, his face flushed as always, his lips pink and parted.

“That was Sonja, my ex-girlfriend,” Even explains. He feels like he’s floating. He feels higher and larger than life.

“How long did it last?”

“We were together for three years.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah,” Even chuckles, carding his fingers through Isak’s hair and feeling him purr.

“Do you kiss all of your exes and all your friends, or only when I happen to be watching?”

“Shut up,” Even laughs, shoving him a bit and making him laugh too.
“So what happened? Why did you break up?”

Even wishes he could tell him, but he’s not confident he can share that part of himself with him just yet. He’s not sure Isak’s not going to use it to shatter him. Even can’t afford to be shattered right now.

“She became a bit controlling,” he says instead, and it’s still true.

“Controlling how?”

“Like a nagging mother. It just became too much. And with everyone constantly freaking out whenever I took a day to binge watch something on Netflix, it just got unbearable.”

“Why do people freak out when you watch Netflix?” Isak asks, propping his chin on Even’s chest.

“It wasn’t Netflix itself,” Even laughs. “It was the idea of me taking a day to breathe and do nothing and not act like the happiest guy in the world.”

“The happiest guy in the world? Poor dude. His life sounds exhausting,” Isak smiles and Even’s heart start tripping over itself again.

“Right?” Even smiles back. “I just wish I could afford to have a bad day and be in a bad mood without everyone worrying that it’s a red flag and that I need an intervention. You know? I wish being and acting happy all the time wasn’t the norm.”

“Yeah the norm. I hate the norm.”

Even laughs at that. He’s cute like this on his chest. He’s cute.

“What about you?” he asks. “What’s your deepest and most unfulfilled wish?”

Even expects Isak to go on a metaphysical and existential rant around how everything is ultimately insignificant. He expects him to quote Sartre, and Kant, and Montaigne, and Aristotle, and his favorite, Heraclitus. He expects him to school him on a concept he’s never truly taken the time to understand.

But Isak doesn’t.

Isak simply answers with, “To feel your touch.”

*Oh.*

Even brings a hand to his face and strokes his cheek gently, ever so gently despite the storm in his heart.

“I’m touching you now,” he whispers.

“Not like that,” Isak mumbles under him, his hand coming up to brush the back of the one Even is using to hold the joint, and it’s intoxicating.

“Like what, then?”

“You know, I spend my time shitting on people who care about silly things like parties, and social media, and validation, and being popular. But the truth is that I’m just envious. Not because I want to care about those things, but because I wish I had the option to. Because I wish I had the option to worry about such vain things and just be a regular dumb teenager. But my mind is always at a war
with itself. And all I’m left with is envy, and sometimes jealousy. Because there’s a difference, you know? Many confuse the two. But envy is what you feel when you want what someone else has, and jealousy is what you feel when you’re afraid of losing what you have at the hands of someone else. I don’t have much, which is why I don’t experience jealousy as often and why it’s so overwhelming when I actually do.”

Even takes a long drag and listens. His head feels heavy. He knows that Isak isn’t about to stop talking anytime soon, and that he’ll eventually get to his point. So for now, he smokes, strokes his hair, and wonders if Isak has ever felt the jealousy Even feels when he’s around other people. I guess I’m afraid of losing you? Huh?

“And it kills me when I do,” Isak continues “Because just like Barthes said about Proust’s take on jealousy, as a jealous man, I suffer four times. I suffer because I’m jealous in the first place, then because I blame myself for being jealous. Then I suffer because I’m afraid my jealousy might hurt others and make me act out of character, and finally I suffer because I allow myself to be subject to such absurdity, to something so banal and below me. In his words, “I suffer from being excluded, from being aggressive, from being crazy, and from being common.” Isn’t it maddening?”

Even flinches. “I hate that word.”

“I know,” Isak sighs. “But my point is, my point is as much as it infuriates me that I allow myself to feel such cheap and pointless emotions, when faced with the opportunity to experience what others do, I don’t wish to turn my back on it. Because while I don’t think my wildest fantasy of someone embracing me and comforting me in public will ever happen, my smaller and dumber fantasies like taking selfies with Snapchat filters and shotgunning in a bedroom at a party can.”

“You want to shotgun?” Even laughs. “This whole speech was to ask me to shotgun while taking selfies?”

“No selfies,” Isak looks away, suddenly flustered, like he’s pictured shotgunning with Even, like he’s regretting uttering his request.

“Just shotgun?”

Isak nods. He looks so pretty like this on his lap asking him to exhale actual smoke into his mouth, into his lungs.

“You’re full of surprises,” Even laughs.

“I’m not gonna beg.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be sweet?”

Isak is about to shove him and throw a tantrum when Even inhales from the joint and leans down, a mere inch away from his face, the fire between them unquenchable.

Isak seems to have forgotten his request because he freezes below him, his eyes wide, wide, wide. Even doesn’t have much choice but to grab his chin and make him part his mouth with his thumb. The touch sends him into a frenzy, Isak’s lips soft, soft, soft, under his finger. Even has to focus so that he doesn’t choke on the smoke. But Isak does. And as soon as Even exhales into his mouth and pulls back, Isak is a coughing mess.

Even doesn’t give him much time to recover, however, his blood buzzing, his fingers tingling, his mouth aching to be that close again, to probe the illusion of touch. He inhales, leans down, and this time Isak meets him with an open mouth and closed eyes. He arches his back and whines, his face
crimson, his curls damp.

Even leaves his thumb there on Isak’s lower lip, padding and sometimes flicking, watching him melt. Isak whimpers and Even has to remain focused. This is one of Isak’s fantasies and he will honor it. He will drive him wild. He will make it worth it.

Isak’s hands find their way to Even’s hair, his fingers carded through his messy mop, and it’s hot, so hot. It hurts to breathe. Even isn’t even sure he inhaled any smoke this time around, the joint now finished and discarded in a coffee mug.

Even only has the fire in his lungs to offer now and it makes him anxious. But Isak’s welcoming it with an open mouth, inhaling the hot air between them and pressing their foreheads together. One more inch, and they would be kissing. But they don’t. They breathe each other’s air, and Isak has his tongue out like he wants to lick. Even’s brain is melting.

Isak licks his thumb and Even can’t control himself. One moment he has Isak’s head on his lap, and the next he’s straddling him and staring at the bit of skin showing now that his shirt’s hiked up over his stomach.

“Like what?” Even pants, his eyes roaming Isak’s face, his sweet flushed face buzzing under his palm. “You said you wanted to feel my touch. But not ‘like that’. How do you want it? Tell me.”

“Even—” Isak bucks his hips and shuts his eyes.

“What do you need? Tell me.”

Isak arches his back, his hands cupping Even’s face now. And he looks exquisite like this. He looks beautiful, wild.

“Please—”

Even puts his hand on him, cups the front of his jeans, and stills just to see. Even sees and hears. Isak moans like he’s never known pleasure, like he’s just been introduced to a foreign land he’s never gotten to step foot into. His face, his moans, his lips, his back arching. Everything about him is outrageous. Even’s mind is spinning.

He takes his hand away.

“No!” Isak moans. “Don’t stop.”

Even keeps a thumb on Isak’s forehead, stroking it gently, knowing how much he treasures these touches. And the tenderness of the gesture draws a striking contrast with how dirty his other hand’s deeds are.

He never unzips Isak’s jeans, never unbuckles his belt. He strokes him over his pants with care and with Isak’s pleasure in mind. And it doesn’t take long, as expected, especially given how Isak’s hips never reach the mattress, his back arching and chasing friction the entire time.

“I’m gonna—”

“Come, Isak. It’s okay.”

“Even—” Isak moans his name and Even will never forget how erotic, how perfect is sounds.

Even presses their foreheads together and holds Isak through his climax, his whole body trembling
like it has never reached a release this powerful. Neither of them can breathe.

Even holds him and waits. He waits for the shame, for the disgust, for the remorse. Even holds him and waits. There’s no going back now. He feels his own heart breaking, his own wounds opening.

“It’s okay, Isak. It’s chill. Don’t worry.”

“I’ve never—Never before. I don’t know—”

Even wonders what Isak means. Has he never climaxed before? That’s impossible. Or never with someone else’s help? Even doesn’t know what to think or say or do. So he holds him.

He’s about to press a kiss to Isak’s forehead when the door flies open and the curly haired boy with the thick eyebrows and the bruised face stumbles inside with a girl behind him, then closes the door after yelling “Sorry! Sorry! Fuck!”

Isak and Even jump away from each other just in time for the guy to reopen the door and come back inside.

“What the fuck?! Isak? Is that you?! The boy exclaims, making Even sit in front of Isak and extend an arm as if to hide him.

*Who is this?!

“Jonas…” Isak speaks in a small voice him, and it feels like an electric shock went through his body.

*Oh.

“Isak? Oh my god. How is this possible?” Jonas gapes at both Isak and Even, approaching the bed.

“You two were touching just now, right? How? Isak, have you figured it out?”

Isak’s folds into himself, looking horrified and Even understands. Isak has a very clear wet spot at the front of his jeans and he isn’t in a state to answer any questions right now.

“Hey buddy, can you get back later?” says Even, scooting closer to Isak.

“You two can touch?!”

Then it happens. Even reaches for Isak and it burns, it feels like a local electric shock, and it’s painful. It’s more painful than the previous times Isak’s burned him. It’s scathing. Even almost screams.

“Fuck!” Isak shouts when he realizes he’s just burned Even. “Fuck, fuck!”

“Oh shit!” Jonas exclaims. “I guess I spoke too soon. Let me see!”

Even feels absurd. He hasn’t come down from his high yet and he still feels beyond turned on. He’s high and sad and Jonas is offering to help treat the burn Isak has just inflicted upon him.

.

Even goes downstairs with Jonas while Isak stays behind, looking like he’s about to combust with shame, his fists clenched, his face red, his eyes full of tears.

Even is in pain but he’s sure he’s right.
It’s shame. You burn me when you’re ashamed. It’s shame.

“I’m Jonas, by the way. I don’t think we’ve met,” says the boy he’s spent resenting nonsensically for the last few weeks and who’s currently treating his burn. “I wish we’d met under different circumstances though.”

“Uh, I’m Even.”

“Oh, you’re Even! Nice to meet you, dude,” he says. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“You have?”

“Yeah,” Jonas smiles. “Not from Isak directly, but Lea wouldn’t shut up about you last time I was over. And Sana might have said something.”

“You know Sana?”

“Yeah, we go to Nissen together. Isak used to be in our class before he transferred to Bakka.”

“Got it.”

Jonas is kind and attractive and effortlessly cool. Even doesn’t even resent him anymore. He hasn’t done anything to be at the end of such negative feelings. Even’s jealousy, or in this case, envy—because Isak is not his to lose—isn’t warranted. Even is being ridiculous.

And when a beautiful girl with long auburn hair joins them in the bathroom and presses a kiss to Jonas’ mouth, Even feels vain. He feels banal, absurd.

“What happened?” she asks when she sees Even’s forearm. “Is it Isak?”

Jonas nods.

“When Chris said that she saw you going into the bathroom with a hot guy, I admit this isn’t what I had in mind,” she chuckles. “I’m Eva, by the way,” she turns to Even. “Nice to meet you.”

“Even.”

“It’s already weird that Isak’s here,” Jonas turns to Eva whom Even assumes is his girlfriend. “So just keep it on the down low. Okay?”

Why is it weird?

“Okay. I’ll make sure Vilde doesn’t find out,” she says before leaving the bathroom and closing the bathroom behind her.

“Does this happen a lot?” Jonas asks Even when it’s just the two of them. “You barely reacted to the burn.”

Even doesn’t know what he’s asking.

“It’s cool what you’re doing for him by the way,” Jonas muses, his brows furrowed as he concentrates on wrapping a bandage around his skin. “He won’t even be in the same room as me after the incident and he won’t let Sana try either anymore.”

“Try what?”
“Touching him. The experiments we’ve been doing,” says Jonas.

What?!

“Sana can touch Isak too?” Even blinks at the shorter boy before him.

“Huh?” Jonas grimaces. “Define ‘can’?”

“Are all of Isak’s friends into philosophy or what?”

“Not really. But you could say we’ve all become that way after he started getting into it,” Jonas smiles. “Now explain what you meant by ‘Can Sana touch Isak, too’?”

“I mean. Does she also share this connection with him? Can she touch him like you can?”

Jonas’ brows furrow again, but in confusion this time. “What do you mean like I can?”

“Like you could, I guess. My understanding is that you were able to touch him until something happened recently and you were no longer able to.”

“What are you talking about?” Jonas full-on frowns now.

“What?”

“I haven’t been able to touch Isak since he developed this condition four years ago. No one has been able to touch him without burning since then,” Jonas explains.

What. So he wasn’t born like this?

“But you said you did experiments? What kind? I thought you touched him?” Even stammers, confused.

“Yes, Sana and I tried to test and understand his condition. We experimented with different layers and materials and tried to determine which ones hurt less and if heat-proof things worked,” says Jonas. “His condition is unheard of, so there’s no precedent, no research. His mother refuses to give him up to some lab, but he’s scared that he might be forced to when he turns eighteen. So we did experiments on the side. He stopped everything after one of our experiments went rogue last year, but then Sana tells me that he’s letting some guy named Even help him out and I just had to meet you.”

Even leans against the wall to process Jonas’ words. Isak wasn’t born like this. Isak developed this condition four years ago when he was thirteen. Isak lost the ability to touch and be touched at thirteen when he first started going through puberty. Isak lost the ability to touch and be touched at thirteen when he first started going through puberty. Isak didn’t lie to him. He’s never experienced this connection. He used to be able to touch Jonas, but that was before he became like this.

Isak lost the sense of touch. He lost it.

‘The worst feeling in the world is when you lose something you’d have for the rest of your life. Something you’ve always taken for granted.’

Even’s heart hurts. He finally understands Isak’s confession. And instead of comforting him and asking more questions, he made it about himself and his envy and his jealousy. He pushed him further away and alienated him and reminded him of how different he is. He put walls between them and asked him to be his secret, to only touch him when it was the two of them. Isak must have been over the moon to have someone who could finally touch him, and Even made him ashamed of it.
Even turned it into a shameful secret.

Even’s heart hurts.

Even tries to find him. He walks through the crowd in the house and tries to locate him, following the fire that never leaves him, the warmth that ties them together, leads them to one another.

*Follow the fire.*

Others find him first, and when Even gets to the room with the ruckus, Isak is surrounded by three guys who are seeing red.

“What the fuck is he doing here?” a short blond boy sneers, and Even notices how Isak is now wearing a different pair of jeans. They’re a bit bigger on him. He probably borrowed them from one of the closets around the house.

Penetrator Chris and another boy, with hair falling over his face and a cool and unimpressed look, step into the room. Even guesses that this house belongs to one of them.

“William invited him,” Chris speaks and Elias was right. He is the right hand. “So everybody chill, okay?”

“Chill?! This fucker burned me last year, remember?” the angry blonde speaks again while Isak puts on his usual cold look.

“He wouldn’t have if you hadn’t tried to fuck with him,” William finally speaks. He sounds just as unimpressed as he looks. “If I were him, I would have killed you.”

Even processes the scene. He focuses on Isak who looks tired, but who keeps on his hard facade, refusing to show weakness. Knowing him, this is probably part of some plan and he probably showed up to this party prepared to deal with this. But he looks tired and defeated. He’s just burned Even after he literally made him reach his climax in someone’s bedroom. His best friend just walked in on them. And he’s high and drunk.

Isak looks tired and Even doesn’t know how to help him.

“Next time, I’ll give you a burn on the other side. Make them symmetrical,” Isak finally speaks. “Heard you’re thinking of going into modeling. Wouldn’t want to ruin your chances.”

“What the fuck?” Another guy groans.

Isak is cornered and these guys are drunk and angry.

“What are you gonna do? Hit me? In front of this entire house? People already have their phones out,” Isak snorts. “Also thanks to you guys and to the bullshit from last year, I’m officially considered disabled. Did you know that? My parents get to park anywhere. It’s pretty great. But it also means that if you lift a finger on me, you’ll get in trouble for assaulting a disabled person. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“You’re a fucking psychopath,” one of the boys snaps.

“Cool. You’re done?” Isak rolls his eyes.

“No, I’m not done, you piece of shit! I had an audition that week and you sent me to the fucking
hospital instead. You knew how important it was and you still made sure to hurt me where it was visible and clear. You sabotaged me!”

“I never asked you to provoke me into a fight, Erik. You did it to yourself,” Isak shrugs. “Also consider this. I probably spared you some heartbreak. We all know you were gonna tank that audition like every single one before that. You’re simply not talented enough. I was being nice. I saved you some time.”

Even watches Isak spew his venom with no care in the world. He almost looks bored. And Even is terrified because there is so much that he doesn’t know about him, so many people he’s rubbed the wrong way, so many people he’s hurt.

“Fuck you!” says the presumed Erik. “You’re gonna die alone. You know that? All this cool act is to hide the fact that you’re fucking dying inside. We all know that you cry when you go home because you feel so unwanted, because nobody can touch you. And guess what? Nobody ever will. This is it. It’s never gonna get better for you. You managed to deform the one person who gave two shits about you and you think I’ll let you make me feel like shit?”

Even is not a violent person. Even doesn’t get into fights. He muffles his anger and smiles in the face of adversity even when it’s killing him. Even doesn’t punch or shove people. Even uses his words and his brains.

But this is Isak and Even doesn’t control his impulses when it comes to this boy. His legs move before he knows it.

He shoves Erik and makes him stumble. “Shut the fuck up!” Even doesn’t even recognize his own voice.

“What the fuck?!” Erik blinks at him. “Who the hell are you?”

It gets messy fast. Jonas and two other boys surge from the back of the room to shove Erik and his friends. And Even is soon forgotten. Sana is also actively involved in the brawl which means that Elias has joined in as well. It’s a mess. William and Chris break the fight, William annoyed, and Chris amused.

It’s a mess, but Even can’t bother caring about the fight. His eyes are glued on Isak. Isak in the jeans that are too big for him because Even stroked him to completion. Isak who’s just had his deepest fears confirmed in front of his entire old school and old friends. Isak who never shows emotions like regular people, but whose language Even has finally cracked. Isak who’s standing there looking empty and numb, who can’t help break the fights because he’ll burn everyone. Isak who’s been getting hurt by Even over and over again for weeks now and taking it without complaints, simply grateful for his touch, accepting all of Even’s clauses and conditions. Not in public. Not in public.

Isak.

Isak who’s never been comforted and held in public.

Isak, the freak. Isak, the freak.

Like me. At a Bakka party.

“I don’t think my wildest fantasy of someone embracing me and comforting me in public will ever happen.”

Even doesn’t think. He simply does. He moves until he’s in front of Isak. ‘Look at me,’ he wants to
say. But he doesn’t have to. Isak’s eyes lock on his a moment later. Big and wet and sad.

“You didn’t have to,” he starts, referring to Even literally starting the fight. “I can handle him. I don’t care—”

Even smiles, hopes the tugging at the corner of his lips is conveying how he feels. _I don’t care that you have a questionable past. I don’t care that you have so many enemies. I don’t care that you’re so broken and so hardened. I don’t care that your heart belongs to someone else. I don’t care that you’re only using me. I don’t care that I don’t matter to you. You matter to me. I’ll do the mattering for both of us. And maybe one day, I’ll sneak up on you. Maybe one day, you’ll have some space in your heart for me. Maybe._

“Even,” Isak breathes like he knows what Even is about to do. “Don’t—”

Even wraps both arms around Isak’s back and brings him to his chest for the hug he’s always yearned for.

There’s fire in his heart, but not in his body. And when he realizes that Isak is not burning him, he holds him tighter and hooks his chin over his shoulder, running his hands up and down his back, comforting him.

Even comforts him.

The room goes quiet. But then perhaps it’s all in his head. Even doesn’t care. All that matters right now is Isak in his arms, not burning him, not pushing him away, not shoving him. Isak standing still in his embrace like he can’t believe he finally gets to have this. Like he doesn’t know how to act or what to do, like it never crossed his mind to prepare for a moment such as this one, like the possibility of Even embracing him right now, right here, in front of everyone, wasn’t even something that occurred to him.

_‘You’re the one person I can’t figure out. The only one.’_

“We’re in public,” Isak whispers against his neck, and it sounds like a whimper. A sweet, sweet whimper.

“I don’t care.”

_Toogether._

_Let’s be freaks together._

Even holds him until Isak brings his arms up and holds him back.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

_dun dun dun_
i can't believe i made it to chapter 7 and they still haven't kissed. writing this is torture. this chapter was about Even learning to/trust/ Isak, however cunning and manipulative he is. Isak is telling Even that he is an exception which is why he's sharing his schemes with him. He didn't have to tell him about David and Vegard but he chose to because he doesn't want him guessing. he wants him to trust him. and while Even is happy he's an "exception" supposedly, he will have to teach him that it's still not ok to use everyone else.

this chapter was about Even's self-preservation. but this is the end of his doubts. from now on, he's going to be ruining Isak for everyone else. he will drive him wild. he will rock his world. true story. Isak has interesting views on 'love' and he still somehow believes that he's a scientist, not a 'homosexual' (u can be both, i swear). so it's going to be a fun ride.

Isak's master scheme hasn't been revealed yet but it's coming next, and Even is going to try to stop him. what do you think Isak is planning? Is he really trying to take down Arvid? or is he playing the Penetrators? why? And how do you think Isak developed this condition in the first place? Is Even ever going to come out to his friends and family? Are they going to allow sleepovers now? Are they ever going to kiss? Stay tuned <33

thank you so much for your support and your comments and all the love. you make me so happy. i want to reply to every single one but i'm drowning. hopefully when i move into my new place i'll be able to answer your questions. thank you <3333 love love love
"Is your brain on overdrive yet?"
"When I'm with you, always."

Ft. eggs, a sleepover, morning 3, an escalator, Isak and Even getting impossibly closer, anatomy jokes, Isak catching Even in the middle of a healthy preventive ritual, Even's mom, Isak's latest big scheme, and a special experiment.

"Even?"
Even’s eyes crack open at the mention of his own name, a soft and careful murmur pulling him out of the already forgotten dream he was drowning in.

He squints. His eyes can't quite adjust. It’s too dark. His surroundings feel too foreign. The mattress beneath him doesn’t feel right, curving unusually as if there’s another body laying beside him.

He’s probably still dreaming, he decides. Because despite the unfamiliarity of the setting, Even can’t recall ever emerging from a deep slumber to this much warmth and serenity.

His eyes flutter close again.

“Even? Are you awake?”

Even’s eyes are wide open now. This is not a dream. The warmth hugging his bones is not in his head. Someone is calling his name. Someone is sharing his bed, keeping him warm. Someone. Isak. Isak who’s lying on his chest, whispering his name.

“I know you’re awake,” Isak murmurs. “Your breathing is shallow.”

Right.

“Uh, gimme a second,” Even groans in his sleepy voice, memories flooding his brain. It feels like he’s slurring his words, his tongue too heavy in his mouth.

“You don’t need to talk,” says Isak, his hand lying flat on Even’s chest. “Just listen.”

“Hm?”
“I just want to say thank you,” Isak whispers, sounding proud but shy. “I didn’t say thank you earlier.”

Isak. Ridiculous Isak with his rules and his games and his shenanigans. Isak who hugged him back and who had stars in his eyes when Even finally let him go. And god, how much it physically pained him to let him go. How much it hurt.

Back in that living room, Even couldn’t focus on anything else, not on their surroundings, not on the people around them with their mouths hanging open, not on the fight that seemingly halted the moment he embraced Isak. Even couldn’t focus on anything else but Isak before him. Isak who looked just as dazed and captivated by him and him alone, his eyes screaming ‘what have we done? what are we going to do?’

“How am I going to explain this to Jonas and the rest right now?” Isak asked as if no one else was listening, as if they weren’t surrounded by fifty other people, his face flushed and his fingers curling around the ends of Even’s shirt like he couldn’t help it.

“You don’t have to explain anything to anyone,” Even whispered right back, his right hand settling on Isak’s neck, making him lean into the touch and prompting the house to erupt in even more pronounced cries. “We can just leave.”

“And go where? Jonas will come to my house.”

“We can go to mine. Jonas doesn’t know where I live. You can stay. We can, uh, we can have a sleepover.”

Even doesn’t remember how they got back to his apartment. They must have run, however. Because they were sweaty and breathless and euphoric by the time they crossed the threshold. So sweaty that Even had to lend Isak a shirt, the same one he put on the bitter night he threw up all over himself, the same shirt he washed and returned after their fallout the following morning.

_You can keep the shirt this time._

Even doesn’t remember much, still riding the sweet high that came with the denouement of the night. And it could have been the alcohol, or the weed, or the fact that he made Isak emit the most outrageous sounds back in that bedroom at the party. But Even knows that it was the hug. The mutual embrace. Isak accepting Even’s touch in front of everyone and returning it with just as much fervor.

It was the hug.

The hug that resumed the moment they both fell into bed, limbs entangled, fingers carded through hair, noses tracing skin. The hug that resumed until Even dozed off.

- “Thank you for earlier.”

“You’re welcome,” Even finally replies, pulling Isak a little bit closer until his nose is safely tucked under his jaw.

“What are we gonna do?” Isak asks, curled around Even and breathing against his neck. And for the first time, he sounds genuinely worried.

_We. We. We._
“Nothing. Nothing’s gonna change,” says Even, reaching for Isak’s curls to play with them absently.

“You don’t know that.”

“I won’t let them mess with you. Not with my savior complex at least,” Even jokes.

“It’s not me I’m worried about, Even.”

“Oh.”

They both gasp at the same time, Even at the confession and Isak probably at how it slipped out of him.

“You’re worried about me?” Even asks and can’t help the smile that's probably bleeding into his voice. This is the sweetest thing Isak has ever said to him, probably.

“Well, you know. I mean. I don’t want you to get tangled up in my business obviously,” Isak stammers. “I already told you that I don’t like owing people things or getting them mixed up in my crap, and—”

“You’re worried about me,” Even repeats, laughing this time, suddenly alert and awake, wrapping both of his arms around Isak’s back and hugging him, pulling him closer.

“Get off of me!” Isak complains, wriggling in his hold, but not exactly resisting. If anything, he’s melting into him, into his touch, giggling.

“You’re worried about me. Me!” Even chants. “The great Isak Valtersen is worried about me. I am finally worthy.”

“Shut up!” Isak shoves him, but it’s weak and playful, and Even’s heart grows tenfold.

He doesn’t think much before bringing a hand to Isak’s face, cupping it and making him look up. Even can feel Isak’s mouth curl into a smile right by his thumb.

“Say it.”

“Say what?” Isak blinks at him in the dark room, the only light seeping through it emanating from the street lamps outside his windows.

“That you care about me.”

Even didn’t plan on saying that, the words feeling too heavy now that they’re out in the open. Say that you care about me. How pathetic. Isak probably has an entire philosophical theory on Even and his desperate quest for affection and acknowledgement. He probably has him all figured out and can psychoanalyze him on the spot. Isak can probably tell how desperate Even is for someone to tell him that he matters and that he is cared for.

“You’re my science partner. I obviously care about your fate,” Isak speaks after a long pause, as if he’s thought this through. “It would be a tremendous loss to me if we were to stop conducting our experiments, you see. Therefore, I worry about you. Yes, like a business partner.”


“I don’t see how my feces have anything to do with the very logical explanation I’ve just provided, Even.”
“Your feces? What the fuck?!” Even shoves him dramatically, then revels in Isak’s laughter. He has the sweetest laugh. He should laugh all the time.

“You started it!” says Isak, still laughing and pulling Even closer the more he tries to get away, refusing to let go. “It’s all your fault.”

They wrestle in bed for a minute, maybe two. And it’s ridiculous because this is the very boy who calculates every interaction and every touch, wrestling him in his bed at four in the morning.

When they both stop to catch their breath, they’re face to face, nose to nose. Even can feel Isak’s hot breath against his cheek. His heart is about to leap out of his chest. Everything is on fire. His brain is on overdrive, his fingertips are aching to touch and ruin, his lips are aching to kiss and mark. Even is aching to ravage him.

I’m fucked.

Even runs his hands over Isak’s face once more instead, feeling him nuzzle against it. He doesn't think anyone has ever yearned for his touch this much. It makes him want to give Isak the world.

“I’m glad I’m here talking about excrements with you,” Isak whispers in the dark and it makes Even both chuckle and melt.

This guy.

“I’m glad you’re here talking about your excrements, too.”

Even falls asleep to the sweetest words. “You made me so happy tonight.”

.

Even wakes up before Isak. And while it breaks his heart to leave bed while Isak is still fast asleep, he cannot deny the embarrassing problem between his legs.

Well.

He painfully untangles himself from Isak’s hold—Isak who, like a baby, reaches for him in his sleep, refusing to be apart even in the deepest of slumbers—and makes his way to the bathroom.

Even tries to think about his distant great aunts, about mathematical equations, about the political chaos in the United States. He reads the news on his phone and navigates to Trump’s twitter. But nothing is helping turn him off. His mind flashes to scientific gibberish and it somehow makes him even more aroused.

Am I fucking fourteen again or what.

Even is overwhelmed with shame as he takes himself into his hand on the toilet seat. Not because the act of relieving one’s arousal is shameful—Even is a proponent of following one’s urges—but because of his arousal itself.

He closes his eyes and strokes himself faster, his sweatpants now around his ankles. He feels awful. Awful and terribly guilty because the only snapshots in his mind are of a cupid bow and flushed cheeks and green eyes and a sharp and ruthless tongue and the softest skin. The absolute softest and most touch-starved skin.

“Even...”
Even replays the way Isak says his name in his head as he nears the edge. He’s ashamed, but he’s reached the primal stage of simply needing to chase his release. His wrist hurts and he’s probably making the most scandalous sounds, but he can’t stop. He can’t for the life of him bring himself to stop.

“Fuck!” he groans as he watches his shame spurt out of him, his chest heaving, his hand aching.

It takes him five more seconds to notice Isak under the door frame in front of him, with his wide eyes and abnormally red face.

Oh.

Oh my fucking god!

“Fuck! What the—?!” Even suddenly stands to pull his pants up, his face probably as flushed as Isak’s.

“I’m—I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I—”

“For fuck’s sake! Please turn around!” Even shouts as he struggles to put on his pants, nearly falling face forward when he stood up.

Isak does as told. He turns his back to Even but for some reason he’s not leaving.

“I’m sorry, Even. I heard you call my name. I thought you needed me for something. I didn’t mean to invade your privacy.”

Even cannot believe this. For one, he forgot to lock the door, too busy trying to will away his hard-on. Second, Isak saw him. Him. Like that. Doing that. He watched him stroke himself to completion while probably moaning his name. Third, his mother is in the house and there’s a high chance she might have heard him too. Fourth, Isak is still there.

“I’m, uh, I’m gonna go,” says Isak as if he’s read his mind.

Even scrambles to wash his hands and clean himself up, his ears still ringing, before running out of the bathroom. He doesn’t know what to say, but this certainly beats their two “shitty mornings” so far. He’s mortified and debating how many days of silence Isak will inflict upon him this time.

When he reaches the kitchen, however, Isak is sitting there on one of the stools reading the back of a cereal box and trying to stifle a grin.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Even blurts out because he doesn’t wish to offend Isak. This feels like crossing an even newer line.

Isak surprises him by bursting into laughter, still holding onto the cereal box.

“Are you laughing at me?” Even scoffs.

“I’m sorry,” Isak laughs again, using the box to hide his face. He’s so cute. Even can’t stand it. “Please ignore me.”

“Are you seriously laughing at me right now? Am I really that funny down there?”

Isak’s laughter dies in his throat as if some obscene images have just crossed his mind. Right. Too soon for dick jokes.
“My bad,” Isak finally speaks, sitting up a bit more upright, as if he’s just gained some sort of resolve. “I didn’t mean to offend you. My laughter had nothing to do with your, uh, anatomy. It was mainly the situation in which it was presented.”

It’s Even’s turn to flush. He feels mortified. He liked it better when Isak was laughing. And Isak has probably noticed.

“Not to say that you should be ashamed of what you were doing,” Isak speaks in his cool and impersonal tone, an interesting way of reassuring Even. “Onanism is a natural practice that is for the most part healthy and encouraged.”

“Onanism?” Even grimaces.

“Well, you know, what you were doing in there just now. Although, it can have other meanings. But yeah, the stimulation of one’s own, uh, parts, is natural. Researchers even say that by flushing out carcinogenic toxins from the body, it can help prevent prostate cancer, which is very common in men. So like, if anything, you were practicing a prevention routine in there. No judgement here.”

“I can’t believe you’re using the words ‘prostate’ and ‘stimulation’ and that I’m not turned on right now.”

Isak chokes on air, seemingly. Yes, finally, a reaction.

“You’re the worst,” Isak huffs out.

“Says the guy who just stood there and watched.”

“I didn’t watch!” Isak bites back. “It was just a second. And if anything, I was just observing out of curiosity.”

“What like for science? You stood there for science?”

“I already told you I don’t want to miss out on learning opportunities.”

“Watching me masturbate is a learning opportunity for you?” Even blurts out before he can control himself.

“I’m— Stop putting words in my mouth!”

Even wants to make a joke about putting other things in his mouth, but it’s too soon, it’s too much. The realization that he’s actually willing to let Isak burn his genitalia is slightly overwhelming right now. He wishes he could go back in time. This is a disaster.

“Immanuel Kant says that pleasuring oneself is a violation of the moral law in ‘The Metaphysics of Morals’. And I always thought it was a bit backwards even though I don’t really do stuff like that myself.”

“Am I seriously listening to you talk about the philosophy of masturbation in my kitchen right now?” Even snorts.

“You started it!”

“What did Even start this time?” a gentle voice interrupts their bickering. It’s Even’s mother. And both Even and Isak are mortified. “What are you both arguing so passionately about this lovely morning?” she smiles at the two of them.
“Good morning, Julie,” Isak recovers first, a delicate and careful smile spreading across his face. He should go into acting, Even thinks. “You look radiant this morning.”

“Oh please!” she laughs, her tousled mop of hair adding to her natural charm. “You’re a sweet talker, Isak. What do you do with these sweet words of yours?”

*If you only knew.*

“Nothing much, unfortunately,” Isak replies, beaming. “They did get you to smile, though. I consider it a victory.”

“Sweet sweet talker. I bet you’re popular with the ladies.”

“Not to break your heart, Julie, but that would require ladies actually accepting to come near me in the first place,” Isak adds with another smile.

But the one on Even’s mother’s face falters. It falls as if she’s just remembered Isak’s condition.

“Oh,” Isak catches on when he sees the look on her face. “It was a joke. Don’t worry about it. I’m okay.”

Even can’t believe they went from joking about masturbation to making his own mother cry.

“You sweet munchkin. I hope Even is nice to you. Let me know if he isn’t. I’ll make sure to pull his ears.”

“Mom!” Even cringes.

“He’s very nice to me. Don’t worry.” Isak smiles again.

“Well just know that you’re always welcome here,” says Julie. “I’d love to stay and listen to your interesting chemistry experiments, but I have to run to brunch with some friends.”

It’s only when she disappears into her room that Even lets out the breath he’s been holding.

“How the hell do you do it?” he asks, stepping closer to Isak’s stool.

“Do what?”

“Pull this shit? How are you so convincing?”

“I see that we’re back on the topic of feces,” Isak snorts.

“God!” Even groans. “There goes my breakfast.”

“What do you want? Toast? Bacon?” Even asks as he prepares to make both of them breakfast, Isak still perched on a stool behind him.

“Uhm. Could you, uh, make eggs?”

Even turns around to take him in, the memory of Isak flushing while eating his eggs that forsaken morning coming back to him. Isak looks flustered and hopeful.

“Yeah of course,” says Even.
“Cool.”

Even carefully places the plate in front of Isak and watches him stifle a smile. He made sure to make the serving larger this time too. It’s just a hunch, but he has reasons to believe that Isak really likes eggs.

He hands him a fork and a knife and props his chin on his hands, watching him. He’s so cute.

“So what’s your deal with eggs?” he cracks a minute later because it’s too much. He’s never seen anyone this happy to be eating eggs.

“What do you mean?” Isak asks.

“Have you just discovered eggs or what?”

Isak blinks at him before looking down and bringing some to his mouth. He nods.

“What?” Even frowns.

“I mean,” Isak pauses to wipe his mouth. “I just never really liked eggs, you know? At least the way we make them in my house. I just assumed I didn’t like them? You know some people simply don’t like certain things. I thought eggs were that for me. But then the other morning your mother was there, and I didn’t want to look like even more of a weirdo, so I forced myself to eat them. And I was rather surprised by, uh, the quality of your eggs, I guess.”

“The quality of my eggs,” Even snorts. “So it’s my eggs that you like?”

“I guess,” says Isak.

“Well, I am certainly flattered. It’s a family secret, actually, and—”

Even is about to share their recipe when his mother sprints out of her room, the perfume he got her for her last birthday overwhelming his nostrils. She’s fully clothed and looks like she’s running late.

“Boys, I’m heading out,” she says as she checks her bag one last time.

“Did you get your car keys?” Even asks.

“Oh! I forgot! What would I do without you?” She sprints back to her bedroom while Even chuckles.

She comes back out, runs in her heels to the door to grab her coat.

“What’s the word of the day, by the way?” she asks as she wraps a scarf around her neck.

*Oh. Right. That.*

Even watches Isak raise a brow, looking curious.

“Uhm. I’ll check that later. Haven’t come up with one for the day,” he replies.

“Well, you have until tonight,” she teases before opening the door.

“I’ll make sure to surprise you.”

“You better.”
Even expects to hear the sound of the door closing behind her when she comes back running to the kitchen.

“Forgot something else?” he smiles.

“Forgot to kiss my boy,” she grins as she grabs Even’s face in both hands and places a sloppy kiss on his cheek.

“Mom!” he whines, laughing.

He’s so busy laughing that he barely notices that she does the same to Isak. She places a hand on his right cheek and presses a kiss to his temple, like a mother would.

“Have a good day, boys!”

The door closes behind her right as Isak nearly falls off his stool.

“What just happened?!”

“Oh my god!” Even exclaims. “What the fuck?”

He runs after his mother to check if the pain has finally caught up with her and if she’s crumbling in agony in the staircase. But she’s already disappeared into the elevator, and no yelps can be heard.

“What the fuck?” he exclaims again, mostly to himself. He runs down the stairs barefoot. And when he reaches the street, his mother has already started the car and driven away.

“Call her, now!” Isak materializes beside him, barefoot and disheveled and looking on the verge of a breakdown. “Synapses sometimes fail to do their job. There might be delayed response. Or perhaps she has high tolerance to pain. She shouldn’t be driving with a burn. You have to call her, Even! Call her now!”

Isak is still shaking when Julie’s car makes its way back to the street.

“She’s back. Fuck!”

They both rush to her as she parks the car rather clumsily.

“Forgot my wallet!” she says soon as she opens her door. “And what are you doing barefoot in the middle of the street? I was gone for literally three minutes.”

“Mom, are you okay?” Even grabs her wrist.

“Yes, of course, why?”

Isak is still shaking when they make their way back to the apartment, his eyes still wide, his breathing still uneven.

“It’s okay, Isak. Nothing happened,” Even reassures him once more, his hand on the small of his back.

“I could have burned your mother!”

“But you didn’t,” Even insists applying more pressure in his touches, as if to say ‘I’m here. It’s fine.’
don’t resent you. I couldn’t resent you.’

“That somehow scares me even more,” Isak admits, bringing his hands to his own hair and sitting on the stool again. “I don’t know what the fuck is going on. I’m freaking out!”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Even whispers moving from Isak’s side to face him, to cup his cheeks and make him look into his eyes. “Hey, look at me. Isak, look at me.”

Isak looks at him, his hands back to his sides.

“You were right,” Isak sighs. “I’m taking too many risks just hanging out around you. I’m putting too many people at risk by being reckless. I’m losing my focus lately. I’m letting my guard down and I’m being weak. This wouldn’t have happened if I were wearing all my clothes and my snapback and my gloves. It’s completely normal for her to forget that I’m abnormal for a second because I deceived her. I’m—”

“Isak, stop talking,” Even interrupts his rant because it’s all too upsetting, because Isak blaming himself for everything reminds him of his own tendencies. It’s too upsetting. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You’re not weak for wearing a goddamn t-shirt on a Sunday morning. Everything’s fine. Okay?”

“But—”

“I, for one, think that this is a good thing.”

“A good thing? What are you on?” Isak grimaces.

“Yes, a good thing. You have more leads on your scientific stuff now, no? I mean my mother and I share blood and DNA. Maybe that’s why? Maybe you’re actually harmless to some people? Maybe you just have to avoid certain types of people and not everyone?”

He’s still holding Isak’s faces in his hands. Isak on the stool. Even between his legs. Their go-to position, always. He can’t remember when they settled into it this time around.

“I’ve barely wrapped my head around what we have,” Isak confesses. “I thought I had it figured out. I thought—”

Even leans in and embraces him. He hugs him the same way he did the previous night—although it somehow feels even more important right now. Because Isak needs it. Because he’s questioning everything and because he’s scared. Isak is scared. So Even holds him and comforts him.

“We’ll figure it out, okay? I’ll be your science partner or whatever for as long as you need. Okay?”

Even runs his hands up and down his back. He realizes that his hands have memorized the curves and dents of Isak’s body, that he knows exactly where to press to get him to unwind and unravel in his arms.

Isak wraps his arms around Even’s waist and buries his face in his neck.

“Okay?” Even repeats.

“Okay.”

.

Even insists on walking Isak home.
“You don’t have to,” says Isak, still wearing his t-shirt despite sleeping in it.

“But I want to,” Even replies with a smile. And it’s true. He does. “I want to stay with you a little longer, if you want.”

Isak doesn’t answer. He simply starts walking, smiling to himself, maybe.

A foreign sense of self-preservation, somewhere deep down, warns Even that this could all be part of Isak’s plan. That perhaps Isak is trying to really fall for him, to bend the rules for him. That perhaps Isak has put on an act to get Even to walk him for whatever reason.

But that voice is muffled by Even’s affection. Affection. That’s what he’s calling from now on. He can’t settle on any other word. Isak fills his heart with nonsensical affection. And perhaps it’s a side effect of whatever magical bond they share. But he doesn’t care.

The word is affection.

“What’s the word of the day?” Isak asks, making him gasp at the idea that he might be creeping into his thoughts.

“Huh?”

“Back in the kitchen. Your mother asked you for the word of the day,” Isak explains.

“Oh. That,” Even chuckles, moving a little bit closer and trying to make his strides match Isak’s. “It’s just a silly thing I do with my mom. A word a day. It helps with maintaining the routine and it gives me something to work toward throughout the day.”

“What routine?”

_Oh. Yeah. Bipolar. He doesn’t know yet._

It’s not that Even has forgotten. How could he forget. His mental illness is always there, with him. The one constant in his oscillating thoughts. Whether it’s giving him hell or not. It’s always there at the back of his mind every time he opens his mouth big and wide to swallow his pills.

But at least, it’s not at the forefront. He’s had other things to obsess over lately. He takes his pills every day the same way his mother religiously applies sunscreen before leaving the house in the morning. Nonchalantly.

He wonders if Isak has noticed him taking them. If he cares. If he would judge him. If he would get away from him.

_He can’t afford to._

The thought that he is Isak’s only viable option makes his heart clench, a bit. He can’t bare the idea of telling Isak about his bipolar and noticing changes in how he treats him. He can’t bare it because anything he does will hurt him. If he distances himself, Even will hurt because he’s doomed to scaring everyone away. If he doesn’t, Even will hurt because he’ll know that Isak is only sticking around for their “experiments”.

“What routine?” Isak repeats.

“Uhm. Just like in general, going to school and stuff. I don’t really like following a routine, so this makes it a bit more interesting,” says Even. “I also get to occupy myself during those boring physics
classes with finding a sentence in which I use whatever word I pick out of the app.”

Isak looks at Even like he’s studying him. He probably doesn’t believe his explanation. He can probably see right through him.

“So what’s the word of the day? Does it have to be a fancy and Byzantine word?” Isak asks.

“Byzantine?”

“As in convoluted.”

Even chuckles. “You’d have way more fun playing this game than me. And no, the word doesn’t have to be an archaic one. It’s just a theme for the day. I guess.”

“Like onanism,” Isak laughs.

“Oh, piss off.” Even shoves him playfully. “I’m sure my mom will be thrilled to hear me use that word.”

“I’m sure she’ll be thrilled with whatever you do or say,” says Isak.

“Right.”

“I’m serious. I don’t think you realize how lucky you are.”

Oh.

Even remembers Isak’s mother and her speech and her cruel words. He remembers that she confiscated his phone and treats him like an abomination, that Isak has to stage his outings and manipulate the universe to go play the drums at a bar.

“Sometimes I wonder if I’d still be like this if my mother were a little bit different,” Isak muses.

“You mean genetically? You think your mom’s DNA has something to do with your condition?”

“No. I mean her beliefs or something. I don’t know.” Isak sighs. “Anyway, that’s not important. What’s important is that you know how lucky you are with a mother like Julie and that you don’t take it for granted. She really loves you.”

Even’s heart aches for him. He can’t ever imagine not being loved by his mother, the mere idea being unconceivable. He would have given up a long time ago if it weren’t for her and her unwavering support and love, if it weren’t for the countless nights she spent by his bed, folded around herself in tiny Ikea armchairs at the hospital.

Even doesn’t know how he would have kept going without her constantly there to shower him with affection and unconditional love, reminding him that he is worthy and loved. His mother who refuses to feel happiness unless Even does, too.

Even wonders if her tendency to bear and emulate all of his emotions is the reason Isak didn’t burn her.

“I’m sure your mother loves you, too,” Even blurts out because he can’t bear the loneliness that Isak has just confessed to feeling.

Isak smiles. And it’s a heartbreaking smile, but it’s a smile nonetheless.
“No, she doesn’t,” he says. “And that’s okay.”

Even feels a little bit brave when they round the corner to Isak’s street. They managed to spend a night together without fighting, without erupting in each other’s face and hurting one another. They’ve been nothing but careful and playful since morning.

So Even feels brave.

And when Isak asks him to leave a few houses before his own, Even takes him into his arms and embraces him again.

“Text me if you need something,” he says when they part, Isak blushing yet again.

“I think I can go an afternoon without you.”

“Wish I could say the same.”

“Shut up,” Isak shoves him, his smile blinding.

And when Even starts laughing, Isak surprises him by hugging his waist and pulling him closer.

“You can’t pass on learning opportunities. Can you?” Even giggles.

Isak pulls back and flips him off.

“Hurtful,” Even pouts.

“Yeah bye.”

“Bye.”

“I like the kid, but are you sure this is okay?” Mutta asks for the third time in a row. They’re on his couch, munching on chips and staring at the ceiling.

“What do you even mean ‘is this okay’?” Even replies nonchalantly. “I already told you. I have no idea why I’m able to touch him without burning. But since it’s happening, we thought we might as well test the limits of that or something.”

“Again. That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what do you mean? What are you worried about? That I have a weird skin condition that allows me to touch him?”

“No. I’m asking you if it’s true,” Mutta sighs.

“If what’s true?”

“If it really doesn’t hurt to touch him.”

“What? Elias and Sonja were there. They told you themselves. Isak doesn’t burn me,” Even replies, feeling increasingly anxious at Mutta’s insinuations.

“Them seeing you hug him doesn’t mean it didn’t hurt. You can hide pain.”
“What the fuck are you implying?” Even is frowning now.

“I’m not implying anything, Even. I’m just saying that given your history, it’s fair to question some of these things.”

“My history?” Even scoffs. “That has nothing to do with this. Absolutely nothing. I wasn’t doing too well back then. This is completely different. I don’t even think about it anymore.”

“Even, I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m just saying that it’s good to keep these things in mind. That’s all,” Muttta replies calmly, looking kind and earthy and robust. And Even wishes he could resent him. “Besides, Adam is going very far with his conspiracy theories. And the Arvid thing is getting sketchier.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. You should ask Adam about the details, but apparently Arvid wasn’t too happy when he learned that Isak went to a Penetrators party without telling him. Yousef also said that he saw someone who looked like Isak with one of the Yakuza guys when he was at his part time job.”

“What?” Even’s brows furrow together. He remembers Jonas’ panicked texts the night Even focused on all the right things. What is he planning.

“I don’t know what he’s doing but it sounds like he’s trying to fuck with every big male Russ Bus in Oslo.”

“Why are we at the mall?” Isak asks, dipping his snapback lower over his face and looking worried.

“I have to pick up something for my mom,” Even explains. “Also, you didn’t have to come with me.”

“Well, I thought you were gonna pick up something from your house. Plus, it’s Tuesday. Who goes to the mall on a Tuesday?”

“Huh? Why can’t you go to the mall on Tuesday?” Even laughs. “Why are you freaking out? You’ve never been to a mall or what?”

Even stops laughing when he realizes that Isak probably avoids places with crowds. He feels awful. Great.

“We can leave. We don’t have to—”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Isak rolls his eyes. “I’ll survive.”

Even stands close. Perhaps too close, because Isak looks flustered now. Even’s own heart is beating slightly faster than normal, the closeness making him giddy and euphoric.

“You might as well just step over my shoes while you’re at it,” Isak mutters, but he’s nervous. Even can tell.

He wraps an arm around his shoulders without giving it much thought.

“What are you doing?”
“What?” Even smiles as he drags them forward through the mall. “Nobody I know goes to the mall on Tuesday as you said, so we can do anything.”

“But—”

“We can just be two pals hanging around the mall. This also makes sure that nobody bumps into you. How about that?”

“Two pals.”

“Two science partners.”


Even doesn’t let him go after that, keeping an arm around Isak’s shoulders or waist at all times. It must get uncomfortable at some point, but Isak never complains.

And when Even takes his arm away to pick up his mother’s order, Isak grabs it and throws it over his shoulders again.

Any type of touch seems to be Isak’s favorite touch.

“What?” Isak frowns.

“Nothing,” Even smiles. “Let’s go.”

Even never really thought of escalators as a romantic prop. If anything, they’re functional but not necessarily aesthetically pleasing. If he were to shoot a movie, he would have never considered an escalator for a scene, especially given how many takes he would have to shoot to get all the angles right.

But he’s reconsidering it right now. Because they’re taking the escalator up, and Isak is facing him one step above him to leave the side open for people wishing to run through the stairs.

Isak is taller than him like this and it’s pretty nice.

He wraps both arms around his waist and pulls him closer.

“What are you doing?” Isak places both hands on Even’s shoulders to look into his eyes and balance on the step.

“This is a learning opportunity,” says Even, making him smile.

“You need to stop using my words against me.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you from this angle while standing. We need to test the angles.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Isak laughs, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, look who’s stealing the other’s words now, huh.”

“Shut up.”

They settle into the coziest of positions. Even’s arms around Isak’s waist. Isak’s around Even’s neck.
Even’s nose against Isak’s collarbone. Isak’s lips by Even’s temple, brushing faintly against the skin there.

It’s perfect. They’re perfect like this. Hugging and rocking gently on a never-ending escalator.

“That was nice,” Isak confesses, looking flustered and shy, his early petulance gone.

Even makes them take every single escalator around the mall. He insists on taking the metro just to take the damn escalator. He’s losing his mind, but it’s worth it. The smallest things make everything so worth it.

Jonas is waiting by Isak’s house when Even walks him back. The bruises on his face are even more pronounced now that Even isn’t drunk and high.

“Lea said I should probably wait outside,” Jonas tells Isak. “Good to see you again, Even.”

“What are you doing here?” Isak frowns.

“Well, you would know if you bothered checking my messages.”

“What?”

“What’s the deal with the Yakuza, and Arvid, and William? Vilde says that you’re still planning something,” says Jonas.

Isak shoots Even a panicked look.

“Can we talk about this later?” he asks Jonas, clearly referring to Even’s presence.

“No. We need to talk about it now. I’m sure your new best friend would like to know as well.”

Uh.

Even feels inadequate listening to their conversation. If he didn’t know any better, he would think this is jealousy.

“Jonas, don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m, uh, I’m gonna go,” says Even. “You guys can chat.”

“Even—”

“It’s chill. We’ll talk tomorrow. Okay?” he smiles at Isak.

“The Yakuza guys beat up Jonas pretty badly a few weeks ago,” says Isak.

He’s sitting on one of the swings while Even pushes him from behind. It’s childish but they’ve both just smoked four joints after swimming, so it doesn’t matter. If Isak wants Even to push him on the damn swing, Even will push him on the damn swing.

“So he doesn’t usually look like that?” Even jokes, referring to Jonas’ black eyes and bruised up face.
“Don’t be a dick.”

“A dick? Me?” Even scoffs.

“May I continue or are you going to act like a child some more?”

“Says the guy on the swing right now.”

“I haven’t gotten to do this in four years. Give me a break!” Isak groans, his legs stretched perfectly to keep the momentum.

“You clearly know how to use a swing without anyone having to push you.”

“Well, maybe I want someone to push me!”

Even refrains from replying right away. Things always get messy when Jonas intervenes, and he doesn’t wish to run with speculations this time around. He will ask him questions this time around.

“Okay, so The Yakuza beat up Jonas,” he says, prompting Isak to continue his story.

“Yes, they fucked him up pretty badly cause they thought he was with William’s people,” says Isak. “Remember William? Pretentious dude with hair to the side from that party.”

“I remember him.”

“Yeah so they fucked him up, and they terrorize pretty much the entire city. They’ve been at it for a while. Arvid lost all credibility when they got into a fight once. He can’t even venture out of certain areas of Oslo from fear of getting jumped. Isn’t that insane?”

“What does that have to do with you?”

“Arvid’s fear is leverage for me. And I used to get into his group.”

“What do you mean?” Even frowns.

“I mean that I gave Arvid a deal that he couldn’t refuse. I offered to help him with his Yakuza problem.”

“In exchange for what?” says Even. “And how are you gonna help with that? What?”

“Well, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m good at planning things. And news must travel fast because I somehow became notorious for that. Not that I mind. It gives me credibility.”

“Credibility to do what?”

“To solve people’s problems,” says Isak, his feet now touching the ground to stop himself from swinging. “Arvid’s bus and William’s both hate the Yakuza and want to get rid of them. So what better way than to form a partnership and gang up on them?”

“What?”

“People tend to do wonders when united by common ideals and objectives, even when they don’t necessarily like each other. For instance, if you take two Justin Bieber fans who cannot stand each other and give them a common goal of voting for him for an award for instance, those two fans will put their differences aside to achieve the goal. But then again, that’s only when the goal is colossal enough that it transcends individual emotions such as pride and dislike. Obviously those tensions
“Come back later when the goal has been achieved, but it doesn’t matter in retrospect.”

“Isak, my head hurts.”

“Stop smoking so much weed, then.”

Even rolls his eyes then walks around the swing to face Isak, who’s swaying gently.

“So Arvid and William are Justin Bieber fans?”

“Arvid and William are Justin Bieber fans,” Isak smiles.

“And you’re like an award show organizer and the award is getting rid of the Yakuza?”

“No, I’m another fan who’s in okay terms with both of them.”

“These analogies are killing me. I’m not going to lie,” says Even.

“Again. Stop smoking so much weed then,” Isak sticks his tongue out playfully.

“Ugh. Fine. Continue your story. Do Arvid and William know that you’re working with both of them?”

“Yes, I’m kind of a buffer. They don’t have to talk to each other as long as I take care of everything.”

“But why do they trust you?” Even furrows his brows. That part he doesn’t get.

“They don’t. I had to give them leverage as well.”

Even has to think about this one.

“Uh, leverage as in what? As in joining Arvid’s bus?” says Even.

“Bingo. See, you’re not that dumb.”

“Shut up,” Even laughs. “What about William?”

“I showed up to his dumb party.”

“How is that leverage?”

“He wanted to see if I’d accept to confront Erik,” says Isak, wincing a bit.

“Wait. So you knew he was gonna cause a scene?”

Isak nods, “he’s the most predictable and plain guy I know. I went into that party ready to get beat up. But then you hugged me.”

Even has to take a moment to process all of Isak’s calculations. He can’t keep up.

“But I heard that Arvid was upset that you went to William’s party.”

“Yeah, I mean they’re still rivals,” says Isak. “It’s like I joined Arvid’s fanclub dedicated to Justin Bieber, then published a public post on William’s fanclub. It diminishes Arvid’s credibility.”

“But you still did it.”
“Because Arvid won’t kick me out of the fanclub.”

“Why not?”

“He needs me too much,” Isak shrugs.

“How? What are you gonna do?”

“It’s not about what I’m going to do. It’s about what he thinks I’ll do.”

“I don’t understand.”

“He took me in, me, the freak, because he thinks I’ll be a competitive advantage,” says Isak, now both feet firmly planted on the ground. “He thinks that if a fight breaks, I will ultimately knock everyone out by burning them.”

“What?!” Even shouts. “Arvid expects you to burn people for his stupid Russ crap?”

“Well, he hasn’t voiced that expectation but I know that he thinks it,” says Isak. “He’ll probably rile me up to get me to jump in.”

“But you won’t?”

“Of course not,” Isak smiles. “I’m one burning incident away from being shipped to some lab.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that my parents have fought tooth and nail to make sure I stay home and be a regular teenager. One more strike, and I’m shipped to fuckland.”

“Are you for real?!”

Even finally understands why Isak is so terrified whenever anyone comes near him. He’s probably not only scared of hurting them but also of becoming a lab rat. Even finally understands why Jonas is so incredibly frustrated and worried.

“Yeah,” Isak shrugs looking down at his feet.

“Then why the hell are you doing all of this? This is crazy!”

“You don’t like that word.”

“No, but it is! Are you trying to unite with Arvid and William to get revenge for what the Yakuza did to Jonas? Is that it?!”

“Not just Jonas.”

“Who’s the one with a savior complex now?” Even huffs.

“You won’t understand but think about it. If these three groups of douchebags get into a huge fight, they might simply wipe each other out. Maybe lawmakers will finally take a look at how dangerous and harmful this stupid tradition is? Maybe if a few rich boys get hurt, they’ll finally start giving a shit about all the others who suffer just so that they can have their fun parties in their fun buses!”

Even blinks at him, his words sinking in.
“You want them to beat each other up? You don’t just want revenge for Jonas?”

“It’s not revenge! It’s called justice!” Isak bites back with fire in his voice.

“It’s not justice if people get hurt!”

“Yes, it is. It’s retributive justice. Those who hurt others morally deserve to suffer a proportionate punishment. Philosophy of morals 101.”

“Isak, life is not some freaking philosophy lecture. You sound like a death penalty proponent!”

“I’m not saying they should die. I’m just saying that perhaps getting a taste of their own medicine might help calibrate them a bit. Even Kant, the most stuck-up and moral philosopher ever, buys into retributive justice.”

“Isak,” Even crouches in front of him, puts both hands on his knees, moves closer so he can feel him, bring him back. “It’s not on you to restore justice in the world. This will upset Jonas. I’m sure he doesn’t want you to partake in any of this.”

“I’m not doing this for Jonas’ affections. I’m doing it because it’s right.”

“You and I both know that it’s not true,” says Even, his voice low and careful this time. He’s learned the hard way that they’re no point having an outburst in front of Isak.

“It doesn’t matter,” Isak replies and his voice is suddenly gentle as well.

“Is getting revenge for a few bruises on Jonas’ face worth putting yourself in danger? What if someone touches you by accident? Is this worth it?” Even moves closer, his hand hovering over Isak’s.

“What if I’m also doing it for myself?” Isak whispers and his eyes are big and sad now. “What if I want the penetrators to pay for terrorizing me at Nissen?”

Oh.

“Isak—”

Even’s heart breaks.

He understands now. Isak has carefully considered collateral damage. He’s not trying to punish someone who doesn’t deserve it.

“What did they do to you?” Even asks with his heart in his throat. “Tell me.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Isak looks away. “It’s fine anyway. I’m like over it.”

Even considers asking more questions about Isak’s time at Nissen, but the way he’s playing with his fingers, his lower lip quivering indicates that he should probably drop it.

“Okay,” he whispers, bringing his right hand to Isak’s cheek, making him gasp. “You don’t have to tell me.”

They sit there for a little while, not speaking a word. Even stroking Isak’s cheek and Isak nuzzling against his hand.

When he walks him home, Even asks a question he can’t shake off.
“What about Arvid? Why are you going after him? Because of the cafeteria incident your first week?”

“No.”

“No?”

Isak reaches for Even’s arm and wraps it around his shoulders.

“Why then?” Even asks.

“Because he hurt you.”

Even thinks about it all night. Isak’s schemes and convoluted plans and feelings. Isak hurting at Nissen because of some of William’s guys. Isak’s quest for retributive justice regarding Arvid because he hurt Even.

Even wonders how much Isak knows, if he knows the full story, if he meant it like that.

‘Because he hurt you. You. You’re as important to me as Jonas. Because he hurt you.’

Isak might have said it to appease him after all, well aware of how badly Even aches for acknowledgement and validation.

‘Because he hurt you.’

Even sleeps with a sore and warm heart, a sweet contradiction. Sweet like him.


Even doesn’t know how to talk Isak out of setting his plan in motion. He doesn’t even know the details of said plan, isn’t sure if he should seek them out. He thinks about it for a while, then decides that perhaps he can trap Isak in bed, perhaps he can distract him with touches, perhaps he could touch his flesh. His stomach. Even wants to kiss it.

Focus.

Heraklit (17:19)

Coming to the pool tonight?

No. i’m not in Oslo

Impromptu trip with the family

Everything okay?

Yeah. just you know. My mom

When are you gonna be back?
Tomorrow or the day after why? No reason

Okay Have fun

It’s a bit tough without you around

Oh wow

I mean because i got used to having your around
Like with the experiments
And the weird bond

You miss me :’)

Uh no

You miss me so much

Bye Even

I miss you too

Bye

In a scientific way
As in my body wants to be near yours
In a completely scientific and non homosexual way

BYE

“Well, look who it is!” Elias exclaims as soon as Even steps into Sonja’s place. “I feel like we haven’t seen you in ages.”

“Yeah, I heard you got a boyfriend,” Yousef teases.

“Don’t be weird,” says Even and immediately regrets it. He’ll need to talk to them eventually. Maybe. Some day. Who knows.

“He’s totally your boyfriend,” says Mutta. “You have actual pictures of him on your phone. That’s the definition of boyfriend/girlfriend.”

“I do not!” Even groans. But he does. He has their selfies with the snapchat filters and the pictures Even couldn’t help but take whenever Isak laughed for too long on his bed or anywhere, really. He’s only human after all. He promised to delete the pictures but never did. He wonders when Mutta saw them.

His chest feels tight throughout the night. It’s good to spend time with his friends. But he feels as though he’s not really there. He feels fake, deceiving. He realizes that he hasn’t been completely honest with any of his friends in a little while.

He’s physically present but his mind is wandering elsewhere. He wonders what Isak is doing, if
everything’s fine, if he’s thinking of him too, if any of this is real.

Even regrets lending his jacket to Sonja the moment he steps outside. It’s cold. Colder than it’s been in a while. Or perhaps it’s because he hasn’t seen Isak in a few days. Perhaps he got used to Isak keeping him warm, curling around him, burying his nose in his neck, locking his arms around his back, holding him, inhaling him, latching onto him, yearning for and demanding his touch until one of them dozed off.

Perhaps it’s the reason Even feels so cold.

He pulls out his phone and stares at his lockscreen for a minute. His heart catches in his throat for a minute. Because Isak is smiling at him. *Smiling*. On his lockscreen. Even needs a minute.

He finally understands why Sonja made a face when she handed him his phone as he was leaving. He finally understands why Mutta and Elias were giggling. They probably changed his lockscreen to that picture of Isak when he went to use the restroom.

*Great.*

He’s still debating whether he should change it back to his previous generic iPhone background when the phone vibrates in his hand.

*Heraklit (20:18)*

I’m at our spot

Even doesn’t know when simple text messages started spreading this much joy in his chest, when simple words on a screen started making him want to sprint to the other side of town. But he doesn’t wish to dwell on it, not right now. He doesn’t have time.

Isak is back and he’s at their spot.

Even runs.

“Did you go over the document I emailed you?” Isak asks in a calm and detached tone without making eye contact. He’s acting strange and Even feels anxiousness twist his insides.

Because contrary to what he expected with every fiber in his being, Isak didn’t throw himself at him the moment they spotted each other across the playground. He didn’t touch him. He barely even greeted him, his eyes shifting from the ground, to some tree behind Even, then back to the ground.

“Which document?” Even frowns because Isak keeps taking a step back whenever he tries to lessen the distance between them.

“I emailed you something,” Isak replies, awkwardly shuffling in place, making Even want to grab his chin and look into his eyes. “You can check it on your phone now if you want.”

Even is about to comply when he remembers his lockscreen, panic spreading from his brain all the way to his fingertips.

“Oh. My phone is at 1%,” he lies. “I’ll read it when I’m home later.”
“We can go now,” Isak interjects with a little more vigour, finally looking up, albeit for barely a second—enough for Even to notice that he’s burning up, that his cheeks are crimson, that he actually looks nervous, not detached and cold.

“Uh, to my place?” Even asks and his heart is tripping over itself at the memories of the last time they were at his place, in his room.

“Yeah, if you want.”

Even tries to ignore Isak removing his shoes behind him. He tries to ignore the fact that he’s removing his puffer jacket, that he’s in a light shirt behind him.

“How was your trip?” Even asks, his back still turned as he fumbles with the tangled cables by the end of his bed.

“It was alright,” says Isak.

“Do anything fun?”

“I couldn’t focus much,” Isak replies and it makes Even pause and turn around to take him in. Isak is sitting on his bed and fumbling with his fingers, looking nervous and shy.

“Why couldn’t you focus?” Even asks although he knows why. He couldn’t focus much either.

“You know why.”

Their eyes remain locked as Even tries to will away the tightness that’s just conquered his heart. Isak always utters words that sound like the sweetest of confessions, words that rhyme with ‘I like you, maybe’ and ‘I feel things for you, perhaps’. But Even cannot afford to believe his interpretation of other people’s words, especially Isak’s. He cannot afford to hang onto these sweet illusions of a confession. He cannot.

“Right,” Even painfully clears his throat and turns around again, his back to Isak.

He plugs his already sufficiently charged phone into a power outlet and quickly navigates past the lockscreen, remembering the email he needs to read.

“I’m gonna check the email now,” he says then watches Isak’s face catch fire again.

Subject: Experiment Proposal #23

Experiment Goal: Release of Dopamine, Oxytocin, and Serotonin
Method: Bodily Fluid Exchange via Labia Oris
Subjects: Isak V. and Even B. N.
Where and When: TBD

Even reads over the new experiment a few more times under Isak’s worried eyes before deciding that he has no idea what it means.

“Uh. Are we doing drugs, or?” Even asks, one eyebrow cocked as he makes his way back to the bed, the knots in his stomach untwisting at the formality of Isak’s request this week.
“No. What?!” Isak half-grimaces and half-smiles as if this is the last reaction he expected to get out of Even.

“Dopamine sounds like medicine,” Even shrugs, his heart suddenly at ease now that Isak’s lips are curling at the corners.

“It’s an organic chemical present in the body. It serves as a neurotransmitter and is linked to motivational behavior,” Isak explains.

“Yeah, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Even smiles then sits next to Isak.

“It’s one of the good chemicals, just like Oxytocin and Serotonin. They’re the happy chemicals, the ones that make you feel good,” Isak continues, this time with a bit less self-assuredness. He sounds flustered.

“Okay, and what is this experiment about? What do you mean release the happy chemicals? How do you do that all at once?”

“It’s, uh, it’s explained in the method section,” Isak stammers, his eyes landing on one of Even’s drawings on the wall and never leaving it, as if he’s trying to anchor himself.

“What the hell is ‘exchange of bodily fluids via Labia Oris’ and why does it sound scary?” Even cracks up, but Isak barely moves next to him. Even can feel all of his muscles stiffening in his body.

“Dopamine, Serotonin, and Oxytocin can be released using various methods. We’ve tried traditional touching and applying pressure to the outer muscles, also known as hugging. There are other methods we haven’t tried. And I think we should run the gamut and experiment with everything while we can.”

“Oh but that still doesn’t explain the bodily fluids thing,” Even muses. “Are we gonna pee on each other or what?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Isak shoves him, but his outrage is betrayed by the laugh threatening to break out of him.

Even is so endeared that he locks his hands around Isak’s wrists and pulls him into the bed, both of them lying on their backs now. And it’s ridiculous how a simple touch, hand around wrist, can provide him with so much peace of mind. Dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin.

Isak is still laughing when Even pulls him closer, his body curving where Even’s hand presses. Endeared. Even is endeared. And when Isak stops laughing and flushes, it makes him want to move even closer.

I’ll stop your scheming with my hands. I’ll change your mind. I’ll trap you in this bed. Keep you safe.

“Hi,” Even whispers, releasing Isak’s wrists to poke his nose, his favorite nose.

“Don’t do that,” Isak complains, stifling a grin and shoving his hand away.

“Your nose is making me do it. It’s not me,” Even laughs.

“You’re an idiot,” Isak rolls his eyes, swatting his hand away again.

“Yes, now please explain the rest of the experiment so I can feel less stupid. What is this bodily fluid
thing?”

“Well,” Isak takes a deep breath and rolls on his back again, his eyes on the ceiling, his voice back to its usual detached tone. “It sounds very weird, but, uh, apparently humans swap an average of 9 milliliters of water when they establish contact between their respective Labia Orises. They also typically exchange protein, sodium chloride and other chemicals, so yeah. Bodily fluids exchange.”

“What the fuck is a Labia Oris?”

“It’s the fleshy folds of skin that surround the oval fissure of an oral vestibule,” says Isak.

“And now in Norwegian?” Even rolls his eyes, propping himself on his elbow so that he can tower over Isak.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me,” Isak shoves him again, feigning offense.

“Well, don’t speak science nerd to me.” Even shrugs, bringing his index finger to boop Isak’s nose again.

“I thought you liked that,” Isak nearly whispers and it takes Even off guard. Again. Yet again. Isak with his little whispers and words that give Even hope. Hope, a thing he cannot afford. I thought you liked that. I do it because I thought you liked it.

Isak’s eyes are undeniably locked on his now. And they’re big, and round, and scared, and his pupils are dilated and Even keeps replaying one of Adam’s speeches about pupil dilation in his head. Pupils and attraction and desire and want and love and lust.

Isak is looking at him like he’s burning for him. Burning for his touch. Only his.

“What’s a Labia Oris, Isak?” Even asks and watches Isak’s eyes flutter close at the mention of his name, like he’s reveling in it. He’ll say more often, he decides.

“It’s one of the most sensitive parts of our bodies along with our fingertips,” Isak mumbles, his eyes fluttering open again.

“Sensitive how?” Even’s hand finds itself on Isak’s cheek, stroking the skin there tenderly, softly. The gentleness his body is conditioned to provide to Isak, always, takes him by surprise.

“Sensitive as in,” Isak pauses to nuzzle closer. ”The brain places a disproportionate emphasis on the sensation felt by the neurotransmitters there, which can cause everything else to disappear and to stop mattering. It can cause the brain to go on overdrive, emulating the feeling of fireworks or an actual drug high.”

“What’s a Labia Oris, Isak?” Even asks again and watches him wriggle in his bed, his favorite sight. He keeps his hand on Isak’s cheek, but slides his thumb to the corner of his mouth, waiting, halting.

“The fleshy folds of skin that surround the—”

Even drags his thumb over Isak’s lower lip, making him arch his back and let out a sound he commits to memory.

“In a language I can understand, Iss,” Even speaks, and his voice is lower than usual, raspier than usual. Isak’s eyes grow even wider and Even wonders if it’s the nickname or his tone. “What’s a Labia Oris? What do you want me to do?”
Surprise me. Do it.

Isak brings a hand to Even’s face, his thumb pressing to the corner of his mouth. And he doesn’t need to say it for Even to get the confirmation he was seeking.

Isak’s thumb brushes over Even’s Labia Oris. Even’s lips.

Isak wants a kiss.

*It’s happening. It’s happening.*

The thought is overwhelming, maddening. Even’s entire body flushes at the idea of kissing Isak, of pressing his lips against his own and feeling them quiver under his touch, of exchanging seven milliliters of water and sending his brain on overdrive, of slipping his tongue inside the warmth of his mouth. The warmth of Isak’s mouth. Even knows that he has the warmest and softest lips. He knows this potential kiss will ruin him for anyone else. He knows he won’t be able to stop.

*What if I kiss him and he burns me?*

*It’s worth it.*

Even’s is dizzy just thinking about it.

“Are you sure?” Even asks and it’s stupid because it’s just a kiss, but it’s never just kiss to him. Never.

Isak nods under him, his eyes droopy, his lips parted. He’s ready. He’s burning for it while lying on his back on Even’s bed.

“Is this a *learning opportunity*?” Even asks because he can’t help but question Isak’s motives, because if this isn’t as colossal to him, then it might break Even. “Is this for science?”

“What else would it be for?” Isak brushes over Even’s lips again, his eyes betraying him and his words.

“For affection.”

“Kissing for affection is a social construct,” Isak breathes softly, his thumb still tracing Even’s bottom lip.

“Which philosopher came up with this one?”

“Nobody knows when kissing started becoming a thing in society, but researchers believe that it was because mothers used to chew food for their toddlers and feeding it to them through the mouth. That bond between mother and child is affectionate in theory, and that’s probably how it spread out before humans discovered that lips are sensitive and can overwhelm the brain with the best sensations when in contact with other lips or flesh.”

“What is your point, Isak?”

“My point is that kissing doesn’t have to bear emotional meaning. It can just be a means to an end. A way of releasing chemicals that make one feel good. It doesn’t have to be linked to myths such as *eros* and *affection*. It can just be a bodily fluid exchange.”

“How long did you rehearse this bullshit for?” Even smiles, his thumb on Isak’s forehead, caressing the skin there.
“I don’t rehearse. I’m a natural,” Isak smiles.

“You should write some of this stuff down. You can sell books on how to convince people to make out with you at parties.”

“I don’t want to make out with you,” Isak frowns, but his breathing is shallow and his face is flushed and his lips are wet, seven milliliters calling Even’s name.

“Lies,” Even beams down at him. “Such lies.”

“I am not lying.”

Even grabs Isak’s face in both hands and leans down, making Isak’s protests die in his throat and his breathing stutter to a halt.

Isak’s face feels so small in his hands like this.

They’re an inch apart. Nose to nose. Chest to chest. Neither of them breathing.

Kissing as a means to an end. It doesn’t have to mean anything. Nothing at all. They’re simply science partners. Nothing less and nothing more. They have physics together and conduct chemistry and biology experiments. It’s not a big deal. It’s just a kiss. Even will get over it. It’s just a kiss.

But then perhaps one of those chemicals will trigger something within Isak. Perhaps Even will kiss him and claim a spot in his heart. Perhaps.

Even wonders if Isak’s been kissed before. Before. If Jonas has claimed his lips before. If it’s the reason Isak is moving mountains to get him retributive justice. Even wonders if anyone will ever care about him enough to plan the obliteration of the entire Russ institution.

Even is a romantic and Isak is waiting.

Even rubs their noses together and doesn’t miss how Isak’s eyes flutter close then open again, like he can’t believe it.

“Have the dopamine and serotonin kicked in yet?”

“Even—” Isak pants under him, both hands around Even’s wrists now—actually pants.

“Is your brain on overdrive yet?”

“Always. Always. When I’m with you.”

Even is about to kiss him when Isak’s phone rings ominously, making him pull back instinctively.

It feels as though the universe is mocking them, as though whoever is writing this bit of the universe they’re in is currently laughing at their fate.

Timing is everything.

“Shit!” Isak groans, sitting up to reach for his phone in his back pocket and looking disoriented.

“We should have a disclaimer before our experiments like the ones they play at the movies. Something like ‘Silence your phone! Do not ruin the experiment!’” Even attempts a joke.

But Isak doesn’t laugh. His brows are furrowed as he picks up the phone call. Even tries not to be
“Hello, Valtersen speaking… Yes. Hi... Correct... Okay. In thirty minutes? Can we do forty five? I’m at the other side of town… Sure. How do I recognize you? Can you wear something specific?”

Isak pauses to take in Even’s appearance. “Uh a green sweater and dark jeans. Oh okay. Good.”

Even sits there and listens to Isak speak to some sort of client. A client who’s seemingly going to meet up with Isak in forty five minutes dressed in a green sweater like Even—except Even is wearing light jeans. But details.

“Who was that?” he frowns when Isak hangs up.

“You don’t need to know. Don’t worry about it,” says Isak, his voice now back to the detached and impersonal tone, as he types out various text messages on his phone. “Uh, I have to go.”

“What? Where? Are you serious?”

“Yes, sorry. We can resume this some other time,” says Isak as he moves toward the edge of the bed and away from Even’s body, avoiding his eyes.

“What’s going on? Is this the Yakuza shit?”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?” says Isak, now gathering his things around the room.

“No! Not okay. What is going on? Why aren’t you telling me? Why do you always tell me things after the fact. You can trust me with things. I can help you.”

Isak is on his feet, towering over Even on the bed. Even who just went from feeling the purest form of affection to the rawest type of frustration.

“Talk to me,” he pleads under Isak’s careful gaze. It’s soft and personal. His walls are down. His hand is on Even’s cheek.

“I can’t get you tangled up in this. I can’t have any weaknesses in this plan. Forgive me.”

Isak runs out and it hurts more than Even thought it would.

Once again, Even is weakness. Even is porcelain. Even needs to be treated with care.

Even is so visibly damaged that not even fire wants to come close and keep him company, too afraid of causing him further harm.

*I’m only here for the meaningless kisses.*

Even feels worthless.

---

**Mutta**

22:29

I’m with Adam and some guy from Arvid’s bus
Isak apparently just messaged the whole bus some location
The guy wouldn’t tell us what the location’s for but they all ran out
Are you with isak?
This isn’t good
The guy we were with said something about
“Finally seeing Isak in action”

Send me the address

Even don’t do anything dumb

Just send it to me
I’ll be fine
I just need to find him

Even runs to the location. It’s not that far from his house and Isak probably only requested forty-five minutes to buy everyone enough time to get to the spot.

Even doesn’t have a plan, but he runs. He could hug him. He could kiss him. Maybe that will have a surreal reaction and cause Isak’s knees to buck and render him useless. Maybe.

Even doesn’t have a plan. But he wants to prove to Isak that he’s more than just a liability. That he can be dependable.

And when he gets to the location, a Russ bus that looks like the Penetrators’ is parked in the distance. They were probably having a party judging by the lights and the music.

It’s all a blur, Even barely recognizing Arvid’s guys. He has no idea who’s who. But he spots Jonas in the back of what seems like a mild argument between a dozen people, and sprints towards him.

“Where is Isak?” he pants, all the running finally catching up to him.

“I don’t know, but he’s probably hiding somewhere,” says Jonas. “He promised me he wouldn’t join the actual fight.”

“What the hell is going on?!” Even exclaims, pulling the hood of his sweater over his head so that Arvid and other guys from his school don’t recognize him.

“A bunch of dicks from all around town are fighting in groups to establish some macho sense of masculinity,” Jonas replies. “Isak’s job was to lure in the leader of the Yakuza gang who never ventures out alone. And indeed, six of his guys are here, but he’s nowhere to be seen. A fight’s gonna break any minute now.”

*Tonight is the night then.*

Even looks out for Isak while a voice which sounds like Penetrator Chris’ shouts obscenities at the group of presumed Yakuza.

Where are you?

Even looks around for Isak. It’s too dark outside. He could be hiding behind the trees or he could be home. Who knows. Even tries to believe Jonas’ words and trust that Isak won’t come out.
What the fuck are you doing here?!!
Go home!!

Where are you?
You can see me?

I'm in Pchris' car
And yes i can see you
LEAVE NOW

Which one is Pchris' car?
Fancy some company? :p

EVEN
EVEN TAKE OFF YOUR SWEATER NOW

Huh? what?

Even squints at his phone. The green sweater. Why is Isak asking him to remove it?

He's typing out his response when he sees William walk toward him with more boys dressed in red overalls trailing behind him. Even's typing out his response when Arvid surges from the back to stand in front of him, as if to protect him.

What the fuck is going on.

“William, it's not him!” Arvid exclaims before being shoved to the side by ‘Penetrator’ Chris.

Even doesn’t even register the bottle of wine William is holding until he smashes it over his skull, until he brings him to his knees, until he singlehandedly takes away the very little strength he still holds onto after all this time.

And it's cruel, so cruel. But it feels right. Even feels as though he deserves it. This. This much pain. This much real pain.

It seems as though the universe has grown tired of metaphors for pain. It seems as though the universe has heard his request for real, sharp, acute, insurmountable physical pain. Because he is now drowning in it.

A bottle of wine to the skull. Perhaps I can blame my brain imbalance on this now.

Everything goes dark for a second.

- 

When he comes to, Isak is towering over him on the ground, saying his name over and over again with flattering desperation—like Even matters to him. His hands are smudged in red liquid, and Even can’t tell if it's red wine or blood.

Everything goes dark for another second.
When he comes to again, Isak is straddling William on the ground, hands around his neck, screaming like he’s in agony when he’s the one inflicting it.


Isak is burning William. Isak who only had one more strike before getting shipped to some lab like a danger to society. Isak who was hiding in a car and only came out for Even. Isak who can’t figure Even out, whose plans always get ruined by Even because he can’t figure him out. Isak who’s being reckless and weak because of Even.

‘Because he hurt you.’

Even is not weakness.

Even is Isak’s weakness.

The last things Even pictures before darkness takes over are an escalator, scrambled eggs, and the brush of a cupid bow's kiss.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

dun dun dun.

Alright this was a lot. I debated moving things around, but it's 4am and I have to be up in 3 hours.

Isak scheduled a meeting with the leader of the yakuza and asked him to wear a specific outfit inspired solely by Even's current clothes during the call. That ad lib backfired because Even showed up wearing the sweater and ended up getting mistaken for the guy who's been terrorizing everyone. To be fair, William does smash a bottle on a Yakuza's head in S2.

Even is Isak's weakness. All his plans fail when he doesn't account for him and his spontaneity. Isak still can't figure him out, but that's mostly because he's shutting himself down and not letting Even in completely. What happened at the end of this chapter absolutely breaks Isak's heart. This is his biggest fear. Causing pain to yet another person he cares about.

Is Isak going to be ok? Is he gonna be forced to leave? Did he burn William super badly? Did he really go on a family trip those couple of days? Is Even going to be ok? Why can Even's mother touch Isak? Why hasn't he burned Even in a while? What happened to him in Nissen for him to hate them so much? Do you agree with his methods? Are they ever going to kiss? Is Isak's brain ever going on overdrive? Is this love? Does Isak have actual feelings for Even or is just the science? Is Even ever going to come out to his mom? What was Mutta worried about?
stay tuned <3

PS: It's 4am and it's a rough week at work but I wanted to get this out. I feel so discouraged lately and tbh your reactions to these stories make me super happy so I thought I'd push through and stay up until I finish the chapter. So thank you so much for reading and commenting and leaving kudos and sending me messages. It makes my days so much brighter and easier to deal with. HUGSSS love yaaa.
Philosophy of Labels

Chapter Summary

"What was that?" Isak asks, flustered.
"Affection. Uh I meant Oxytocin, obviously. Oxytocin."

ft frustrating Isak, oxytocin galore, lost and sad Even, Mutta, Even's mom, sleepovers, a supermarket, a fridge door, a few confessions and an overdue experiment.

Chapter Notes

hiii. sorry for the wait. icymi, i posted a short chapter from Isak's pov which takes place between ch8 and ch9 here: http://cuteandtwisted.tumblr.com/post/173789835535/bft-ch-85-bonus-chapter

<3
tw: some violence and abuse

Edit: hope you like this chapter. i don't know when i'll be writing the next one. but i think it might be a while. x

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Even woke up in a hospital—this hospital—wasn’t a very fond memory.

Not because it hurt to breathe, or because there were tubes perforating his skin, or because his brain was scrambling in an attempt to make sense of his surroundings. It was horrible because he had wished with all his heart that he wouldn’t wake up in the first place. Because the mere realization that he was awake—or, alive—was too painful, too cruel, too daunting.

The first time Even woke up in a hospital, he wasn’t really trying to.

Later on, he learned to be grateful. He learned to cherish life and the second chance he’d been handed by the universe. He learned. And although it took a few months, he did manage to walk by the hospital again, to look at it from afar without wincing, to think about it without his breath catching in his chest.

Later on, he learned to be grateful, to be okay with his little stay at the hospital. He learned to forget about it. He tried his best. He promised himself he would never return. At least not as a patient.

Even learned. Even tried. For his mother, but also for himself. Even did his best.

Even never really had time to think about how his second time waking up at the hospital would feel like. He writes and perfects scripts for nearly every possible scenario in his daily life, but he never thought about plotting this one.
Waking up at the hospital. *Again.*

He didn’t think about it because he didn’t think he had to. But he would have expected it to go down a little bit differently.

For one, he would have expected more chaos. Chaos in his brain and chaos in his body. He would have expected to feel a little bit more lost, a little bit more disoriented. He would have expected to panic about his whereabouts, to lash out and try to remove the tubes, maybe. He’s not sure. He would have expected to feel a little bit sad, to go back and try to remember how he ended up here in the first place, to perhaps assume the worst, to break his own heart by thinking that he put himself here again. Maybe.

Even isn’t sure what he would have planned and prepared for if he had taken the time to think about it.

But it isn’t this.

The second time Even wakes up at the hospital — this hospital — he feels *okay.* He almost feels numb, but in a reassuring way. He feels safe, grateful, almost happy. He feels relieved. He feels calm. He has a migraine and his entire body is throbbing with an acute pain, but he still feels good. He feels like smiling.

Even wakes up feeling warm.

**Even wakes up feeling him.**

The first person he sees, however, isn’t *him.* It’s Mutta. Good old Mutta, with his curly hair and his warm smile and his comforting scent. Even can’t remember how to speak, but he smiles when Mutta bursts into laughter upon seeing his eyes crack open. And who does this, really? Who laughs when their friend wakes up?

Even loves Mutta. He really does. He hopes that everyone who comes to in a hospital has a Mutta to simply *laugh* while greeting them. His laughter is generous like him, contagious like him.

Even’s mother is there moments later. And she laughs too, but it’s mixed with sobs and sloppy kisses to the forehead, and Even is too tired to whine, so he doesn’t. Because he’s happy to be awake, to be back.

The nurses have to physically kick people out of his room and Even feels thankful. Because as much as he enjoys the attention—a little part of him will always believe that nobody will truly care if he ceases to exist—he really needs to sleep. He really needs everything to stop for a moment or two.

But Even can barely keep his eyes closed because his entire body is on edge. It’s broken and his head hurts despite the painkillers, but his body won’t relax. It won’t unwind. It’s waiting. His body is waiting for that warmth to overwhelm it again. It’s been waiting since this afternoon.

Even is waiting for Isak.

He felt him. He knows it was him. It was the first thing he felt when his eyes cracked open. And somewhere deep down, he wonders if it was the reason they cracked open in the first place.
He wants to ask, but visitor hours are over. He hoped someone would simply mention him. He hoped Isak would simply walk in with his cold eyes and his snapback and his layers, and maybe hug him in front of everyone. Maybe.

But Isak never crosses the threshold to his room and Even makes up excuses for him in his head while looking forward to tomorrow.

Or maybe tonight. Perhaps Isak is nervous about the crowd and won’t show up until he is sure that everyone is gone, until visiting hours are over. Perhaps Isak will show up tonight.

Even can’t fall asleep now that the thought has settled in his mind. He wouldn’t want Isak turning around and leaving upon realizing that he is asleep. It’s pathetic but Even is almost grateful that he got hurt, because it means Isak will probably be nicer, softer, more gentle and open with him.

So Even thinks and hopes and hopes and hopes for minutes that stretch into hours in the darkness of his tiny room. He imagines their reunion in his head. Tearful, perhaps. Or perhaps there will be laughter, just like with Mutta and his mother.

Now that he thinks about it, he can’t picture Isak crying over him, Isak who only ever cries when his body betrays him. Isak will probably give him a muffled smile and say something about being glad to have his science partner back. And they will laugh until Even scoots over and makes space for him in his bed. Isak will perhaps wrap himself around him, maybe.

They might cuddle. He can picture Isak saying something about how cuddling is good for his recovery, to which Even will reply with ‘this is science, not homosexuality’. He hopes that Isak will remember that he is hurt and that he won’t shove him too hard when he inevitably rolls his eyes.

Even feels warm simply thinking about it, about him in his arms, about his scent, and his hair, and the way he bends and folds around him. Even feels warm thinking about feeling him.

But Isak never visits and Even never feels him.

Disappointment eventually settles in with certainty, cementing itself in Even’s bones when he opens his eyes and realizes that it’s bright outside, that it’s day. It’s tomorrow already. And Isak still isn’t here.

He frowns for a total of four minutes before remembering a very important detail, a very important image that his brain had managed to bury in all of the chaos.

Isak on top of William, and not in a way that might excite him or otherwise make him jealous. No. Isak with his knees crushing William’s chest. Isak with his hands around William’s neck. Isak screaming as if he’s being burned.

Isak choking William on the floor.


Even suddenly can’t breathe. He chokes in bed while his mother is telling him a story about a man named Adrian Eksett who’s been coincidentally parking his car right next to hers for three days straight and calling her to ask her to move it every single day. Even coughs until she brings her hand to his back to pat it before disappearing into the hall to call a nurse.

He feels stupid, so incredibly stupid for not asking about Isak when he’s been awake for nearly a day. He feels stupid for acting coy because he’s been awaiting some epic surprise, some picture perfect reunion with tears and laughter and maybe a kiss, the kiss they paused to get into this mess in
the first place.

“Even, what’s wrong?” Mutta asks when he enters his room later that morning and sees that his smile from the previous day has faltered.

“Where is Isak? What happened to Isak?!” Even asks, a little bit out of breath, a little bit out of time.

Mutta’s face falls and Even can’t believe he’s spent nearly twenty-four hours fantasizing about some damned reunion instead of asking the right questions.

“Did they take him?! He said he couldn’t hurt anyone again. He said he wouldn’t. But then he just—Fuck!”

Mutta closes the door and sits a little bit closer than he normally would. He explains what he knows. He tells him that William got burned but that he doesn’t know the extent of the burns. He tells him that Isak called him, Mikael, and Julie almost immediately, but that he wasn’t there when they arrived. He tells him that some boy named Jonas went with them to the hospital and that he was so nice that he waited all night with them until Even’s surgery ended, and that he hugged Mikael when he finally cracked.

He tells him that William was admitted to the same hospital a few hours later by his girlfriend Noora, and that he didn’t want to which means his burns aren’t that bad. He tells him that they were approached by some of the Penetrators who suggested a deal: if Even doesn’t press charges against William for smashing a bottle on his head, William won’t press charges against Isak for burning him. He also tells him that there is absolutely no way in hell that they’re letting Even drop the charges against William and that he’s only telling him as a courtesy.

“So Isak isn’t with the police? They didn’t take him?” Even asks a little too eagerly.

“The police never got involved because the fight dispersed as soon as you got hit and everyone realized that it was a big mistake,” says Mutta. “Apparently, William was told that the leader of the Yakuza was wearing a green sweater and he thought it was you because it was dark and he never bothered to check. Fucking dick.”

“So Isak went home?”

Mutta bites the inside of his lip and nods hesitantly. “I mean, I’m not sure where he went, but he’s not being held in some police station if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Even takes a minute to process everything. He got accidentally assaulted for wearing a green sweater. Isak lost his temper and hurt William because of his strong beliefs in retribution and maybe because of his own personal agenda against him. He eventually calmed down, called Even’s mother and his closest friends, asked Jonas to tag along, and went home to avoid getting in trouble.

It all makes sense. It’s not exactly out of character for Isak, except maybe for the assault on William. Isak always looks out for himself first. He probably asked Jonas to stay behind to remain updated on Even’s condition, out of guilt maybe. Isak hates owing people things.

Even tries to rationalize everything, but his brain somehow rejects this version of reality. It makes sense, but it also doesn’t.

Because his mind flashes to Isak towering over him right after he hit the ground. It flashes to those desperate cries. And they were cries. Isak called his name over and over and over again. Even isn’t making any of this up. Isak was hysterical. It couldn’t have been mere guilt. It had to be more. He has to mean more to Isak.
But if he does, then where is he? Why isn’t he here? Was he here the day Even woke up? Was it Isak he felt or was it simply the feeling of getting back into his body?

“He never visited me?” Even asks and he hates how sad and disappointed he sounds. He hates that Mutta has to see him like this, heartbroken over a boy who might or might not care.

Mutta hesitates—probably because he doesn’t want to hurt Even’s feelings—but he eventually shakes his head.

“I mean, he could have. I wasn’t here 24/7,” Mutta adds, scratching the back of his neck like he’s lying, and Even feels pathetic.

---

**Heraklit**

**17:18**

I’m back
As in I’m awake
In case you were wondering or something haha
Only telling you cause i know you care about “the fate of your science partner”
Hope you didn’t get in trouble that night and i’m sorry about ruining your plan
That will teach you to use my looks in your plans :p
Also were you there the day i woke up?
I felt like i felt you

---

“Where’s your boyfriend?” Elias asks jokingly the day he gets discharged on their way to his mother’s car. And Even can’t help the deep frown that settles between his brows.

It’s a joke and he should probably brush it off, but it still stings. He knows that Isak has a reason for this cruel silence, for not even sending a text or a message with someone asking him how he’s doing, for not responding to Even’s texts, but it still hurts.

His friends never tease him about Isak again that weekend. Sonja comes over to play with his hair that one long afternoon and his mother spares him and makes the pasta for the night.

Later when Even admits that he can’t sleep over text, Mikael comes over and lies on a couple of blankets on the floor beside his bed.

“You don’t have to do this,” Even says and he feels ridiculous for all his friends babying him.

“I want to,” Mikael replies.

And in another universe, perhaps these words make Even’s chest grow tenfold, perhaps he leaves his bed and joins him on the floor, perhaps he uses his condition to ask for a hug just to breathe him in.

But in this universe, the words do nothing but widen the void inside him.

Even simply lies there in his bed staring at the ceiling and pining after someone else, wondering “am I always going to want people I cannot have?”

His mother takes him to see his therapist the next day. His surgery wasn’t exactly minimal, and while
his recovery is being referred to by everyone as “miraculous”, the drugs might have messed with his dosage and his mood.

Even complies because his mother hasn’t confronted him about his involvement in the fight yet, because she hasn’t even asked, simply grateful for Even’s quick recovery. And while he suspects that she might have gotten her information from other people, he knows that it’s taking all of her might to keep from asking him directly.

His doctor adjusts his meds and asks a few intrusive questions that probably aim to check whether Even put himself in that situation on purpose. He smiles through all of it and offers his mother his right arm as they make their way outside.

Even focuses on the good, on the fact that it’s sunny today even though it’s cold, on the fact that his mother is humming along to some mainstream pop song playing on the radio. He drives them to the supermarket and pushes the shopping cart as his mother fills it with vegetables and fruits, not even asking about his time with the therapist.

The elephant in the room, always.

A woman approaches them and Even can’t recall her name, but he’s seen her before. A friend of his mother, or perhaps an acquaintance.

He watches the two women exchange greetings and smiles.

“Even, how are you?” the woman asks, her smile wide but fake, so fake. “We heard you were at the hospital. Hope you’re feeling better.”

“Oh, he’s feeling much better. Thank you, Ella,” his mother chuckles nervously, her fingers holding the railing of the shopping cart so tight that her knuckles are turning white.

“It was surgery on his shoulder, right? That’s what Lars said,” the woman asks and Even suddenly stills.

“Oh, uh, yes,” Julie laughs again. “Even had to undergo surgery on his shoulder after a bad fall a few years ago. He got into swimming recently and it’s been bothering him. Right, Even?”

Even doesn’t really smile on their way home. He doesn’t ask his mother about the fictional fall and the fictional shoulder injury she’s been sharing with her colleagues at work. He doesn’t ask because she hasn’t asked about why she found him bleeding in some damn park. It’s better this way.

“Even—” she mumbles as he begins to unload the groceries from the car and he pretends that he hasn’t heard as he sprints to the building.

He sprints because he wants to cry and he doesn’t want her to see him cry.

It dawns upon him then. Just how ashamed she is of him and of all his shit. Just how hard it is being his mother. How she probably always has to make up stories at work and with her friends so they wouldn’t look down on her and feel bad for her. Julie and her unstable son. Julie and her crazy bipolar son who chased his father away, his father who didn’t even bother showing up to the hospital. Julie. Poor Julie.

He finally understands why she insisted that he wear a snapback today. It wasn’t because of the sun and his acne scars. It was to hide the missing patch of hair on the side of his head so that the shoulder
story could make sense.

A shoulder injury when he got assaulted. He wonders what she told everyone when he bled out on purpose.

Fuck.

He punches a wall in the staircase on his way up to their apartment. He punches it again and again until his knuckles ache and crack, until he no longer feels like crying, until he is positive that his mother reached their apartment already, having taken the elevator instead.

She’s at the door when he finally climbs the last set of stairs. And when she hugs him and whispers “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, baby” over and over again, he lets her and he hugs her back.

“It’s okay, mom.”

Heraklit

14:18

Do you also feel like your family is ashamed of you sometimes? I love my mom more than life but she just broke my heart

Your heart is nothing but a muscle that pumps blood into the rest of your body

... I thought your mom might have taken your phone again

I guess not

Why did you assume that? Because you weren’t replying to my texts

Maybe i had nothing to say

I got discharged. I’m feeling better.

I heard.

You have nothing to say?

I’m glad you’re not dead if that’s what you’re asking That’s not what i’m asking

What are you asking then?

You were there the day i woke up

I wasn’t

You were. I felt you

You hit your head pretty badly

I wouldn’t trust my ‘feelings’ post-surgery if i were you
Why are you being cruel?
What is this? What's happening?!

Isak doesn’t reply and Even goes to Mutta’s to smoke a joint or two, to forget a bit, to breathe a bit. Mutta won’t look him in the eyes and Even doesn’t really want him to. So they smoke silently until Even feels like he’s floating, until everything hurts less, until the urge to go to Isak’s house and maybe fight him subsides.

---

**Jonas**

18:24

Hey man
How’s it going?
Feeling better?

Hey
Yeah thank you

No worries

Also thanks for the other night
Mutta told me you were there and stuff
Thanks a lot

No problem
I’m glad you recovered quickly
Isak was worried sick

Well i’m ok now
So tell him that he shouldn’t be

Why don’t you tell him yourself
Wait
Don’t tell me
Ughh

? 

Is he ignoring you right now?
Is he being a dick?

What?

Please don’t tell me you’re upset because he’s pushing you away now that he put you in the hospital and thinks that he can never get close to anyone without hurting them and all that bullshit he made up in his head
Oh.

“I have to stay away from him. Jonas.”

Even’s foggy mind flashes to Isak’s drunken confession about Jonas, about how he started pushing him away and being mean after sending him to the hospital because he’s not “good” for him, because he has to protect him from himself.

Even feels stupid, yet again. He feels incredibly dumb for being so predictable, for being hurt over something so trivial and falling prey to Isak’s games, for not trying harder.

Of course Isak is going to push him away.

Even doesn’t see him at school on Monday. He doesn’t see him Tuesday or Wednesday either. He learns that Isak hasn’t shown up since the incident. He wants to call him, to go to his house and talk to him, but he still feels weak from his head injury and it shouldn’t be on him to chase Isak around, not now.

He busies himself with catching up on what he missed at school and ignoring the gossip about his accident. He hears plenty of rumors. But not just about himself. He hears about how Isak is probably hiding because Arvid swore him off, because the Yakuza and the Penetrators and every stupid boy in town is trying to make him pay for the big fight whose only casualty was, ironically, Even.

He hears many stories, but the one that catches his attention is that he’s being sent away to some lab an hour or so away. It’s an oddly specific rumor and Even can’t shake it off.

He decides to go to Isak’s home after school despite his head throbbing, despite his joints aching. Because he needs to know, because he needs to talk to him and see him and look into his eyes. Because it’s been more than a week and he can never trust Isak’s words and his silence unless they’re near, the only times Isak’s walls seem to go down.

But then Julie texts him that she needs more oddly specific fruits from MENY and he obliges, albeit reluctantly.

Even’s heart jumps the moment he crosses the sliding door of the supermarket. He feels him everywhere. He feels him too much. It’s almost painful.

He remembers Isak’s theory about their hunger for each other only growing stronger when they’re apart for too long. His limbs are trembling with want as he starts running through the aisles, suspecting that Isak can probably feel him too and that he’ll make a run for the door to avoid this confrontation.

The pull is more powerful than it’s ever been, and Even knows that it’s not in his head when he finally finds Isak, flushed and breathless and scandalous and actually running in the frozen foods aisle.

“Stop!” Even shouts after him then marvels at how Isak’s body listens and halts almost immediately.

Isak stops and looks shocked by how his own legs betrayed him, by how Even seemingly can just
make him stop by simply uttering the words. Even has never crossed an aisle this fast in his life.

“What the fuck are you doing here?!” Isak bites harshly, but his voice cracks and his eyes widen even more.

“This is the fucking Supermarket, Isak,” Even bites right back. He regrets it instantly, however.

Even can see that Isak wants to throw himself into his arms. He feels it. Even wants to embrace him, too. This is what he needed. To see him, to hear his voice tripping over itself, to be near him, to watch him flush while standing in the coldest aisle of the supermarket. This is the only confirmation he needed.

Isak’s brows are furrowed but his eyes are hollow and sad. And underneath his four layers, he’s wearing Even’s shirt. The one he wore every time he stayed over, the one he won’t return. Even can see its collar peeking around Isak’s collarbones. They both realize it at the same time, apparently, because Isak suddenly looks exposed and embarrassed as he pulls the outermost layer around his neck.

“Can we talk?” Even asks, his hands in fists to keep himself from reaching and touching.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Isak replies coldly, his body language never getting any more inviting. He keeps his arms crossed and his brows furrowed.

“Aren’t you curious how I’m doing?”

“You look just fine. Can I go now?”

“You’re pushing me away,” says Even, cutting to the chase. “You’re being mean and treating me like shit like you did to Jonas after he got hurt.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Isak grimaces, almost sneering. And if Even didn’t know him, he would buy it.

“I know you were there when I woke up. I know you came to see me at the hospital.”

“I already told you that I didn’t come to see you,” Isak challenges him and Even begins to feel a little bit silly and insecure.

“I felt you. I can feel you, remember?” Even insists.

“Even,” Isak pauses to sigh dramatically, something shifting in his eyes, as if he has rehearsed this specific exchange, as if this is part of some plan. “I didn’t come to see you.”

“But—”

Oh.

“I was at the hospital, yes. But it wasn’t for you,” Isak explains.

It feels like a slap. It’s silly, but it feels like a slap.

“I went to the hospital once with my dad to see William,” Isak shrugs. “The lawyer my dad hired in case douche face pressed charges advised me to go visit to show ‘remorse’ or something. I wasn’t there for you.”

Even is suddenly grateful he found him here instead of having to listen to this in his house. The
simple thought of climbing the stairs from Isak’s basement is daunting.

“So I magically happened to wake up the one time you visited the hospital?” Even mumbles.

“I mean, we can’t ascertain with confidence that my presence is what led to you waking up, but it’s an interesting theory,” Isak shrugs again. “All in all, my point is I simply wasn’t there for you. I’m not lying to you or pushing you away on purpose for some noble reason.”

“Then why are you being mean all of a sudden?”

“I’m not being mean. I’m just a little bit busy. I don’t know if you heard, but I’m moving away soon,” says Isak.

“What? Moving where?” Even squints, feeling his insides shrink up a bit. “Are the rumors true?”

“Depends which rumors you’re referring to.” Isak lets out a bitter laugh.

“Are you being shipped to some lab?”

“Well, that’s one way to put it. Kind of dramatic though. I wouldn’t use the word ‘shipped’. It strips away my consent in this transaction,” says Isak.

“Isak!” Even can’t help but shout at Isak’s admission. “What?!”

“What do you mean what?” Isak blinks at him.

“It’s true?! Fuck, it’s true?! You’re leaving? Because of what happened?! You’re being sent away because you lost your temper and attacked William for hurting me? It’s because of me?!”

Even is suddenly hysterical at the realization. He’s always so busy being in his feelings and hurting and questioning the wrong things that he doesn’t see what’s happening right in front of him.

“Even, please,” Isak rolls his eyes. He actually rolls his eyes and Even feels like placing both hands on his shoulders and shaking him. “It’s not because of you. You’re not that important.”

Even ignores that last part.

“What is it, then? You were planning on attacking William all along?”

“No. That was a glitch on my part. He just really pissed me off. But it didn’t change anything.”

“What do you mean?!?”

“It was already decided that I would leave at that point,” Isak shrugs. “You didn’t ruin anything and none of this is your fault.”

“But— that makes no sense. We were together that night. We, we were doing “experiments”. You had just come back from a trip with your parents and—” Even pauses because he doesn’t know where he’s going with this.

“A trip to the lab,” Isak says with a cold and detached voice. “It’s not exactly a lab by the way. It’s more like a facility. You know, like homes for the elderly or people in rehab. Except it’s for people with weird medical conditions. So it’s not like I’m going to prison or anything.”

Even blinks at him. He feels as though Isak is constantly pulling a rug from under his feet, like he’s never fully honest with him. He tries to remember what Isak told him about his trip, but can’t quite
recall anything.

“You knew. You already knew at that point?” Even speaks, his shock and pain probably bleeding through his voice.

“Why do you think I insisted on carrying out my plan as soon as possible that night?”

“You ditched me because you didn’t know when else you’d have that opportunity?”

Isak nods.

“But the experiment—” Even pauses. The word feels too bitter around his tongue.

“Was extreme. I reckon,” says Isak. “It was an extreme experiment because I thought I had nothing to lose. I already told you that I want to try everything while I can, even things I don’t necessarily want.”

A goodbye kiss.

Even takes a few moments to process Isak’s words. It feels like it’s all he does lately: take a few moments to process people’s words. His mother’s. His therapists. His friends’. Isak’s.

For some reason, Isak’s hurt the most. Isak is being cruel and it’s not the first time he’s stabbed Even in the chest like this. Yet every time he has, he’s always managed to have a reason, to crack and bend in his arms later.

Even feels hurt. He feels frail and see-through. The little bit of pride he has remaining is begging him to turn around and forget about the nightmare that is Isak Valtersen. But something deep down in his bones is begging him to see through the cracks, to look for the Isak who admitted that Even made him happy the night he hugged him in front of everyone, to give the Isak who melts for his touches the benefit of a doubt, to not fall for this Isak’s careful calculations. Even feels hurt, but his heart is telling him to hold on.

“I don’t believe you,” he hisses. It takes all of his courage, but he says the words nonetheless.

“What exactly don’t you believe?” Isak asks nonchalantly, cruelly. Even wants to shake him until he breaks.

“This. You. Everything!”

“You’re welcome to check with my mother who’s probably a few aisles down right now. I’m sure she’ll be more than happy to walk you through the pamphlets we got from the lab.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Even hisses again, this time taking a step forward and watching Isak’s eyes widen as he takes an immediate step back.

“Then what do you mean?” Isak speaks but his voice is less confident this time around, as if the distance between them must be maintained or otherwise, he will crumble.

“I mean,” Even moves again, this time a bit faster. His brain is advising him against it, but his heart—the muscle that pumps blood into the rest of his body—is encouraging him. He takes two long strides until Isak has nowhere else to go, his back hitting the glass of the fridge behind him. “I mean—”

“Even, stop—” Isak puts up his right hand, his voice strained and his eyes wide. His words die in his throat the moment his fingers brush against Even’s chest, as though his resolve evaporates, his
tongue tied and forgotten.

Even feels brave and takes Isak’s hand, curling his fingers around it and keeping it on his chest.

“Even—” Isak whispers this time around and it’s unlike any sound he’s made so far today.

“You talk so much shit but you always say my name like—” Even speaks softly, squeezing Isak’s fingers and crowding him further up against the cold fridge, both of them burning up, too hot to care or mind. “Like you care.”

“Stop,” says Isak, but his fingers squeeze back, his body betraying him again like it has a mind and a tongue of its own accord.

“But you’re squeezing my hand.”

“Fuck you. I’m not!” Isak hisses weakly and Even wants to hug him and set him free. All of his walls, all of his rules, all of his suffering. Even wants to end all of it because Isak sounds like he’s suffocating.

“And you’re wearing my shirt,” Even continues, leans down to press his nose to his neck because they’re both mad and nothing really matters anymore.

Even breathes him in, inhales loudly and obnoxiously against his skin. And Isak’s reaction is borderline frenzied, getting on his tiptoes as if to allow him better access to his neck.

“Ev—”

“You even smell like me,” Even sighs against his skin and feels Isak melt against the fridge. A wonder, he is a wonder.

They stay like that for a moment, both of them heaving against the cold glass. Even’s face buried in Isak’s neck and Isak pressing his palm flat against Even’s chest. Both of them panting, barely speaking, dizzy, so dizzy. Even can’t even afford to think about what they currently look like, snuggling in the frozen foods aisle against an actual fridge.

“Stop pushing me away,” Even whispers, breaking the spell. “Don’t push me away.”

“Get off of me!” Isak whines, but parts his legs as if to make space for him there.

“I know you,” Even mumbles where Isak’s neck meets his shoulder. “I know you.”

Isak curls into him, brings a hand to Even’s hair by the nape of his neck, right below his snapback, and buries it there. It’s too soft for the words that follow. “You don’t know shit.”

“I know you and you’re not mean. I know you. Look at you. You’re so gentle.”

“You don’t know me! It’s the oxytocin,” Isak finally says as if he’s figured out what to say, at last. “This madness, it’s the oxytocin. This isn’t me. This is chemistry.”

“Chemistry makes you soft?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth!”

“Trust me. It’s not words I’m trying to put in there.”

Isak stills in his arms. Objectively, it’s a pretty corny and outrageous line. But it still takes Isak’s
breath away. Even pulls back to take him in, wide green eyes and rosy lips and heaving chest. A
sight.

“It’s just chemistry,” Isak says again, a new type of resolve dancing in his eyes. “None of this is real,
Even. None of this matters. I react to you because my body is conditioned to. It doesn’t mean that
you know me. It doesn’t mean that I care about you. It has nothing to do with feelings.”

He won’t give up, Even realizes.

“But I know you. I do and—”

Even’s connection with Isak is so strong that it’s easy to forget about his surroundings sometimes.
It’s so easy that they had an entire conversation about masturbating in his own kitchen with his
mother right there in the adjacent room. It’s so easy that they embraced and hugged in a house full of
people and it still felt like they were the only two people in the world. It’s so easy that everyone else
in the supermarket ceased to exist for the few minutes spanning their exchange.

But not for long.

Isak hears her first, shoves Even so hard that he stumbles and nearly falls.

“Get away from my son!” Isak’s mother shouts with venom in her voice.

Her strides are fast, so fast, and her eyes are cruel. Even barely has time to take her in before Isak
steps in front of him and shoves him again, this time to push him behind, his right arm extending to
the side as if to protect Even from his own mother.

“What were you doing to him, you demon!” Isak’s mother addresses him again, and Even realizes
that he’s not mentally strong enough to bear verbal abuse right now. He suddenly feels younger than
Isak.

He wants to defend himself, to say that he’s no ‘demon’, that he would never hurt her son, that she
cannot speak to him this way. But words fail him. He doesn’t wish to offend her or Isak. He doesn’t
wish to complicate things any further.

“He wasn’t doing anything to me,” Isak speaks calmly. “He was about to leave. Weren’t you?” he
asks Even without turning around, his arm still extended, still protecting him.

“What’s your name?” Isak’s mother continues. “Whose son are you?! Do your parents know what
you do? Do they know?!”

Even feels too fragile, too worn out. Isak probably thinks he’s weak. Isak who’s protecting him with
his own body while keeping his mother at an arm’s length. Even wonders if his mother touches him
at all, if Isak can get away with anything because she can’t touch him without burning.

“I will not stand still and let you corrupt my son any further!” she shouts.

Even stands there and feels useless while Isak whispers for him to leave, his eyes never leaving his
mother’s. He takes careful steps back as if he’s afraid his mother might burst and physically lunge
forward.

And she does. She actually tries to reach for Even and he can’t quite believe it. This woman is
actually trying to physically chase him away. His brain can’t compute it.

“Don’t fucking touch him!” Isak lashes out, stepping forward and glaring at his own mother with an
intensity that rivals hers.

“Isak, you cannot speak to me this way!” she warns, but Isak doesn’t listen. He raises his voice even higher and Even wants to crawl into the ground. He never wished for this to happen. “Step away from him,” she insists again.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Isak hisses at his mother as if he’s hoping to anger her even further. “You are insane! You can’t hit my friends! It’s you who’s fucked in the brain! You’re the one who needs to get locked up, not me!”

Isak is provoking her, Even realizes. Probably to redirect her irrational anger from Even to himself. But her eyes never leave Even’s. She’s oddly transfixed on him, as if she’s finally found something or someone to blame for her son’s curse, as if punishing Even will make everything okay again.

“This boy is corrupting you, Isak. Can’t you see?! He’s making you do and say things against your will. He’s turning you against your own mother. This isn’t you, my son. You're not yourself!”

Even realizes that this is the second time someone’s told Isak that this ‘isn’t him’ today. He’s probably beyond tired of people claiming to know the real him. He wonders what Isak will do next. Calling her ‘crazy’ and cursing clearly hasn’t succeeded at displacing her anger. His plan is failing.

“Believe it or not,” Isak hisses. “But I’ve never felt more like myself than when I was choking around his dick!”

It works. The outrageous lie works.

She strikes Isak across the face and Even stands there open-mouthed and paralyzed. It’s the second time he’s found himself caught in a lie in the middle of a supermarket, he realizes dumbly. Everyone lies for him. To spare him questions and judgment, and in this case, physical retribution.

It’s a hard and cruel blow, but Isak barely flinches. He doesn’t even react. He doesn’t because this is probably what he wanted, what he expected. Isak’s mother wails in pain while holding her wrist, her palm visibly burning. And Isak uses the opportunity to turn around and cup Even’s face in both hands.

It’s such a gentle and tender touch for someone who’s just been struck hard and fast, red and bright fingers burning through his pale skin.

Even can’t even place a word, his eyes wide, his brain a whirlwind.

“Yes, you okay?” Isak asks with furrowed brows and short, shallow breaths, his eyes roaming Even’s face and the top of his head—stopping when they get to where the bottle struck, to his injury, his precious injury—as if he’s the one who just got slapped. “You need to go, Even. Okay?”

“I—”

“Please go. It’s okay. The burn will distract her. Just go.”

Even doesn’t know what to do. He waits outside MENY, hiding between two walls like a coward, and watches Isak’s father drag his mother out of the supermarket. He watches Lea stroll behind with her head hanging low, looking ashamed and drained. He then watches Isak follow closely behind.
He remembers Lea’s words about their mother not being well. He remembers the first time he saw her outside the pool and how awful and unpleasant she had been. He remembers how she’s not okay with Jonas being around their home either.

*Does she keep Isak away from ALL boys? Has she ever caught Isak and Jonas doing something?*

Even knew that she wasn’t the most gentle mother and that Isak is convinced that she doesn’t love him. But he never expected her to actually hit him. He never expected her to be flat out *awful*.

Even can’t even begin to wrap his head around the way Isak didn’t even blink after the slap, the way he stood his ground and thought about comforting Even first, as if these slaps are normal occurrences for him, as if it’s a regular touch his mother inflicts on him, just like the kisses Julie presses to Even’s temple before leaving their apartment every morning.

*The only time she’ll touch him, it’s to hit him.*

It breaks his heart. It really does.

He cannot begin to fathom how broken Isak must be to think of this as a solution, to resort to provoking his mother into hitting him in public to get Even out of a sticky situation.

Even’s heart is bent. And when he gets home, he hugs his mom and forgives her for everything.

“I think that’s like against the law or something,” says Mikael through his computer screen.

They’re skyping. It’s 22:00 on a school night but Even can’t focus on anything else. He feels terrible for sharing what just happened with Mikael, but he can’t keep it bottled up. He needs a second opinion. He doesn’t know what to do.

“Like you can’t hit your children. It’s against the law,” says Mikael.

“You said that already,” Even sighs. “But what’s the right thing to do here? It’s not like she beat him up. It was a slap. And his father was there later.”

“Yeah, and didn’t you say she’s mentally ill?”

“Uh, what does that have to do with this?” Even frowns.

“I don’t know. But like she can’t exactly be held accountable, right?”

“Mikael, you don’t slap your child in the supermarket. Being mentally ill doesn’t mean you get to traumatize your child.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry,” Mikael replies apologetically. “And for the record, not to condone hitting and stuff and I don’t know if it’s like a cultural thing, but I always get smacked by my mom when I piss her the hell off. It’s not the end of the world. I’m sure it wasn’t that big of a deal for him. I’m sure Isak’s fine. If anything he’s probably just embarrassed that you had to see that.”

It makes some sense. Isak really did provoke her in there. Mothers lose their temper sometimes, too. It’s not the end of the world. But for some reason, the tightness never leaves Even’s chest because Isak didn’t look embarrassed. He looked relieved that his plan worked.

“Just text him to check if he’s okay or something,” says Mikael. “He probably feels like shit.”
Even stares at Isak’s chat for what feels like hours. He types out several texts from “how are you” to “I’m sorry” to “I’m the most useless piece of shit ever” then back to “I just hope you’re okay” then erases them.

He thinks about all the ways things could have gone differently. He thinks about what he could have done to calm Isak’s mother. He thinks about what would have happened if he had just kept his distance like Isak asked.

And Isak did ask. He asked so many times and Even didn’t listen, too blinded by his own want, assuming that Isak was resisting him to prove a point.

Isak probably hates him. Even keeps ruining all of his plans, touching him and following him and hugging him and trying to save him when Isak doesn’t need any saving. Isak was perfectly content, but Even had to come along and play the hero and send him to a lab. Isak said it’s not his fault but Even knows that it is.

Of course, Isak cannot stand him any longer. Of course, he didn’t visit him at the hospital. Of course.

_________________________

**Heraklit**

23:29

I’m outside
Can i come in?

_________________________

Even jumps out of bed upon reading the texts. He reads them three more times just to be sure that his mind isn’t playing any tricks on him. Isak is outside.

*What*?!?

Even puts on sweatpants and sprints to the door, taking a second to sigh in relief when he realizes that his mom’s light is turned off and that she’s probably already asleep.

Isak is wearing a blue sweater with the hoodie pulled over his head and his mother’s fingers are still visible on his skin, no longer red, but still there, unmistakably there. The marks are almost blue on his pale skin now. Even’s heart sinks.

Isak won’t look him in the eyes, but he’s here on his doorstep looking at his own feet like he’s asking them why they brought him here to him, to Even.

“Isak—” he whispers his name with care and watches Isak’s shoulders sink lower and lower, like he’s giving up.

Isak is here to give up.

Even hugs him. He doesn’t ask him. He just embraces him. This is probably what Isak is here for. A hug. Comfort. Even places a hand on Isak’s neck under his hoodie to pull him in and wraps his other
arm around his back.

Comfort. Even will give him comfort. He’s the only one who can, after all.

And Isak accepts it. He bends and breaks where Even’s hands touch and squeeze. He sighs against his collarbones and wraps his arms around Even’s waist like he needs him to remain sane, to remain here.

They hug and Even can’t believe that this is the same boy who spewed all of those mean things in his face earlier at the supermarket, the same boy who called him unimportant and who claimed that he couldn’t care less about him.

And perhaps it’s because it’s dark in the hallway and even darker inside the apartment. But Isak doesn’t resist when Even drags him inside and closes the door behind him. He doesn’t protest when Even leads the way to his room. He doesn’t. He follows pliantly.

And when Even hugs him again in the confines of his bedroom, crowding him against the very door he’s just locked behind them, Isak’s knees give out in a soft and tired whimper, making Even squeeze around his middle to pull him back up on his feet and drag them to his bed.

They don’t speak. They touch.

Even presses his thumbs where Isak’s hips and legs meet, and Isak lets him. Isak lets him do whatever he wants. He lets him strip him of his layers until he’s in nothing but the shirt he won’t return. He lets him press his nose against his neck and drag his hands along his sides. Isak lets him, probably because he knows Even won’t go overboard, because he knows Even won’t actually touch him below the waist, won’t actually touch the skin underneath the shirt.

Isak gives up and lies there on the bed like he’s expecting Even to have his way with him, to use him to assuage his hunger, like this is nothing but a transaction, a repayment.

And it makes Even pause and sit up, because this doesn’t feel like Even comforting Isak anymore. It feels like Isak comforting Even. It feels like Isak apologizing and making amends.

Even wants to ask what this is, why he’s here in his bed after preaching about oxytocin. But then Isak sits up too and brings a soft hand to his neck— the first time he’s touched him unprompted since everything went to hell. And Even feels himself melt too, feels his resolve slip away from him too.

He understands what Isak said about his body being conditioned to give up in his vicinity now, because Even is melting too.

Isak cups his face in both hands and Even wishes there was more light in his room right now because he wants to look into his eyes and drown in them. He wants to memorize everything about this, about right now. He wants to know how the pillows are positioned on the bed and exactly how dilated Isak’s pupils are in this light. Even wants to know everything.

Isak’s thumbs brush against his cheekbones and it’s so gentle that it makes Even want to combust from the inside out. He caresses his face until Even brings his hand to Isak’s face too, his fingers hovering because the bruise on his cheek scares him. He doesn’t want to hurt him.

“Your beautiful face,” Even whispers. He can’t help it. His heart hurts.

And Isak looks sad and hurt, too. He nuzzles against Even’s hand as if to tell him that it’s okay to
touch, that it doesn’t hurt.

And they’re so good to each other when they let themselves be good to each other.

*But it’s the oxytocin,* Even has to remind himself. It’s chemistry. It’s science. “*It’s not real. None of this is real.***”

“It doesn’t hurt,” Isak mumbles. “My skin is just sensitive and bruises easily. It wasn’t that bad.”

“But—” Even tries to believe him, tries to let his thumb caress his cheek. “You should be touched with nothing but tenderness.”

The words are too corny, but Even can’t help the fact that his heart is overflowing with affection. He’ll blame it in the oxytocin.

“I provoked her. I had it coming,” says Isak, ignoring Even’s pathetic words. “She only does that when I go overboard.”

Even tries to believe him. He tries.

“How is your head?” Isak asks after a short pause, his voice low and sweet, his hands brushing over Even’s cheeks gently.

“Better now that you’re here,” Even admits, turning his face to kiss Isak’s palm. And when his breath hitches, Even wonders if it’s because of the kiss or the admission. “How is your face?”

“Better now that I’m here,” says Isak.

“Don’t steal my words.” Even smiles against his palm but Isak doesn’t reciprocate.

“I’m leaving in a few days.”

Even’s smile falters in the dark, his body clenching of its own accord. He holds Isak tighter, moves closer and closer until Isak reshuffles their positions and climbs on his lap, his hands still on Even’s face.

“To the lab thing?” he asks.

“Yes,” Isak nods on his lap, his voice steady and detached. “I thought about it a lot, and after seeing you this afternoon I figured it wouldn’t hurt if I help out a little before I leave.”

“Help out?”

“I can make you feel better, objectively, by being physically around. At least I think I can. What happened was entirely my fault. And the least I could do is help you feel better.”

“What are you talking about?” Even frowns, moves his hands until his arms are locked around Isak’s back and his neck is stretched upwards to look at him. It’s quite the intimate position. Isak on his lap, between his legs, his fingers in his hair talking about ‘helping out’.

“I shouldn’t have asked that guy to dress up like you that night. I was lazy and distracted and I didn’t think about it beforehand. And because of my laziness, you got hurt. Granted, no one asked you to show up and I still wonder how you got the address. But it remains my fault. And I know it’s a little late now, but I want to take responsibility for it.”

Isak rambles and it’s almost endearing. His breathing is uneven and his fingers are playing with
Even’s hair while Even draws lazy circles on his thighs, his thighs which are straddling his own.

“What responsibility? You’re talking like you knocked me up,” Even whispers, laughs a bit because he can’t help it, stretches his neck until his mouth reaches the skin around Isak’s collarbones. He halts there, closes his eyes, breathes, focuses on not puckering his lips and kissing his skin.

“I’m talking about my duty as your partner in this madness,” Isak nearly pants on his lap, ignoring his joke. “You’ve been nothing but helpful and considerate and it’s time I pay you back.”

“Pay me back how?” Even asks, then kisses his neck this time. Can’t help it. Not when Isak is being like this. He feels drunk.

“I already told you. By being physically around, by doing experiments. Oxytocin and serotonin can speed up your recovery. It’s scientifically proven. And I think it’s enhanced for us. I think it’s the least I could do to pay back for my part in you ending up at the hospital.”

“So you’re here for me?”

“I hate owing—”

Even places both hands on Isak’s sides, squeezes until he no longer feels dizzy, then lifts him with a loud and primal grunt. He lifts him and flips them over—almost squealing at how Isak’s legs instinctively squeeze back around him—until Isak is on his back again, until he’s pinned under him. Even is thankful for his time exercising at the pool.

“You’re only here to make me feel better. No hidden agenda?” Even asks, revels in how Isak’s curls are a mess on his bed, in how his breath catches in his throat.

“Yes.”

“Why the sudden change of heart? You didn’t even reply to my texts.”

“Texts won’t make you feel better. I can’t help you release good chemicals through text,” Isak mumbles.

“A text from you would have made me feel better,” Even confesses, lets his cheek nuzzle against Isak’s, chest to chest. “Anything from you would have made me feel better.”

He feels it again, Isak’s breath hitching in his chest. He’s not trying to guilt trip him, but he can feel him shrivel up beneath him.

“I—” Isak opens his mouth as if to speak, then closes it again.

Perhaps, he hasn’t realized just how hurt Even is. Perhaps, he doesn’t have the slightest idea how disappointed he felt when he realized that he didn’t matter to Isak at all.

“I’m sorry,” Isak says and it sounds genuine. It sounds more genuine than anything he’s said to him in days.

Isak is sorry and he sounds like Mikael did when he rejected him. ‘I’m sorry. I don’t feel the same way.’ And it’s not fair to Isak, Even realizes. Isak never claimed that what they had meant anything real to him. He’s insisted countless that this was nothing but experiments and science and chemistry.

It’s no one else’s fault that Even thought of his pleas as jokes and quirks and banter, that he got
attached and carried away, that he imagined their bond to be anything more than physical and chemical.

“It’s not your fault,” Even smiles despite the hurt, wonders if Isak can see or feel it. “I thought we got closer before everything happened. But you’re right. It’s just chemistry. You don’t owe me anything. You don’t have to care about me.”

Isak wraps himself around Even without uttering a word. And it could mean anything, but Even chooses to see it as a peace offering, chooses to interpret it as ‘No I don’t have feelings for you. But I will give you the physical comfort you crave and need right now, just like you’ve given it to me when I needed it.’

And if it hurts because Even wants and craves and needs more, Isak doesn’t have to know.

Even will take what he can get.

When Even wakes up around five in the morning, Isak is no longer there. He doesn’t leave a note, doesn’t leave anything behind. He’s just gone.

Even wonders if he should reach out first. Isak very clearly expressed guilt and said that he would be around the days leading up to his departure to ease that guilt.

And the healthy thing to do would be to reject Isak’s kind gesture and simply get better on his own. But Even is only human, and he craves that intimacy. He craves to be near him even if it means nothing to him.

---

**Heraklit**

13:09

Are you coming back tonight?

Do you want me to?

I do feel better today
Your theory is probably right

That our experiments help speed up your recovery?

Yes

I can swing by tonight again if you want
For science

---

Isak is wearing his shirt again, but it’s a shirt Even doesn’t remember giving him. It’s larger on him, loose around the shoulders. Even realizes he’s never seen Isak’s bare shoulders. He must have taken it on his way out yesterday.

“You steal my shirts now?” Even asks as he closes the door behind them.
“Borrow,” Isak replies and he’s blushing.

He makes no sense. Why does he need to borrow Even’s clothes when he has his own? Why is he blushing? Why is he here lying on his stomach on Even’s bed with his bare shoulder peeking out of his loose shirt?

Even doesn’t understand, but he’ll take it. He’ll take anything.

They don’t sleep. They hug and cuddle and touch all night. And it’s all meaningless but Even gives as much as he can in those touches.

He tucks Isak’s hair behind his ears, brushes the back of his fingers against his lips, and kisses his bare shoulders when he thinks Isak is about to doze off.

“What was that?” Isak actually interjects at the gesture, his voice shaky and small.

“Affection,” Even murmurs.

“Even...”


Isak surprises him later when he asks him to do it again, for “science” because he’s not sure how it felt the first time.

And Even is an idiot but he does it again. He kisses Isak’s bare shoulder and shuts his eyes tightly when Isak moans.

“Again.”

Even kisses the skin on his shoulder then somehow ends up kissing his neck, somehow ends up sucking on the skin there for a long time. And it’s going to leave bruises on his already sensitive skin, but Isak is not complaining.

He wears a turtleneck the next day and the day after that. And Even takes it as an invitation to keep marking his skin. But he’s gentle with it. And most of his time is spent simply kissing his neck.

.

Even catches Isak trying to sneak out their third night together.

“Stay until morning,” he asks, throwing his legs over Isak’s and holding him closer to his chest.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for your mom to see me here in the morning.”

Even wonders why. Does Isak think his mother resents him?

“She’s too busy trying to make it up to me to mind who’s in my bed,” says Even. “Don’t worry.”

“What happened by the way?” says Isak. “Why would you think that she’s ashamed of you?”

“Are you kidding me?” Even snorts, but there’s no humor there.

“What?”

Even considers if he should tell Isak about the shoulder surgery incident. His mind flashes to his
mother slapping him in MENY. He’s probably going to think Even is silly for being hurt over something so trivial, especially if he doesn’t explain that he’s woken up in a hospital before. Or even worse, what if Isak feels hurt?

“I feel like we don’t talk. My mom and I. We love each other, but we don’t talk,” says Even, baring his heart because why not at this point. “She doesn’t know the first thing about me.”

“What is the first thing about you?”

What an odd question. Even pauses to think.

“It’s just an expression,” says Even.

“Yes, but what is it that you think your mother doesn’t know about you? How do you know that she doesn’t know if you don’t talk?”

Even blinks in the dark because Isak might use words to get what he wants without there being any veracity to them necessarily, but this makes sense.

“Things only count as knowledge if they are true,” says Isak. “Basic epistemology. If you can’t absolutely prove that something is true, then it is not knowledge. If you can’t prove that your mother doesn’t know what you think she doesn’t know, then you don’t know for sure that she doesn’t know.”

“What the fuck?” Even laughs. He actually laughs.

“What?” Isak chuckles too, burrows further into Even and wraps both arms around his back. “I actually put it in simple words compared to what Aristotle said. I bet you’ll hold your head and whine if you heard his version.”

“Whine?” Even scoffs. “I don’t whine. And what did Mister Aristotle say?”

“He said exactly what I just said but in even more confusing terms.”

“Not possible.”

“Possible. I’m going to recite his bullshit and you can tell me what you think,” says Isak. He sits up a bit, props himself on an elbow. “He said that to say of something which is that it is not, or to say of something which is not that it is, is false. But to say of something which is that it is, or of something which is not that it is not, is true.”

Even laughs harder, twines his arms around Isak’s waist to pull him back down. “Yeah, you literally just pulled that out of your ass.”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Yes, you did,” Even insists, laughing harder now, hoping they’re not waking his mother.

“Trust me, that’s not what I want pulling out of my ass.”

Silence.

Even actually scrambles a bit to even begin wrapping his head around what Isak just said.

“Wow!” he sighs loudly.
“What?” Isak laughs.

“Are you serious? Do you realize what you just said? Are you messing with me?”

“How am I messing with you? I’m merely using word play here to carry on this banter we settled into. I don’t know what you’re getting worked up over.”

This guy. It’s like he’s trying to kill Even, Even whose mind is wandering down a rabbit hole, down, well, a hole.

“Fuck!” he groans, turning his head to the side to muffle his frustration with the pillow.

“Jesus, what’s wrong with you?” Isak laughs, the cheeky bastard.

“You’re joking about things pulling out of your ass and I can’t even argue that you’re fucking with me, because I can’t prove that you know what it means.”

Isak smiles and Even’s eyes must have gotten adjusted to the darkness, because he sees him perfectly now. He sees where his cheeks dimple and his eyes crinkle. He sees him perfectly.

“You’re a fast learner,” Isak muses, still smiling.

“I feel like I’d grasp most concepts faster if they were explained using pulling out and ass jokes. I don’t know,” Even smiles back, a hand coming up to thread through Isak’s hair. Isak who purrs and melts into the touch.

“A tip for your word game with your mother. Perhaps incorporating these jokes will help you memorize words better.”

They settle on the pillow again, Even playing with Isak’s curls and Isak simply staring at him like these touches matter.

“I don’t think my mom would be too thrilled to hear about my penchant for dick jokes,” Even confesses and feels Isak still in his arms.

Well.

Now that he thinks about it, Isak probably thinks Even is out and proud. Maybe.

“Your mom doesn’t know?” Isak asks softly, no hint of judgement in his voice.

“I don’t think she does. I can’t prove that she doesn’t know, but I never really told her anything.”

“Why not?” says Isak. “Are you scared she might not accept it?”

And what a ridiculous conversation to have with Isak Valtersen. Isak who insists that it’s ‘science, not homosexuality’, that he’s anything but a ‘homosexual’.

“It’s not about acceptance. It’s about change. It’s about labels,” says Even.

“Labels?”

“I don’t like labels,” Even elaborates. “People use them to put them in boxes and create harmful generalizations. I don’t like it.”

“True. But that’s in the context of sharing one’s label with others. Labels can also simply help one
establish a sense of identity. Don’t you think? It can just make you closer to yourself."

“I don’t need a label to feel connected to myself,” says Even. “I can just be me. Labels are more like a one-word description you give people who don’t wish to take time to get to know you. They’re used to divide and categorize people.”

“They’re also used to unite and push people closer together.”

“Who are you?” Even chuckles.

“I don’t know. I mean I’m not a fan of labels myself. I’m just trying to play devil’s advocate here. There’s a difference between disliking labels and fearing labels.”

“I don’t fear labels,” Even frowns.

“How do you know for sure that you don’t?” says Isak. “Can you prove it? Do you refuse to label yourself because you don’t think there’s anything out there that captures who you are or because you’re scared people won’t be able to see beyond the label itself?”

Even’s brain hurts. He winces. “I don’t know.”

“I used to shy away from schools of thoughts in philosophy because I didn’t want people to think that I was one thing and that I thought in one specific way. Existentialism, for example, is my jam but pre-socratic concepts and Heraklit’s philosophy are also something I absolutely live by. I’m not just one thing. And I think that once you realize that about yourself, once you know that you’re more than one thing, embracing labels becomes easier because it’s no longer scary.”

.

Their conversation plays itself over and over again in his head the next day, guilt settling in his chest when his mother kisses him goodbye in the morning.

Labels. Identity. Who he is. Who Even is as a person. As an individual.

Even doesn’t know. Isn’t sure he is ready to know.

He wonders if he’ll spend the rest of his life wondering and hiding, if he’ll ever find the courage to announce himself to the world, to his friends, to his mother, to be proud of who he is as a person.

Even feels down, and he wonders if it’s because Isak is leaving tomorrow.

.

When he gets home from school, he finds his mom waiting for him with his favorite dish.

It makes him smile, at last.

“What owes me this pleasure?” he beams.

“For being my darling son whom I love so very much.”

Even sits and eats. He listens to her talk about Lars and the new employee that everyone hates because it sounds like he got hired out of nepotism. Nepotism, that’s a nice word of the day, he thinks.

She talks and talks and talks. And Even nods and nods and nods.
He feels tired. Not just in his body, and his mind, but also in his heart. It feels so sore. His feelings are eating at him and everything hurts like he’s paperthin. He should go see his therapist. He should adjust his meds. This isn’t working.

“Even, is everything okay?” his mom asks, and it’s so sweet.

It’s not the first time she’s asked, but it’s the first time he considers answering truthfully.

No, nothing is okay. I feel so fake. My heart hurts. My mom is ashamed of me. My dad isn’t fucked to care. My friends think I’m pathetic and suicidal. The guy I sort of like doesn’t give two shits about me and has been using me and my body for experiments because he can’t have anybody else. And when I almost died because of the shady shit he’s into, he didn’t even bother visiting me. And I’m so pathetic and useless that I’m heartbroken over him leaving instead of being angry that he doesn’t care about me. I’m so pathetic that I can’t even tell my mom any of this because I’m too scared that all she’ll remember is the new label, the new odd thing about me, me being heartbroken over a guy. Not a girl, a guy. So no. Everything is not okay.

“Of course,” he says, takes another bite, then smiles.

He can feel her heavy gaze on his face. He can feel the hot tears burning at the corners of his eyes. He can feel hers too. She always cries when he does. Always.

“Even.”

“Yes, mom?” he answers, not lifting his eyes from his plate because he doesn’t want to risk her seeing his glistening eyes.

“It’s been a while since we shared our word of the day with each other. Don’t you think?” she asks, her voice soft and careful and filled with sorrow. Even hates that he’s made her sad again. He hates it. “I can start this time. I haven’t played in a while.”

“Okay,” says Even.

“My word of the day is ‘Contrite’,” she says. “Do you know what it means?”

Even shakes his head, still stuffing his face with pasta.

“It means feeling or expressing remorse, being affected by guilt.”

Even stills. “Okay.”

“It’s what a person feels when they do something not very nice and feel guilty about it later.”

“Okay.”

“Like maybe when a mother lies about why her son is in the hospital,” she continues hesitantly.

Even bites the inside of his lip and continues chewing, refusing to meet her eyes.

“The mother feels remorseful, contrite, because while she might have lied out of fear that people would judge her son—because people are cruel and mean and she just wanted her son to stop feeling judged for once—it still hurt her son when he heard the lie. It hurt her son a lot, and the mother is feeling remorseful because she can’t make up for that hurt although she’s trying very hard. And while she can’t erase that mistake, she promises that it will never happen again. She promises that she will do her very best to be a better mother to her son in the future. She promises that she won’t hurt
him like that again because he’s the most important thing in her life, the only good thing.”

She pauses to squeeze his hands, both of them. She’s crying so hard that Even can barely keep up with her words.

“And she knows that she promised to take care of her son from now on, and that she failed. She knows that she promised to be so good that he would never have to return to the hospital. She knows that she failed and she’s so sorry. She’ll do better. She will do her best in the future. I’ll do my best, baby. I promise. Okay?”

Even can’t help the big hot tears rolling down his cheeks. He can’t help his sobs and the hurt in his chest. He promised himself he’d never let her see him cry, but it turns out that he too cries whenever she cries.

They cry together. His mother hysterically because she’s a wonder like that, and Even like someone who’s muffled his cries for so long that he forgot how to cry freely.

“Mom, it’s okay. It’s not your fault. I promise,” he insists, holding her hands now, both of them weeping at the dinner table.

“I felt like I was going to die when I saw you at the hospital with all that blood. My heart stopped. I was so scared!”

“Mom. I’m okay. It’s okay.”

“All I could think about was all the things I don’t tell you and the things you don’t tell me,” his mother continues, her sobs nonsensical and heartbreaking. “You can tell me anything. You know, darling? There’s nothing you could say that will ever make me love you less. Nothing at all. Okay?”

*My mother will always love me and accept me. No matter what. No matter what label I put on myself. She will always love me.*

“Okay.”

Even thinks about Isak and hopes that he, too, has someone who loves him this unconditionally.

“Okay.”

Even lies on his bed to think. He’s emotionally drained after his meal with his mother and anxious because Isak hasn’t confirmed whether he’ll be coming over tonight, because Isak is still leaving tomorrow.

He thinks about what it means for him and his heart.

Even thinks and thinks and thinks.

It’s late and his mother is getting ready for bed. Even can hear her tiptoeing around the apartment. She stops by his room to kiss his temple and to light a vanilla scented candle on his bookshelf.

“What’s that for?” he smiles.

“It’s more romantic. Don’t you think?” she winks then walks away, leaving him floored.

She knows.
She knows about Isak spending his nights cuddled up against him in his bed. She knows and she’s okay with it. She knows and she’s not making a big deal out of it. She knows and she’s lighting scented candles for him, for romance.

It takes him maybe an hour to type the words and even longer to perfect them.

He goes on Safari and browses to the page he’s had bookmarked for months now. He reads the definition again and again and again. He looks at the colors and feels his heart fill up at the sight. He likes them. Pink, yellow, blue. He likes them.

Mamma

23:39

Word of the day: Pansexual.

Not limited in sexual choice with regard to biological sex, gender, or gender identity. It describes a person who’s attracted to all people. A person who loves as long as the heart is willing to love, regardless of labels and identities and genders. A person who just loves.

Like me. I just love. And i know that there are other words and labels to describe this and how I feel and who I’m attracted to, but this is the one my heart is leaning toward, the one I feel safest with. These are the colors i want on my heart.

And I know that it’s one more thing to make up excuses and stories for. I know it’s one more thing to lie about to friends and colleagues, to hide and conceal because they might not understand. And I tried to deny it, to make it go away. Because it broke my heart that you had to end up not only with a bipolar son, but with a queer bipolar son.

And I did my best, mom. I did. Because I barely have the bipolar thing figured out. Because just living with that one label is hard enough. Because i somehow stopped being real and liking myself lately, and i don’t want another label to bring me down any further. I tried to be ‘normal’, mom. But i can’t help it.

For most people, the heart is a muscle that pumps blood into the rest of the body. But for me, it’s what makes me me, what makes me love. And I cannot not love. I don’t know everything about myself. I still don’t who i am as an individual but i know that cannot not love.

I’m sorry i make you so ashamed sometimes. But i’ll do my best to make you proud too. I promise. I love you so much and i’m so lucky to have you as my mom.

My only wish is that one day you’ll feel lucky to have me as your son too.

Love, Even

Even hits send and wipes the tear or two that spilled. He’s not sad. He’s scared, but he’s not sad. He feels proud, almost. He feels free.

His phone buzzes and his heart catches at his throat expecting it to be a reply from his mother. But it isn’t. It’s Isak. And he’s outside.
He’s wearing another one of Even’s shirts. He’s probably taken four or five at this point. Even doesn’t mind.

Isak looks sad tonight. He looks as blue as Even feels. Perhaps he’ll miss their arrangement, too. Perhaps.

He notices Even’s bloodshot eyes as soon as they make it to his room. He cups his face and frowns.

“Even, have you been crying?” he asks with actual concern in his voice.

“What happened?”

Even shows him the texts he sent to his mother, the texts she will probably read in the morning because she puts her phone on airplane mode at night. He watches Isak read through them with furrowed brows at first, his legs folded on his bed, and Even feels slightly embarrassed and self-conscious.

“I’m not as articulate as you,” Even mumbles while staring down at his own hands.

He gasps when Isak shifts next to him and leans in to press a kiss to his cheek. A soft and tender kiss to the cheek. So comforting, so rewarding. Even feels his toes curl.

“Thank you for showing me,” says Isak, his cheeks flushed like he can’t believe he kissed Even on the cheek unprompted. “It’s beautiful. It’s perfect. Thank you.”

Even wants to kiss his cheek, too. And he does.

Isak ends up on his back again and Even cuddles up to him this time, burrows into him, folds himself to surround him.

He can’t believe they’ll be separated tomorrow. He can’t believe he will no longer have this.

So he gives it his all. And Isak is more tender and affectionate than he’s ever been, kissing his face and his neck and anything he can reach, wrapping his hands around Even’s wrists and digging his fingers into his skin and playing with his hair.

Even gives and marvels at each and every single one of Isak’s reactions, at the little gasps and blushes and moans and whimpers and groans and looks and blinks. Isak is the most responsive person he’s ever been intimate with. And it’s ironic given that he’s the one who feels the least for him.

Even has to recite the words in his head to remind himself that it’s all chemicals, that Isak doesn’t truly care about him unless he’s near him. That starting tomorrow Isak will no longer be near him and will therefore no longer care about him.

But it’s so daunting when Isak looks at him like he’s his whole entire universe, like he never wants to leave this very bed.

“Can I just stay here with you forever?” Isak breathes when they’re face to face, nose to nose, chest to chest.

His voice is breaking and Even wants to take him away, to take his hand and lead them to his mother’s car and run away with him. It’s real as long as they’re physically close. Isak is sweet and
caring as long as they’re physically close.

“You can,” says Even and he means it. Isak can if he wants to. He can.

Isak runs his thumb over Even’s lower lip, waiting, blinking up at him, breathing against his jaw. And Even leans in to kiss him. Because he needs to. Because he wants to. Because he’s aching to.

Even cups Isak’s cheek with his right hand and gasps when he arches his back and whimpers in his arms. So affected. By everything.

Even is about to kiss him when his mind flashes to Isak leaving him high and dry last time to start the fight, when it flashes to how utterly crushed it felt to not have Isak visit him at the hospital.

He will probably never hear from Isak after this, he realizes.

Even doesn’t kiss him.

Even walks Isak outside around seven in the morning. The sky is still dark and the streets are empty. And Even’s lips are still buzzing from pressing against the back of Isak’s neck on their way down the stairs.

He just did it on impulse, really. Like much of everything he did this past week, on impulse. Without thinking because he doesn’t think he’ll ever get to do them again.

Isak is leaving today. Isak is leaving in a few hours.

“So this is it,” says Even, both arms wrapping around himself. And it’s so cold and cruel outside.

“This is it.”

Even hugs him one last time. He doesn’t squeeze as much as he wants to because he’s afraid he might not be able to let go, because he’s afraid Isak will be able to tell just how much this is tearing him apart.

Isak holds him tight, however. He does the squeezing for both of them, his fingers digging into Even’s flesh while the wind blows ominously around them.

“Some oxytocin for the road,” Isak mumbles, providing an explanation for his desperation when Even didn’t even ask for one.

“Some oxytocin for the road.”

Mutta stops by in the morning to return the camera he borrowed from Even a few weeks ago, and he doesn’t miss the hurt on his face.

“Are you okay?” he asks him with that same guilty look he’s been carrying ever since Even woke up at the hospital, like he’s hiding something.

“Isak’s leaving today.”

“And are you okay?”
“I’ll get over it,” Even shrugs and lets his head fall back against the wall supporting the couch behind him.

_Shouldn’t be that hard to forget about someone who insisted through every minute we spent together that he couldn’t care less about what happens to me._

He expects Mutta to shake his head and walk away, but he doesn’t. He stays there, looking guilty and torn.

“What?” Even frowns.

“Please don’t get mad.”

“What?” Even sits up now, his brows furrowed, his frown deep.

“You’re gonna fucking hate me but I really thought I was doing the right thing,” Mutta sighs.

“What did you do?!”

“Well I didn’t actually do anything. It was mostly what I said. Or in this case didn’t say.”

“Mutta!”

“Fine! Damn! It’s just Isak,” Mutta stammers.

“What about him?”

“Uh, he made me promise not to tell you so I don’t know if—”

“Mutta, spill it!”

“I was with him when you woke up at the hospital,” says Mutta.

“Huh?” Even winces. “You were there when I woke up.”

“Yes, and so was Isak.”

“You mean when he was visiting William?”

“No. Visiting William? What?” Mutta grimaces. “No, we were talking because I caught him leaving your room. Well, I didn’t really catch him. I more like waited for him to be done because it looked intense in there, and I knew Elias would cause a scene if he saw him in your room. So I guarded the door for a bit and confronted him on his way out.”

Mutta rambles while Even wraps his head around this new stream information.

“Isak came to see me? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought I was doing the right thing. I don’t know. I was afraid you’d try to drop the charges against William to protect him. And Isak himself asked me to keep it from you. I’m sorry.”

“Fuck, Mutta! I’ve been acting like a child about this visiting at the hospital thing.”

“I’m sorry! I don’t know. I figured he’d eventually tell you. I mean I don’t even know what you two are or do. And I know you might say it’s related to your experiments or something, and I might be a dumb History and Economics kinda guy, but I watched enough romantic comedies to know that the
kid cares about you. He showed up everyday until you woke up, and he hid in some old woman’s room to avoid us and William’s guys. They were literally roaming the hospital looking for him. And he still showed up everyday in shitty disguise. I thought he was smart but his outfits were literally screaming for attention. I don’t think he actually went into your room until the day you woke up though. So yeah. That’s what you missed on Glee, I guess.”

Heraklit

11:21

I’m leaving soon
Lea asked me what i’m going to miss the most and it took me a bit off guard
But the answer was actually pretty evident in my mind
Lea. Drumming. And You.
I’m going to miss you
I meant to tell you this morning but i didn’t have the courage

Where are you??

Loading the car by my house why?

Can i stop by?

??
Why?
My mom is here it’s not a good idea
And i thought we said everything this morning

I, too, lacked the courage to do something this morning.

Even gets there in twelve minutes. His heart soars in his chest when he feels him. It always jumps and ignites when they’re near, but this is probing euphoria. It feels too big for one person. It’s probably why they’re two to bear it.

Even stops when he spots Isak by the car. He’s loading boxes in the backseat while his parents are seemingly arguing by the front door. And Isak feels him too, apparently, because he turns around immediately.

Even stops and stays on the other end of the street because he doesn’t want Isak to get in trouble unless he wishes to, unless he decides to.

Heraklit

11:42

What are you doing here?

Care for more oxytocin for the road?

What?
Experiment #23
I just realized that we never completed it
What kind of science partners don’t complete their experiments?

Even isn’t sure what he expected from Isak. Isak who falls for the corniest lines, who smiles at the dirtiest jokes, who cries into the warmest hugs, who marvels before the most complicated philosophical concepts, and who snaps at the most trivial matters. Even isn’t sure what he expected Isak’s response to his proposal to be.

But it certainly isn’t this.

It isn’t Isak running, running, to him from the car. It isn’t Isak wearing all four shirts he stole from Even all at once like he needs his scent overwhelming him, hugging him, suffocating him to get through this day, to leave his home, his basement where he was already confined, and settle in a facility where he’ll be treated like a guinea pig, like an experiment in and of itself, like he’s not a person, like he’s not real, like the sole purpose of his existence is to advance science. For science. Everything is for science.

Isak who spews the most hurtful words but touches him like he knows how bent and broken Even is inside. Isak who lost sight of himself when he thought that he lost Even. Isak who lost him anyway, because he would rather lose him a thousand times over than bear the thought of hurting him again. Isak who will take looking like the scum of the earth before baring how he truly feels if it’s for the greater good.

Isak who feels so unloved and alone that he has to provoke his mother into a physical altercation to feel her touch.

Isak.

Running to him.

And it might be their connection. It might be their bond. It might be the invisible thread linking their two bodies, their two hearts, their two DNAs. It might be the fact that their bones curve perfectly to fit the other, that Isak’s head fits perfectly under Even’s chin, that Even’s arm fits perfectly around Isak’s shoulders, that their noses fit perfectly against the other. It might be that.

Or it might be more. It could be more. Even doesn’t know.

But he opens his arms big and wide and lets Isak crash into him. He lets Isak latch onto him like he’s never had anyone to latch onto. He lets him and he holds him and squeezes him the way he wanted to hold him and squeeze him earlier that morning. And he feels him break and bend in his arms and it’s okay, because he’s got him. Because if Isak’s knees decide to give out right now, Even will be right there to catch him.

They hug, and it’s a beautiful morning to just hug.

“I never meant for you to get hurt, you know?” Isak confesses in the crook of Even’s neck, his arms strong and steady around Even’s middle.

“It’s okay.” Even smiles, his fingers threading through Isak’s hair, his eyes darting to his mouth. “Accidents happen sometimes when doing experiments, when doing science.”

This isn’t any different from previous instances of their banter, but it feels different all the same. Even doesn’t miss how the air around them thickens, how his lungs tighten in his ribcage, how his chest
begins to ache for a denouement.

“Science,” Isak echoes, the word bitter around his tongue, his eyes a meadow, a dream when he pulls back. “Is that what we’ve been doing? Science—”

Even rips the word from his mouth with a kiss.

A gentle yet bruising kiss. An antithesis. Like him.

Even kisses him on the mouth. He cups Isak’s face with his right hand and kisses him on the lips, on the mouth. And it’s unlike any kiss he’s ever given or received. It’s unlike anything he’s ever felt or lived through.

The neurotransmitters in the Labia Oris can overwhelm the brain, can cause everything else to stop mattering.

Even feels like he’s kissing him with his whole body, like his whole being has just been kissed.

He has barely pressed their lips together, but it already feels as though his insides have caught fire, as though a torrent has just been unleashed inside of him, for every single nerve-ending in his body is here for this kiss and this kiss alone.

Even pulls back, the fire between them too strong, too consuming not to, and their lips separate in a shy but dizzying pop, only drowned out by Isak’s actual gasp and by their matching shallow breaths.

And he’s gorgeous like this, face flushed, eyes wide, curls wild, lips wet and red.

Isak looks the way Even feels. On fire.

“Isak—”

Isak pulls him in this time, has one hand on Even’s neck and the other on his nape. It’s a hard kiss, but it’s still sweet. And Isak’s mouth is open, and warm, and eager, and naive, and messy. It’s so messy, Even can barely breathe, can’t decide if he wants his hands in Isak’s hair or fisting his shirt by his waist, can’t decide if he wants Isak to slow down so that he can kiss him deep and gentle or if he wants to let Isak do everything and anything he wants.

So sweet. So wild.

Isak kisses like he lives, Even realizes. Urgently, desperately, messily, and most of all like he’s lonely, so lonely. Isak kisses like he’s burning. Isak kisses like he’s hurting. Isak kisses like he doesn’t know how to let another person in.

And god, Even wants to show him. He wants to press him against a wall or a car or a streetlight. Even wants to undress him and strip him until he is nothing but skin and skin and skin, then kiss him everywhere, every inch.

Even wants to show him. Even wants to kiss him good and kiss him slow. He wants to kiss him hard and kiss him fast.

Isak whimpers against his mouth like he’s peered into his thoughts, and Even lifts him off the ground by squeezing around his middle, feeling strangely proud when he realizes that Isak was on his tiptoes for him.

Isak stills in his arms and Even uses his flustered state to press soft little kisses to his mouth. One,
two, three. One, two, three. Soft and tender kisses to his soft tender lips. He nuzzles against his cheek. He opens his mouth with his thumb. He kisses his jaw and the corner of his mouth, then claims his lips again and again and again, until he starts to hear Isak’s mother and father in the background.

“Even—” Isak moans and Even is tempted to kidnap him, to take him in, to maybe marry him so he can take care of him.

Even puts him down and Isak looks lost and flustered and aroused and happy, so happy. He looks like he’s about to implode, like he cannot contain himself. Isak looks like a dream.

And when Even caresses his cheek and smiles, Isak looks down shyly and hides his face in Even’s shoulder.

“Shy, are you now?” Even teases him.

“Fuck off,” Isak mumbles against his arm.

And he’s so sweet and soft like this despite his choice of words. He’s so sweet that Even has to cup his face with both hands to lift it and kiss him again. And this time, the kiss is slow and deep and dizzying. This time, Even pryes Isak’s mouth open with his own.

They’re kissing. For affection. For science. For oxytocin. Who cares. As long as they’re kissing.

“Next time, we can try this experiment via the Lingua not just Labia Oris.”

"Next time," Isak repeats with lights dancing in his eyes, missing how Even had to go google the Latin word 'tongue.' "When I come back?"

"When you come back," says Even, tucking a strand of hair behind Isak’s ear. "If you want."

"Will you wait for me?" Isak asks and his eyes are big and round like he's pleading. He's so sweet.

"I will wait for you. You're my science partner after all."

"Yes, we're scientists, not homosexuals after all," Isak beams.

And Even knows there is a high probability that Isak is right, that this is the oxytocin and other chemicals talking, that they're being sweet to each other and smiling and kissing and making promises to one another because of chemicals, not real feelings. Even knows this. But he's willing to take the leap of faith. He's willing to put himself out there and wear his heart on sleeve. Even is willing to bet against probability. For him. Even is willing to, for him.

"Because this is science. Not homosexuality," Even whispers.

"Science," Isak repeats then gets on his tiptoes to press a kiss to Even’s mouth one last time. "Not homosexuality."

When they see each other again, Isak won’t look him in the eyes.

When they see each other again, Even can no longer feel him, can no longer touch him without burning.

When they see each other again, their bond is shattered, their bond is broken.
EDIT: I'm gonna stop sharing bits about myself in long useless endnotes since apparently some use that to assume and spread things about me. I don't need that anxiety and virtual harassment in my life.

If you've made it this far thank you. I appreciate you. Hope you liked this chapter. As I said in my previous edit, I don't know when I'll be writing the next one but I think it might be a while.

Love you. Thank you.
Philosophy of Pain

Chapter Summary

"When it's just the two of us, can I hold your hand then?"
"You can."

ft Isak's prison break, lots of science talk, cute phone calls, tired scientists, Eskild, the biggest SCHEME, the science of pain, worried! Even, phone kisses, hand holding, and RAIN.

Chapter Notes

hello it's been a while! <3
if you read 9.5, you may skip to "Goodnight, babe" just ctrl+F it. But you should probably re-read it. x

TW: very difficult chapter for me to write and I'm guessing for you to read. This is Isak's POV. we're in his head and it's full of self-hatred and misunderstandings. He gets his pain tolerance tested in this chapter in the lab and SCHEMES to get out.

buckle up.

Find the rest of the TWs in the endnotes xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Like a phantom limb. Like a piece of me. Outside of me.

"Don’t be silly, Terje. This is your son we’re talking about. You know what he’s capable of."

“It’s just a phone, Marianne. Give him a break. He’s leaving for who knows how long. You can’t just take his phone away and cut him off from his friends.”

“His friends? Oh you mean that perverse boy who just had his tongue down our son’s throat?! In broad daylight? Right in front of our house and our neighbors?!”

“Marianne, can we just— Can we do this later? I’d really like to focus on the road right now.”

“Oh, so now you want to focus on the road?! I am talking about our son’s safety right now. If we let him keep his phone, who knows what he could plan! He could even call up that degenerate and have him pick him up. He could—”

“Marianne, the facility has tight security. They won’t just let him out. Besides— let’s. Let’s just talk about this later, okay?”
“Fine! Just don’t tell me I didn’t say so when he finds a way to run away.”

Silence. At last.

Except not really. Remnants of his mother’s prickly voice are still lingering in the stuffed air filling the car, waltzing with the nonchalance in his father’s tone. Isak usually can’t tell what irritates him the most.

The engine of the car is humming and the radio is on as well. Isak hadn’t even noticed that it was on until now. Not with all the pandemonium and chaos.

Chaos. Sweet sweet chaos.

Not the chaos in the car. Not his parents arguing for the past two hours with him sitting right there in the backseat. Not the box currently ramming into his thigh every time his father makes an unnecessary abrupt turn—as if hoping they would crash into something and finally put a stop to Marianne’s nagging. Not the prospect of spending tonight alone in a new room that will probably smell of disinfectants and strange chemicals.

No.

The chaos in his own mind. His own chest. His own heart?

Isak lets his head fall against the cold window and smiles as he watches trees go by and blend in together. He smiles so wide that his cheeks and eyes begin to hurt. His stomach is fluttering, and he feels strangely empty inside. Empty and hollow but in a pleasant way, as if something is rattling inside him, as if he’s riding a rollercoaster—at least based on memories from when he was younger and could still go on rollercoasters.

His heart pounds even through his parents’ silence and he can’t recall ever feeling this serene and peaceful in their presence. It’s particularly ironic given their occasional bursts and heated discussions around what he’s capable of doing and what a nightmare he is.

Isak would otherwise join and drive his mother to hysterics until his father has to pull over and calm both of them down.

But not today.

Today, Isak doesn’t care. Doesn’t have the option to care for his brain is overwhelmed with one all too consuming thought. One shiny and glossy thought that keeps his blood flowing to his face, that keeps his fingertips warm, his heart pounding, his stomach fluttering, his lips buzzing.

Isak is on fire. Always has been on the outside, but it has somehow managed to spread into his insides. Like a virus. Like an infection. Creeping its way to his bloodstream and settling there, comfortably, like it belongs. Like a new physical necessity.

He can barely recognize himself, barely claim his thoughts. But he still likes it, this feeling of utter loss of control. Like a freefall.

Isak’s brain is on overdrive, and he thinks he finally understands how people who can only focus on one thing at a time feel like. It’s almost impairing, but in the most wonderful way. In the most amazing and intoxicating way. Isak feels intoxicated.

It’s oxytocin. It’s nothing but oxytocin.
He tries to frown, tries to force the thought into his mind, tries to believe in the words. But he tries too hard and ends up smiling to himself again, letting out a stupid giggle in the process.

Shit.

“Isak?” his mother calls for him, confused. Isak won’t look at her, his eyes fixated on the trees outside. But he knows that her head is turned toward him. He knows she can see him smiling. “Are you laughing?”

“Why? Is that not allowed either?” he replies. He attempts to sound mean, but he smiles while saying it. He feels like dancing, like opening the door of the car and running through the fields while screaming and jumping.

*It’s oxytocin. It’s nothing but oxytocin.*

Another pause before Marianne turns to Terje and mutters something about Isak losing his mind, about Even doing something to him during the incident.

The incident.

*My first kiss.*

“Don’t be silly, Marianne,” Terje sighs again, visibly irritated. He hasn’t had to drive with Marianne in the car in a while. Isak can tell that he’s about to burst, that his unnecessary sudden turns and brake stomps are no longer enough to assuage him.

“Silly? Silly?! He is smiling, Terje. Smiling when he was throwing a tantrum just moments before—before that thing happened.”

“It was a kiss, mom,” Isak chimes in again, still smiling, still looking at the trees. He doesn’t care. Today, he couldn’t care less.

*Oxytocin. Oxytocin.*

“Isak!” she yelps, horrified.

“Dad, could you turn up the volume please? I like this song.”

Dad. The word feels weird in his mouth, leaves a sour taste behind. He hasn’t actually called his father ‘dad’ in years, maybe.

‘Science makes you soft?’ the words echo themselves in his head.

*Fucking Even.*

“Oh, sure, son,” his father says, and he sounds calmer now.

The word seems to even placate his mother.

*Oxytocin. Endorphins. Serotonin.*

The song is about some girl missing some guy, and Isak feels his cheeks heat up even more. He feels fire spread within him, all over him. He feels him, Even. And he knows he’s not there. He knows it because there are no cars in their vicinity and Even cannot fly or teleport, at least not to his knowledge. Isak knows this. But he feels him, still.
The kissing. Kissing is technically an exchange of bodily fluids. They’ve exchanged fluids, as odd as that sounds. It’s almost repulsive, but the thought still makes Isak flustered.

_I am carrying bits of Even with me, in me._

He’s… inside me.

Isak snorts and doesn’t even care when his mother turns to look at him again.

“Give me your phone!” she demands, irritated.

“Here you go.” Isak hands it over without protesting. She probably thought he was texting Even. If she could only know what he was really giggling about.

He brings his fingertips to his lips once she’s turned her attention back to the road and lets them hover there for a while, unsure of what to do next.

He pads his lips, once, twice, three times. Blushes some more. Grins some more. He parts his mouth and lets his thumb brush against his tongue. _What on earth am I doing?!_ He almost curls into himself when hot flashes overwhelm him. His tongue. His mouth. He must have seemed desperate. He must have screamed inexperience and eagerness.

He suddenly feels embarrassed, tries to recall the sounds he made, where his hands were, if his mouth was open at all times, if he bit him at any time. God. Even didn’t look in particular discomfort after the kissing ended. He tries to hold onto that thought.

_He did do something to me._

Isak remains flustered and in a daze until they reach the facility hours later. And it’s all a blur after that. He barely remembers unloading the car and being introduced to the staff that will be “taking care of him”. He barely remembers the corridors and the stairs leading up to his room. He will probably have to roam the space later when he’s calmed down, especially if he’s going to set his plan in motion any time soon. He will probably have to reintroduce himself to everyone if he wants anyone to actually fear him in this place and not believe that he’s some stupid weak blushing boy.

He remains on his cloud the entire day. He waves to a little boy with ridiculously spiky hair who keeps watching him while his parents talk to some doctor, and smiles at a girl with a pixie haircut whose name is Emma, apparently. He even smiles at his mother when it’s finally time for her to leave.

She cries. Of course she does. She gives him the speech about how this is good for him, how this is going to cure him, how they’re all going to be able to touch him after this. She cries and tries to hold him, and Isak is thankful to his father for stopping her. She tends to forget sometimes, tends to ignore consequences. She’s impulsive like that.

And Isak tries to keep his face from falling, tries to hold onto every single horrible thing she’s done to him, every single awful thing she’s said to him. But he can’t. He can’t stand seeing her cry hysterically like this.

“It’s going to be okay, mom,” he says, surprising himself as well. “Don’t worry. I will be fine. I
promise.”

The act of kindness lingers in the air between them, unspoken forgiveness. Isak wonders why he suddenly feels like extending her the courtesy of kindness, especially considering his later plans. He wonders where this foreign feeling came from.

*He did something to me.*

She smiles and hands him something, his phone.

“Thank you,” says Isak, and this one he actually means.

His锁screen alerts him that he has three new messages, all from Even. His heart leaps in his chest again and he hasn’t even read them yet.

“You okay?” says Emma, walking next to him. She’s volunteered to give him a tour of the place and Isak doesn’t trust himself not to combust in front of her.

“Yeah. Totally fine.”

She has some condition that he can’t remember because he was only partially listening when she ambushed him.

“So that was the first floor. The second floor is where most of us actually spend time, so if you—”

“Uhm, actually, Emma,” Isak interrupts her, the three unread messages on his phone making it unbearable to focus on anything else right now. “I don’t feel too good right now because of the road. Do you mind if we continue this tomorrow? I’m very sorry.”

“Oh,” she fumbles, flustered. “Of course not. Tomorrow is totally fine.”

“Thank you so much,” he beams at her and notices how she won’t meet his eyes and how she’s biting her lower lip like she didn’t understand the part about him not being able to touch or be touched.

She likes him. Her body language seems to suggest so at least. This could come in handy.

“Oh hey, Emma,” he calls after her as she begins to walk away.

“Yes?”

“You’re definitely my favorite person here,” he says in his most casual voice, trying to sound convincing and not too eager or fake.

It works because she’s a shy mess in seconds.

“Oh, you’ve only met like four people so far,” she giggles.

“Doesn’t matter. I’m sure you’ll remain my favorite.”

She smiles to herself, her cheeks coloring ever slightly.

Infatuation. What a lovely thing. Isak wonders what about himself draws her in. Perhaps it’s the unattainability. Or perhaps it’s the fact that she’s stuck here at age fifteen and that there are no other
teenage boys in the vicinity. Whatever it is, Isak can make it work to his advantage.

*Infatuation.*

---

**Science Partner 3**

**12:13**

I miss you already

Fuck

**15:18**

How are you? I miss you

---

Isak almost screams into his pillow. His new room came with pillows, but he still made sure to bring his own. He can’t sleep without his pillow. And he’s now hugging it so hard. He can barely breathe.

*I miss you.*

It’s the oxytocin talking. It’s the dopamine and serotonin. All these chemicals create an obsessive sense of longing. An enhanced and fake need that subdues once the chemicals dissipate. It’s all science. Even is just confused.

He doesn’t actually miss and want Isak. He doesn’t. How could he. Isak has made sure to be horrible to him to make this easier. Yet he somehow appeared at the very last minute to *kiss* him goodbye. Experiment 23. It was all an experiment. A long experiment with lots of pauses and interesting sounds and touches, but an experiment nonetheless.

Even is riding the post-kiss high, and so is Isak. None of this is actually real.

This isn’t *love* or whatever they call it. This is an expected result to a standard experiment.

---

**Science Partner 3**

**19:02**

I’m all settled in

Thank you for asking :)

Thank you for asking?

I can’t think

I can’t do anything

Drink some water

Take a walk

It’s a common side effect

Of what? Kissing?

Yeah. of the experiment

haha
babe i’ve kissed people before and it never felt like this
Uh ok
congrats on having kissed many people before

You focus on interesting things
What do you want me to focus on?
‘Babe’?
I’m not your babe

Not babe. noted
Sorry about that
It just slipped
habit

Congrats on having people you call babe on a regular basis

Oh my god ISAK!

You’re ridiculous
I miss your ridiculous crap already

Ok lol

All i meant was that it felt special with you
The kissing

That’s the oxytocin talking

It’s a compliment. An objective non-homosexual compliment
You’re a good kisser

Shut up

A bit sloppy but nothing practice can’t fix <3

EVEN!

…

haha
I’ll stop now
I just want to know how you’re doing
Is everything ok? Not too lonely?
Do you need anything?

I’ll be fine Even
Don’t worry
Just focus on functioning again

So formal

I just don’t want you getting the wrong idea
And what idea is that?
That i might think you actually liked making out with me?

IT WASN’T MAKING OUT
It was AN EXPERIMENT!

Whatever you call it
And for the record, i liked it

It helped you release good hormones
Of course you liked it

Yes, the hormones
that’s the only reason

Bye Even

<3

Isak doesn’t sleep that night. His heart keeps beating at an abnormal pace, as if it’s tripping over itself, clenching in his chest with every breath he takes. He can’t taste anything, can’t smell anything, can’t really focus on anything. It’s as though the rest of his senses have stopped behaving the way they’re supposed to and given way to his sense of touch. Or perhaps it’s his brain. His brain is having trouble interpreting the most basic pieces of information.

Every time his eyes flutter shut, he feels the swipe of Even’s tongue over his lips. Every time he thinks he can doze off, he feels Even’s big hands holding him, his fingers parting over his skin and squeezing hard, so hard, like he can’t bear the thought of letting him go. He feels him and sees him and hears him and smells him. Even is still all over him, still inside him. That warmth, that comforting warmth.

Isak turns to the side and remembers how he moaned into Even’s mouth, his fingers carded through his perfect hair.

He’s burning up in the dark. He can’t sleep.

Isak sits up and stares at his phone screen for a while. He’s not sure what he’s waiting for. It’s almost three in the morning and Even is probably asleep. He won’t text him. He has no reason to. He has kissed people before. He calls other people babe. Even won’t text him in the middle of the night.

Isak closes his eyes for a moment and remembers how it felt to have Even cup his face and smile before leaning in and kissing him on the mouth again and again and again. Isak is dizzy with it. He can’t think. He can’t sleep. He can’t function.

He knows that this is all chemistry. That the human brain and body are conditioned to react this way to kissing among other physical activities. He knows that this will eventually go away. That this isn’t love, or whatever they call it. That this is just a chemical reaction. But he can’t ignore how he’s feeling right now.

He misses him.

He misses him so much, he could die from the longing alone.
The phone rings once, twice, then Isak is hearing him breathe on the other side of the line. It’s unmistakably him. Even his breathing is distinct. Isak could pick it out from a crowd of thousands.

“Isak?” Even whispers through the phone and it makes Isak’s skin prickle. It’s instant.

“How—” Isak begins, betraying himself and his plan.

“I may have people I regularly call ‘babe’, but I don’t have anyone else to call me anonymously at 3 in the morning,” says Even, and his voice is so deep and hoarse on the phone. Isak feels like melting into his new mattress.

“But—” Isak stops himself. All this dizziness has cost him some brain cells apparently. He does not trust himself not to say something stupid next, so he refrains from talking altogether.

“Can’t sleep?” Even asks and he’s back to whispering. It’s so intimate and sweet. Isak is blushing under his sheets. He can’t bear feeling like this, like jelly, papertthin, transparent. “Tell me.”

“I can’t think,” Isak admits, hopes his voice has some resolve in it.

“Me neither. I can’t sleep, either,” says Even. “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“Stop.”

“I miss you.”

“Even—” Isak feels like squirming.

“Is that not allowed? You said that it’s normal for this to happen after the exchange of bodily fluids thing. So can’t I just feel like this for a little while?”

“It’s not that it’s not allowed! It’s just—”

“I should keep it to myself, then? You don’t want to hear it?” Even insists, and he doesn’t sound irritated. If anything, he sounds amused.

“No—”

“Is it because it’s the oxytocin talking? Is it—”

“Even, let me speak!”

Silence settles on both ends of the line and Isak realizes that he doesn’t even know what to say. He’s beyond flustered and outside of his comfort zone. He can’t plan ahead. He can’t compute the possible outcomes of his words.

“Isak?”

“I’m thinking!”

“I thought you couldn’t do that.”

“Which is why it’s taking me so damn long!” Isak lets out a frustrated sigh. He feels like he has a fever. Yelling at Even on the phone wasn’t on his list of things to do tonight.

“Hey,” Even whispers and it’s sweet, so sweet. “How about this? Since we’re both experiencing common side effects of kissing, how about we just describe what we’re feeling to each other? It
doesn’t have to mean anything. It’s just to document stuff for later. These feelings are temporary anyway, so we can talk about them and promise each other not to hold them against one another. How does it sound?”

Isak marvels at how logical Even sounds when he’s struggling to even form sentences. It makes sense. He can do this. This sounds good.

“Okay?” Even asks again.

“Oh, okay.”

“Alright, want me to start?”

“Uh, sure,” says Isak.

“But you won’t hold it against me, right? This isn’t real or whatever. You’re gonna be chill about this. Yeah?”

“Yes. I’ll be chill,” Isak promises, pulling the covers over himself in anticipation. He knows Even is about to say something outrageous. He just knows it.

“I can’t stop thinking about kissing you.”

Isak’s heart jumps again, his brain catching fire. “Even!”

“And if you were here with me right now, I’d still be kissing you. I probably wouldn’t have stopped since this morning. But only if you wanted me to, of course.”

Isak can’t form coherent thoughts, so he focuses on covering the microphone with his palm to conceal his heavy breathing. Kissing Even for hours. Isak would probably combust after five minutes, reaching his limit like an oversensitive mess with the lowest of thresholds.

“What do you think?” Even adds, sounding a little bit out of breath.

“I, uh, I think those aren’t objective feelings,” Isak stammers, finally getting back into his own body. “You said we’d share feelings and sensations, not what you wish you were hypothetically doing.”

“Oh. Okay. So like. I’m feeling very horny right now would be a sensation you’re interested in hearing about?”

“Even!”

Even bursts into laughter and it’s wonderful. So wonderful. Isak feels himself melt into his new sheets, the butterflies in his stomach currently soaring.

“You tell me then,” says Even. “Give me an example or a template to follow. What are you feeling?”

“It’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair? Just tell me. I won’t hold it against you. This is like when you go to the dentist and feel woozy for hours after getting your wisdom tooth removed,” says Even. “Doesn’t count.”

“You didn’t get your wisdom tooth removed.”

“Not the point. Just tell me. Just—”
“It was my first kiss,” Isak blurts out, feeling the heat rise to his chest then his face, then envelop him whole, the words feeling heavy, so heavy above him. “My very first kiss.”

“Oh—”

“And you know what? If it also happens to be my last, then I won’t even mind.”

It’s not love. It’s not affection. It’s the oxytocin and all the other great chemicals mixed with some gratitude. Isak feels himself shake with the emotion, with how raw and exposed he feels. He always does when he reveals bits and pieces of himself to Even, when he allows himself to be this vulnerable, this honest, this naked. He always does.

“It doesn’t have to be your last,” Even whispers and Isak closes his eyes because it feels like a promise, like a solemn and precious promise that he intends to keep.

He closes his eyes and lets the heat and warmth overwhelm him. He listens to Even breathe through the phone, remembers what it felt to have him breathing into his lungs and curls into himself.

“Close your eyes,” Even whispers again and it’s ridiculous because Isak’s eyes are already closed, and what is this? A meditation session?

“Why?”

“We’re gonna do it right now. I’m going to kiss you through the phone right now.”

“You’re an idiot,” Isak protests, but laughs nonetheless.

“You’re laughing. That’s good. Laughing and smiling into kisses is good for your health. I read it in a science magazine once.”

“Even!”

“Close your eyes, Isak. Please. I’m about to be an idiot and kiss my phone screen and I need you to be ridiculous, too. Do it for science.”

“What are you even trying to prove, here?!” Isak laughs and he’s sure someone can hear him laughing on the phone now, but he can’t bring himself to care.

“Isn’t it obvious?” says Even. “I’m trying to prove that I can kiss you through the phone. Experiment 31.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’ll bear this verbal abuse as long as you do it. Come on. You’re not being a very cooperative science partner.”

Isak closes his eyes. He’s giddy and he feels his IQ dropping and his face is burning up and he won’t be sleeping any time soon, but he closes his eyes and opens his heart.

And it feels like a caress at first, like Even reached out with his mind and gave his heart a caress. But the phantom touch somehow turns into a real one, soft and barely there, but still there. Like a memory lighting up in his brain and overwhelming it.

Isak isn’t sure if he actually feels Even’s phone kiss or if the remnants of their previous ones are still there in him, the ghost of their touch lingering on his lips.
It’s the most idiotic thing he’s ever done in his life and it can’t be very hygienic, but Isak brings his phone to his mouth and kisses it.

_Idiots together._

“Please tell me you have some evil master plan to break out of that facility,” Even blurts out after their most ridiculous experiment to date. “Please! Because if not I might just have to come and break you out myself.”

“I do have an evil master plan to break out of this facility,” Isak admits. He didn’t want to involve anyone, but he doesn’t trust that Even won’t ruin everything by playing hero again. “I just need you to stand still and not do anything dumb while I’m carrying it out.”

“Can I visit while you’re executing your plan?”

Isak smiles. He thinks about it. He’ll probably have to find a special place for them to touch, or rather, conduct experiments. He doesn’t want anyone from the staff finding out that Even can touch him.

“You can,” says Isak.

“How about tomorrow?” Even suggests, hasty.

“Even, we drove for like six hours. It’s not an easy trip. You shouldn’t miss school.”

“Ugh. What about next week then?”

“Next week works,” Isak replies, and he feels excited all of a sudden. He has something to look forward to amid all this calamity.

“I can’t stand knowing that you’re alone in there,” Even sighs into the phone and Isak can feel his frowning. It’s almost comforting.

“I’m not alone, Even,” Isak replies. “I already made a friend. Her name is Emma and she’s cute.”

“I might have to come earlier than planned, actually.”

“Even!” Isak laughs. He can’t help it. He likes it, the attention, the humor, the ease. He likes it.

“What? I want to see her for myself. Do you think I’m her type? Do you think she’ll like me?”

“Asshole,” Isak groans while Even laughs. He loves that sound. He loves it so much.

“Jealous?”

“More like concerned. She’s fifteen, you weirdo!”

“Oh shit. I guess I’m stuck with you, then.”

They talk on the phone until Isak can hear people waking up and walking through the corridors. They talk until a gentle drowsiness starts pulling at him, his eyelids feeling heavy, so heavy. He’s about to doze off, and he can no longer tell if his dreams are bleeding into his reality, his limbs heavy, his mind foggy.

“Night, Even.”
“Goodnight, babe.”

*babe. why does such a stupid word make me feel so much.*

It’s not love. It’s not affection. It can’t be. This will subdue in the morning. It has to.

.

It doesn’t.

Morning comes, and hormones and chemicals have had plenty of time to diffuse in his system. His brain should be returning to normal and he should be able to eat and function by now.

And yet, here he is. Staring at his plate with a blush high up his cheeks, his stomach in knots, his heart ablaze, with texts he hasn’t dared to look at yet.

---

**Science Partner 3**

09:49

Didn’t sleep much but latest update:
(because i’m an amazing science partner)
I still can’t stop thinking about you
Have a good day <3

---

It’s not love. It’s not affection.

But Isak is running out of excuses for his euphoric state. He’s running out of chemicals to blame. He’s running out of theories and apprehensions and doubts.

*When will this feeling go away.*

“Is everything okay?” Emma asks, she’s wearing a flower dress today and her hair looks different. “Your face looks a little bit red. Do you perhaps have a fever?”

Right. He is in a lab, one of the best in the world, and today is his first day with Doctor Carlsen, a renowned and scary neuroscientist. He’s here on a mission. He has a plan to carry out. Blushing over meaningless text messages is not part of that plan.

“It’s part of my condition,” Isak replies, turning slightly to the side to look her in the eyes. Eye contact typically increases existing attraction, thought one-sided. It works. She’s blushing. “My face flushes at random times.”

“Oh, I see!” she chuckles nervously, tucking the little bit of hair framing her delicate face behind her ear. It’s either a nervous byproduct of her infatuation with him or she’s kept long hair for some time. “Uhm. Doctor Carlsen says to report unusual things like fevers and stuff. That can get you a free day.”

“Good to know. Thank you for the tip, Emma,” Isak smiles at her. She blushes again, both hands curled into little fists on her lap. Isak wonders if she’d act this way knowing that everything anyone ever does is governed by stupid chemicals, that her actions are results of predictable chemical equations, that she has no free-will to do anything.
“You’re welcome,” she giggles. “And good luck with her today. She can be a bit scary. Just tell her if it gets too much.”

“Don’t worry. I can be a bit scary, too.”

His mother is scarier.

Doctor Carlsen is exactly how he pictured her in his head. A short but self-assured woman with auburn hair tied into a tight bun, and piercing brown eyes behind thick square glasses. She’s wearing comfortable slacks and a long white blouse.

“The famous Isak,” she calls him when he enters her office, and he remembers that he still hasn’t picked which persona to go with. Sweet and harmless boy or cunning and unimpressed? He wanted to meet her first to decide. “We finally get to meet!”

“Isak is fine,” he replies. He sounds condescending already, but he can fix it later. “Lovely meeting you as well,” he adds with a smile.

“As charming as your file said you would be,” she smiles before placing both hands around her arm chairs. “I usually shake my patients’ hands when I first meet them, but I’m afraid I have very low tolerance to pain.”

Isak frowns. *Fuck you.*

“I was told you’d start hurting me *after* I sign the waivers and disclaimers, not before,” he offers, smiling.

“Hurt you?” she frowns. “Isak, is that what you think we’ll be doing to you here?”

“That’s what I *know* you’ll be doing to me here. Within what’s ethically permissible of course,” Isak offers her another smile. “I did my research. I know what you do.”

*Pain.* She specializes in the study of pain. And while Isak panicked at first when he pulled out her name from the file he stole from one of the nurses, he figured he could use it to his advantage.

“I’m impressed.”

“I don’t really wish to waste your time, doctor. I know you’re busy.”

“How considerate of you, Isak. And since we’re on the topic of saving time, I have some good news for you,” she leans in a bit over her desk, and her smile has a plastic quality to it. It reminds him of his own. “Since you’re still a minor, the signing of the waivers and disclaimers was already done by your parents. So we can just jump right into it.”

He frowns. He already knew that, of course, and he let it slip just so that she would confirm it.

A doctoral student, with what looks like a precocious receding hairline and going by the name of Geir, guides him to the room where they’ll be doing a series of initial tests to establish a baseline. Isak initially considered downplaying his intelligence during the entire ordeal, but Carlsen seems to know a lot about him already. And if she’s seen his file, then she probably knows he’s skipped two grades and that he has a vicious tongue. There’s no use playing ‘dumb’.

Geir barely looks at him, his eyes empty and tired. He looks overworked and Isak wonders if he can
drive him to his breaking point. He probably can. But then he notices Geir’s hands shaking a little bit. He’s wearing pink rubber gloves. He’s probably afraid of burning himself. Ironic.

“I thought you guys would be better equipped,” Isak sneers on the bed where Geir is examining him, almost a meter separating them.

“She didn’t want to hurt your ego by using thick gloves. Negative emotions can alter your perception of pain,” Geir answers and Isak hates him too.

“I’d rather my ego gets bruised than your fingers. But you do you.”

Fuck. Isak sighs. This is the definition of starting off on the wrong foot, so much for playing innocent and nice and wonderful and making allies.

Geir meets his eyes and his features are rather gentle. He looks completely unphased by Isak and his insolence.

“I know it must be scary. But I promise you’ll be fine. We can stop at any time you feel uncomfortable. Just say the word. We’re not here to torture you. We’re here to conduct experiments that can hopefully make your life and many other people’s a little less hard. And it would be so much more valuable if you’re cooperative.”

Isak is left aghast and feeling rather childish. This young man is only trying to do his job and Isak probably looks like a fussy child at the dentist’s office.

It placates Isak ever so slightly. Something about this Geir character almost reminds him of Even and it makes him nervous.

“I’m going to apply some capsaicin on your right shin now, if that’s okay,” says Geir. “It’s the chemical responsible for——”

“The burn of chili,” Isak completes his sentence, unable of helping himself. “I know what capsaicin is.”

Geir smiles. “She did say you were smart.”

Isak shrugs. “Still am.”

“And humble. I recall reading that in your file.”

“Can you maybe do your job now?” Isak snaps, feeling childish again, his composed self long gone now. Something about Geir’s calmness reminds him of Even’s and it drives him up the wall. *Stop thinking about him.*

“Abusing my employees already, I see,” Doctor Carlsen says as she enters the exam room. She’s wearing a different pair of shoes now with slight heels. They make noise when she walks.

“It’s the least I could do considering the pain you guys are about to put me through,” Isak replies.

“The pain you allegedly don’t feel.”

*Right.* That’s the whole plan. Isak needs to remain focused on his plan.

Carlsen drags a chair closer to the bed and sits on it.

“Isak, you’re a smart young man and I’m sure you’ve done your fair share of research on the
subject,” she says. “Negative emotions can alter your perception of pain as Geir might have told you, which is why we don’t want you harboring any.”

“No negative emotions on my end. I’m merely stating facts.”

“Anticipation is an ancillary factor that can distort the level of pain you’re actually feeling. I’m sure you’ve read about that as well,” she says. “So if you’re anticipating to feel pain, chances are that will make you feel even more pain.”

It’s true. Isak did read about it. He read all the articles her team published over the years. He also read her mentor’s work, Dr. Irene Tracey who has her own lab in the University of Oxford. She’s nicknamed “the Queen of Pain” and Isak is somewhat glad he’s in Carlsen’s lab instead. He wonders why women tend to go more into these fields, the study of pain, the study of touch, the study of sensations. He’ll look it up later.

“We won’t be doing much today, just a series of basic tests and going over basic terminology. Is that okay, Isak?” she says as if talking to a child. “I’ll also hand you paperwork that you can read over and sign.”

“I thought my parents already did that,” he mutters.

“Yes, but something tells me you might want to go over it yourself.”

“A false sense of agency?”

“If you will.”

Isak’s jaw drops a little when he finds out he’ll be getting into a Tesla-7 MRI scanner machine. There’s only about a hundred in the world and Norway has only recently acquired one, a property of the National University of Technology in Trondheim which about an hour North.

“I told you you were special,” Doctor Carlsen smiles and Isak suddenly feels giddy. “My team and I usually operate out of the University, but we figured you’d be more comfortable in this setting instead of in a University hospital. So we made arrangements to bring everything down here. We didn’t want you to feel hospitalized.”

This is… considerate.

“You won’t be trying it on until tomorrow, but I thought it might make you more cooperative.”

This woman is indeed scary. But it’s a different kind of scary. Unlike his mother, she does not yell until her voice is the only thing filling his brain. No, Dr. Carlsen is scary because she’s as cunning and manipulative as Isak is.

They’ll get along just fine.

Science Partner 3

16:18

How’s your day?
Yeah. met the doctors. We did initial tests

No. they’re actually nice :)

They’re not torturing you in there?

Oh ok that’s a relief!
That’s good
But don’t get too cozy
You still need to leave

Wanna chat maybe?

We’re currently chatting

No i meant like talk
on the phone
As in can i call you

Uhm why

I like it better when i can hear your voice
That way i can tell if you’re laughing or smiling

That’s unsettling

I’m calling right now
You better pick up

“Hi.”

Isak doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to Even’s voice on the phone. It’s deep and soft, but with a raspy edge to it. He sounds like he just woke up, and Isak suddenly misses waking up next to him, his body heating up instantly at the thought.

“Hi,” Isak echoes, but it comes out squeaky and weird. Shit. Even laughs.

“See? I can’t hear things like this when we’re texting.”

“Why would you want to hear things like this?” Isak retorts and he kind of wants to know the answer.

“It’s more sincere. Don’t you think? It also makes me feel good about myself to know that you’re not as curt and and cold when you hear my voice.”

“You’re so full of yourself,” Isak laughs. “Maybe I’m just anxious over speaking on the phone in general.”

"You? Anxious? On the phone? I bet you've manipulated half of the facility into submission
already."

Isak rolls his eyes.

“You just rolled your eyes. Didn’t you?” Even laughs, and Isak has to sit down because his stomach
is starting to flutter again. “So how was your day? What kind of tests are you doing? Tell me
everything.”

Telling Even everything. That’s probably a catastrophic idea. Knowing Even and his savior
complex, he would probably find a way to book a flight to Trondheim and walk the remaining
distance on foot to come bark outside his window.

Isak can’t really tell him what’s he’s planning on doing. But he could share the outlines, maybe.

“What do you want to know?” Isak offers.

“I don’t know. How’s your room? Where is this building? Is it surrounded by other buildings? Are
people nice? How’s the food?”

Isak takes a deep breath. He can answer questions like these.

“Well, the food is awful. My room is very sterile and plain, but at least I don’t have a roommate. I
have two large windows and I’m on the fifth floor. And before you ask, no I can’t escape using the
windows, nor can you climb them, they’re far too high.” Even giggles at that and Isak secretly smiles
to himself, tries not to let it bleed into his voice. He’s not sure why, but he doesn’t want Even
knowing that his giggles make him smile. “The building looks like an old castle,” he continues. “It’s
in the middle of the woods. There’s a short driveway and the nearest building is a few kilometers
away. It looks like a rehab facility or like a mental institution.”

Isak pauses. Mental institution. Bipolar. He remembers Even sharing his diagnosis with him. They
haven’t really talked about it.

He listens for signs of distress coming from Even through the phone, but there aren’t any.

“Mental institution is not a trigger word for me, Isak,” Even says as if he’s heard his thoughts, and
Isak lets out the breath he’s been holding. “Keep going.”

“Uh, okay. I think that pretty much sums it up.”

“How about the doctors? Are they nice? Have they started ‘examining’ you?”

“Well, I met Dr. Carlsen today. She’s testing my pain tolerance level,” says Isak.

“Pain tolerance? What does that have to do with you burning people?”

“Well, whatever is burning people who touch me also allegedly burns me. So a good starting point is
investigating my tolerance to that pain.”

Isak can hear Even thinking through the phone.

“But, shouldn’t they try to help you with your pressing matter first? As in the burning itself? Isn’t it
the purpose of this whole thing?”

Even. So nice. So gullible.

“Not really. I know it’s going to sound weird. But I’m an asset right now. A very expensive one at
that. And when you’re an asset, you’re used to solve pressing matters for the majority, or at least what the entities providing money deem as pressing matters, not your own,” says Isak.

“In simpler words, please?”

Isak smiles. “I’m not paying the lab. The lab is paying me. Or in this case, my parents. Therefore, the lab’s priority isn’t to cure me of my condition. It’s to use my condition to find a cure for whatever is considered higher priority.”

Isak can tell that Even is getting upset through the phone.

“What other pressing matters are there? What’s higher priority than your discomfort?”

“Well. Believe it or not, but not many people are touch-blind, or in my case, incapable of feeling or giving touch without burning others. Many people, however, suffer from chronic pain. So that gets prioritized over what I have, I guess.”

“How is that fair?”

“It isn’t. Which is why I’ll get out soon.”

“When?” Even asks and he sounds more determined now.

“Soon.”

“How?”

“I can’t tell you yet.”

“But—”

“Just trust me. I got this.”

Even lets out a frustrated sigh, but it sounds like he will drop it at least. It feels weird, however, to utter the words. Trust me. So personal. So delicate. Isak isn’t sure why Even does, trust him, why he believes his words when most of them have been nothing but lies. Isak isn’t sure why this boy keeps trusting him, fighting for him. Isak doesn’t know.

“How are you?” Isak asks because he realizes that he forgot to ask. It’s just a question but his cheeks heat up on their own.

Even sounds just as surprised by Isak’s sensible inquiry.


“How’s Julie?”

“Oh, god. Right. That!” Even sighs, and Isak remembers the message Even sent her, the message he shared with him. “She’s good. She’s really good. She barged into my room when she read it. She nearly choked me with a hug and she cried a lot. You know how she is.”

Kind. That’s how she is.

“I’m glad everything is okay,” Isak tells him and he means it.

“Thank you. Me too.”
The second day, Isak is early to Dr. Carlsen’s office. He finds Geir preparing for their session and greets him with a nod.

“Excited?” Geir asks, knowing very well why Isak’s eyes are sparkling. A 7-Tesla MRI. The science nerd living and breathing inside of him cannot wait, even if he’s going under it.

“Somewhat,” Isak shrugs.

Carlsen shows him the sensory map they’ll be using to understand his brain during the tests, and Isak nods at every single thing she says. He’s only seen pictures in large books. Seeing renditions with his own eyes leaves him in awe.

“We’ll be able to see everything that goes on in that wonderful brain of yours,” she says as if addressing a regular person who knows nothing about neuroscience. Isak knows how ambitious the field is and how far it has come, but he also knows that pain remains a mystery to scientists due to its subjectivity. He knows that they’ll still rely on his account of his own pain. “We’ll still ask you to rate your pain on scale from 0 to 10 after every experiment, for benchmarks.”

“Benchmarks,” Isak nods despite knowing that it’s not true.

“You look skeptical,” she says.

“Why do I need to rate my pain if you can see it in the way my brain lights up on the map?” because my brain will light up everywhere and you have no way of knowing if I’m actually hurting.

“Because your account of your pain is ultimately what matters. I can deduce from what your brain is telling me how much discomfort your body is in, but only you can assess how bad it is.”

She’s not being completely honest with him, but she’s not lying to him either. This is good.

“Because only I can feel what I feel,” says Isak, and it makes her smile.

“Only you can feel what you feel.”

“How was that?” Geir asks. Carlsen is not here for this part and Isak tries to figure out why.

“A three,” Isak lies. That was at least a six, an eight to a regular person. But they can’t know.

“Are you sure?” Geir inquires and he actually looks worried. He’s just pressed a boiling hot water bottle to a capsaicin covered patch of his thigh, which mimics the effect of a second degree burn. He looks completely thrown off by Isak’s calmness.

“I’m sure,” Isak lies.

He’s had plenty of practice concealing his pain. It doesn’t mean that he doesn’t feel it. He just learns to ignore it, to focus on greater pains, on greater matters. As long as he conceals his pain, it is not there.

Geir then applies a cooling pack to the burn and Isak has to work hard to conceal his relief as well, to keep tears from rolling down his cheeks.
Geir ‘tortures’ him some more, diligently, methodically, reading off a list with instructions, with unnerving precision and studiousness: scientifically. Isak almost laughs because that’s probably what he sounded like to Even, suggesting scientific cuddles and scientific kisses.

At least, I wasn’t hurting him.

If he could just see Even right now. Perhaps this would hurt less. Perhaps.

Fuck.

Carlsen visits him later, when he’s catching his breath and fighting tears in a corner with no cameras, and Isak pulls himself together in a matter of seconds.

“I thought I was special,” he tells her, feigning being hurt by her absence.

“You are,” she replies. “I was in the control room. Figured you’d be more relaxed with Geir alone.”

“Relaxed? That’s one way to put how I felt,” Isak tries to laugh, but even that hurts right now.

“Yes, relaxed. At least judging by how you rated everything between 1 and 4 out of ten.”

“It didn’t hurt that much,” Isak shrugs.

“Isak, your whole brain was on fire.”

“I’m always on fire.”

She sighs, visibly irritated. “Isak, this trial will only be successful if you cooperate and report your level of pain accurately. There is no use lying to us if you’re in pain. We’re only trying to help you.”

“I’ve been in pain my whole life. Perhaps, I just got used to it.”

And that’s the first true thing he’s told her, though coping with crippling pain only became part of who he is when he turned thirteen.

She sits on the chair beside his own and adjusts her glasses on the bridge of her nose. Her brows furrow together while her mouth purses ever so slightly. She’s thinking and her thoughts aren’t as loud as most people’s. He can’t really read her. Not yet.

“Did you know that pain is considered the fifth vital sign?” she asks him. But it’s not condescending. Her tone has changed, too. It’s friendlier.

Isak shakes his head because no, he didn’t know. He would huff out his chest and find a way to show that he did in fact know, because he hates not knowing things. But he’s too tired to play, and she’s offering him free knowledge. “Aren’t there four?”

“Pulse rate, temperature, respiration rate, and blood pressure are the primary four. That’s correct,” she nods, then leans in a bit closer, closer than anyone knowing his condition would feel comfortable doing. “But pain has recently been added to the list. Because without the ability to feel pain, we are a looming catastrophe.”

Isak doesn’t respond, doesn’t have the energy to find words.

“The world is a dangerous place and pain is a mechanism for us to learn from mistakes and visible
threats and stay away. When you stub your toe against a table corner, your body learns to avoid that corner. When you burn yourself, you make sure to never do it again, etc. Pain is vital.”

Isak doesn’t know where she’s getting at. His pain is not comparable to a regular person’s. His pain is not induced by external factors and objects. His pain is on his skin, in his bones. His pain is chronic.

“People who cannot feel pain are in different programs, Isak. And I can refer you to one of those,” she says and he finally understands the point of her monologue.

“I rated my pain between 1 and 4. I don’t have congenital insensitivity to pain,” he challenges her. He knows that she won’t make him switch programs. He knows that she’s challenging his claims and how he rated his pain. She’s trying to manipulate him the way he would manipulate anyone in this situation.

She stares at him, hard, and it’s humbling. He almost feels like looking down and apologizing.

“I will not tell you how you feel, Isak. What I will tell you, however, is that whatever you think you’re doing will backfire. If you continue rating your pain this low, the tests will get harder to determine your body’s breaking point. And some of the effects can be longstanding. You might regret this later.”

“I will be fine.”

Isak can’t eat that evening because he feels sick. His skin is burning where it’s been repeatedly assaulted by fake burning and electrifying sensations by good old Geir, and his vision is slightly blurry. He stole a thermometer from one of the supply closets and his fever is beginning to worry him. He feels dizzy. He feels worn out and frail.

He spends fourteen minutes with the rest of the patients in the large common room and speaks to at least three people. He knows that one of the nurses is monitoring him and reporting back to Carlsen, and he needs her to believe his claims about his high tolerance to pain. Fainting or causing a scene or isolating himself in his room right now will indicate otherwise.

So he makes sure to look completely unphased during supper and to make specific conversation with others in case they’re interrogated about his behavior later.

Isak then locks himself in his room and tries to will the pain away.

He curls around himself in bed, his knees between his arms and rocks his body like a child. It’s silly but it has proven successful in the past.

It doesn’t, this time.

He painfully reaches for the box under his bed and retrieves one of the books at the very top. Hegel. German Idealist. Great. Isak doesn’t particularly enjoy reading idealists’ gibberish. But some of Hegel’s work manages fills him with ease. Perhaps it’s his equal fascination with Heraclitus.

Or perhaps it’s the way he defines reality. The only reality we know is virtual. Nothing is real. Isak’s pain is not real if the world he lives in isn’t.

It usually does the trick.
I’m not really here. I’m not here.

It doesn’t work and Isak feels like his bones are rattling inside of him, begging for some sort of release, for medication. He could acquire some morphine downstairs if he’s careful enough. He knows where it is thanks to his walks with Emma. He knows he could get away with it. But it would show in his labs.

He needs to bear this on his own.

But it hurts. It hurts so much, Isak can barely see, his skin is ablaze, his sheets soaked. His brain really does feel as though it has caught fire.

Fire.

Isak thinks about Even without meaning to. About his soft hands, and his smile, and the crook of his neck where Isak loved to hide when he could, where he felt the safest and the warmest.

And the all too consuming thought is so comforting and soothing, that he nearly jumps at the relief that washes over his body. It feels like being drenched by a water hose on a hot July afternoon.

For a moment, he can breathe. And Isak latches onto the moment to make it stretch and last as long possible, for he knows this will end soon and the pain will be ten times more intense.

But it doesn’t.

Huh.

What was that?!

Isak sits up, the pain now having left his body as if a spell was cast on him. He then realizes that he hasn’t thought of Even all day until now.

Even.

Even has always kept the pain away when he was near. It was part of the reason Isak couldn’t stay away. But Even isn’t here right now. How is simply thinking about him making this easier?

Isak calls him when it gets too much, can’t quite help it. It’s as though the experiments have activated receptors and parts of his brain that had been dormant for the longest time, the ones most susceptible to pain.

And while the pain from the tests subsides, the one he carries with him all the time shines and soars as the sun dips in the sky.

Isak clings to the thought of him, but ends up calling him when it’s dark and foggy.

Even picks up like he’s been staring at his phone.

Isak smiles for the first time today. He can’t remember what the joke was, but it’s funny. Even is so funny. And Isak feels dizzy, exhausted, disoriented. He needs to lie down again.

“Are you okay?” Even asks and Isak wants to lie, needs to lie. But he feels so alone and so worn out, and honesty seems like a silver lining amid all of this calamity.
“I don’t know. I feel drunk,” Isak mumbles into the phone. He’s on his side in bed and he’s clutching the phone so hard like it might vanish.

“Drunk? Did you drink?!”

“No. I’m just very tired.”

“How was today?” Even asks and Isak can see the frown all the way from here. He wants to soothe it with his thumb.

“It was hard,” Isak admits.

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Isak, are they hurting you?” the concern in Even’s voice is so soothing.

Nobody cares about me like you do. Isak thinks. But that’s not true. Jonas has called him over twenty times and has left him countless messages. Sana, too. But they’ve never seen him the way Even did and does. And he doesn’t wish for them to.

“A little bit,” says Isak. And he knows he’s being selfish right now. He knows that he’s putting himself in this situation and that he could easily put himself out of it. But hearing Even— someone, no, Even— fuss over him makes him feel special, in a good way.

“Isak, that’s not okay! They can’t hurt you. They have to stop whatever they’re doing if you’re in pain. And they should give you medication afterward, no?! Why do you sound so tired?”

Isak is giddy. He’s no longer in pain, though the exhaustion lingers. And he’s giddy.

“Do you want me to come earlier? Mutta is driving with me and I can convince him to go earlier. We can just kidnap you. Or like. Not kidnap you but like take you with us.”

“Even,” Isak laughs because he’s so endearing when he gets worked up. “You’re not kidnapping me. You’re not doing anything. I’m going to be okay.”

“Why would you call me sounding so hurt, and then refuse to let me help you?”

“You’re helping me right now.”

“What?”

Isak turns to the other side, throws the covers over his head as if to hide from someone, perhaps, from himself.

“Your voice,” Isak whispers into the phone like it’s a secret. “Hearing your voice makes everything okay.”

Isak can’t see him but he knows Even is flustered on the other end of the line. He doesn’t tell him nice things often. He should tell him nice things more often.

“What do you need me to do?” Even asks after a long pause.

“Just talk to me. Tell me things. Tell me everything.”
They talk on the phone for hours. Even does most of the talking while Isak laughs occasionally at Julie’s quirky attempts to bond with Even given the latest development.

Even tells him how he came back home to a pansexual flag hanging on their front door and how his mother made a fuss over stores not having pansexual themed accessories to hang on the rearview mirror of her car.

“She ordered a bunch online. I think she lost it,” Even chuckles while Isak clutches the covers with one hand and the phone with the other. “She added a gay flag to her keychain when I told her it was an umbrella term and she’ll replace it with the pansexual one once it’s delivered. She’s even signing up for associations of families of LGBT or something. And she got worked up when she realized there was no ‘P’ in there. She’s just really out there.”

Isak smiles. That sounds nice. “I’m happy for you,” he tells him and he means it.

“Thank you. I’m afraid she’ll out me to whole world before I get a chance to do it myself, though.”

And then there’s silence. Because this has been a confusing time. Even is out and proud. And Isak is confused and confused.

“I’m sure your parents—”

“No,” Isak interrupts him because this has been a lovely evening. He does not wish to spoil it by thinking about what hurts the most. He does not wish to figure things out. Not tonight. “Please don’t.”

Even doesn’t.

He tells him more things, more stories, funny ones, mostly funny ones, until Isak feels sleep pulling at his skin, his eyelids heavy with the tension from the day, his body comforted but with new scars and pain points.

“Even, I’m falling asleep,” he whispers to him, a courtesy. He doesn’t want Even thinking he’s just leaving him hanging.

“Then sleep. I’ll talk until you sleep. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Make sure you dream of me,” Even whispers. “Scientifically of course.”

Isak dreams of him. And in his dream, he touches him, and kisses him, and sleeps with him.

And when Even asks him what he’ll do if he can no longer touch him, Isak tells him:

“I will die. think that if I can no longer touch you or feel you or hear you, I will just die.”

Isak frowns when he sees the vital signs monitor close to the bed. He frowns some more when Geir starts clipping sensors on his fingers and asks him to remove his t-shirt. It’s Even’s and Isak is not taking it off.

“I need to place this patch on your chest,” Geir explains, already exasperated.

“I’ll do it myself.”
“You’re gonna have to let us see your chest at some point.”

No. I won’t. There’s no way anyone is looking at my chest.

“Monitoring my vital signs today?” Isak asks Carlsen in a cold and monotone voice, the one that drives everyone up the wall.

“Yes, we need to get a baseline for those as well,” she smiles before placing a notebook on one of the side tables. “I can see that your vitals look pretty standard. So we’re going to get those numbers up a bit to see how you react to things. Is that okay?”

Isak shrugs. What could they possibly do.

“How do you feel about capitalism, Isak?” she asks, making him blink a few times.

“Huh?”

“Capitalism. What do you think about it? One of your essays this past year was very heated about it. Is it something that makes you angry, makes your heart jump?”

Isak resists the urge to snort. “Not any more than it does the regular teenager.”

“Okay. I see.”

She asks him a few more weird questions and watches the monitor spit out the exact same stats from before. If she’s trying to get under his skin, she might want to steer away from social injustice, because he’s too busy being angry at the entire universe to let that make his blood boil.

“Who’s Even Bech Næsheim?”

Isak jerks forward as if his skin has been pricked and he hears the beeping change in pace in absolute horror. What the fuck.

Carlsen is smirking over him while staring at the monitor.

“What? Who?” Isak feigns ignorance at first, but his heart is at 140 beats per minute and that’s a significant jump from where it was resting at 90.

“Even Bech Næsheim,” she repeats, then smiles again when Isak’s heart jumps a second time.

Fuck. fuck. Fuck.

“Are you going through my phone, spying on me in my room?” Isak manages to utter after getting ahold of his thoughts. “I don’t remember my parents signing a document authorizing you to do that.”

“We didn’t go through your phone or spy on you,” she smiles. “He called in to be put as a guest visitor for next week. He reserved a parking spot up front. Sounded absolutely charming.”

Oh.

Shit.

“Boyfriend?” she asks and Isak’s blood pressure starts to hike up as well, while his pulse reaches an abnormal 160.

“What?! No! What?!”
Geir lets out a giggle in the distance and Isak is overwhelmed with an urge to cross the room and burn him.

“Not boyfriend. Noted,” she smiles, scribbling something down on her empty notebook. She’s always pretending to write things down. But Isak checked when she went to open a cabinet and it was indeed blank. A basic intimidation strategy. “A friend, then?”

“Why does that matter?” Isak mutters.

“I asked about your political views. Now I’m asking about your support system. Basic questions. We can skip Mr. Bech Næsheim if you’re not comfortable, however.”

Isak hates her and her manipulative self. She’s brilliant. Isak would love to spend more time with her under different circumstances.

“He’s a friend,” he tells her, not wishing to draw any further suspicion to his name. He’s visiting him next week and he’s also the only person who can touch him, seemingly. Not to mention that he can take his pain away by simply speaking to him. Isak doesn’t want her finding out.

“Why did you heart rate jump at the mention of a mere friend?”

“I put him in the hospital before coming here. I guess my brain and body are still not over it,” Isak replies instantly, hoping it would put an end to the Even Bech Næsheim questionnaire

But Carlsen narrows her eyes and scribbles more nothingness into her notebook.

“Did you know that most patients with obscure conditions that we’ve treated here were homosexual?”

Isak’s pulse trips over itself again, his temperature spiking up too. It’s always high, but even Geir is beginning to worry now. Carlsen doesn’t want baselines. Carlsen wants to know how to break him down. That’s what she’s trying to do.

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“Most came from extremely religious families and grew up in intolerant environments, which led to severe trauma, internalization, and deeply rooted self-hatred.”

“Did your pretty scanner tell you all of this?” Isak spits out because his skin is crawling and he does not need to hear this. He knows what she’s doing and it won’t work.

“No, we worked closely with psychiatrists,” Carlsen replies calmly. “A child’s brain is the most powerful thing in the world. The way it adapts and improvises to protect its little owner is utterly fascinating. But unfortunately, it can also be very destructive. It can lead to deep trauma being hidden under layers of complex physiological symptoms. Like non-epileptic seizures for instance.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“One of my earlier cases was this young girl who suffered from severe paroxysms that weren’t linked to a discharge of cortical neurons, meaning they weren’t epileptic. We spent the longest time trying to understand what was wrong with her and her brain. And her seizures turned out to be due to psychological factors. She was a young devoted Christian who happened to love girls, you see,” she pauses and Isak’s brain is melting. “She repressed so much of who she was due to her religious and strict upbringing, that her brain lashed out to deal with the tension. Fascinating. Don’t you think?”
Isak doesn’t find it fascinating. He doesn’t like Carlsen poking where he flinches. He doesn’t like her tone and her condescending gaze. She thinks she knows. But she doesn’t. She doesn’t know anything. She doesn’t know the first thing about him.

“So what? She accepted her homosexuality then ran off happy and seizure-free? Is that the moral of your story here?”

“No, the moral of my story is that we should have brought in a psychiatrist earlier in the trial because the brain is tricky little fella,” she says as she stands up. “You’re meeting yours tomorrow morning. Figured I’d give you a proper introduction.”

The tests are the same as yesterday’s. Isak goes inside the MRI for a little while, gets poked with sharp objects, gets burned, soothed, hurt again, then pricked again. He tries to give different scores but within the same range. He doesn’t go above four.

He closes his eyes when it’s one of those tests that hurt a lot the day before, knowing it will hurt even more now that he’s anticipating it to. He closes his eyes and can somehow smell Even’s scent on the shirt he’s wearing underneath his medical gown.

*Even.*

Isak latches onto the thought of him and it doesn’t hurt nearly as much.

*Even.*

Isak smiles to himself, because the numbers are now reflected on the monitor. He’s calm while being burned and Geir can’t quite believe it.

Isak recalls reading an article about how religious people can handle pain better when they think about Jesus or Buddha or whatever entity they believe in. And it makes him laugh that Even is what makes it hurt less.

By the end of the day, Geir looks like he feels bad for Isak who just lay there and took whatever he put him through.

“I think you should do an IV drip tonight,” he tells him as he gets it ready by the bed.

“Uhm. Is that morphine?” Isak raises an eyebrow as he sees him inject it with morphine. Why would Geir inject him with pain killers?

“Just take it. Okay? I know you don’t feel that much pain. But just, for my peace of mind.”

Isak almost feels like laughing. “You’re gonna get fired.”

“Shut up.”

*You even like me like Even likes me.*

Morphine high. Isak’s favorite high. Perhaps it’s because it’s been a while since his last morphine injection. Or maybe Geir’s guilt is so great that he gave him twice the recommended dose.

Isak is high. Isak is baked. He is euphoric. And he can’t contain it.
I called your lab today
They were so weird about it
I reserved a parking spot
It was weird
Are you sure i can’t kidnap you?

Oh okay
What?

“Hello? Isak, are you okay?”

“Hi Even!” Isak exclaims then giggles into his free hand.

“What? Isak are you giggling?”

“No, shut up!”

“Are you sure you’re in a lab and not in some wild party? You call me drunk every day,” he hears Even chuckle.

“Not drunk! High!”


“Morphine.”

“Oh. I like a good morphine buzz.”

“I’m sure you do,” says Isak. He rolls onto his stomach in bed and lets his feet dangle in the air behind him. He feels… like a girl? “I feel like a girl.”

“What does that even mean?” Even laughs and it makes Isak want to laugh, too.

“I don’t know. I feel weird. Don’t ask me questions.”

“Why not? Cause you might answer them truthfully?”

“That’s a question. I said no questions.”

“Met anyone hot who is of age, yet?” Even teases him and Isak would shove him if he was near.

“Geir is not hot.”

“Geir? Who’s Geir?”
“The guy who gave me morphine,” Isak shrugs. “I think he likes me even if he’s rough with me during the experiments. He’s so nice to me even when I’m horrible.”

“You’re cheating on me with a Geir?” Even scoffs through the phone and Isak nearly falls off the bed.

“No! What are you talking about?!?” Isak yells, horrified, while Even’s laughter fills his ear and his brain. “I’m not—We’re not! You and I, we’re not—”

“Relax, Isak. I meant as a science partner, as someone you do experiments with. I know you’re not a homosexual.”

Shit.

Isak doesn’t think he’s ever laughed this much on the phone. Everything Even says is hilarious and important and colossal all at once. Every sound Even makes is committed to memory. Everything. And Isak feels as though he’s floating.

“How high are you right now?” Even asks later in the night.

“Extremely.”

“Define extremely.”

“Extremely as in I’ll have outrageous answers to every question you might ask me,” Isak blurts out.

“Did you like making out with me?”

“Fuck! I wasn’t ready yet. Give me time to get ready,” says Isak as he sits up in bed.

“Okay, are you ready now?”

“Yes.”

“Did you like making out with me?” Even asks again.

“You’re annoying,” Isak frowns.

“Yes, but did you?”

“Did you?”

“Extremely,” Even says, and there’s honey in his voice. “I would do it again.”

“Of course you would. Pfft. Next question.”

“What do you mean ‘pfft’? Also, you didn’t answer it.”

“Next question.”

Even sighs, sounds like he’s wracking his brain.

“What would you do if you could suddenly touch everyone? What do you want to do when you’re cured?”

“Sex. I want to have sex,” Isak blurts out, and he’s somehow on the floor now. Whatever.
“Oh wow,” Even coughs on the other end of the line. “This is an interesting development. I must say that I did not expect this.”

“Lots of very hot sex. Lots of it.”

“You’ve never had sex though. What if you don’t like it?”

“I will like it,” Isak replies like it’s a challenge.


“Why are you laughing?”

“Is it okay if I record this conversation? I don’t think you’ll believe me when I tell you.”

“What?”

“Nothing. Nothing,” Even laughs again. “So what besides sex do you want to try?”

“Blowjobs. Lots of blowjobs.”

“Oh my god!” Even yelps through the phone and Isak doesn’t understand but he laughs nonetheless.

“What?!”

“Isak, that’s so gay. That’s like very very homosexual.”

“No! Not if I’m the one getting the blowjobs!” Isak challenges him.

“It could still be if a guy is giving you the blowjob.”

“I, no! No, guys will not give me blowjobs. They’re not allowed to give me blowjobs!”


“Are you making a list?”

“Yes, for when you get out,” says Even. “Wanna add other things?”

Isak thinks. He’s on his back on the floor and he’s bizarrely content and relaxed.

“Holding hands,” he says after long thought. “I’ve always wanted to hold hands with someone.”

He’s probably imagining this, but he’s almost certain Even is smiling on the phone right now.

“Are guys out of the question for this one as well?”

Isak thinks about it. She wouldn’t mind that much. He doesn’t think she would strike him for holding hands with a guy. Probably not. She’ll yell but not hit. She won’t lock him up in a closet for that.

“No. It’s okay. I think it’s okay.”

They talk about what they will do when Even visits, and Isak tells him that he cannot touch him in front of others. He tells him that it will ruin his plans and Even promises that he won’t.

“What about when it’s just the two of us?” Even asks.
“I don’t know if they’ll let me be with you alone.”

“What if we find a way though? Can I hold your hand then?”

Isak flushes in the dark and it’s such a nice feeling.

“You can.”

“Who’s Even Bech Næsheim?” Carlsen asks him again over the next couple of days. She’s probably trying to determine what to do when he visits, and Isak has been burning and hurting on her table for hours now.

He’s at his breaking point and she knows it. She can see it on the monitor. They’re tearing him apart and not even Even’s scent is helping make this easier.

Geir must have known they were going to make everything ten times harder the night he gave him morphine.

“Who’s Even Bech Næsheim?”

“None of your business!” Isak bites through his teeth. He’s wearing three of his shirts under his gown, soaking all three.

“Okay. I guess I’ll have a little chat with him when he comes tomorrow,” Carlsen smiles.

“If you touch him, I will burn this whole fucking place down!”

Carlsen lowers her glasses on her nose. She looks surprised, taken aback. Isak wants to undo her bun with his own hands and scream in her face. His flesh no longer feels like his own. He’s on the verge of insanity.

“A very dear friend. Noted,” she says, then goes back to scribbling nonsense on her fake notebook.

“Don’t provoke her,” Geir says when it’s just the two of them and he’s placing cooling packs onto his skin. “Just say that he’s your friend. Don’t let your emotions get the best of you.”

“Fuck you! If you so much as breathe in Even’s direction, I will kill you!”

“Jesus, Isak,” Geir sighs, before getting up. He comes back with tissue and more cooling packs.

“You’re crying.”

He sits down and starts wiping Isak’s face like he’s not even there.

“Don’t touch me! I am not crying! I don’t cry!”

But he does and he is. Or at least his body is.

Why do people cry? Why do some cry while others don’t? Why are women more inclined to cry than men? What’s the difference between regular crying and emotional crying? Isak remembers spending an entire week looking into crying and the science behind it.

He knows that his tears are from the pain he’s been subjected to, but his hysteria is giving him reason to believe it might be something else as well.
“Isak, the damage done to your nerves could be irreversible. You need to tell me if we need to stop. You need to, okay?”

“Valtersen, you have a visitor,” says Sara, a staff member who’s just fetched him from the common area later in the evening.

“A visitor?”

“Yes, a young man is here to see you.”

Isak runs to the front desk without thinking. Of course Even would come a day early to surprise him. His bones are still hurting and his skin remains ablaze because he’s refused all kinds of painkillers after today’s horror session.

He runs and his body carries him to the main entrance in a blur.

Isak has no idea what to say or what to do, isn’t sure what he currently looks or smells like, but he doesn’t care. He runs.

And it’s only when he gets there that he realizes that if it were Even, he would have physically felt his presence. Of course.

He doesn’t even try to conceal his disappointment.

Arvid.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Isak frowns when they’ve found a table outside in the courtyard. It’s chilly considering he’s only wearing his hospital gown and two of Even’s t-shirts underneath, but it soothes him. His skin is still on fire.

“Funny cause I was just about to ask you the same question,” Arvid replies. He’s wearing a red sweater and dark jeans and he looks way too smug for Isak’s liking.

“What do you want?”

“I’m not here to give you shit for stabbing me in the back. Don’t worry.”

“Do I look like I worry about your feelings of betrayal, Arvid?”

“Cold,” Arvid winces. “I’d feel hurt, but looking at you right now, you do seem to have other things to worry about.”

“I don’t have all day,” Isak rolls his eyes. He doesn’t care if Arvid sees him at his lowest.

“No? What else do you have to do today if you don’t mind me asking.”

“Fuck you!” Isak barks in his face, his fists clenched.

“What are they doing to you in this place? You’re a mess. I like you better when you’re stone cold and calm and calculating.”

“No, I don’t think you do, Arvid,” says Isak. “I don’t think you like me when I rip you to shreds
using my words alone.”

“If by ripping me to shreds you mean psychoanalyzing me, then I’m happy to inform you that I won’t fall for that crap anymore. Psychoanalyze me all you want. I know what you’re made of now. I won’t fall for it.”

Isak sneers. He actually snorts. He likes this, finally having something to focus his energy and wrath on.

“Arvid, dear. I feel like there’s some sort of misunderstanding here. I wasn’t psychoanalyzing you. I never did. I apologize if that’s what you thought was happening.”

“Here we go again with your bullshit.”

“Psychoanalysis is a therapeutic technique whereby a professional in the field guides the patient through their unconscious mind, usually through questions or prompts, to help them uncover their deepest secrets and bring their problems and internal conflicts and turmoil to the surface to properly treat them and get over them,” Isak explains and his skin finally feels like his own again. This is his element. This is what he does.

“Valtersen—”

“You see, by saying that I was psychoanalyzing you, you’re assuming many things. One: that I give a shit about your problems and internal turmoil. I do not and I did not. I couldn’t care less about your daddy issues and your sick inferiority complex. Two: that I want to help you get better. I do not. I literally couldn’t give less shits about you. Three: that I have some sort of professional degree in Freudian psychology and years of experience. I might have read all of that sick fuck’s work, but no I do not.”

Isak takes a deep breath, then continues. “Now, back to what I was actually doing. I was throwing shit on the wall and hoping some of it would stick. I don’t know you inside out, Arvid. Haven’t put enough effort into knowing you because you’re not that interesting even if you sometimes think you are. But you know what? You’re so plain and predictable that even if I say the most random awful things, you’ll always find a way to make them about you and get offended. It’s manipulation 101. Say a bunch of crap, make it personal and targeted enough, add fancy words around it, make sure to detach yourself, and there you have it: a wonderful offense strategy that breaks your opponent’s self-esteem even further and has them screaming ‘they’re psychoanalyzing me, pfft, as if, what a bunch of crap’, while I laugh in my corner because: no dear, I am not psychoanalyzing you. I don’t care about you to waste that much time on you. You are nobody. I’m simply driving you up the wall because I can.”

Isak is heaving by the time he’s finished with his speech. It’s vile and it’s mean. And it’s probably unwarranted because Arvid has been nothing but supportive of him these past few months. But Isak is angry. Isak is tired. Isak is seeing red. And Arvid will get over it. He’s boring and plain like that.

“You’re fucking awful,” Arvid mutters under his breath. “I can’t believe I drove all the way here to hear this bullshit.”

“You’re welcome to leave.”

“Not before I say what I have to say.”

“What do you want?!” Isak glares at him, feeling self-conscious now that Arvid’s eyes are roaming his bruised body.
“They’re calling in witnesses for Even’s case, for the bottle smashing,” says Arvid.

“So?”

“I wasn’t there. In case the cops ask you, you say that I wasn’t there.”

“Why? Daddy’s gonna take your allowance?”

“Listen, you sick fuck!” Arvid jumps from his seat to get in his face. “I get that you’re angry! I get that everything sucks for you. I know this. I spent enough time with you to know that you hate everything! But that doesn’t give you the right to treat everyone like shit.”

“Aw. This is so sweet. I wonder why you didn’t think of this when you were bullying Even and every other person you didn’t quite like in school. Where was this empathy when you were giving me shit my first week? When you were making Even’s life a living hell. Huh?”

“Even?” Arvid huffs out a dry laugh. “So this is about Even? Is this why you hate me so much? Because I was once a little mean to your boyfriend?”

Isak seals his lips together. He cannot let Arvid know that this phases him. He cannot let his guard down.

“I don’t hate you. I don’t care enough about you to hate you,” says Isak. But Arvid doesn’t flinch. He’s smiling.

Fuck.

“So it is Even, huh,” Arvid laughs now. He clasps his hands together like he’s just had the most brilliant idea. “You really have no idea, do you?!”

Isak frowns. What is he talking about?

“Oh god! You probably don’t,” Arvid adds.

Isak’s fists are clenched and he knows better than to take the bait. He knows better than to bite when he’s invented this strategy. He knows better. But Arvid’s laugh is filling him with anxiety. And suddenly, every doubt he’s ever had about Even is back to the surface. Every bad thought. Every reason he’s had to mistrust him so far is back to screaming in his face.

“Do you like it when he touches you?”

Isak’s face flushes, and he’s now confused and angry and scared.

“I bet you do.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Isak hisses.

“You never wondered why he could touch you while all of us wail when you do so much as come near?”

No. shut up. No!

Isak doesn’t know what Arvid is about to say, but he doesn’t want to hear it. He is not prepared for any of this. He can’t bear another blow.

“You know nothing!” Isak challenges him.
“He’s bipolar.”

Isak lets out the breath that was stuck in his throat. He breathes so hard that he nearly feels like shouting. That’s it? That was it?

“I know,” Isak stares at him, unphased.

“You know?” Arvid tilts his head to the side.

“Yes, I know. He told me.”

“Then how come—” Arvid pauses. “Oh, he didn’t tell you everything I assume.”

“You do realize that being bipolar doesn’t make you immune to burns, right?” Isak rolls his eyes.

“He likes fire.”

Isak stares at Arvid. He stares at him hard, tries to read him. Fire. What does this have to do with him.

“He started a fire the year before you joined in his house. He wanted to be close to the flames, he told the firefighters. He burned his whole room and caused his parents severe financial damage. His parents separated as a result. His father couldn’t take it anymore and his mother could barely keep it together.”

Isak doesn’t want to listen to this. This is Even’s personal and private life. He doesn’t want to listen to his deepest secrets.


“Fuck you!” Arvid barks, finally cracks.

“Are you done now? I have some matters to attend to,” Isak says as he’s leaving his chair.

“Don’t you get it, you fucking lunatic?! Are you so far up your own ass and your pain that you don’t see anything else?”

“I’m gonna go have soup now. Soup is on the menu today,” Isak turns around and begins to walk away.

“You’re hurting him! You’re burning him! You have been the whole time! He just likes it.”

Isak stops walking.

He doesn’t turn around. He just stops walking while Arvid shoots daggers straight into his back.

“Even is a self-destructive mess. He missed class most of last year because he was in therapy for constantly harming himself. We were all instructed to treat him the same way we did before everything went to shit which is why I continued being an asshole when he came back, while some of his friends pretend nothing happened. He is sick and you are a symptom, an escape. You’re a kink. And everyone can see it but you!”

Isak can’t breathe, as if two hands have just locked around his throat and squeezed.

It’s bullshit. It’s not true. Keep walking. Isak’s brain instructs him. But his heart. His heart tells him to
remain there, to listen. And suddenly all of his insecurities are back to the surface to haunt him, to swallow him whole.

I hurt him? I've been hurting him?

“Ever wonder why Mutta and Mikael are so against you two? Why Mikael felt the need to join the cabin trip? Why Even had to go see a therapist after carrying you the day you fainted at school? Ever wonder why Even has to meet with the school counselor three times a week? Why he’s always so happy to help you and be around you even when he knew nothing about you? Ever wonder why he doesn’t hurt when you touch him?”

God, Isak can’t take this anymore. The world is spinning and his thoughts are a jumble.

“Stop talking!” he tells Arvid.

“You could probably tell that he was in pain. You’ve probably seen him wince once or twice, but you didn’t care, didn’t you? It felt so good to finally be able to touch someone, right? After all those years in seclusion. All those years, sitting there confused.”

“Shut up!”

“I read your file, Valtersen. I went so far as to dig up your old file. Your mom locked you up in a closet when you were twelve or thirteen during a mental breakdown, didn’t she? Fucked you up so bad that you came out burning everyone and everything when your dad finally found you. She said she was only trying to ‘fix’ you when the police interrogated her and your dad lied to protect her and said that you locked yourself there by accident. You're a pathetic fuck! It's the only reason I felt so compelled to look out for you because I pity you!”

Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! Isak wants to scream, to wail with both hands on his ears like a child. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. He can almost see the way light filtered through the little openings in the closet. He can almost recall the way it smelled in there.

But he doesn't scream. He doesn't cause a scene. He won't let Arvid see him break. He's broken enough.

"I'm gonna go have soup now before it gets cold," he tells Arvid. "Also I hope you know I'll make sure your dad gets fired for allowing you to have access to sealed information. I've been digging up dirt on your old man, and here you are offering it to me on a silver platter. I should probably thank you."

Arvid, behind him, stands with an open mouth, left aghast as if he wasn't expecting to explode in Isak's face in such a way, as if remorseful.

"Isak-"

"Enjoy your drive back."

Isak walks away silently until he's out of sight. He walks through the fields behind the garden and walks and walks until he finds a spot between the trees. Then he screams at the top of his lungs until someone comes to get him. Someone. Geir and another man. He burns both of them as they try to touch him.

He runs back to the building and into his room. And he bangs his head against his closed door like in the old days until he can no longer see, until darkness takes over and the voices in his head cease.
I’m not here. I’m not here. I’m not here. I’m not here. I’m not here. This isn’t real. This isn’t real. This isn’t real.

“I don’t think you should receive visitors today,” Geir tells him and there’s a thick bandage around his forearm where Isak grazed him. “I think you should rest. Your friends will understand. I’m sure.”

“No.”

I need to know. I need to talk to him. I need to see him. I need to know if I hurt him. I can’t stand it. I can’t.

Isak’s heart clenches in his chest just as the two hands find their way around his throat again. And it hurts. It hurts so much to see Even in the distance from the balcony in Carlsen’s office in his perfect plaid shirt and his perfect hair and his Ray Ban sunglasses and his dark skinny jeans. It hurts so much because Isak can see him. He can see him. But he cannot feel him.

It’s over. It’s broken. Their bond. Isak can’t breathe.

“Tell them I’m gone for the day. Tell them I’m not here,” Isak begs Geir. “Please! I promise you I will stop being a nightmare. I’m begging you!” He asks and his heart hurts and he can’t bear it. Even will believe it. He probably can’t feel him either. He will believe it.

I’ve been hurting him this whole time. This whole time!

Geir runs downstairs and Isak puts on his headphones and blasts ‘System of a Down’ until he can’t hear anything else, until he’s not here, he’s not here.

He waits for Geir to come back and tell him that they’re gone. He can’t even look out the window. He can’t do anything. So he waits.

The door opens and Isak turns around expecting Geir, but it’s him. It’s Even.

And Isak wants to scream because he’s in front of him but he cannot feel him. It’s like eating without tasting, or sniffing without smelling. It’s out of place.

And Even looks just as shaken too. He looks terrified too.

“What happened?! I can’t feel you. Why can’t I feel you?”

“I—”

Geir comes up then and Isak shakes his head to tell Even to keep his distance, their secret arrangement.

“Sorry,” Geir tells Isak.

“Why was this man trying to keep me from seeing you?” Even asks, and he’s frowning at Geir. He looks so much older like this, so much more confident, stronger. His voice is deep and his concern makes him look threatening. There’s no hint of his general goofiness in his demeanor.

“I have to go to a different lab for an emergency test,” Isak lies through his teeth. And he’s shaking but hopefully Even cannot see.
“What emergency test?”

“Even, I’m very sorry that this came up, and I’ll apologize to Mutta myself. But I have to go. You should go home.”

“Isak, what the hell is going on?!”

Every time he says his name, Isak feels the urge to scream.

“Mr. Valtersen has gone a very difficult test yesterday and we need to transfer him to a different facility to make sure there are no long term or irreversible effects down the road,” says Geir, his cool and calm finally coming in handy. He’s a good liar too. Isak wonders if it was a requirement for the job.

“Bullshit!” Even’s frown deepens as he takes a step forward toward Isak who recoils and puts his arms up. “Isak, talk to me.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Isak breathes through his nose. Even will not go away if Isak is mean or angry. Even knows him too well and he will only leave if he’s confident Isak is safe. “We messed up yesterday and my side effects are getting worse, so they’re taking me there to fix it. It’s in Trondheim at the university hospital. I was embarrassed about it which is why I told Geir to tell you both that I was already gone.”

Even stares at him hard and Isak feels himself melt on the spot.

“Are you sure?” he asks and takes another step forward.

*Please don’t touch me. Please don’t.*

“I promise.”

Even stops in front of him, and they’re now mere inches apart. Isak shakes his head *no*, tries to tell him with his eyes, begs him like he begged him on the phone a few days ago *“Don’t touch me. If they find out you can touch me, it could put you in a weird spot. Please don’t touch me.”*

But Even’s kind eyes say *“I don’t care.”*

And Isak watches his right hand come up to his face, and he doesn’t think anything has ever been this painful.

He feels it then, Even’s palm burning as it comes into contact with his cheek, Even jumping ever so slightly, Even wincing like he’s just been shocked with current. He sees it, feels it, hears it. Even’s hand is burning and yet there it is on Isak’s face, like everything is okay, like it’s a regular touch.

*No.*

*It can’t be true.*

Even smiles with tears in his eyes now. He is in undeniable pain. Isak knows how one looks when they’re concealing their pain. Even’s hand is burning, yet his touch is soft and tender.

“I will come back tomorrow,” Even says and it’s gentle, but his voice is strained.

.

Later when he’s gone, when Isak’s mind has stopped spiraling, when Even’s touch no longer lingers
on his cheek, Geir comes to find him in his room.

And Isak is devastated before he even tells him.

“We just had to take your friend to the hospital to treat his hand. Why did you let him touch you? Why did he do that? Why did he let you burn him?”


The following weeks are hell. Sartre said that ‘L’enfer, c’est les autres’, that hell is other people. But it’s not true. Hell is on his skin. Hell is within him. Hell is him. He is constantly burning. The new addition to his already damaged chest is alarming and debilitating.

Isak powers through because he can no longer feel much, because he’s stuck in limbo, because he has felt so much that he can no longer feel. He texts Even that he’s transferring to another location and won’t have his phone with him, then blocks his number.

The experiments all bleed into one another and Isak waits until his body breaks. He waits and he waits and he waits.

And then it happens. He’s taken to the nearest hospital, and the man his lawyer said would come is there when he wakes up. It all happens in a blink, really. Isak barely has time to process any of it.

A minor held in a clinical trial against his will. Extremely religious parents with a history of abuse and mental illness selling their son to a lab conducting painful experiments for money. Said son tortured in a lab to the point of losing consciousness.

It all goes according to plan. Isak stays with a female friend of the lawyer he approached before leaving Oslo, a sturdy man in his forties who works closely with a Children’s rights association. He sleeps for two days before catching a train back south.

His case is complicated but the judge doesn’t dwell on it. Isak is granted emancipation despite the lab protesting that he lied about the level of pain he could bear and was feeling. His mother locking him up in a closet in his early teens proved helpful too. Isak didn’t even have to testify. He didn’t have to do anything. Even poor Geir testified in his favor by saying that any child who feels the need to go this far just to escape his parents when he’ll be an adult in the next year anyway must be heard and set free.

Isak didn’t have to raise a finger. He just walked aimlessly with empty eyes and a broken heart while the adults took care of everything. The “adults”. Isak hates this word.

Isak knows that he will run into Even. He knows that he will run into someone who will tell Even that he’s back. He knows this, but he’s not ready to deal with it. He has barely come to terms with his newfound freedom, an odd term given how trapped he’s feeling right now.

He’s homeless, alone, hurt, and scared. He misses his little sister more than anything, and he’s afraid for her. He knows their parents would never do her any harm, but he’s afraid of what people might
assume now that he’s put his family through this mess. He calls her a few times and his heart shatters when she refuses to meet him. She needs some time. He thinks. This was arguably his biggest scheme to date, and he’d spent ages planning it.

But this scam had a different ending when he first started executing it. It had a happy ending. It involved smiles and laughter. It involved a pair of blue eyes, maybe. The crook of a long neck to recoil into. The promise of touches and caresses and scientific affection. Maybe.

Not this.

Emptiness.

Isak feels empty. It starts at the pit of his stomach, the gnawing feeling. And it evolves into aching despair that spreads to his heart and then his limbs. Isak is on his back watching the ceiling while the hole in his core widens, and it cannot be filled nor can it be contained. It consumes everything on its way, but only grows bigger and wider.

There is nothing but void within him at all times. And he doesn’t even care. He is hollow. But he does not care.

Isak is lost. He lives with a kind woman from the association that took his case and assumed guardianship over him, and he feels like a stray dog. He feels like he’s betrayed everyone he’s ever met, every soul he’s ever crossed paths with. He feels hated and despised, and spends his days reading complex philosophy books that help him focus on deciphering complicated riddles, so that he can ignore his cold and harsh reality.

He sees a therapist twice a week, a bland man who treats him like a fragile victim. And Isak can roll with that. He tells him what he wants to hear and leaves a few minutes before their time is up every time.

This time, however, his therapist suggests that he find somewhere new to live, somewhere with younger people, perhaps. He needs to start over, to find himself. Yada yada.

Isak ends up in a kollektiv. Sana said that she knew someone who needed a roommate and forgot to mention that it was Noora’s old apartment.

But Isak doesn’t mind. He’s stuck in limbo, the void in him now having engulfed him whole.

“Just don’t touch me,” he tells his new roommates.

“That’s what all the straight guys say at first,” Eskild, a flamboyant and irrationally happy young man, says to lighten up the mood.

Isak doesn’t flinch when he comes home to his new roommate Eskild getting pleasured orally by another man. He doesn’t react. He just continues walking to his room where he sleeps for the rest of the day.

He’s not offended when Linn, his other roommate, asks him if he’s depressed one night in front of their TV.

“Probably,” he tells her.

“Me too,” she replies.
He’s not angry when Eskild confronts him about it. “Feeling depressed and doing nothing about it is not cute, Isak. You need to go out there and seek some help. Linn is getting help. You should too.”

He’s not angry when Eskild keeps pressing or when he asks him why he cries sometimes in his room when he thinks everybody’s sleeping.

“Crying lubricates the eye and provides moisture that is necessary for eyesight. It also kills bacteria and removes toxins,” Isak shrugs with the plate of food he’s taking to his room. He should be embarrassed that Eskild has heard him cry when it got too much, but he isn’t. He couldn’t care less. “Emotional crying is also a healthy coping mechanism that allows you to release negative emotions and elevate your mood.”

“This science talk is very sexy, baby jesus. It would be even sexier if you left your room. Also your mood doesn’t seem too elevated right now, Isabell,” Eskild teases him, and once again, Isak cannot be bothered to be bothered.

“It’s elevated enough for me. I’ll be fine, Eskild. Just go have fun.”

“I’d cuddle you if you let me. I hope you know that, Isabell,” Eskild pouts.

“Trust me, you don’t want ugly burn scars ruining your chances with Grindr dudes.”

“I know a few people who wouldn’t mind ugly burn scars. Some people have a thing for pain, you know?”

And that hurts. Isak hasn’t felt pain there in his heart in a while. Yes. I know.

He runs into him at 7-eleven on Torggata. And he should have seen it coming as it’s right by Elvebakken.

Isak is buying Chips and Fanta dressed in twelve layers and he doesn’t notice him until he’s about to pay, until Even is staring at him so hard that his skin burns with it.

“You’re back.”

Isak leaves his items on the counter and runs out because he cannot bear it, the sight of him, the scent of him, him.

He’s not ready. He can’t.

Even catches up to him at the corner with Møllergata, and Isak stops before Even reaches for him and breaks his heart a second time.

“I looked for you everywhere!” Even pants because he ran. Because they both ran. "I called you a million times. I did everything!"

“I had a lot going on. I’m sorry.”

“Your sister said you filed for emancipation?! And Jonas has been keeping me updated on the case. I was worried sick until Sana told me you were living with a friend of hers.”

“Even, I should get back—”

“What did they do to you back there?! I couldn’t feel you and they’re saying you collapsed and, and
“And I burned the skin right off your palm.”

Even stills, and Isak finally takes him in. He’s wearing a gray winter jacket and several layers, and his hair is blowing softly in the wind. There’s a gentle flush on his cheeks. And for the first time in weeks, months, his heart moves inside his chest.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” Even mumbles.

“Why would you let me burn you, Even?! Why?!” And it’s suddenly flowing out of him, the rage, the sadness. It stings so bad, Isak wants to go back to not feeling anything.

“I didn’t want to upset you.”

Did you like it? Isak wants to ask. He wants to lay it all bare right here in the middle of the street. He wants to finally explode and let it all out. Perhaps it would prove more cathartic than those pathetic attempts at crying in his room late at night. Perhaps.

“I can’t believe I can no longer feel you,” says Even, adding another tear to whatever remains of him. "I feel so empty."

“How do you think I feel?” Isak blurts out, defeated.

They stand there at the intersection, both of them breathing heavily. And Isak is hit by how much he misses him, by how much he wishes he could reach out and touch him.

Touch him. Isak wonders how many of Even’s bruises and scars he’s caused. He wonders how much of it was real and how much of it was Even thinking he wanted him. It’s all chemicals at the end of the day. Even is driven by his blind need for pleasure through pain, by his fascination with fire. And he might think it’s affection. But Isak knows better.

“Perhaps, it’s better this way,” Even speaks carefully, his blue eyes boring into Isak’s hollow ones, and Isak has to hold onto the nearest pole to tether himself. “Perhaps, we can stop pretending now.”


“Perhaps, you can be with me for me now,” Even explains. “Perhaps, you can be with me because you want to, not because we share an invisible bond that physically draws us to each other against our will. Perhaps we can come together because we want to now, not because we need to.”

Sweet gullible Even.

“I will never forgive myself if I burn you again,” Isak admits, taking a step back whenever Even takes one forward.

“You won’t burn me.”

Isak remembers Even saying these same words to him before. You won’t burn me. What a liar. What a bunch of lies. “I will!”

“You won’t. We’ll fix this. We will find a way. I know it!”

You will not trick me into hurting you. You will not!

“I don’t think so, Even.”
Eskild finds them staring at each other at the corner right after that and Isak is too shaken to even address him or the fact that he’s referred to him as ‘baby jesus’ in front of Even.

He watches them greet each other, apparently having previously met at some party, and Isak remembers that Sana is Elias’ sister. He grits his teeth when they shake hands. He clenches his fists when they smile at each other.

It’s so easy. Isak wants easy. Isak doesn’t want this. This endless suffering. He doesn’t want any of it.

“You should come over some time. We live on Deichman’s Gate,” Eskild giggles, being his over the top self.

“So close to Bakka.”

“Yes. You should stop by after school for a snack sometime,” Eskild clasps his hands together and lets out another laugh.

Isak starts walking away.

“What the hell was that?!?” Eskild exclaims once he catches up to him. “How do you know Even? What was all that sexual tension back there?”

“Nothing. He’s nobody,” Isak tells and it’s firm and final.

Later when he’s in his room and it’s dark and cold and he’s alone, Isak tries to cry. He tries to follow his therapists advice and to release the negative emotions. But the tears won’t come out. The emptiness persists. The emptiness remains.

When he wakes up, Eskild is on the floor beside him on a few crumpled sheets. And Isak hasn’t felt this tethered to the world in a while.

A support system. Someone to make you want to feel better.

“I do this with Linn sometimes,” he tells him in the morning and Isak is overwhelmed with the urge to hug him.

He remembers Even’s mother hugging him without burning, and he wonders if Eskild could ever do the same.

Even sends him messages with Eskild until he unblocks him and asks him to stop.

Science Partner 3

20:17

We can’t make progress if we don’t meet
Experiment 34. Are you up for it?
Even, please stop this.

Punctuation. Scary

I know you’re only trying to help but it’s pointless now
We no longer share a connection
There’s no use doing experiments or whatever

We can restore it
Just meet me

Please stop bothering my roommate
Please Even
It’s over.

Why do you get to decide that?
I haven’t slept since you ran off
I was worried sick about you
i did everything i could

maybe it’s time you get over your savior complex
you can stop worrying now

It’s Friday and Eskild’s having a little get together at Kollektivet. Nothing harmless. Just a few friends, each louder than the next. They’ve all been briefed and tasked with leaving Isak alone. And they all wave at him from a distance when he comes out to say hi.

They’re dressed in colors and flashy outfits. And one of the men is wearing a skirt and Isak has to blink to make sure they’re indeed a man. Perhaps they’re a woman. Isak isn’t sure. He feels weird for assuming.

Ever since moving in with Eskild, Isak has been more sensible about these things, more open-minded. He flinches less at mentions of Kim Kardashian and “sucking sock”. He doesn’t care half as much, but then again perhaps it’s because he’s feeling hollow.

Isak talks to the person in the skirt and he turns out to be a he.

“You’re cute,” he tells him and Isak’s face flushes like a fuse. He rolls against the wall until his breathing evens out. No one has ever approached him like, apart from Even.

Even.

His heart hurts again.

It was never affection. It was never “love” as Eskild calls it—he dragged some vague information out of Isak after a bottle of wine.

But how come his heart clenches every time he thinks of him.

It takes all of Isak’s courage to utter the words. “Thank you.” He is filled with shame, but shame is easier to bear when around people who have gotten rid of theirs. “Thank you so much.”

Isak sits on the window sill with his beer and watches two men kiss on his couch. They’re kissing
passionately, and there’s so much tongue and touching that Isak is filled with shame and curiosity and fascination all the same.

He watches them for a good minute until Eskild tells him that it’s a little bit weird.

“You’ve never seen two guys get it on or what?!”

Isak shakes his head. “Nope.”

He drinks until the prospect of these two men getting undressed and literally taking each other on his couch no longer repulses him. He would gladly offer them his room if they wished.

He’s so deep in thought that he doesn’t notice Eskild placing his hand on his shoulder for a moment until he’s gone.

*What was that?! Did he just touch me?!!*

Eskild comes back out of the kitchen and he seems fine.

*I guess not.*

Later in the night, when the two men’s kisses turn soft and loving again, Isak is filled with sadness and loneliness. He expected them to find another partner through the night, but they didn’t. They stayed together all night and they’re now gently nipping at each other’s lips.

Isak is jealous and alone and confused.

He looks out the window and watches the rain pour out of the pitch dark sky. He watches it pour and closes his eyes to hear it reach the ground.

*Somebody to kiss on a rainy night.*

Isak thinks about Even. And the thought doesn’t have time to become debilitating for his phone buzzes almost instantly.

---

**Science Partner 3**

**00:18**

Come outside

What

I’m outside your new place

? 

Come outside Isak

Please

It’s pouring

Please
The truth is that Isak left the apartment as soon as he read the first text. He ran down the stairs as he typed out his responses. He ran so fast that he almost fell. He ran barefoot and he didn’t care. The dimmed music from their apartment is playing in the distance and the heavy rainfall seems to land against his heart, for it’s the one sound he hears.

He runs and he runs, and he remembers running to Even the day they kissed, the day they finally kissed. Isak had never wanted anything more, ever. He remembers how it felt to kiss him and be kissed by him. Isak remembers as his heart awakes from its coma, resurges from limbo.

Even is waiting outside and he’s soaking wet. He’s dripping, his hair a mess on his face. This is what Isak used to call angry rain when he was a child. Angry rain coming down the sky for when God is angry.

God must be very angry tonight.

Isak runs downstairs, but he stops when he sees him. Why did I run?

“You ran,” says Even, walking a bit closer so that they can hear each other.

“I did,” says Isak. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s raining.”

“So?”

“Remember our first attempted experiment?” Even asks and they’re both so drenched now, they might as well be under a showerhead. God must be very angry tonight.

“No.”

Even moves closer and Isak pulls back. “If you touch me, I will scream.”

“Will you?”

Isak is not sure he will. He’s had enough to drink. He’s drunk a lot tonight.

“Eskild says you can’t sleep,” says Even.

“Eskild needs to mind his own business.”

“He says you cry a lot.”

Isak flinches back again. The look on Even’s face is not exactly pity, but it’s something close. It burns. It burns so much. I don’t cry. But I want to. I want to cry so bad.

“I don’t,” Isak tries, but it’s not convincing.

And then Even is walking right into him and Isak steps back until his back hits the wall.

It’s still raining around them, they’re still drenched, they’re still getting sick tomorrow. Both of them. Isak steps back but he cannot push him away. He doesn’t want to.

“You’re so sad,” Even says like it’s breaking his heart. “Baby, why are you so sad?”

*Baby.* Isak probably cracks right then and there. *Even after everything?* He wants to ask.
“I don’t want to hurt you. I’m so sick of hurting you,” Isak sighs, and it’s such an exhausted sigh.

“You won’t. Trust me.”

Isak’s heart beats in his throat and he reminisces Carlsen’s machines and Geir’s dexterous hands. Perhaps, they’d know what to do with him right now, a jumble of emotions and nerves.

**Trust me.**

Isak trusts him like Even’s always trusted him.

**Trust me.**

Even reaches between them and grabs his hand.

*Oh.*

His eyes fly open and Even’s are kind and happy.

“What are you doing?!” Isak panics.

“Holding your hand.”

“Even!”

Even laces their fingers together like they do in his dreams, the ones he cannot control and that leave him filled with shame, but content and fulfilled all the same, the ones where he’s not scared and filled with hate, the ones where he knows nothing about chemicals and philosophical concepts and everything about love and happiness.

Even laces their fingers together until something breaks within him, until he stops fighting it and lets his fingers close around Even’s knuckles. And perhaps another Isak would take what he needs and ignore the pain he’s spreading, but not him. Not anymore.

“Am I hurting you? Even, tell me the truth!”

“No,” Even smiles, squeezes Isak’s hand and runs his thumb over the back of it. “It’s raining. Fire does not burn in water. Basic chemistry.”

Isak jumps into his arms, hugs him until his bones ache with it, until he is stripped of his pain and his shame, until all he has left is his soaring broken heart.

*Why are you so sad?* Because I’m heartbroken.

Even lifts him then, both arms strong around his waist, and Isak didn’t realize that he’s grown these past few months until now, because Even doesn’t feel as big as before.

Still, Even crowds him against the wall, and Isak clings. He clings with everything he has because these last few months have been so hard. Because his body is recuperating, but he’s not sure his mind or heart ever will. Because he is homeless, family-less, and now simply less. Because this is the only form of comfort he’s had and will ever have. Because who knows when it will rain this heavily again? Who knows when God will get this angry again?

His head finds the crook of Even’s neck and hides there, where he is safest, where he is wholest.

“Why did you let me burn you, Even? Why?”
“Because you said you would die if you could no longer touch me.”

And it’s not love. It never was and it never will be.

It’s science. It’s chemicals. It’s sociology. It’s a neurochemical and sociocultural con job. It’s Even’s savior complex and it's Isak’s desperate need for touch. None of this is real.

It’s not love. It can’t be.

But what do you call it then,
When someone loves even the most broken and shameful part of you.
If not love, what do you call it then?
If not love.

Chapter End Notes

tw: self-loathing; mentions of self-harm; mentions of difficult childhood; confinement; internalized homophobia; depressive thoughts

Their bond is broken because Isak's heart is broken.

Even is not using Isak to harm himself and he's in a healthy place in his body and mind thanks to his mother and support system. Arvid was reaching and lashed out at Isak because he kept hurting him. this is in no way romanticization of SH in any way. this is Isak turning his deepest fear and insecurity into a real-life nightmare through the magic of assumption and misunderstanding, things that happen in real life a lot.

they'll work on 'finding a way' the way Even said. they'll work on 'making it rain hard' until better solutions show themselves.

thank you for reading and waiting and commenting. you guys are amazing <3 do you think they'll ever get to that mysterious list? wink wink

As always, leave a comment if you felt something, anything. love you thank you for making me smile with your words <333
Philosophy of Touch

Chapter Summary

“My senses are all screwed. I feel like I’m staring into the sun when you touch me.”
“That’s romantic,” Even chuckles.
“Shut up. I’m serious.”

ft Even coping, ESKILD, Even’s new "friend”, swimming, a shower, a sushi date, towels, Julie and her candles, Isak and Even on the floor talking about philosophy and the universe, hand holding, and very homosexual activities.

Chapter Notes

hii. sorry for the wait. more things were supposed to happen in this chapter but i got to 15K and it's 4am so i split it.
hope u like it.
Even's POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I wasn’t always like this. I wasn’t always dumb and nice or whatever you just called me.”

“Pushover is the word I used,” Adrian corrects him with an amused yet stolid smile. He’s drawing precise circles into his gin and tonic with a thin purple straw. It makes Even wince. But he doesn’t dwell on it. He’s far too high and drunk to dwell on anything.

“I’m not. I’m not a pushover. I’m just. I just stopped. You know? I mean why do people assume you’re a pushover when you’re nice? I’ll never understand that. And the funny thing is people who don’t know me think I’m a pushover, but people who do know me think I’m overcompensating or like focusing my energy on forgetting everything that happened before. Like I’m trying really hard to peel off my own skin and wear a new one. You know? I don’t get that. Like I love my friends but he was right, you know? Isak, he was right. Every time he gave me shit about not showing my true feelings around my friends. He was right about everything. Like I just came out to my mom and I thought I could tell the guys but it’s so fucking hard? Because what if one of them gets weird or what if they keep saying homophobic shit without meaning to and it just starts hurting for real then because they’ll know? Isak was so right. And I hate how I can only see it now that I can’t see him. I mean, he was always a dick about it, but in many ways I felt like he knew me better than anyone? I don’t know. I’m just. I don’t know. I’m so fucking drunk right now.”

Adrian walks with him, one hand in the pocket of his mustard jacket while the other occasionally brings a lighter to the the cigarette that keeps dimming between his lips. And Even is drunk. He hasn’t felt this drunk in a while.
Even will never try what Adrian calls ‘girly’ drinks again. He’s only had five and here he is, tripping over his own feet with emotions overflowing and desperately trying to burst out of him. He can’t recall being this out of control since he began his last treatment. He can’t recall his heart feeling this swollen since the night Mikael broke it.

“You okay there, buddy?” Adrian asks, and Even feels his hand on his shoulder. It’s smaller than Isak’s hand.

Adrian is older, more confident, but he’s shorter than Isak. He has trimmed dark hair and brown eyes, and Even isn’t sure if his facial muscles limit his emotional range or if it’s the opposite. His mannerisms are mostly shrugs, subtle sighs, and blank stares. Everything about Adrian screams surliness and boredom. He reminds Even of Isak in a way, but without the colors. Without the red in his cheeks and the green in his eyes and the gold in his hair.

“I fucking miss him.” Even sighs loudly because he’s tired.

He closes his eyes, but the world is still spinning, spinning, spinning. His palm still hurts from the burn back at Isak’s lab, but the anguish of not knowing where he is or why he won’t talk to him somehow stings more.

“The whole purpose of this Guys Night thing is to help you get over this Isak dude, not make you miss him more.” Adrian says in that unbothered tone of his.

“I don’t even know if there’s anything to get over. I don’t know what we were.”

“It ended. It shouldn’t matter at this point.”

Even kisses Adrian under a streetlamp by the corner around his mother’s apartment. And he wonders if this is his brain’s standard response to anguish and alcohol, kissing the first boy who’s just there and who happens to say something comforting.

He’s not sure when the kiss ends but he apologizes as soon as he can see again, and Adrian gives him that same detached and bored smile.

“Get some sleep, Even. I like my men sober.”

Even met Adrian at a party. He was leaving Isak yet another useless voicemail that would remain unanswered when the older boy found him in the backyard. They chatted over joints for a while, then Adrian somehow took it upon himself to cheer Even up and help him find “another boy” to cure his heartbreak.

“I’m not heartbroken. I’m just worried and angry.”

“About your ‘science partner’ skipping town?” Adrian snorted. Even remembers him snorting so distinctly.

“It’s complicated.”

“But you miss him.”

“I do.”

“Then it’s heartbreak,” Adrian concluded. “And we need to find you a boy as soon as possible.”
Even explained that he liked boys and girls, but Adrian insisted that only a boy would help him get over a boy.

They had an intense debate around that which turned into Even haranguing him about gender roles and sexuality and stereotypes at four in the morning over terrible pizza.

Which then turned into a friendship. Because when the sun rose, Even realized that he didn’t even “come out” to Adrian, that it was the easiest conversation he’d ever had.

So he still sees him. They’re friends. Even talks about Isak and his efforts to find him and get information on his whereabouts and Adrian nods, bored.

But Even kissed him during their “Guys Night Out” after drowning in five or six “girly” drinks. And it could be weird. Of course it doesn’t have to, but it could be.

He doesn’t have anyone to talk to, so he figures he’ll deal with it when the time comes.

But time stretches, and days turn into weeks which turn into months. And he can’t find Isak. He doesn’t know when he will return or if he ever will. He knows that he filed for emancipation and he even mustered up the courage to stop by Isak’s parents’ house to speak with Lea who was burning with resentment and rage.

“How could he do this to me? After everything I did for him? How could he leave me and destroy our family like this? How could he turn our parents into abusive monsters in the eyes of the law? How could he lie like this?”

Even still remembers Lea’s eyes tearing up around the corners while she spewed things she did not mean about her older brother, blinded by rage and hurt. He remembers feeling relieved upon realizing that their parents did not hurt her too, at least judging by how she believed that Isak was lying. He remembers wondering why it never occurred to him to question Isak’s claims, how he knew it in his heart that he was telling the truth even though Isak never shared anything with him.

Even tries to find him, to send messages through Jonas or Sana, but they don’t have details either, gathering most of the information in bits and pieces from their own parents.

Even is a little bit hopeless. He wants to help but he doesn’t know how. He’s not sure Isak wants his help in the first place, but he feels like he owes it to him to sit and mope and wait.

“Will you wait for me?”

“I will wait for you.”

But for how long?

Even can’t afford to drink and smoke every night to feel better and get rid of that gnawing feeling. He can no longer afford to stare at the series of unanswered texts and phone calls, hoping that Isak will change his mind. And every time his eyes open in the morning, his remaining self-preservation instincts whisper to him that he needs to start moving on. This is his last year of high school and he cannot afford to mess it up again.

“Did you dream of him last night?” Adrian asks him at a coffee shop before he needs to head for class. And Even realizes that he didn’t. He did not dream of Isak.

“No.”
Adrian kisses him and Even, hollow and empty inside, lets him.

“Wanna hang out today? After you leave school?”

“Sure,” Even nods, numb.

He does not feel a damn thing. Kissing Isak felt like firework were being lit inside his brain.

This felt like being drowned in nothingness.

.

Even does not meet Adrian after school because he runs into Isak at the 7-Eleven on Torggata.

And the emotions that wash over him, he does not understand.

Isak is back. Even is relieved.

Isak is standing in front of him he does not feel him. Even is scared.

Isak never returned any of his calls or bothered to tell him that he's back. Even is hurt.

Isak runs away and he has to chase him. Even is angry.

Isak is taller but frail and skinny and sallow. Even is heartbroken.

He does not know which emotion to focus on, which one to start with. He wants to be angry but he can’t, for worry takes over as soon as Isak opens his mouth.

“Why did you let me burn you, Even?!”

The rawness in Isak’s voice does not belong to a person who doesn’t care. Isak cares. He is shaking. His eyes are rimmed with tears he's not aware of. Even is floored.

Who is this boy? Why does he look so broken? Why is he out of breath after climbing one short hill? Why was he buying so much comfort food at the store? What is he doing around Grünerløkka?

“Maybe it’s better this way. Maybe we can stop pretending now.” Even tells him the words he’s been rehearsing in his head this entire time.

Because they’re true. Because Even does not care about Adrian or anyone else for that matter. Because Even hasn’t been able to sleep without dreaming of him for months now.

Isak walks away when Eskild joins in, but Even finally feels blood flowing through his veins again.

This is good. He focuses on the good.

Isak is back.

.

“You’re dipping today again?” Adrian asks with a cigarette between his lips. He’s wearing a black leather jacket, and he’s just stopped by the KB where Even started a side job.

“Isak is back,” Even explains.

“Oh.”
“Yeah.”

“So, you two are like a thing now?”

“No. He won’t really talk to me,” says Even, and he knows that it’s not fair to rub it in Adrian’s face, but he doubts that he bears any feelings for him anyway. They only ever meet to commiserate over exes and, in Even’s case, ex-science partners. “I can text him now though and I found out that he lives with Eskild.”

“Eskild? My friend Eskild?”

Even nods. He met Adrian the same night he met Eskild.

“This Isak kid is stealing everyone away from me,” Adrian laughs.

Even laughs, too.

Even tries but Isak shuts him down every single time. And he grows frustrated and irascible until Eskild messages him directly and asks him if he can help.

---

**Eskild**

Help how?

I don’t know
Adrian said Isak and you have ‘history’
You could come over if you want?
Force him out of his room?

He won’t even return my texts

Which is why i was thinking physical confrontation in a confined space would work like magic
Like in the hot pornos minus the anal sex of course

... I don’t want to upset him

You won’t

I don’t know how i could help him
He made it very clear that he wants me to leave him alone

He doesn’t sleep
He doesn’t eat
He cries at night
He’s breaking my gay heart
I don’t know what happened to him before all this but he needs someone
and I feel like you could be that someone?
I’ve never seen him exhibit as many emotions as when i interrupted your moment the other day
Eskild’s messages make Even fight back tears. The fact that a perfect stranger can see how much pain Isak is in when he used to be able to conceal it so easily breaks Even’s heart. The image of Isak crying himself to sleep in his room late at night brands itself into his brain, never leaving his thoughts.

*How do I help you heal your heart?*

“It’s raining cats and dogs,” Adrian observes, one cigarette between his lips as always. He stopped by and Even didn’t have the heart to kick him out.

*Friends. We’re just friends.*

“It hasn’t rained in a while,” says Even, feeling like he has to contribute to the plain conversation. Adrian brought weed. It’s the least he could do.

“Lighting a cigarette on my way back is gonna be bitch.”

“Yeah, a bitch.”

Even sits up all of a sudden.

The rain.

Of course. You can’t light a cigarette in the rain. You can’t start a fire under the rain.

Even spits out an apology and runs out.

It’s pouring.

Even has been thinking of ways to get Isak to see him for days now. He can’t recall being this determined for anything, ever.

White shards crack the sky open until it weeps, and weeps, and weeps and Even feels his chest slice open, too.

*The rain. He can’t possibly burn me if we’re soaked.*

Isak runs to him. Isak always runs in moments like these and Even wonders why, why, why. If Isak couldn’t care less about him, how come he runs to him every single time? How come his body carries him as fast as it can to him, to Even, if it doesn’t want anything to do with him.

Isak is barefoot. He’s in a t-shirt. He looks lovely. And Even aches with how much he misses him, misses feeling him, touching him. It feels like he’s lost a sense.

Even grabs Isak’s hand, and laces their fingers together. He remembers Isak’s wish to hold hands over the phone, how it was his only true wish. He remembers how serious Isak sounded when he told him that he couldn’t bear the thought of never touching him again. Even remembers.

Isak is shaking but Even isn’t sure it’s from the cold. His brows are furrowed, his feet bare, his chest heaving. He’s pushing him away with his words, but his body keeps leaning toward him, like a magnet yearning for metal.

And it’s raining so hard Even can barely think.
“Am I hurting you? Even, tell me the truth!”

It sounds like the most important question in the world, like everything else can wait until Even answers it, like Isak won’t budge, won’t do whatever he’s about to do until he has his answer. Even feels the weight of the question but does not understand it.

“No. It’s raining. Fire does not burn in water.”

The shock of the embrace almost makes Even lose his balance, for Isak jumps into his arms with so much force that air is knocked right out of his lungs.

It’s a strong hold. The strongest hold. It’s the hold of a soul that does not get to hold.

And Even does not understand it. The irrational tenderness he bears for this complicated boy who constantly slices into his heart, who constantly makes his blood boil and his skin crawl. Even does not understand it. But he holds him back.

Isak is shaking in his embrace and he’s taller now. He’s almost Even’s height but his waist feels slimmer, he feels frail and fragile, like he’ll bend and break if Even holds him any tighter. And for a moment, it feels as though they’ve gotten their bond back. Just for a moment.

Because Isak clings. He clings so hard like all those times he claimed that he didn’t have a choice because of their bond. Because his body couldn’t not cling.

And it’s a hard embrace, but it’s still tender. Isak’s face is in Even’s neck and his fingers are running up and down his back like he’s making sure he’s here with him.

“Why did you let me burn you, Even? Why?”

That same question. Even feels something stir within him because the question bears so much weight from the way Isak is asking it alone. Even wonders if Isak thought he’s been burning him all along. Even wonders.

Don’t you remember?

“Because you said you would die if you could no longer touch me.”

Isak stills in his arms. Like he’s processing the words. And it’s true that he said them in a hazy state on the phone. Perhaps he doesn’t remember.

“I couldn’t bear it. I couldn’t feel you and they wouldn’t let me see you and you sounded in so much pain on the phone. I didn’t want you thinking that you burned me now. I couldn’t bear the thought of making you even more sad. I didn’t think. I’m so sorry. I just ended up making everything worse as always.”

It’s raining so hard that Even has to shout his speech. He shouts it until he feels his throat burning. And Isak is there listening with big doe eyes, wet curls framing his face, and an expression Even cannot read.

Everything feels bigger, heavier, more significant. The concrete is somewhat harder under his feet and he wonders how Isak feels, barefoot and in such thin clothing.

He wonders what Isak is about to do, if he’s about to snap out of his hazy state now that they’ve hugged it out, now that he’s gotten some human contact and proven one of his longest standing theories. He wonders if Isak is about to push him away and go seek comfort in someone else’s arms
now that he knows for a fact that he does not burn people in the rain. He wonders if Isak will run to Jonas after this, his first love, his only love, and ask for comfort.

Even’s heart shrinks in his chest at the thought and he suddenly cannot stand it. Not having Isak’s undivided attention, no longer being an exception, his exception. He cannot bear it.

*Are you done with me now? Are you really done with me now?*

Isak unhooks his arms from around his neck, the loss of contact burning through Even.

And Even waits, waits for the philosophical speech and the looming rejection.

But Isak does not push him away. He does not speak a word. He loops his arms around Even’s waist and pulls him closer, so much closer, their fronts now flushed together, chest to chest, stomach to stomach. He can feel Isak’s heartbeat. He can feel all of him.

Even is breathless by the time Isak rests his head on Even’s shoulder, turning his head to the side so that he’s cuddled up to his chest, squeezing around his middle and just burrowing into him.

“Isak-” Even breathes because he knows he’s blushing under the rain now, the gesture too tender, too intimate, too sweet.

They’ve never held each other like this, outside, in the rain, for everyone to see. Isak has never latched onto him this gently, this intimately. It’s a tender embrace, unhurried, unrehearsed yet feeling like a habit. Isak feels at peace in his arms, happy, content, relieved.

It’s not desperate. It stems out of need, but not out of despair. Isak is hugging him like it’s healing him, like he’s intending to hug him again, and again, and again later. He’s holding him like it’s not the last time.

And Even holds him back, feeling something within him untwine, the knot that’s been there since Isak stopped responding, maybe. He hugs him and Isak hugs him back until they’re rocking in each other’s arms, eyes closed, muscles relaxed, arms gripping the other. Isak cuddles up to his chest and Even presses phantom kisses to his wet hair because he can’t help it, not when Isak is being this soft and sweet.

“I missed you so much.”

Even thinks he said the words, but it’s not until Eskild finds them outside in each other’s arms in the pouring rain that Even realizes that it was Isak who said them.

“What on Earth are you two doing?!” Eskild yells from underneath the door frame of their apartment building, making Even jump away from Isak immediately.

But Isak clings, his body refusing to let go.

“Are you trying to catch the flu?! Isak, are you barefoot?! Who is that?! Are you making out with someone? What?!”

That seems to snap Isak out of his cuddly state for he almost shoves Even away, making him trip in the process.

“Is that Even?!”

Isak straightens his clothes and takes a deep breath before crossing the street to get to Eskild. Even is
not sure what to do so he follows, flustered and wet and happy and confused.

“Hi Eskild. Good to see you again,” he grins, then watches Isak run the back of his hand under his nose nervously, like he’s plotting how to explain this situation.

“What were you doing in there? Were you hugging?” Eskild asks with an exaggerated shriek, his mouth hanging dramatically open.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Isak says, pushing past him to get inside the building. “I would burn him.”

Right. It’s not public knowledge.

“Are you sure, Isabell? Cause I’m pretty sure I just saw you two-”

“Eskild, you’re clearly drunk. I wouldn't trust my eyesight if I were you.”

Eskild holds both hands up as if to surrender, then holds the door for Even to step inside as well.

“Uh, I should probably go home,” he says hesitantly, cheeks probably flushed too because his heart is on fire. He’s not sure how Isak feels right now and he doesn’t wish to intrude in his new home.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Isak says calmly once inside, now squeezing his shirt, twisting it around the ends, and kneading it to dry it. “You’re gonna get sick. You should at least change to dry clothes and take an umbrella.”

“I’ll be fine-”

“Even, don’t be weird,” Isak adds, his unbothered look back on his lovely face. He’s drying his hair now and his feet are bare and dirty from all the soil on the ground.

Even comes up to Kollektivet and finds a dying party taking place in the living room. It looks like Eskild’s thrown it and Even wonders why Adrian wasn’t invited.

“A small get together,” Eskild explains. “For the raging queens. Adrian still passes for a hetero. No offense.”

“None taken,” Even laughs. “I’m pan.”

“Oh. Lovely,” Eskild smiles, cupping his cheeks with one hand. “Single? Taken?”

“Eskild!” Isak groans. He has a white towel wrapped around his hair now and he’s wearing sweatpants and a white Simpsons shirt. “Leave Even alone.”

“Taken. Got it.”

“Piss off!” Isak rolls his eyes, but his cheeks are pink and he looks so cute like this, so so cute, Even wants to cuddle him.

He hands Even a large blue towel, sweatpants, and a t-shirt with Jesus on it. He’s blushing abnormally, like those days at school when Even used to watch him run from one class to another in dozens of layers. But his face remains unphased, the way he carries himself stolid.

“You should take a warm shower then put these on,” Isak adds and he won’t lock eyes with Even.
“I don’t need to.”

“But you should. You need to raise your body temperature after standing in the rain for so long. When you’re cold, your enzymes can’t do their job and your immune system is rendered useless, making you vulnerable to all sorts of viruses carried through raindrops. You can’t afford to be freezing right now.”

Even watches him, endeared and feeling fond, so fond. He’s missed all of his science gibberish. He wants to add that he’s burning up after cuddling him for so long, but he doesn’t.

“Okay,” Even replies and he’s grinning because he can’t help it.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Whatever you want.”

Isak looks away and Even can tell that he’s trying to hide how he feels. Even knows it. His body is buzzing with warmth, its fire so soothing and comforting. Even wishes he could wrap his arms around him from behind. Even wishes for a lot of things.

Even takes a quick shower and finds Isak waiting for him in the hallway with an umbrella. He’s no longer wearing the towel around his head, but his hair is still damp, his curls still wet. He looks so good.

“Do you feel warmer now?” Isak asks, and Even realizes that he doesn’t want to go home tonight. He doesn’t want to leave him. He doesn’t want to be apart from him now that he finally gets to be near him again.


“Uh. You’re welcome.”

Isak looks at his own feet and Even can feel his discomfort, his inner turmoil.

“I’ll show myself out.”

“I can walk you outside,” Isak blurts out like it just slipped.

“You should stay,” Even tells him and they’re almost whispering because Eskild and his friends are eavesdropping from the living room.

He watches Isak struggle before him, like he wants to say something but is afraid of regretting it. Even wonders if he also feels this, this overwhelming need to stay together even without their bond.

“I need some fresh air, anyway. It’s no big deal,” Isak mumbles under his breath because he can probably tell that it’s not convincing. He sounds embarrassed.

“Isak,” Even whispers, leaning closer until he can feel the warmth Isak’s body is exuding. “If you come with me outside, we might end up getting wet again and then both our enzymes will stop working.”

Isak flushes and takes a step back and Even wants to nuzzle his nose against his cheek.

“Just for a moment,” Isak pleads, and it breaks Even’s heart that Isak has to resort to sounding so
vulnerable to keep him. “Just wait five minutes and then go?”

Even waits five minutes. Isak shows him his room while he hovers behind. It’s very plain with a mattress hoisted on a box spring. The bedding is blue and gray and Isak’s walls are white and bare. He would have expected posters of his favorite bands or philosophers or a bookshelf, but there’s nothing but gray curtains to break the white on the walls.

“I haven’t had time to decorate or anything,” Isak explains, one leg crossed under his thigh while he sits awkwardly on his bed.

“Where are all your books?” Even asks.

“At home. I couldn’t bring stuff.”

“Oh,” Even bites his lip then contemplates what to say next. “Do you need help moving things? I could help you.”

Isak smiles. “No, my parents would probably kill me if I go anywhere near that house.”

Even frowns. Isak is smiling but he knows that he’s hurting.

“No, they won’t. I’m sure if you let them know beforehand or coordinate with Lea—”

Isak’s face falls at the mention of his sister and Even decides that it’s time for him to stop talking.

“I’m sorry.”

“Have you spoken to her?”

“Yes,” Even admits. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Isak sighs. “She hates me, but I expected this. It’s a very predictable reaction and I don’t resent her for it. I’m sure she’ll turn around eventually. She’s forgiven me for worse before.”

“But you haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I’d rather she keeps believing I’m the bad guy, than start resenting our parents. It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Isak sounds ten years older. He’s always used big words in his speech and seemed wise for his age, but his petulance is gone. He sounds resigned, tired, older.

“We should go get some of your things when your parents are out or something. I’m sure Lea won’t be opposed to it.”

“It’s fine. I don’t really hold anything that dear to my heart.”

“What about your drumset?” Even asks then watches Isak’s face fall again.

“My mom destroyed it in a fit of rage apparently.”

Even feels anger seep through his veins. Isak loved his drumset so much. How could she.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Isak says with a smile and it’s so fake, Even wishes he could just let go and truly speak
his mind. “It was old anyway and I wanted a new one for the longest time. It’s chill.”

Even watches this new Isak pull at his sleeves while avoiding his eyes. He watches him reply to all of his questions with a placid smile like he’s trying to convince Even that he’s doing well. He watches his blank face not convey a single emotion while he speaks.

Even misses the tempestuous boy who threw tantrums and made him want to scream in rage.

This Isak looks defeated.

“I’m sorry for boring you with all this stuff. But you don’t need to feel sorry for me or anything. I’m happier than I’ve been in a while. That I can promise.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Isak nods, then leaves his bed. “I think you should go home now. It looks like it stopped raining a bit. You should go before it starts again.”

Even walks home with a strange feeling roaming his chest. He’s relieved but also sad to see just how down Isak looks, and sounds, and acts.

It doesn’t rain after that night. Even loves blue skies and starry nights, but he finds himself anxiously waiting for rain, hoping his weather app is somehow wrong, that it will rain instead of snow.

He messages Isak several times a day, and Isak replies every single time now with a meme or a philosophical quote from whatever book he’s reading. It feels like a platonic long-distance relationship. And Even is confused about what Isak wants. He’s not sure he knows what he wants either.

Adrian stops trying to see him after the third or fourth time Even comes up with an excuse to bail on him. And Even is back to feeling stuck, wondering ‘Do I want this kid? Does this kid actually want me? What do we have now that our bond is no longer there, now that science is no longer trying to push us together? What are we, really?’

Even wonders, doesn’t know where to take it from here, waits for Isak to perhaps give him a sign. It doesn’t rain for an additional week and Even wonders if Isak would accept to see him even without the rain.

He thinks about it, lets it grind in his brain and constrict his chest. He’s with the boys, spacing out when Mutta asks him what’s going on and mentions that he heard about Isak being back.

And Even tells him because he doesn’t feel like he has anything to lose at this point. He omits the details about kissing him and maybe bearing romantic feelings for him. But he feels like Mutta knows anyway. Mutta always knows.

“Why are you waiting for the rain? Are you shitting me?”

“What?”

“He’s probably waiting for you to make the first move.”

Even messages Isak and asks him if he wants to get sushi. It’s an awkward proposal, but it’s friendly
enough according to Mutta. Meeting up for coffee has now been appropriated by people on Tinder meeting for the first time. And a proper meal sounds weird unless a specific cuisine is mentioned. Thus, cheap sushi at 14:00. It’s harmless.

Isak says yes.

Even arrives at the sushi place at 13:58 and finds him already waiting. He’s bundled up in a winter jacket, a beanie, thick yellow gloves, and a gray scarf.

He stands up awkwardly and waves when he spots Even. It’s cute.

“You’re early,” says Even.

“Time is a man-made construct. If you look at the relativity of time, I’m not early nor are you late.”

“You still love to talk about bullshit, I see.”

“I wouldn’t call the Theory of Relativity bullshit. But okay.”

Even laughs as he sits down. It feels good to have this back. “I can’t believe you actually showed up.”

“I’m a man of my word.”

They have cheap sushi and Even notices that Isak dips his maki pieces into the soy sauce instead of pouring it over his roll. He takes off his gloves to use his chopsticks even though he’s not good at it, and simply seeing his skin makes Even ache to touch it.

Isak continues eating, unbothered. He asks Even about Bakka and Mutta and everyone else. He asks about Julie and promises to visit her if it’s okay. He asks Even how he’s doing with classes and volunteers to help him out with Physics when Even says that he’s struggling a bit.

It’s quite nice. It feels like they’re friends, like Isak actually cares about him and wants to do nice things for him without asking for anything in return.

“I haven’t been outside much since I got back,” Isak admits when Even comments on how happy he looks.

“Why not?”

“Was afraid of running into you.”

It’s brutally honest and Even isn’t sure what to say.

“But I’m glad we got that out of the way,” Isak adds. “It's not that bad.”

“So you’ll still see me?”

“As long as you don’t touch me.”

“That’s the only reason you kept me around before,” Even adds dumbly because it's true.

“Believe it or not but I’ve grown to enjoy your company.”
“Last time you said that to me you were scheming and plotting your biggest coup to date.”

“No more scheming and plotting.”

“You retired?” Even smiles at him.

“I’m just tired,” Isak sighs, and he looks it. He looks exhausted. “I think I’m done with experiments for a while. Besides, we no longer share that blind bond that used to make us do weird things.”

*Like kissing and cuddling and holding each other.*

They pay the bill separately and head to use the restroom before leaving, with Even trailing behind Isak, unsure if he should wait or go in with him.

It’s awkward but Isak is composed and oblivious to Even’s presence as he disappears into one of the stalls. Even doesn’t know if this sushi date actually made things better or worse. He doesn’t know what Isak wants from him. Friendship? Companionship? Is he going to request cuddles when it rains again?

Even washes his hands by the long communal sink next to Isak, the water running and drowning out his thoughts. And it’s not until their eyes meet through the mirror that he realizes that Isak’s been washing his hands for several minutes now, like he’s been waiting for him to realize something, like he wants him to do something.

*Oh.*

Even looks down, overwhelmed and unsure, and Isak follows, embarrassed and regretful.

He watches Isak fumble to rinse off all the excess soap he poured into his palms to prolong his hand-washing, looking vulnerable and mortified, his cheeks burning with a fierce shade of red. He’s been stolid and unreadable all afternoon. And when he finally let Even peer into his thoughts and true desires, he ended up feeling ashamed.

*No.*

Even doesn’t think when he reaches for Isak’s hand under the water. He doesn’t think. He just does it. And the contact is almost electric, a gasp escaping both of their mouths in unison.

It would be embarrassing if it didn’t feel this good.

Their bodies are nearly touching now, standing side by side in front of a mirror in the restroom, hand in hand under a running faucet, neither of them looking up.

Even waits for the rejection, for the appalled “what the hell do you think you’re doing?!”. But it never comes.

Isak accepts his hand with urgency and need, the sigh he lets out so loud that it resembles the end of a sob. And Even will never get used to this, to Isak being so touch-starved that holding hands under a faucet gets him choked up.

He feels like risking everything and holding him. But he knows Isak will never forgive him.

“Does this hurt you?” He asks Even in a small voice, his eyes glued on their clasped hands like he can't believe he can have this.
“No,” Even replies firmly. “This doesn’t hurt me. This is okay.”

The soap runs between their palms and Isak brings his other hand to cup Even’s. He runs his fingers along the back of it, as if to remember every bump and every callus and every dent.

Even is overwhelmed by Isak’s careful examination of his hand, a limb he often takes for granted but which feels so precious under Isak’s touch. Even does not wish to interrupt it. He lets him do whatever he wants. He lets him touch all he wants.

Isak laces his right hand with Even’s left, and they remain like that by the sink, breathing heavily but not daring to look up.

Even wants to say something but nothing could possibly convey the way he is feeling. So his lips remain shut.

But then he feels Isak shift beside him. He feels him raise his head ever so slowly. He feels him look up, and Even looks up, too.

Isak’s reflection is flushed and breathless in the mirror, his eyes droopy. He looks drunk, high off a simple filtered touch.

He smiles. Even smiles, too.

“Are you okay?” Even asks because he never knows how Isak is feeling.

“Yeah. This is nice.”

Even runs his thumb over the back of Isak’s hand as tenderly as he possibly can. And Isak digs his fingers into his knuckles, closing his eyes momentarily as if to amplify the touch.

They hold hands until someone comes in and makes them self-conscious about wasting water.

The loss of contact is cruel, and when Isak tries to dry his hands, Even stops him.

“Leave them.”

“Not drying your hands can contribute to the spreading and dissemination of bacteria and germs.”

“I don’t give a fuck about germs right now, Isak.”

The urgency in Even’s voice is foreign even to himself, and Isak flushes hard and does as he’s told, accepting Even’s wet hand as they exit the restaurant.

Their fingers remain secretly laced on the tram in Even’s pocket until they dry, until Isak physically forces his hand out of Even’s grasp.

“I don’t feel any pain. I promise,” Even insists.

“Even, it’s enough.”

.

Enough? It’s not enough. It never is.

Even can’t think about anything else. If it won’t rain, they just have to make it.
They could swim in the pool. They could take a shower. They could take baths together.

So many possibilities, each less plausible than the other. Even has never seen Isak in anything less than a shirt. The probability of Isak accepting to shower with him is close to nonexistent. But still.

Even’s head is spinning thinking about the summer. They could go to some fjord and spend a week there. They could swim in the many lakes surrounding the city. They could go to his dad’s cabin. Even is willing to make up with his father for this.

But Isak is distant. He’s distant for someone who knows that they can have this now. And it makes Even anxious.

Nothing’s stopping Isak from seeking that same level of comfort from someone else now. Even can’t stop thinking about it. It eats at him.

“Is Adrian coming today?” his mother asks after dinner. She’s prodding.

“Isak is back,” Even admits. And she doesn’t bother him again that night.

He broods until he gets a message. A message from him.

Heraklit
20:34

Hello

Hi

How are you?

Uh I’m good. You?

I’m good :)

What’s up? I was about to text you

Do you want to perhaps go swimming tomorrow? Like in the indoor pool we used to go to

You renewed your membership?

Yes today
It took me some time
They wanted parental consent
And i had to prove that i was emancipated and all

Oh
Yeah
Yeah sure
What time?

After you’re done with school?

Does 16:00 work?
Even can’t sleep. He’s way too excited to fall asleep. But he knows that he needs to. He knows that he can’t afford to fall back into bad habits and self-destructive behavior when he’s been doing so well. His drinking and smoking has already been on the rise and he needs to check himself.

He opens one of those meditation apps and lets a man with a soothing voice lull him to sleep.

“Hello? Earth to Even?” Mutta shakes him and Even smiles. He loves it when Mutta says this. Earth and Mutta. Mutta and Earth. “What are you daydreaming about?”

“I’m seeing Isak after school today,” Even tells him nonchalantly, like his body is not buzzing with anticipation, like he doesn’t wish he was in his speedos right now.

“For real? You two good now?”

“Kind of? I don’t know.”

“You still can’t touch him?”

“Yeah. But we’re going swimming,” Even adds with a grin.

“Why are you smiling?” Mutta squints. “Can you touch him when you’re swimming or something?”

Even doesn’t reply but his smile gives it a way.

“Seriously?! Wait. That’s so cool.”
“Promise you won’t tell anyone.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. Isak is super weird about it,” says Even.

“Alright. I promise.”

Even sprints to the pool and he hopes that it won’t be too crowded. He hopes they’ll be able to talk and to touch, maybe.

Isak is already in the pool in his dark gray wetsuit. Even knew he wouldn’t be bare, but he still hoped.

“You’re late,” Isak tells him when he gets into the water.

“I thought time was a man-made construct.”

“For some reason, I thought you’d be excited for this.”

“I am. I’m late cause I spent time making myself extra pretty for you,” Even says, sticking out his tongue like a child because he feels like it.

Isak splashes him with water and Even strikes back.

There’s only one other person in the pool and she’s doing nonstop laps, barely paying them any attention.

“Pretty where?” Isak teases him and Even wants to pounce on him and maybe drown him, but he’s not sure. He’s still unsure what Isak summoned him for.

“You don’t think I’m pretty?” Even whispers instead, swimming close, way too close. He can almost count Isak’s eyelashes.

Isak flushes and swims away, making Even chase after him.

They swim in random circles around one another. Isak in his wetsuit and Even in his speedos. The silence feels too heavy.

“Last time we were here, we were holding each other,” Even blurts out.

“Last time we were here, we shared a physical connection that didn’t give us a choice but to hold each other.”

Even floats, using both arms and both legs to remain here for this. He weighs the words on his tongue.

“Given a choice, I would still do it,” he says.

“You don’t have a choice now either.”

“I do. Nothing is forcing me.”

“Your memories are. The way you felt before is telling you that you want this. It’s like when you
have amazing food and you can’t help but want it again, based on that memory alone.”

“You’re not making sense,” Even frowns because he doesn’t want Isak twisting his words and applying weird theories on him.

“I am. That’s why you’re annoyed. Because I’m making sense. I can’t choose you if all I’ve ever known is you.”

Isak is pushing where it hurts. He’s testing him. Even knows it. Isak is no mind-reader but the way he gets under his skin and peers into his most intimate thoughts terrifies him sometimes.

Isak knows that Even is feeling insecure about his newfound freedom to touch other people in bodies of water. He’s trying to test his theory. A more naive Even wouldn’t see it, but he does. Even knows what Isak is doing.

“Are you going to touch other people?” Even asks, straight to the point, because miscommunication is great in romantic movies, but he’s tired of not understanding how either of them feels.

“Are you going to resent me if I do?”

Even thinks about it. He will feel anxious about being forgotten and left behind. But he won’t resent him. How could he.

“No.”

“No?”

“I can’t resent you for wanting to feel someone else’s touch. I understand.”

“You do?”

“You can’t choose me if all you’ve ever known is me.” It stings, but Even understands.

Isak looks at him with wide eyes, taken aback by his response. And Even wonders what the purpose of this swimming session is.

“You’ve gotten wiser,” Isak says.

“I just know you better now.”

“Do you?”

Even lunges forward and closes the gap between them, wrapping both arms around Isak’s back and pulling him to his chest so forcefully that his cupid-bow lips part in a loud yelp.

“You tell me,” Even almost pants from the proximity, Isak’s body flushed against his bare chest.

It’s always so dizzying, being this close. And Even would feel self-conscious about his speedos expanding underwater if he wasn’t so busy staring at Isak’s flushed face.

“I-” Isak’s mouth opens and closes again. He can barely breathe. Even can feel the erratic rise and fall of his chest against his own.

“Is this what you want?” Even tries to assert some form of dominance after Isak all but stomped on his confused feelings again.
But he doesn’t keep it up.

Because Isak curls into him almost instantly, throwing both arms around his neck and resting his head in the crook there, his nose nuzzling the skin under Even’s ear while his legs circle his waist.

They float. Their heartbeats matching the girl’s harsh strokes three lanes away from them. They float and Even waits for Isak’s breathing to calm down. He holds him and he waits.

Isak is pliant now when touching is involved now. His tongue does not cut through Even. His general meanness leaves his body. All he wants is to be held.

"This is what I want."

“I don’t mind you touching other people,” Even lies through his teeth because he’d rather have this than nothing.

“Promise you won’t be upset.”

“I promise.”

“Promise me!” Isak says again, his face leaving Even’s neck and a frown slicing through it.

“I just did,” Even chuckles.

Isak flushes and Even cups his cheek with his right hand, his left under his thigh to keep him floating. And Isak’s eyes flutter shut instantly, like it’s too much for his brain to bear the touch and the sight at once.

“Look at me,” Even whispers to him. “Look at me when I touch you.”

Isak opens his eyes, then looks down like it’s too much.

“It’s too much,” he admits.

“It’s just me.”

“My senses are fucked,” Isak blurts out. “I feel like I’m staring into the sun when you touch me.”

“That’s romantic,” Even chuckles.

“Shut up. I’m serious,” Isak groans but he smiles, finally. He smiles.

“Much better,” Even smiles too, rests his thumb in the shy dimple on Isak’s cheek, stroking it.

They don’t fight again. They don’t argue. They just touch. They just cuddle.

.

“Promise me,” Isak repeats again when they’re leaving two hours later, and Even regrets not insisting that shower together. “Promise me you won’t be upset.”

Even makes him a promise he’s not sure he can keep.

“I promise you.”
“He’s seeing other people,” he tells Adrian a few days later over joints in his room.

“Other people?”

“Yeah, I think. I don’t know.”

“How can he see other people if he’s burning them?”

“He might be suggesting pools or something? I don’t know. Maybe Jonas owns a pool? He certainly owns a bathtub. I mean maybe he just has a shower.”

“Who the hell is Jonas?”

“Forget it,” Even sighs, brings both palms to his eyes because he’s tired and he feels vain. “I promised I wouldn’t do this, yet here I am.”

“So you’re like in an open relationship?”

“More like open science-partnership.”

It’s so dumb. His own words make him laugh now.

“You know what you need Even? Dick. You need dick. Or pussy. I don’t know what you’re feeling like tonight.”

Even shoves him with his leg and they laugh until his mother knocks on his door. He hopes it doesn’t smell like joints anymore, but he’s sure she can tell.

“Hi Julie,” Adrian greets her. And she’s warm to him, but not nearly as warm as she was to Isak.

“Not to be rude but this room could use scents other than Teenage Boy, I think,” she says, laughing, as she lights a new candle on Even’s top shelf.

It’s vanilla scented.

The ones she used to leave for Isak and him when he spent the night.

She waves at them then closes the door behind her. And Even lets himself fall into his bed.

Even his mother can’t move on from Isak. How is he supposed to.

Who’s touching you tonight? Who’s holding you tonight? Can it be me? Can you leave some space for me?

“Can I stay over tonight?” Adrian asks. “I’m so high. I don’t think I can ride my bike right now. My legs feel wobbly as fuck.”

“You can stay. It’s chill.”

Adrian makes himself comfortable on the couch.

---

Eskild

16:19

Hello sexy beast
So you think you’re a sexy beast?
Isak did say you were cocky

He did
He drank so much last night he told us some juicy things :p

I promised I wouldn’t say
I’m sorry :( roomies over hoes
But you can come hang out with us today if you want
Isak is still hungover but I’m sure he’ll say yes to this party I’m trying to throw if you grace us with your presence
yes/yes?
Please???
He said the CUTEST things about you last night you have to comeee

What time?

Isak is still hungover when Even knocks on his door. It turns out that the party doesn’t start until eleven and Eskild tricked him into placating Isak before he brings people from a pre-game across town.

“Fucking Eskild!” Isak groans from his bed when he sees Even’s head peeking behind the door.

“Hello to you too, Isabell,” Even teases despite feeling nervous.

“Call me Isabell one more time and I will kill you.”

“Fierce much?” Even chuckles as he makes his way to Isak’s bed.

“My head is killing me!”

“It’s been twenty four hours. How can you be hungover for twenty four hours?”

“I also set things on fire, so I guess I’m a big fuck you to science.”

Even smiles down at him. He looks sallow and horrible, but his cheeks have gained some color in the last minute alone.

“You’re gaining some color. That’s good.”

“It’s because you’re here,” says Isak.

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

Even takes the wet towel soaked in a small water container by Isak’s bed and brings it to his forehead. It’s quite the strange setting. Isak under the covers in his room a Friday night at 23:00 and Even towering over him and wetting his forehead with a towel.
It’s almost comical.

“Better?” he asks.

Isak’s face is now completely pink, none of the yellowish color remaining on his skin.

“Fucking hell.” Isak groans, annoyed and flustered all at once.

“You don’t like this?”

“I told you it’s too much.” Isak buries his face in his blue pillow, embarrassed and mortified.

“Like looking into the sun?”

“Like tasting the spiciest food after eating nothing but bland things, or listening to something at maximum volume after being in complete silence for a while.”

“Very specific.” Even says, feeling both flattered and lost at once.

“Yet you’re more than all those things combined.”

It’s Even’s turn to blush. But then he remembers that Isak is referred to being touched in general. Not to being touched by him.

“Does being touched feel that drastic?”

Isak nods.

Then the rest of the party barges through the doors of Kollektivet.

“Apparently, drinking will make you feel better,” Even suggests while Isak trails behind him in a winter jacket while most are in t-shirts.

“That’s a myth,” Isak shouts into his ear because the music is too loud.

“No, it’s not. I’m sure there’s like science behind it and stuff.”

“It’s basically just alleviating symptoms for a second and making them worse for later.”

“Isn’t that like a metaphor for life?”

“Like what? What do you mean?” Isak shouts.

“I mean!- Wait! Isak do you wanna maybe chill outside for a second? I can barely hear you.”

“We can just go back to my room!”

“Yeah, okay. Okay.”

They end up on the floor, with Even suggesting weed with no scientific basis at all.

“At least it won’t fuck with your stomach. I think?”

“You better hold my hair while I throw up later,” says Isak.
“Deal.”

They smoke. And it feels so good, getting back to this. Isak strips until he’s in a t-shirt and jeans, and they lie on the floor in a weird ying yang pose, facing away from each other, but still only breaths away.

“Are you high yet?” Even asks.

“I don’t feel like shit anymore. So I guess I am?”

“Why were you feeling like shit?”

Isak takes a long drag from the joint, think gloves making sure he doesn’t burn Even when he passes it back.

“Sometimes I dream about Carlsen and Geir. Sometimes I dream about waking up there again.”

“Is that why you can’t sleep?”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“Have you been seeing a therapist?” Even asks, and he knows it’s personal, but he’s positive that Isak won’t mind.

“Yeah. But I bullshit him most of the time. I don’t think he’ll get to the bottom of it.”

“Why do you bullshit him?”

“Because I can’t really trust anyone anymore.”

“You can trust me,” Even blurts out.

“And I do.”

“Do you?”

“I’m telling you all of this bullshit so yeah, I do.”

Silence settles between them again, and Even takes three long drags to muster up the courage to ask him this question.

“Did they hurt you in there?”

“Yeah,” Isak answers like it’s nothing.

“You let them hurt you.”

“I did what I had to do.”

“There were other ways. We could have found another way.”

“It’s done now. There’s no use moaning about what already happened. Why do you care so much about the means when I got to the desired outcome anyway? The war was won at the end of the day.”
“But is it winning if innocent people are killed? Isn’t it just a big cruel game?”

“No innocent people were killed, Even. Stop being so dramatic.”

“They hurt you! You can’t sleep. Now that’s dramatic!”

“Soldiers get hurt in times of war and most end up with PTSD. It’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

“But you’re not a soldier, Isak. You chose to put yourself through that when you knew we could have found another way.”

Isak sits up, suddenly furious.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to get at. But I was not on some sick mission to hurt myself, Even.”

“Why did you put yourself through all those experiments then?!”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I wanted to learn more about my fucking illness? Has it ever crossed your mind that perhaps the reason I went along with all of it in one of the most advanced labs in the world is because I wanted to find out what the hell is wrong with me?”

Even sits up too, regretful and ashamed. Isak is furious.

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s like no research done on this sickness that I have. Nothing, Even! Do you know how frustrating it is to know that I’m one a maybe a handful of people who deal with this? I don’t mean to sound like a dick and I know you’re not better off, but at least many people suffer from bipolar? I wish I had people I could share this shit with, people who understand what it feels like to not be able to touch when all you want to do is touch and be touched.”

“I’m sorry.” Even repeats because he is. The joint has dimmed and died between his fingers, and he’s not surprised when Eskild knocks on the door to check on them.

“Everything okay in here?”

“Yes, we’re just chatting,” Isak replies, with an annoyed edge to his voice.

“Okay. Just don’t scare my guests please.”

The door closes behind him and Even doesn’t know how to fix it, how to rewind time to ten minutes ago.

“I can leave if you want.”

“Don’t. You know I don’t want that.”

Even sighs in relief.

“Want me to roll another one?”

.

Even rolls another one and then another one after that. They’re back on the floor, back to their ying yang position. And Even is careful when he asks.
“Tell me about your research.”

“Hm?”

“Your findings about your condition. What you read. What you think. What your theories are.”

Some Gabrielle song is playing in the background and Even can feel Isak rummage through his thoughts.

“There’s no science,” he says. “I think I’ve told you before. But research is mostly reactionary. Someone suffers from something then people start trying to understand the whys and hows to cure them or at least alleviate their symptoms. So since there are a lot of blind and deaf people, there’s a lot of research and science around that. In my case, the closest thing is the research that goes into insensitivity to pain, meaning people who simply do not feel it. You might think it’s a good thing but they often end up dying early. Because not feeling pain doesn’t mean that your body is not deteriorating. It just means you’re not feeling it deteriorate. In many ways, pain is a blessing.”

Pain is blessing. Pain is a blessing.

Even winces.

“Sorry,” Isak says, noticing. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“No, I know. Continue.”

“Yeah so like I’m not touch-blind exactly. Because I can touch. I can feel touch and I can interpret it. The only reason I cannot touch is because I hurt others when I do. It’s like that X-men who shoots lasers from his eyes. Imagine if you hurt people every time you looked at them or they looked at you. You would just have to become blind at that point.”

“You’ve been watching X-men?”

“Reading.”

“Of course,” Even chuckles. “Continue.”

“So yes, my touch is basically poisonous but no one has reported this before, or at least it’s not documented, so there’s no grants going into it and no desperate graduate students trying to find solutions for it. My suffering doesn’t even matter to the science community, because to them it’s not an actual problem. It’s merely an inconvenience whereas people who cannot see can barely lead a regular life without the help of others.”

“It’s more than an inconvenience.”

“Yes, but I should be able to live with it. Some people are paralyzed and cannot feel anything. At least I can feel it all. At least I can tell shapes by touching objects. I may not be able to touch humans and animals. But it’s okay. I should be able to live with it.”

“But you’re not.”

Even takes another drag then hands the joint back to Isak.

“But I’m not.”

Even thinks about how he also wishes for more, always. How he wishes his brain worked perfectly in another world. How he wishes he didn’t have to swallow pills every day to regulate his mood.
“Am I selfish for wanting to feel touch? Am I that selfish for wanting to enjoy a basic sense like everyone else?”

“No.”

“The Platonians said that eyesight is the most important sense but Aristotle challenged that view by saying that touch is the superior one. You know why?”

“Why?”

“Because we’re always touching. Because touching doesn’t have a single anatomical part responsible for it. Unlike eyesight and hearing, you can’t just stop the sensation of touching. You can cover your eyes and you can cover your ears and you can pinch your nose. You can just not eat anything and you won’t be able to taste a thing. But you can’t decide to stop touching. Even if you were to fly or float, you’re still touching air and water. The only way is to be flung into space and be left in the void. Other than that, we’re always touching and being touched. When we’re sleeping, when we’re walking, when we’re breathing. Touch is the one sense you can’t filter out.”

“Hm.”

“And yet it’s the sense that makes us the loneliest. Seeing and hearing and smelling and tasting don’t make us yearn for more necessarily. We might want what others have. We might want to eat a certain type of food or smell a certain fragrance or see a certain band live. But the absence of these things don’t make us as lonely as the absence of touch. The absence of touch is the loneliest, the most cruel, the most unbearable at all times when you have the sense but cannot use it. It’s like you know you can feel touch and you can give it but you’re not allowed to.

Don’t get me wrong. I couldn’t imagine not being able to see or hear. What I’m talking about is that the absence of certain sights doesn’t make me drown in hurt and pain like the absence of certain touches does.”

Listening to Isak talk about pain and hurt is more wounding than imagining him doing so.

“You have a way with words that cuts through me. I hate that you feel this way.”

Isak shrugs then takes another long drag, the smoke above them now thick and heavy.

“Philosophers spent so much time trying to figure out what the real ‘us’ is. And my favorites actually argued that we are anything but our bodies. We are our minds, our memories, our personalities, anything but our bodies. Because if I were to meet you in another world and you were in a completely different body, I would still feel drawn to you. I would still share this connection with you. Because we’re not our bodies. We’re our souls. Yada yada. But it’s actually bullshit. Because I am my body. I am my suffering. Descartes said that ‘I think. Therefore, I am.’ But for me, it’s “I cannot touch. Therefore, I am.” My struggle defines me. I am my struggle.”

“No.” Even sits up, hurt and bruised up, his heart so heavy in his chest. “You are not your struggle. Your struggle does not define you. You’re more than your inability to touch. You’re much more. If you’re your struggle, then I’m my struggle. And I refuse to be my struggle, Isak. I refuse.”

Isak stares at him from the floor, and Even doesn’t know if it’s tears blurring his vision or the clouds of smoke. They’re floating. And Isak looks like he can’t challenge Even’s words for once.

“We are not our struggles, Isak! We’re not.”

“Can you two shut the fuck up?!?” someone startles them both. It’s a boy with tousled hair sprawled
on Isak’s bed. And Even wonders how they haven’t noticed his presence at all.

“Who the the fuck are you?” Isak says as he sits up.

“I don’t know man. Why the fuck are you talking about Descartes at one in the morning. Get a life!”

“Excuse me?!”

“Go bang it out or something, bro. I need to sleep for real.”

The boy passes out on the bed and Even waits a total of two seconds before bursting into laughter.

Isak joins him not long after.

It must be the joints. It has to be the joints.

“You’re gonna have to carry him out of my room,” Isak tells him.

“And why would I?”

“Do you expect me to carry him and burn him?”

“Or you could leave him here.”

“And sleep where?”

“My house is always an option,” says Even.

“You’d rather I burn you than some douchebag?”

“You won’t burn me. We can sleep in the tub.”

Isak laughs but looks away, flushing, like he’s entertaining the thought.

“What? I’m serious,” Even laughs with him. They’re both on their feet now.

“I’m not gonna respond to that.”


“I would hit you if I could.”

“You can.”

“Fuck off, yeah?”

Isak opens the door to his room and heads where the music is blasting. Even follows close behind. Isak is only in a t-shirt so he keeps his arms extended around him just in case someone tries to get too close to him.

It makes Isak snort when he realizes what Even is doing.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“I need alcohol.”

They drink in a corner alone. Eskild is giving some girl a lap dance in their living room and Adrian is
sucking on someone’s tongue by the big windows. Even didn’t even know he was invited.

It makes him nervous for some reason, and when he approaches Isak and him, a lump forms in his throat.

“Hello,” Adrian greets them with a smile. “You must be the famous Isak.”

“Let me guess. Eskild has been sharing pictures of me in his groupchats again,” Isak retorts, sipping on a fruity but strong drink that will probably hit in a few minutes.

“False. It was Even actually.”

“Oh,” Isak’s smile drops as he turns to Even.

“Uhm. Well, now you’re making it sound like I have pictures of Isak lying around in my phone,” Even chuckles nervously.

“You do though,” Adrian grins. And Even frowns at him, almost mouthing what are you doing?

“Sorry. I’m Adrian, by the way,” he tells Isak. “Even has been bitching to me about you for quite some time now. I know all about you.”

It almost sounds rude. Adrian is probably drunk. He’s probably a little bit annoyed that Even keeps choosing Isak. Even hopes he won’t get on Isak’s “shit-list” because there’s no coming back from it.

“Well, Adreen. I wish I could say the same about you,” a smile. “But it’s the first time I hear about you.”

Too late. Adreen isn’t even a name. He’s not even trying.

“It’s Adrian.”

“Cool name,” Isak smiles again.

“So is Isak.”

“Thank you. You’re very kind, Adreen.” He turns to Even. “Even, how come you never told me about this very kind new friend of yours? Not super important?”

“You’re the guy he can only bang underwater right? Does it hurt? I bet it hurts.”

“Adrian! That’s enough!” Even almost shouts, his voice firm and angry. His body between Isak’s and Adrian’s now.

He understands feeling hurt, but Adrian knows how insecure Isak is about his condition. And Even made him promise not to tell anyone about how he can touch him in bodies of water. How could he flush all of it down the drain because his ego got bruised.

“Fucking hell,” Adrian mutters, like he realizes just how childish he’s just sounded.

“You should probably leave,” Even tells him.

“Yeah. I’m going.” Adrian excuses himself to go give Eskild a half-hug before leaving altogether.

Even is anxious to find out Isak’s reaction and he delays it. But Isak starts chuckling behind him as soon as Adrian is out of the door.
“You’re laughing? You’re laughing right now?”

“Adreen isn’t even a name.”

Even feels terrible but seeing Isak laugh makes laughter bubble up inside him, too. This kid.

“God, fuck you!” Even sighs.

“Who is he? Some guy you fuck on the side?”

“Isak!” Even gasps, appalled.

“What? I know you have biological homosexual needs. I may not be a homosexual but I know this.”

“What are you talking-”

“What the hell did Eskild put in this punch? I feel so drunk.”

Even drags Isak to the kitchen without touching him and tries to force him into having water, but Isak isn’t biting. He pours himself more punch.

“Isak-”

“He sounded jealous. Why is he jealous of me? Me? Of all people! Hilarious! Is he stupid?”

“You need to stop drinking. You’ll probably end up throwing up at this rate,” Even insists with a glass of water in hand. He’s drunk and high, too. But he needs to make sure Isak doesn’t burn anyone tonight.

“You need to tell your fuckbuddy friend that he has nothing to be jealous about. Tell him that you can’t touch me and that I can’t touch you and that nothing can happen between us anyway, because I’m not a homosexual. It’s very important. Okay?”

“You’re not a homosexual. Yes, of course. I’ll make sure to tell him,” Even laughs.

“Tell him that even though we kissed once, it was because I thought I was never going to see you again and I wanted to know how it felt like and stuff. Because I can’t kiss girls without burning them. Although maybe I can try in a shower now or something. I don’t know. I just wanted to know. Because all the books talk about how magical kissing is and stuff for the brain.”

“Magical?” Even snorts.

“Yes, I felt like I was going to explode when you kissed me. I told Eskild yesterday and he laughed at me. Fucking asshole.”

Even laughs. He’s so cute.

“Explode in like a bad way?” he asks, amused. He gets Isak to sit on a chair and down a glass of water, at last.

“No. In the best way.”

“In a ‘you would do it again’ way?”

Isak opens his mouth then closes it. He frowns. “You’re trying to get me to say homosexual things.”
Even bursts into laughter. He laughs so hard, his stomach aches with it. He laughs so hard, he doesn’t notice Isak stilling before him, his eyes wide, his face flushed, his expression in awe.

Isak is staring at Even with undivided and devoted attention while he laughs. It makes Even halt and flush.

“What are you staring at?” he asks, suddenly nervous.


“I’m not even touching you.”

“Yet it feels like looking into the sun.”

Even is overwhelmed by the need to kiss him. He wants to. He’s aching to. But what if he ruins everything? It would ruin everything. There’s no way it wouldn’t ruin everything.

“What are you thinking about?” Isak asks.

“I want to kiss you,” Even admits, defeated. He hopes Isak will forgive him in the morning.

“I want to kiss you, too.”

Even’s heart is hammering in his chest, Isak’s words not feeling quite real. They can’t be real.

“But-” he tries. But Isak is on his feet before he can place a word. “What are you doing?”

“Follow me.”

Even does. He takes a moment to breathe then leaves his chair in the kitchen, his legs wobbly.

“Where is he?” he asks Eskild because he can’t see him.

“Bathroom.”

Even knows. Of course he knows. He knows even before he sees Isak’s shoes in the hallway, even before entering the bathroom.

“Isak?”

“Take off your shoes. Shoes take the longest time to dry.”

“What are you doing?” Even laughs when he sees him, back against the wall, hot water running from the showerhead. “Are you gonna take a shower?”

“Yes,” Isak replies before entering that very shower with his clothes on. “Take off your shoes!”

“What are you doing?! Oh my god, I’m never giving you weed ever again!”

“Close the door behind you.”

“What?”

“He’s gonna knock in ten seconds,” says Isak, and he’s completely soaked now, from head to toe, his white shirt clinging to him while his jeans turn darker.

“Ten seconds?” Even repeats as he kicks off his shoes.
Eskild knocks. “Boys, is everything alright?” he asks, trying to open the door.

“Yes, mom. I’m taking a shower and Even is making sure I don’t slip and die,” says Isak, trying to stifle a laugh.

“You’re showering with Even?!” Eskild shrieks.

Even can’t help but laugh.

“Shh!” Isak orders then gestures for him to come closer.

“No, mom. I’m fully clothed.”

“What the hell are you doing in there?!” Eskild knocks again.

“Nothing. I can’t touch him and he can’t touch me, remember?”

“Just. No sex in the shower, Isabell! Okay? Jerking off counts as sex, too!”

“Eskild!” Isak yelps.

“What?! If I can’t do it, you can’t do it either.”

And with that he’s gone.

“Oh god,” Isak groans.

Even laughs so hard, he nearly loses his balance and trips when Isak pulls him into the shower by the collar of his shirt.

“Oh my god!” he shrieks, both hands landing on the wall on either side of Isak’s face to keep himself from slipping and falling on top of him. He is now getting soaked too. “What the hell? What did Eskild slip you?”

Isak touches him, both hands traveling along his sides, up to his ribs, his eyes meadows in a warm afternoon, and Even loses all words.

“Isak—”

Isak touches him carefully, gently, like he’s precious. And the shower is drowning out both of their sighs and embarrassing moans. Even’s hands are almost fists against the wall. Isak runs his fingers all along Even’s chest, stopping on his pecs to touch and pad, his chest rising and falling, rising and falling. He moves to his neck, tracing his collarbones with his index finger, before stopping at his jaw, then moving to his cheeks, and then his hair. Even is entranced by the touch. He is gone. Gone for him. So gone.

Even thinks Isak is done but his hands go back to his sides and then his hips. And next thing he knows, Isak has dropped on his knees in front of him.

“Oh god! What are you doing?!”

Isak runs his hands up and down his thighs and then the rest of his legs. He touches him, feels him, memorizes his joints and the feel of his bones. Even is overwhelmed, tries to get Isak to stand back up, but Isak stops halfway and hugs his stomach.

“I want to know everything. I want to feel everything about you.”
Even pulls him up, presses him hard against the wall until Isak stops worshipping his body and is left staring at him with big sad green eyes that want so much, but that can never have.

“Your eyes are ‘swimming pool’ blue.”

“What do you want?” Even asks, firm and direct, his hair now wet and all over his face.

“Kiss me.”

Even kisses him.

He kisses him.

There’s kissing, and there’s kissing. This is kissing. This is the magic Isak was referring to. Even feels like he’s on the verge of exploding too. Not because they’re under a warm running shower or because of the fierceness of the kiss—it is nothing but tender—but because of all the feelings and significance it bears.

Even has kissed many before. He’s kissed some passionately and some less passionately. But this is on another realm. It doesn’t make much sense. It’s an antilogy. But still. This isn’t kissing. This is kissing.

He feels as though a chasm has just been opened through him, a void for later, a void for when he stops kissing him. Even already mourns the end and it hasn’t even begun.

“Kiss me,” Isak pants into his mouth, like he can hear his thoughts, although he’s being kissed breathless and senseless.

Even has both hands on Isak’s face, his head tilted to the side, pressing him against the wall like he needs something concrete to keep both of them from collapsing. And he kisses him like Isak wants to be kissed. Outrageous, long, deep, and fierce. Even feels him gasp and still in his arms when his tongue makes it into the warmth of his mouth. And he takes his time. He takes his sweet time finding Isak’s tongue, coaxing it out of hiding, teasing it, licking it, kissing it, flicking against it. Isak is melting against the wall, his mouth open like he’s not sure what to do with himself.

“Oh my god!” Isak moans, making Even laugh against his mouth and giving him a second to breathe before leaning in to kiss him again.

This time, Even tilts his head to the other side and presses short little kisses to Isak’s lips before licking into his mouth. And although, Isak does not slide down the wall again like his knees have given out, Even still brings his hands to his hips, pressing him against the wall to give him leverage.

He’s rendered breathless when Isak cups his face this time around, his hands soft and careful like he’s still afraid he might burn him. Isak kisses him deep, kisses him like he wants and cherishes him, like he wants to remember what his mouth feels like inside. Isak kisses him with no reservations, no calculations, no false pretenses. It’s messy and probably embarrassing, but Isak does not care and Even has never been kissed this thoroughly, this passionately.

Even feels a pang of anxiousness go through him. He knows he will mourn this later. He knows this will sting and burn later. This isn’t a drunken make-out session under the shower to him. This is explosions in the sky to him.

Even pulls back for a moment, the loss of contact brutal. He feels cold and frail, regret immediately washing over him.
“What are you doing?! Don't stop- What are you-” Isak protests, his hands reaching for him, bringing him closer.

“You could be doing this with anyone else. You could be standing under a showerhead with your clothes on kissing anyone else,” Even admits like a jealous loser.

Isak brings both hands to his face again, squeezes his cheeks so hard, Even feels like anyone else would wince.

But he can't focus on his synapses because, Isak looks like he means his words. Because Isak’s touch—dizzying as ever—doesn't feel the slightest bit calculated.

“No. No, I couldn’t. You know I couldn’t,” Isak whispers.

“I don't believe you. I never know when to-”

Isak kisses him again, kisses him slow, kisses him tender, nuzzles his nose, hugs his neck. It’s so sweet, so generous, so considerate and healing. Even believes him.

They make out until Isak’s fingers are under Even’s shirt, until their skin becomes blotchy, until their eyes begin to hurt. They make out, long and slow, until Isak’s back is arched and his hands are in Even’s hair, pulling, until their heads begin to hurt because the alcohol is dissipating. They make out until Even can no longer feel his mouth, until Isak begins pressing the sweetest kisses to his face, his cheeks, his nose, his eyes, his jaw. He’s so sweet.

“You’re so fucking sweet. You’re killing me.”

“You kill me all the fucking time.”

Even stares at him, wants to tell him everything he bears for him, how this isn’t just a random drunken make-out session for him. But Isak suddenly shoves him out of nowhere.

“Isak? Are you- Are you okay?”

“Oh fuck!”

Isak throws up and Eskild makes Even clean the bathroom. A particularly horrific predicament when one is dazed and high on kisses, and a little bit hard because a hot boy spent a good thirty minutes kissing him and touching him under a warm shower.

“That’s embarrassing. You’re not sleeping in Isabell’s room with that,” Eskild tells him, referring to the problem between his legs.

“Jesus Christ! It will go away. And I won’t touch him. I can’t touch him! Not that I would if I could. I would never!”

“Relax, Austin Butler. I didn’t mean it like that,” Eskild laughs. “You should probably stay over. He’s still drunk. He might do something dumb like wake up and go looking for you or something.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“You’re right. He wouldn’t. But still. I think he’ll be happy to see you in the morning.”

“Yeah?”
“Yeah. He mentioned your eggs once,” says Eskild.

“He did?” Even’s heart swells. He remembers the first time he made him eggs.

“He did.”

They get Isak out of his wet clothes, and Eskild asks Even to turn around when he’s about to take off his shirt, making Even raise a brow.

“It’s okay. I’ll help.”

“He’ll kill me if I let you see,” says Eskild.

“Let me see what?” Even frowns.

“You can ask him when he’s awake and sober, yeah? Let’s just get him into warm clothes.”

Isak is asleep in a Winnie the Pooh sweater and Linn’s sweatpants. He looks like an angel like this, curls framing his face, asleep, with no care in the world.

Even and Eskild stare at him as he curls around himself in fetal position like a child.

“He’s so strong, this kid,” Eskild sighs. Almost everyone is out of their apartment already.

“He really is,” says Even. “I’m glad he found someone like you to look after him.”

Eskild smiles.

“Yet most of the time, it feels like he’s looking after me.”

“How?”

“I had a bad encounter on Grindr with this foreign guy a few weeks ago. And Isak almost killed him,” Eskild explains and it brings back memories. “I never thought that adorable sad baby gay could turn into a ball of fire and rage. He only stopped because I asked him to.”

*Baby gay.*

Even doesn’t dwell on it but he’s sure Isak’s never shared anything like that with Eskild.

“He let it go?” Even asks.

“Nope,” Eskild chuckles. “I found out a few days ago that the man got fired from his job for what he said to me and that his wife found out about his sex travels. And I was lucky cause I caught the red flags early on and immediately asked him to leave, having dealt with assholes with extreme internalized homophobia before. But still, Isak being home provided me with a lot of comfort and emotional support. Seeing him ready to burn that fucker’s dick off felt really good too.”

“He would do that,” Even chuckles.

“He’s been destroying this man’s reputation and making sure he gets punished this entire time. Isak can be scary as hell.”

“Yeah he can.”
“Still. I’d probably die for him now.”

Me too. Even thinks.

“They broke his heart in that lab. They completely broke him. We need to help him, Even. We need to love him. He’s never been loved. He’s always been treated like he’s a curse. Like something is fucking wrong with him. Like he’ll never be wanted by anyone. We need to help him heal, Even. We need to be there for him while he gets better. We have to. The other night after two drinks he told me that he’s incomplete because he cannot touch. He told me that he cannot believe in love because if he does, then he will be heartbroken his whole life, because ‘to love or be loved truly is to able to say: I have been touched.’ Isn’t that the saddest thing you’ve ever heard? We have to love him, Even. Do you understand me? We have to. If we don’t do it, who will? We have to—”

Eskild chokes up and his heart is so big, Even feels tears in his eyes too, feels the lump in his throat too. He’s so happy Isak found him. He can’t believe people like Eskild still exist in the world. Even would probably kill for him, too.

He’s so happy Eskild cares this deeply for Isak, he’s crying with it.

“Yes. I understand. Yes.”

.

Eskild leaves them. And Even knows he can sleep on the floor for good measures. But he doesn’t want to. He wants to sleep beside Isak. He wants to look at him. He wants to feel him, even if it’s from afar. The bed is big enough to hold both of them and Isak doesn’t move that much in his sleep.

Even will just be careful.

He climbs into bed with him and watches him. They spent so much time kissing, yet Even can’t wait to do it again. If Isak wants to, if he wishes to, when they’re both sober this time. Even wants to try when they’re sober.

He wants to so bad.

“He’ll kill me if I let you see.”

Even’s chest hurts at the memory. Let me see what? What is he hiding? Why does Isak constantly hide his chest from him? Even has never seen his chest.

The ugliest part of him wants to look, to lift his shirt and just look, but he would never forgive himself, ever.

He watches him, stares at him as moonlight draws the loveliest lines and shapes across his face. He watches him until Isak’s scrunches up and his muscles constrict like he’s in pain. He watches him until Isak no longer looks peaceful and in a content state. He watches him until worry overwhelms him, for Isak is curled around himself, thrashing around and grunting like he’s in pain, like in unbearable agony.

He must be dreaming of Carlsen and Geir. He must be dreaming of the lab and the experiments, Even thinks.

And he can do nothing but watch in horror and helplessness until Isak stops rocking his body from side to side. Even can’t wake him, can’t hold him, can’t shake him to awareness. Even can do nothing but wait and hope that his nightmare ends soon, feeling useless and miserable.
Even watches him.

Isak settles into a sleeping position again. He stops thrashing around. He stops moving. And Even feels relief wash over him. But it does not last. For Isak begins weeping.

Weeping.

Isak weeps in his sleep like his heart is bleeding in his dreams. And Even feels like a new wound with Isak’s name on it has added itself to his own heart.

He can’t bear it. He cannot stand it.

Eskild wasn’t lying.

Fuck.

Even rolls on the bed and hopes, prays, implores the skies that they let him have this. He rolls on the bed until he reaches Isak’s body, until he can almost feel the warmth emanating from him.

And Even knows this is some form of Russian Roulette. He knows this could ruin everything. He knows Isak will never forgive him when he wakes up. He knows all of this. He knows. But he can’t sit still. He cannot.

Even closes his eyes, reaches for Isak, and embraces him in the dark.

Oh.

Nothing.

Nothing happens.

Even is not burning. Even is not shrieking in pain and Isak is not waking up from the force of the impact.

Nothing happens.

Oh my god.

Even holds him closer, and nearly falls off the bed when Isak latches onto him in his sleep, like a silver lining in an otherwise grim nightmare. Isak holds onto his chest and doesn’t let go. And Even is too busy trying not to scream to keep him from melting into him.

I can touch you! We are not wet. I can just touch you!

But Even’s happiness does not last, because Isak keeps weeping silently against his chest. Like someone who does not get to cry and let emotions out during the day, so their body and subconscious does it for them when they’re in deep slumber.

Everything about Isak breaks his heart.

Even holds him until Eskild comes in and finds Isak sprawled all over his chest.

Fuck.

FUck. fuck. Fuck. fuck.
“It’s- It’s not what you think!” Even tries to push Isak away, to shake him awake, maybe. Isak would know how to recover from this. “I took something, so like I don’t feel pain? I think?” he tries, panicked, because Isak won’t let go of him. His cheek smeared over his collarbone.

Eskild sighs.

Even waits for a dramatic breakdown.

“Relax,” says Eskild. “He doesn’t know it. But I can touch him, too.”

Chapter End Notes

tw: some sadness, Eskild talks about a bad Grindr date, internalized homophobia, alcohol.

Isak is a very sad puppy whose psyche is trying to protect him any way it can. Even can touch him when he's asleep. he works off of that next chapter. tries to find ways to test if he can touch him when he's awake too. Eskild can touch him. dun dun dun. has been able to for some time.

next chapter Isak tries to open up to Even about why he doesn’t show his chest, but it doesn't go exactly as planned. also Even tries to come out to the guys and Isak is not happy with some reactions.

any guesses what next chapter title might be?

thank you for reading <333 i miss all of you too. i'm sorry i'm not around as much. lots of stuff going on. but stop deactivating your accounts I'm so sad to see this fandom dying T___T please stop. also thank you for leaving comments. i read all of them and i want to reply but i keep procrastinating i am the worst. i'm going to do my best from now on

As I mentioned before, this series might be over but i'm here until i finish all my WIPs

thank you love you (thanks for all the anon love as well im sorry i dont reply on tumblr as much.)

Leave a comment if you felt something, anything.
<3333
Philosophy of Secrets

Chapter Summary

"No one has ever kissed me there before."
"Was it not comforting?"

ft. Even & Eskild scheming, Lea, reveals, baths, Isak and Even shampoo each other’s hair, a cabin, a lake, Led Zeppelin, softness, raunchiness, a hickey, secrets.

Chapter Notes

hiii. i wanted to update tomorrow but my mom hit me with that surprise visit so you get this instead. took out one scene and will put it in the next chapter.

happy monday <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What do you mean you can touch him too?” Even whispers to Eskild in the dark hallway. He’s frowning. His heart is beating fast, too fast for his liking.

He’s barely had time to wrap his head around the fact that he can touch Isak again. But those short minutes were enough to cement the vacuous idea that he was special again into his brain, to carve the thought that he could somewhat restore what he had with Isak into the back of his mind.

A vain thought, but a thought nonetheless. Wishing to be special, to be the only one capable of something, even if it’s merely touching another being, isn’t that what it means to be human?

“Since when?!” Even insists because Eskild hasn’t answered him yet.

“I don’t know,” Eskild whispers, not nearly as alarmed as Even currently is. “You’re gonna wake Isak and Linn. Do you know how difficult it is for both of them to fall asleep?”

“Eskild, you need to tell me!” Even whisper-shouts, a hand coming up to curl around Eskild’s forearm before being withdrawn apologetically.

He’s never actually touched Eskild, he realizes. Touching has begun to bear more weight after Isak. It’s more… significant. More important. Every touch matters.

A lot of things bear so much more weight now.

“No, I don’t need to tell you anything, Austin,” Eskild says, and he doesn’t appear to be shaken by Even’s earlier touch. He moves back and wraps his robe around himself more tightly. “What I need is my beauty sleep. You and I will speak tomorrow.”

“But-”
“No buts. I’m going back to bed and you’re gonna go back to cuddling your boyfriend. Tomorrow I’ll make sure to pull you aside after you make us these famous eggs Isak spent a whole hour fantasizing about, and we’ll talk. Deal?”

“Isak is not my boyfriend,” Even mumbles under his breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. And you’ll need to tell me why you keep calling me Austin.”

Even does as he’s told and goes back into Isak’s room. He entertains his anxious thoughts for a total of twenty seconds before he sees Isak curled around himself on his side of the bed—as if waiting for Even to come back—and he feels himself unwind again.

How could he feel upset at the thought of other people potentially being able to touch Isak now? How could he? It’s all Isak wants. And Isak deserves to be able to feel whoever’s touch he craves. Even has no right to mourn the loss of his silly “exclusive status”. None at all.

So he lies down and takes him in. Isak and his long lashes and strong features under the moonlight. Isak and his curly hair and his cute nose and his cupid bow. Isak and his walls which melt around him when his brain isn’t scheming and plotting, when he sleeps, when he just breathes.

Isak looks like he’s basking in a pleasant dream now. His face is no longer all constricted muscles and rough lines. He’s no longer crying. But he’s still on his side, his arms open as if he's waiting to be embraced, as if his body can feel where Even’s is and is naturally opening up for it. Like magnets. Like opposite forces feeling the same pull.

Their bond is no longer there, but Even is still drawn to him. Some might call it simple attraction.

Even reaches for him with his right hand, cups his cheek in his palm and sighs when Isak nuzzles against it, craving it even in the deepest of slumbers. Even thumbs his dimple, brushes his fingers against the skin there and tries not to wake him, tries to be gentle and tender like Isak likes it.

Isak is warm. His hair is still damp and Even’s hand is buzzing with heat. He wishes he could touch him all over. But he shouldn’t get too close. Sleep is already pulling at his eyelids, already engulfing his brain. He doesn’t wish to startle Isak in the morning by waking up pressed to him or holding him.

Isak could panic and end up burning him again.

Even keeps his distance, takes his hand back once he yawns for the fifth time.

He watches him and he falls sleep.

He sleeps.

And when he wakes for a moment in the middle of the night, he feels Isak all over him, chest to chest, legs twined, arms linked, Isak’s face in the crook of his neck, his mouth hovering over Isak’s temple. They feel like one.

And Even wants to try and push him away, to leave his embrace. But sleep pulls him in again. It feels so good to be in his arms, to have Isak in his. How could he push him away under such circumstances?

Even sleeps.
Even awakes anxious and apprehensive. He sometimes forgets his whereabouts upon regaining consciousness. But not this time. He knows exactly where he is before even opening his eyes or feeling his limbs.

He can still feel the press of Isak’s muscles against his own, still smell his scent on his skin.

Yet when Even finally dares to take in his surroundings, he does not feel Isak. Isak is not in his arms. Isak isn’t even in bed.

“Morning princess.” Isak’s honey voice startles him into a seating position. It’s much deeper than he’s used to. This isn’t Isak’s regular voice.

“Huh?”

“It’s 10 in the morning,” Isak pauses to clear his throat, as if he’s heard Even’s thought. “Are you gonna sleep all day?”

He’s fully clothed and sitting at his desk. He seems to be reading a book, holding a cup of coffee over his mouth. And he looks unbothered by Even’s presence in his bed.

“Hello?” Isak speaks again, tilting his head to the side a bit. He looks amused by Even taking his sweet time to respond to a simple jab.

“Fuck, give me a second.” Even groans, his own voice slightly deeper than normal. He sits up straighter and stretches his arms over his head.

“Yes, make yourself at home.” Isak says with sarcasm in his voice. “Would you perhaps like to do some yoga in the living room? Eskild holds a class in the morning that no one attends.”

“Wait. Did you really call me princess just now?” Even pauses mid-stretch and squints his eyes.

“I may have. Why?”

“Who are you?” Even chuckles.

“Whatever. It’s called humor.”

“You called me Princess,” Even repeats. “I’m going to document this.”

“Well. Do as you please,” Isak turns his attention back to his book, his usual cold demeanor controlling every single muscle in his body and indicating that he’s not here for early morning banter. “Eskild says everyone who spends the night in this apartment is a princess. So you’ll get called that plenty today.”

Even attempts a smile, but a sinking feeling settles in his stomach instead. He suddenly remembers why his brain is hurting.

- He can touch Isak again.
- Other people can touch him too.
- Isak might have woken up in Even’s arms and found out about all of this.
- They spent over thirty minutes making out in the shower and now both of their voices are hoarse.

Even can’t pick a thought to focus on.
“I’d say I hope I didn’t burn you last night, but no one asked you to crash in my bed.” Isak speaks and fills the space in his brain. *Oh.*

This probably means that Isak didn’t wake up pressed to Even and that he has no idea that they can touch again—allegedly, when Isak is asleep, for example.

“Uh. Sorry. I was a bit too drunk to ride my bike last night.”

“You could have shared with Eskild or even Linn.”

“Oh, I was. Uh. I was drunk so I didn’t think,” Even lies.

“And how could Eskild let you sleep in my room?” Isak stands up now and squints at Even, and a feeling even more gut-churning finds home in his insides.

*He doesn’t remember.*

“You don’t remember?” Even blurs out. He’s not sure what he’s referring to specifically. But he hopes for Isak to flush, or for a sign of recollection to show on his face. His lips still ache from all the sucking and kissing and biting and licking. Isak cannot have forgotten.

How could he.

“Remember what?” Isak looks at him with a blank expression.

Even is still slightly irritated when Eskild pulls him aside after breakfast. He didn’t burn the eggs, but he came close.

“What’s with the long face?”

“Nothing,” Even sighs then attempts to put on a smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Did Isak give you shit for cuddling him?”

“No. He, uh, he doesn’t really know? I mean I think he forgot everything that happened last night.”


“Shh!” Even whispers, turning around to make sure that Isak isn’t around. “He’s gonna hear us.”

“Excuse me? He forgot!?” Eskild scoffs again. “Not under my watch. There’s absolutely no way I’m letting him forget that he threw up all over our bathroom. This guy has been living with us for months and he’s never bothered to clean once! And I know you tried your best last night, Even. But I read somewhere that it takes a lot of effort to get rid of like vomit and stuff, and I’m gonna have to sit on a sticky toilet for the next few weeks. No, I’m not letting him forget.”

“Jesus, Eskild,” Even grimaces at the images suddenly flooding his brain, but he chuckles. Eskild is quite the character.

“But wait,” Eskild frowns. “Did he, uh, did he also forget that you two…”

“That we two what?” Even challenges him despite his cheeks heating up and his eyes widening.

“‘Hung out’ in the shower?” Eskild smiles knowingly and Even doesn’t know how to describe the
squirming sensation that overtakes him.


“I think only gays can touch him or something,” Eskild explains. “I mean Linn said she touched him too. And she claims to be straight, but like who’s still straight these days? Am I right?”

“Uh. Well, I like your theory. It’s very cool. But I doubt it. My mom was able to touch him too. It was a long time ago though.”

“Uhm. Your point?” Eskild asks with a genuinely puzzled expression.

“Uh, she had me?”

“Lesbians have kids too, Even,” Eskild sighs dramatically. “I thought you were more educated than this. I’m disappointed.”

“What?” Even actually chuckles. “I meant I think I’d know if my mom was a lesbian.”

“She doesn’t have to be a lesbian. Bisexual would work. You’re pan, right?”

“Eskild, my mom is not bisexual. She’s not into women. I’m telling you,” Even insists despite laughter bubbling up inside him. He’s never had a conversation such as this one before.

“How would you know? Don’t you think you’re being close-minded and presumptuous? Older women are allowed to love women too. I’m so disappointed, Even. You have no idea.”

“Eskild, oh my god-”

“Did your mom give you a run-through of her sex life? How do you know-”

“Uh, why are we talking about Julie’s sex life so early in the morning?” Isak startles both of them, making them jump a little.

Even is both worried that Isak overheard and confused by Eskild’s words. He actually has no idea who his mother fancies or if she fancies anyone at all. He knows almost nothing about her these days.

Eskild on the other hand is smiling to himself.

“I was just messing with your little friend here,” he admits, giggling.

“Please leave Even alone, Eskild. I think you’ve done enough.”

“I’ve done enough? Me? Says the boy who threw up all over our bathroom last night.”

“What? I did not!” Isak frowns, suddenly horrified.

He really did forget everything.

Even doesn’t know if he should laugh or cry.
“Uh, you can stay if you want,” Isak tells him when Even announces that he’s going home. “Or something. I don’t know.”

Even would let himself be charmed by the sudden deterioration of Isak’s vocabulary—now using phrases like “or something”. He could let himself read into Isak’s mannerisms, into the way he’s looking at his feet instead of giving him that long cold stare. He could let himself believe that Isak is acting coy and nervous. But he needs to go home. He needs to leave and think. These ups and downs have been feeling like riding a neverending rollercoaster, except that Even never stopped feeling nauseous.

He just wishes for the guessing game to stop for a minute or two. Did Isak forget? Is he pretending that he forgot? Does it even matter? What are we? You asked me to kiss you. I never kissed anyone like I kissed you. I want to do it again and it freaks me out.

“I’m gonna head home for the day. My head hurts with the hangover and all.”

“Okay. I see.”

Isak walks him outside and it’s warm for the end of April. “Wanna go to the pool this week?” he asks him, and his voice still sounds hoarse and deep.

He hopes he doesn’t get sick from spending so much time making out under the shower. Is that even a thing? Can someone get sick after that?

“I don’t know. I’ll let you know,” Even answers honestly.

“Okay.”

Even finds Adrian entertaining Julie in his kitchen. Guilt takes over when he realizes that he forgot about him these past twelve hours, never bothering to check his phone after the altercation with Isak.

“I’m the biggest douchebag asshole in the universe and I need you to forgive me,” Adrian greets him with remorseful eyes once they make it to Even’s room.

He reaches for his hands and Even instinctively flinches, as if his body feels inadequate allowing Adrian to touch him.

“Oh.”


The word feels heavy and wrong on his tongue. He’s somehow implying that he’s developed this ‘reflex’ from spending time with Isak. It couldn’t be more wrong. He only ever wants to touch him when he’s with him.

“It’s okay,” Adrian sighs. “I sent you a few texts to apologize for acting like an asshole but you didn’t answer. So here I am.”

“You were mean to Isak, not to me.”

“Ugh, I know!” Adrian sighs. “I’ll try to talk to him. I asked Eskild to arrange something but he said that he probably doesn’t remember.”

The reminder stings.
“Yeah, he probably doesn’t.”

“I’m sorry though. I was drunk and he always gives you such a hard time and he was so cocky. It got on my nerves.”

“Isak doesn’t give me a hard time,” Even frowns.

“I know. I meant like, he has you pining and drowning in feelings.”

“Huh? I’m not pining, what the hell?” Even chuckles nervously. “I’m just worried about him. That’s all.”

“Yeah right.”

Adrian spends the evening over. He watches a movie with Julie in the living room while Even sleeps in his room. He needs to sleep. That’s what he needs. When he sleeps, he doesn’t think.

So he sleeps.

.

Isak messages Even that he’s outside his door at 00:23.

“What!” Even groans to himself when he realizes that it’s 00:31 and that Isak has probably left.

Even runs out of his room to get the door and wakes Adrian who’s under a light cover on the couch by the TV.

“Isak.”

“Hi,” Isak whispers, probably because he thinks Julie is sleeping. He’s wearing one of Even’s older shirts, one of the four he stole before leaving for the lab. Even had no idea he still kept them.

The sight makes him yearn for a time when things were simple, gentle, tender. And Isak looks bashful, almost embarrassed to be standing at his front door again.

Even wonders if he remembers all the times they ended up just like this, whispering in front of his home. He wonders if he remembers the time Even dragged him inside without speaking a word to hold him up against the wall.

“What’s going on?” Even asks, worried, because why else would Isak come to him so late when he saw him in the morning.

“What’s going on?” Even asks, worried, because why else would Isak come to him so late when he saw him in the morning.

“Nothing. I just. I just wanted to-”

Isak pauses. And it takes Even a moment to realize that it’s because Adrian is standing behind him in nothing but shorts.

“What’s happening? Even, come back to sleep,” Adrian mumbles, his voice groggy with sleep.

“Oh.” Isak mouths. “I, uh. I’m sorry. I didn’t realize-”

“Hey, what?” Even frowns at Isak’s choice of words. This is a misunderstanding in the making. This is how all those frustrating scenes on TV go down. Isak is making up stories in his head. “No-”

“I’m, uh. I’m gonna go. It was presumptuous of me to come here so late without alerting you ahead
of time. I shouldn’t have assumed that you were-”

“It’s not what you think!” Even interrupts him and hopes his mother cannot hear. He turns around to Adrian who finally understands what’s going on.

“Oh hey, Isak,” he greets him and there’s no malice in his voice.

“Oh, Adrian. Just go back to sleep. It’s fine,” Even turns to tell him.

And he doesn’t think much of it when he lets his hand fall on Adrian’s shoulder. It’s a casual touch he would give anyone. It’s just a touch.

But Isak’s face somewhat slices into his heart. It’s just a touch, but it’s enough to paint devastation on Isak’s features.

“He’s just crashing on the couch. Nothing’s going on between Adrian and me,” Even tells him sincerely once the door has closed and it’s the two of them in the dimly lit hallway. He’s shirtless too, but he trusts Isak to trust him. Even has no reason to lie to him.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care.”

Liar.

“I just wanted to check on you cause you looked upset this morning, and I went out for a walk cause I couldn’t sleep. That’s all,” says Isak. “I don’t care what you do with Adrian. I know you have needs. I don’t care.”

“I’m not saying that you care. I’m saying that there’s nothing.”

“But there could be. Something. There could be.”

“What? No, there couldn’t. What are you-”

Even pauses. It sinks in. He’s a bit slower than Isak. Sometimes, he needs a minute to catch up. But there could be. Isak isn’t referring to the plausibility or likelihood of Even wishing to have something with Adrian. He’s speaking of the feasibility and possibility of Even&Adrian. There could be as opposed to there may be.

Even&Adrian. They could if they wanted.

Even&Isak. They couldn’t even if they did.

Jealousy or simply envy because Isak doesn’t even have the option to want? Even doesn’t know.

“But there won’t be,” Even answers in Isak’s language and hopes that he gets it.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Isak leaves. Even thinks, broods, goes back to his daily scripts.

It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter.

Even hasn’t seen Isak in a few days. He hasn’t contacted him about their potential pool date. He hasn’t messaged him anything condescending in days.
It’s radio silence and Even wonders if it’s because of the Adrian incident. But then again, he made sure to explain himself and leave no doubt in Isak’s mind. If he wishes to be difficult, it’s not Even’s fault.

*It doesn’t matter.*

Even starts letting go of his phone a bit, no longer expecting Isak to reach out. He swims without him one day. He does a few laps, lazily at first, then with more acharnement. His lungs burn when he finishes, but it feels good to have something else to focus on, to do things for himself and by himself. It feels good.

He’s with Mutta and the boys when Lea calls him in hysterics.

“I need to see you.”

Lea is wearing a lovely flower patterned dress and brand new sneakers, her feet dangling from the stool she’s perched on.

“Hello,” Even waves awkwardly as he enters the small coffee shop. He hasn’t seen her since she becried Isak’s ways and accused him of destroying their family. He’s a bit nervous. “How have you been?”

She doesn’t look too well when Even takes her in. The emptiness in her eyes reminds him of Isak’s, the dark bags underneath them all too familiar. She’s not sleeping much. Even can tell.

“What’s wrong?” He asks, his own smile leaving his face now.

“Even, you need to be honest with me. You need to tell me the truth, okay?” she asks of him, her voice shaking with emotion he’s never seen her convey before. “Please?”

“About what? What’s going on?”

“Is it true?” she asks, leaning closer to him despite the fact that he’s standing and that she’s still on her stool. They’re almost the same height.

“Is what true?”

“The emancipation stuff. The stuff Isak says they did to him. Is it true?”

*Oh, love.*

Even’s heart sinks. Isak does not want her to know. Their parents treat her well. Even can tell from the new clothes and the general obliviousness. Isak would never forgive him.

“I, I don’t know.”

“Even, please don’t lie to me! I know we’re not close. And I know I’m just a dumb child but I need to know. Is it true that they hurt him and mistreated him? Is it true what everybody is saying? I can’t stand it! Please tell me.”

She has tears in her eyes now, and Even realizes that he doesn’t even know the answer to her questions. He doesn’t know what her mother specifically did to Isak. He doesn’t know the extent of the emotional and psychological abuse he went through. All he knows is the results and the mental scars that show in Isak’s demeanor and reactions to most things. All he knows is that they made him
live in a basement and that his mother isn’t very well in her head.

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t,” he tells her.

She turns to the side to fetch something from her plum Kanken backpack, and she’s shaking with emotion and nerves. Even doesn’t know what to expect when she places four old and crumpled notebooks on the counter between them.

“I found these,” she breathes. “In a box around the house. I found more, but it’s the same thing. They’re all the same.”

“What are you talking about?” Even frowns.

“They belonged to Isak, these notebooks. I don’t know why my dad hid them in his storage boxes, but he did. They’re dated, too. And I don’t know what to think anymore. I don’t know but the dates correspond to the time mom lost her shit when I was still super young and when Isak started becoming... like this.”

Even reaches for one of the notebooks, unsure of what to expect. Lea looks embarrassed and scared, and Even isn’t sure he’s allowed to peer into thirteen year old Isak’s thoughts. He’s not sure Isak will forgive him.

“Just keep them,” Lea tells him. “I don’t know what to do. You’re the only person I could think of.”

Even smokes an entire pack of cigarettes. He walks around the city, pauses around Aker Brygge to take in the scenery, until his skin stops crawling. He walks and he walks and he walks. Then around five in the afternoon, he calls the only person he can think of.

“Jesus Christ,” Eskild sighs.

He flips through the pages carefully at first, one by one, as if expecting to stumble upon other words, then he gives up and skims through the rest.

The same sentence, written over and over again, filling up every page, every corner, like a silly punishment a teacher in elementary school makes one go through.

Except that the words aren’t about not chewing gum in class or forgetting to do homework. No.

The words spell something else. Something personal. Something hurtful. Something that could be truthful, but not with this level acharnement. Something a thirteen year old shouldn’t have to write over and over again in capital letters, as if to carve the words into his heart, his mind, his soul.

“I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL.
Eskild throws the first notebook and flips through the second. There’s no hint of his ebullient personality left on his face. Nothing but devastation and worry. Even smokes silently beside him. Eskild lets him smoke in the living room at Kollektivet, because Isak is out with Linn on their daily stroll, and probably because he can see that the smoke and the burn down his throat are the only things anchoring him right now.

Eskild holds his head. Even smokes.

“Jesus fucking Christ. What are we dealing with here?!” Eskild finally exclaims when he throws the fourth notebook away.

“His sister says there’s more notebooks just like these in their home,” says Even, his voice is hoarse and void, like it belongs to someone who doesn’t care. “I don’t know what kind of thirteen year old would try to deprogram himself like this.”

“You think he realized he might be gay and decided to do this to himself at thirteen?!?”

“His mother is a bit much. Maybe he was scared of her. Maybe he read about some method to do that online or something.”

“What, like on a DIY gay conversion blog?”

Eskild breaks into a stupid chuckle first. It’s a horrible situation. All of this is awful. Even feels terrible for finding out and for sharing it with Eskild. But he trusts him, and he couldn’t keep it to
himself. He would have gone mad trying to bear it alone.

They both laugh at Eskild’s awful joke.

“This is around the time he—” Eskild pauses, as if weighing his words.

“Around the time he what? Started burning people?”

“Yes among other things.”

“What other things?” Even sits up, buries the remainder of his cigarette into a mug. “The stuff you won’t tell me? The stuff you wouldn’t let me see?”

“Yes. I guess.”

Even stills, his heart clenching around itself. Isak’s chest. A part he does not show to anyone like it’s the key to figuring him out, like anyone could decode him if they could see.

It hurts. Even’s chest feels tight. He wonders if it’s the same type of ache Isak described feeling when he looked at him.

The thought is dark, way too dark. It takes Even places he hasn’t been in years. But still.

*Does Isak hurt himself?*

“Fuck!” Even stands up, pushing the table back in the process.

“You need to calm down. Okay? I know it’s easy to lose it, but this isn’t our battle to win. This isn’t about you and it isn’t about me. This is his story. All we can do is be there for him while he works through things. We don’t get to be upset. We don’t get to assume things and judge him.”

“I know. I know, god! He probably told you about my so-called savior complex. If he talked about my eggs, he probably mentioned his favorite theory of all time.”

“No, he didn’t,” Eskild smiles. “But I can see it.”

“No, you just love him too much.”

Even chokes on the word. *What?*

“I don’t love him,” Even rectifies, a nervous chuckle escaping his mouth.

“So you hate him?” Eskild counters.

“What? No! It’s not just either or.”

“You’re indifferent to him?”

Even has both hands on his hips now, and the day’s emotional toll has left him feeling drained and see-through. So no. He’s not having this conversation. Not today, not right now, not with Eskild.

“How I wish someone could be this indifferent to me, huh.” Eskild teases and Even cannot go down that rabbit hole.

“I hope you don’t think I’m a piece of shit for sharing with you what Lea showed me,” Even says,
changes the topic because he needs to. “I just know you care about him and I just didn’t want to be rash and impulsive about things for once.”

“Well now thanks to you, I’m probably going to adopt Isak by the end of this year,” Eskild sighs dramatically. “But don’t worry. I think I would have done the same thing if I were you. Some secrets are less dangerous when shared. If anything, I think I understand things better now.”

“Things?”

“I think I get it. And I would tell you, but Isak would never forgive me.”

“I will never find out then,” Even protests.

“If he doesn’t wish for you to find out, then maybe you shouldn’t.”

“How is it fair?”

“It’s not about whether it’s fair. You don’t get to decide if it’s fair. Some stories need to be told by the person who lived them because they aren’t ours to tell,” says Eskild. “Doesn’t it make your skin crawl when someone tries to tell your story? Even if they repeat it in your words, doesn’t it infuriate you that someone would even try if they haven’t lived it or something like it? Like those movies about gays dying in the 80s made by straight men. Don’t those movies piss you off?”

“He will never tell me anything,” Even admits, feeling discouraged and exhausted. “He doesn’t trust me.”

“He does. I feel like you’re the one who doesn’t trust him.”

Heraklit

19:00

Pool tomorrow?

It’s closed tomorrow

For real?

Can we go to another one?

Don’t have membership

Then the day after tomorrow?

We could do that

Why what’s up?

Nothing

I just haven’t seen you in a while

You could still come outside of a pool you know

But then I won’t be able to touch you

Who says I’d let you touch me in a pool
It’s about having the option to
Not about doing it
You get it
I do
I don’t think you realize how upset this makes me
Im sorry
I can come over to your place tomorrow
Who knows
Maybe it will rain
I have a bathtub
And I have a kitchen. Your point?
Isak is there in the afternoon. He’s wearing Even’s t-shirt, dark blue jeans, dirty converses, and a
snapback. His cheeks are flushed and his eyes are green and hopeful.
Julie rejoices at the door. She almost hugs him, but Even stands between them before she gets the
chance to.
“You didn’t tell me Isak was coming. How could you!” she complains to Even while putting on her
shoes.
She’s meeting friends and Even has no idea if that’s even true. Images of his mother meeting a
female lover suddenly pop in his head, and for a moment, he cannot breathe.
“Julie, it’s always wonderful to see you,” Isak tells her and he’s so cute when he’s polite and
charming like this. No wonder Julie is so fond of him. She’s never this happy to see Adrian.
“I can always cancel this thing and hang out with you boys. What do you say?”
“Mom.” Even smiles at her but his tone is begging her to leave.
“Alright, alright. I’m leaving. Have fun.”
They both stare at the floor when the door closes and it’s just the two of them. The air is thick and
heavy around them, the tension alive and palpable, and Even entertains the thought of pressing him
against the wall and just kissing him senseless—bond or no bond, burns be damned, “I AM NOT A
HOMOSEXUAL” long forgotten—for half a second before Isak starts speaking.
“So.”
“So,” Even echoes.
“Where’s Adrian?”
“I don’t know.”
“Isn’t he your boyfriend now or something?”


Even rolls his eyes and walks past Isak to the kitchen. “You’re incredibly annoying. Do you know that?”

“Excuse me? I’m just asking a question. No need to be all sensitive,” Isak barks right back, but when Even turns to look at him, he’s smiling.

“It won’t rain today.”

“I heard.”

“I still have a bathtub.”

“Do you brag about your bathtub to everyone who visits your apartment or just to people you cannot physically touch unless you’re surrounded by bodies of water or are in a wet state?”

“The latter.” Even smiles.

“Hurtful,” Isak grimaces then makes his way to the kitchen. He removes his jacket and folds it over a chair. But it’s not until he removes his gloves, his snapback, and his shoes, that Even’s heart starts hammering in his chest. “But I guess I can see physical and mental benefits to whatever it is you’re suggesting by speaking of your bathtub. So I’m not too opposed to it.”

“You’re not too opposed to it? So just a little bit?”

“I mean I’m not 100% on board. Your limbs are very large and I am large myself. I don’t know if you noticed but I got a bit taller. So chances are we’ll end with cramps and sore muscles if we try whatever you’re suggesting in your bathtub. And these drawbacks might trump the benefits, namely the release of the good chemicals and transmitters.”

“Sorry, you lost me when you started talking about how “large” you are.”

“Oh piss off,” Isak rolls his eyes, but he smiles and hides his face behind his hands like he doesn’t want Even to see. He’s so cute.

“So you’re here to release the good chemicals in your body?” Even stops in front of him to breathe him in, maybe. He likes watching Isak’s resolve melt away when they’re this close.

“Yeah. Might as well. Since I’m here. You know,” he mumbles, his eyes on the floor. “My therapist is on vacation this week. My mental health is in jeopardy.”

“You’re full of shit,” Even chuckles, now removing his shoes too.

“So are you,” Isak grins, following Even’s movements like he can’t wait.

“There’s no bond to hide behind this time,” Even whispers. And they’re too close.

“It’s just a bath. Get over yourself.”

“You first.”

Isak was right. The tub is too small for both of them, but they make do. Even has never been in a tub with his shorts on, but “Anything for Isak Valtersen, huh?”

“You wanted this. You suggested this!” Isak protests.
“I guess I did.”

Isak is wearing black shorts and Even’s t-shirt and he looks obdurate and on the defense, even more so than before they got into the tub, as if he’s talked himself into his usual cold state again. His walls are high, too high around him. The Isak who asked Even to kiss him in the shower is not here in the tub with him.

Not yet, a voice whispers in Even’s head.

They settle into an awkward position. They’re face to face, both on either side of the tub. Even’s legs are spread wide and bent around the knees, while Isak’s are pressed to his own chest between Even’s thighs. They’re not quite touching. But it’s inevitable.

The warm water runs and helps drown out the noise and the awkwardness. However peculiar their relationship is (and always has been), there is no platonic explanation to taking a bath together, even if they’re not completely naked. There’s no handling this objectively or denying the pull or calming the nerves. None of this is ordinary. Even can’t help but want.

Isak, on the other hand, won’t even look at him.

Focus.

Right. This isn’t a sexual experiment. The purpose of this torturous process is to get Isak to open up to him.

“Why do you never take your shirt off?” Even asks, and he tries to sound playful, tries to claim the banter card just in case it backfires. And it works. Isak isn’t particularly offended or affected by the question.

“You drool over me with my clothes on already. I’m trying to spare you,” Isak jokes. And Even has no idea where he suddenly got this sense of humor from.

“What a few months living with Eskild will do to you. Huh?”

“Ha. If he only knew the number of times he left Even tongue-tied, heartstrings-tied, everything-tied. If he only knew how Even is feeling right now, sitting in his own tub with his underwear on and staring at the very boy whose walls he’s trying to climb. The very boy with wet curls framing his face, lashes long and heavy, skin aching to be touched and worshipped.

If he only knew.

“I’ll take it you won’t be showing me your nipples anytime soon,” Even says when he manages to clear his throat and stop staring.

“I don’t think you can handle my nipples, Bech Næsheim,” Isak smiles, but he looks down and something like sorrow takes over his eyes.

“Why not? Are they too big? Do you have five nipples or something?”

“No. I just. I don’t think you want to see.”

Oh.

Oh.
“I do,” he says with nothing but seriousness in his tone, stifling the hurt in his chest.

There’s silence and the secrets between them suddenly feel too heavy. Everything is too deafening.

“Whatever it is, I don’t care,” Even promises. “I don’t. I promise you.”

Isak doesn’t respond. He looks uncomfortable now, like he regrets coming over, like this wasn’t what he “signed up for”. And it’s true. He came to be touched and to release “the good chemicals”, not to be questioned and forced into talking about his childhood trauma.

“It’s whatever,” Isak brushes it off.

And Even should know better. He knows how difficult it is to talk about certain things. He knows how secrets can become heavier than intended when they’ve been kept inside for a while. He knows. Even knows how he, himself, has been pretending that some things never happened. He knows how difficult it is to trust someone with a piece of oneself that one does not even entrust oneself with.

Even knows.

“You good?” Isak asks, careful, treading water, both figuratively and literally. He’s an enigma, far more emotionally intelligent than Even could ever be.

And Even tell him about the overwhelming shame that’s just washed over his body, making him dip his limbs into the water around them despite the discomfort to hide the skin stretching over them. Even could tell him his deepest secrets and coax Isak’s out of him. But he won’t.

The prospect of using his own story to get Isak to open up feels suddenly outrageous and unacceptable. He won’t emotionally manipulate Isak into opening up to him by offering him pieces of his trauma.

Still, he’ll give him something. A secret. A different secret, but a secret nonetheless.

“I set my room on fire a year or so ago,” Even muses. “I don’t know if you heard by now.”

“I did,” Isak replies almost instantly with a sigh. He sounds like he’s been holding his breath, like he expected Even to talk about something else.

“Who told you?”

“Arvid, but I didn’t pay it too much attention.”

Even understands what Eskild was referring to now. He’s frowning imagining Arvid’s version of what happened.

“Well. There isn’t much to tell,” Even sighs. “It was severe mania coupled with heartbreak from being rejected by my best friend, plus the shame of bearing feelings for another boy in the first place. Fire was also my obsession of the moment, so one thing led to another. And next thing I know my dad has left and everything has gone to shit.”

Even pauses and takes a deep breath. He’s not sure he’s ever spoken about that particular episode this concisely and objectively. He’s not sure he’s ever had to.
“I’m sorry,” Isak says like he means it.

“No need to be.”

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Why do you always thank me when I tell you something?” Even asks, his mind wandering to the time he showed Isak the coming out texts he sent his mother. He remembers how Isak thanked him for sharing that with him, how he kissed his cheek and was the sweetest person in the universe that night.

“Because you don’t owe me your trauma and your secrets,” says Isak. “You don’t owe me anything. And you still choose to tell me. It’s a compliment to my character.”

“A compliment to your character?”

“By confiding in me, you’re implicitly stating that you believe I am trustworthy. You’re making yourself temporarily vulnerable and exposing yourself to the potential threat of me exploiting your secrets,” Isak explains.

“You won’t exploit my secrets.”

“I won’t. Most of the time, the risks associated with confiding in someone are blown out of proportion and exaggerated because of one’s paranoia. And you’re right to assume that I won’t exploit what you just told me. But still. It’s just nice to know that you trust me with a secret.”


“But nobody knows your version of what happened. The secret is how you felt about all of it, not how it went down.”

“This is the deepest conversation I’ve had in my bathroom.”

“What did you expect inviting me here, really?” Isak smiles.

“I don’t know. For you to show me your nipples?” Even smiles right back. It’s a difficult conversation, but Isak’s smile make him feel at ease.

“I guess that’s a nice metaphor for getting me to confide in you.”

“What do you mean?”

“We both know why you’re suddenly taking interest in that part of my body.”

“I don’t follow.” Even furrows his brows.

“For someone who gave me so much shit about manipulating people, you sure don’t seem to mind when it’s you doing it.”

Even stills, his mouth agape. Isak could see right through him. Of course.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You said it yourself. I never take my shirt off. That indicates that I’m keeping some sort of secret that would be revealed if I were to finally do it,” Isak continues. “You get me into a tub and ask me about it. And when I brush it off, you suddenly open up to me.”
“Maybe I just felt like opening up to you.”

“Bullshit,” Isak counters, smiling. He doesn’t seem too upset by Even’s failed attempt at getting him to open up. He’s right. Even should pay attention to double standards.

“I’m sorry,” he says finally, holding Isak’s gaze.

“Don’t be. I’ve only manipulated you a couple of hundred times myself.”

“Three hundred and seven times,” Even interjects with a random number.

“Keeping track, I see.”

“Trying to make a case for myself. You’ve mistreated me enough, don’t you think? Maybe I deserve to see your nipples by now,” Even jokes.

“What if I have five nipples?”

“Three more to play with.”

“God. Shut up.” Isak splashes him with water and it makes Even let out a breathy and deep laugh.

“Who was the last person you were honest with, Even?” Isak asks, and the way he says his name makes Even’s heart skip a beat. He’s playing with water, cupping his hands together and lifting them before letting water slip between his fingers.

“Huh?”

“I mean who was the last person you confided in? Excluding me right now.”

Even thinks. He leans back against the tub and wracks his brain. He’s not sure.

“Define ‘confiding in’, ” he says.

“Saying whatever has been weighing on your mind to someone. Something dark and that fills you with worry maybe.”

Even thinks.

“Eskild?”

Isak meets his gaze and there’s defiance and a bit of resentment in his eyes.

“Something that’s about you, not about me,” Isak challenges him, his face indicating that Eskild and Even talking about him is no news to him.

“I’m not sure. My mom, perhaps,” Even replies. “I’m not sure.”

“Because you trust your mother. Because you know she’ll never fuck you over.”

“Uh, I guess.”

“See, I don’t have that.”

Even sits up, watches him carefully, following a water droplet as it glides around one of his curls. He
distracts himself from his impossible beauty. Isak’s beauty strikes him at the most random times, like now, right now, as Isak is about to spill something deep and personal. Even watches the droplet.

“Last time I confided in my mother, I lost my sense of touch.”

Even searches for Isak’s eyes, but they’re fixed on the water under him.

“Trust doesn’t come easily after something like that,” Isak adds. “Talking about things isn’t so easy and natural anymore. If anything, it’s counternatural. It’s cumbersome. It’s scary and anxiety inducing.”

“I understand.” Even nods, accepting Isak’s explanation for why he cannot confide in him, and not trying to push him any further. If Isak wants to elaborate on how his mother contributed to him losing his touch, he will. Even won’t push him.

“Do you?”

“I do,” says Even. “Nowadays, people would rather pay strangers a lot of money to listen to their problems than confide in a real person.”

“But it’s counter nature. You know? Kant said that all humans have a strong impulse to divulge oneself. He said that self-revelation is human necessity.”

“I think some people prefer to keep things to themselves,” Even shrugs. “I’m not fighting an impulse to divulge anything.”

“Some would argue that it’s the result of disappointment and bad experiences with previously confiding in someone. That maybe you opened up when the situation was fraught with risk and got hurt, so you never did it again. Still makes it counter nature.”

“Sounds like everything about me is counter nature, huh?” Even jokes but Isak doesn’t laugh.

“Why don’t you talk to your friends about things that matter? Isak asks, moving the focus of the conversation away from himself with little to no effort. “You have good friends who wouldn’t betray you.”

“I don’t wish to be a burden.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t think of you as one.”

“My thoughts are darker than theirs. The way they view me will eventually be altered if I share my thoughts with them. They will start looking for that darkness in everything I say or do. They will start seeing that darkness everywhere. Maybe I don’t want them to see how it is inside my head. Maybe it will eventually become a burden to me.”

“You speak of darkness, but I only ever see light in you.”

The words are spoken with ease but there’s a gasp at the end. Isak looks like he’s just caught himself thinking out loud. He blushes, looks away, fumbles with his fingers.

Even is flattered and flustered at once. He’s not sure where to go from here.

Is this when they flung themselves at each other after talking about philosophy and psychology? Is Even supposed to kiss him now? Does Isak want to be kissed? Are they releasing the good chemicals now? They’re not even touching.
Isak looks like he’s squirming. Even focuses on another drop of water tracing one of his locks.

“Can I shampoo your hair?” Even asks out of nowhere.

Isak mewls with his eyes closed while Even massages his scalp. They’re still sitting face to face, and Even is grateful for his long arms being able to reach Isak’s hair. His legs are still the outermost while Isak sits between them with his knees drawn to his chest.

Even’s fingers run through his scalp minutiously. He takes his time, drags his thumb and his index finger repeatedly over the spots that make Isak unwind and sigh. He shampoos his hair, pulling at his locks gently while Isak lets out outrageous little sounds of unfiltered pleasure, like he can’t help it.

They don’t speak over the course of this tedious process. It was a whimsical request that neither of them seems to be regretting as Even pours the second load of shampoo into his palms before proceeding to wash Isak’s hair a second time.

Isak leans against him while he works through his locks, no longer bothering to close his mouth, his lips perpetually parted like he’s the most relaxed he’s ever felt.

He remains like that after Even is done rinsing his hair, in a daze, his cheeks flushed, his eyes closed. He looks cozy and content. Even wishes he could snap a picture of him right now.

“I already washed your hair twice,” Even says when Isak’s eyes flutter open.

“Oh. Right,” Isak sits up, leaning away from Even in the tub. “Uh, can I do you?”

Even makes the naive mistake of opening his eyes while Isak is rinsing his hair the second time around.

It strikes him again, Isak’s impossible beauty. He can’t pinpoint what it is that draws him in quite undeniably. But it’s there, somewhere in the way his delicate features work together to paint his expressions, somewhere in the way he breathes. Can one like the way a person breathes? Even loves the way Isak breathes.

Is this indifference? Even thinks about Eskild’s words. ‘You love him too much’. This isn’t love. Even knows this. But what is it then? There’s no bond now. It’s just pure desire. It’s ironic how Even is the one burning for him.

“You okay?” Isak whispers, probably noticing the flush on Even’s cheeks, the wonder in his eyes. “Maybe the water’s too hot. You can get high off of hanging out in a hot tub.”

Why does Isak analyze and find an explanation for everything except for what they do, what they have.

“Yeah, the water. Hot.”

Even indulges, lets Isak shampoo his hair a third time and dig his fingers into his scalp. He lets him put on his mother’s conditioner and give him a mohawk. He only stops him when Isak tries to reach for his phone, which he brought into the bathroom with him, to snap a picture of Even with his shampoo mohawk.
Isak laughs and it rings inside him. Even can’t help but laugh too.

They finish washing each other’s hairs and lean back. *What now?* Is this enough serotonin and dopamine? What exactly was Isak’s plan coming here? Should they cuddle in the water? *What now?*

Isak stares at him. He’s pretty like this. Way too pretty. Has he always been this pretty? Maybe Isak’s right. Maybe Even got high off the steam alone.

“Do you miss your father?” Isak asks out of nowhere, and the question knocks the air out of Even’s lungs. Isak and his ways.

“I do,” Even answers truthfully.

“Even if you hate him?”

“Even if I hate him.”

Isak and his ways. Even spoke maybe three words about his father to Isak, but it was enough for him to paint the full picture.

“I feel the same way about my mom,” says Isak.

He still misses his mother even after everything she’s done to him. Even gives him a piece of him and Isak gives him one right back. Complimenting each other’s characters.

Even presses his knee against Isak’s thigh in the water. It’s a silly gesture, but he figures it could be comforting. Isak soaks up all touches after all, intentional and accidental alike. He appreciates even the silly ones. Even hopes Isak knows this one is intentional.

“I don’t think my dad would have bothered fighting to keep me if I filed for emancipation though.”

It’s not exactly a secret, but Even has never said the words out loud, has never allowed how he feels about his father escape the confines of his mind.

And it’s so cliché, but the way his own dad never really loved him somewhat ended up defining him. Perhaps it’s the reason he yearns for affection so clumsily, so desperately.

Even gasps when he feels Isak’s hand on his knee, his thumb caressing the skin there, his green eyes kind and understanding and tender on his own.

He’s a dream, this cold boy. His stare is ice, but his heart nurses a warm fire.

It disarms Even to know that Isak’s touching him of his own accord. There’s no impossible physical bond pulling them to one another, no hunger, no magnetic force making Isak touch him. No. Isak is touching him because he’s choosing to. Because he deems that Even likes it or needs it or yearns for it.

Even’s reaches for Isak’s face because it’s time, because Isak started it, and he pauses when his thumb lands on the soft skin of his cheek, strokes it until Isak’s mouth falls open the way it always does when Even caresses him.

Isak closes his eyes at the touch. *So sweet.*

Even does it a few times, draws lazy circles on his left cheek until Isak dips his head and presses the sweetest kiss to the side of Even’s knee, leaving him speechless and floored.
He looks up, locks eyes with Even for a moment, then does it again, kisses Even’s knee like it's a normal thing that people do.

“What was that?”

“Comfort,” Isak replies coldly.

“You’re comforting me?”

“I am.”

“Because I told you my sob story?”

“Yeah.”

“Then should I comfort you too?”

“I’m comforted when you are.”

Even holds Isak’s gaze, unflinching and with fire. You can’t say shit like this to me and claim that I don’t mean anything to you. Even wants to scream.

“No one has ever kissed my knee before,” he says instead.

“Was it not comforting? Did it bother you?” Isak asks like he means it, like he doesn’t have a clue, like his mouth latched on the first readily available bit of skin it could find.

“It was comforting.”

“Yeah?”

“C’mere,” Even says without thinking, his hands reaching for Isak’s face, pulling him in and probably giving him a backache.

But Isak yields. Even says ‘come here’ and Isak ‘comes here’. He sits up and moves his legs until they’re under him, until he’s on his knees.

“I’m here,” Isak whispers. And he’s so sweet when he yields, when he says yes, proud and defiant even in his submission, when he allows himself to want and to have.

Even cups Isak’s face with both hands, strokes his cheeks until his eyes flutter close and he sighs that delicious sigh of his, his lips parted, his hands around Even’s wrists. Like magnets, like cuffs. Even doesn’t know when they locked around his pulse, but it’s suddenly the only sensation that matters.

“You want to comfort me?” Even whispers to him, his thumbs stroking Isak’s cheekbones, making him close his eyes again, his eyelashes fluttering shut slowly, too slowly.

There’s no bond. None of that senseless fire that used to live between them and push them together. Even feels wild with desire, but it’s not the bond. It’s just Even. This is his desire and his desire alone.

“I do,” Isak replies and his voice is hoarse and low, his eyes droopy and enthralled by Even’s lips.

“Comfort me like this,” Even says before grabbing his face and pressing their lips together.

A tender, close-mouthed, and simple kiss. Even could go for more, knows Isak would let him
because he’s being like this, because his walls are down and he’s yielding impossibly. But he doesn’t.

Even kisses him once. And when he pulls back, Isak’s eyes are still closed and his mouth is openly chasing Even’s. The sight makes something stir inside his chest.

“Is this okay?” Even asks.

“Yes.”

Even kisses him again, makes Isak’s mouth open up for him. He kisses him carefully, taking his time, just nipping on his upper lip while stroking his cheek and wondering if Isak remembers that they made out against a wall for over thirty minutes.

Isak doesn’t seem to be pleased with the pace, his own hands coming up to Even’s face to deepen the kisses and sigh down his throat.

“Comfort you like this?” Isak asks before he softly bites into Even’s lower lip, driving him into a frenzy.

Even jerks forward and brings a wanting hand to Isak’s waist, making his mouth drop open and his back arch. Even’s brain catches fire when Isak moans right below his ear.

“You remember?” Even asks him between wanting kisses, because Isak is not surprised. He’s not having a meltdown over making out in a tub. He looks like this is what he came here for.

“Of course I remember,” Isak pants against his mouth.

“You let me think you didn’t.”

“It was all in your head. I never said I forgot,” Isak responds and he digs his fingers in Even’s hair, leaving a wet trail of kisses along his jaw.

“You never said you remembered either.” Even fists his right hand in Isak’s hair and pulls him to his face, kisses him deep until he moans around his tongue.

“Why would I?” Isak pants. “It doesn’t matter.”

Even pulls back and there’s spit running down his chin now. He’s mesmerized and hard and confused and hopeful.

“Then what is this?”

“This is me returning the favor,” Isak replies, then leans in to kiss him on the mouth again.

“What favor?”

“I drunkenly initiated kissing last time in my shower and you granted me my wish. Today I’m granting yours. Now we’re even.”

Even would shove him and walk away if he weren’t so aroused right now.

“Bullshit,” he groans, spreading his hands on Isak’s flesh, then kissing him again, surprised when a searching tongue meets his almost instantly.

And perhaps it’s this ambivalence that draws Even to Isak so intensely. Isak’s desire is never filtered
when he’s like this, wild and and free and desperate. His mouth continues speaking nonsense, denying and denying and denying, but his body curves, yields, melts, and moves to the rhythm of Even’s.

The fire in Isak is perhaps greater than the one in him, for he never got to do any of these things with anyone else. And Even knows that a better person would slow down their kissing, would help Isak set foot back on earth before he is filled with shame. He knows that a better person would try to understand him and speak to him before unraveling him in a bathtub at four in the afternoon.

But Isak pushes on Even’s knees until his legs are stretched out in front of him, then moves on his lap until he’s straddling him.

“Isak-”

Isak doesn’t listen. He mounts him, places both hands on Even’s shoulders to steady himself before sitting on him, on him, the most intimate part of his body laying on Even’s embarrassing and undeniable hardness.

“Isak, I’m sorry-” Even begins to say, not wishing for Isak to take offense in his arousal. But Isak kisses him again, makes his lips open and ache from the force of the kiss alone.

And they’ve kissed before, but never while Isak was sitting on the physical manifestation of his desire for him, indisputably sensing it under him but not feeling repulsed by it.

Even does not understand him, probably never will. And he can only groan and close his eyes when Isak begins moving on his lap, rocking his hips back and forth in motions bordering on dirty, kissing him with his hands on his face while Even twitches below him.

And it gets too much. Everything is too much. Even can barely breathe, losing himself in the friction. Utter abandon. Even grunts and latches onto Isak, wrapping both arms around him, and clinging.

They’re no longer kissing now. Just grinding against one another in the water. Even begins sucking on Isak’s neck, kissing it, licking it, and sinking his teeth into the soft skin there, reveling in the sounds Isak makes. And it’s going to leave a bruise. Isak will have to wear a turtleneck or a scarf.

“Fuck,” Isak moans into his ear. And it’s so dirty and so perfect, Even can’t help but buck his hips and thrust upwards, meeting him halfway, feeling him in ways he’s never felt him before, meeting his rhythm.

And he panics for two seconds when Isak stills, fearing that he’s crossed a line, but Isak kisses his temple and Even does it again, and again, and again, until Isak is a panting mess in his arms, rocking on his lap like he couldn’t care less what happens next.

Utter abandon is what happens next. The water around them sounds like a torrent as they move in it, blind with desire and arousal, and Even never knew it was possible to lose oneself this way without actually having sex.

Fuck.

Does this count as sex?

What are we doing?

Isak kisses him and Even is close, so close. He feels so selfish. He feels awful.
“Isak, fuck-”

“It’s okay. You did this for me once. It’s okay! Come on.”

And it hits him then, the fragment of the not so distant memory, of Isak panting in someone’s bed, high out of his mind and Even stroking him over his pants until he spilled in his own underwear, forcing him to wear someone’s jeans for the remainder of the night.

‘This is me returning the favor.’

This is Isak returning the favor. If I come right now, we’ll be even. Isak wants to be even.

“This isn’t just about me!” he pants while Isak breathes through his nose on top of him. He looks wrecked. “Fucking hell. Just look at you!”

“What-”

Even feels brave, so he reaches between them and cups Isak over his shorts. They won’t be ‘even’ if Even lies him on his back and takes him into his mouth. Will they?

“Ev-”

And they’re so busy being at this nonsensical war with each other that everything else seems to stop mattering. Because neither of them notices the door swinging open.

“What the fuck?!” a loud shriek makes them jump away from one another, Isak’s back hitting the side of the tub with a loud thud.

It’s Elias. ELIAS.

Fuck.

“Why are they here?! They never come to my place! Fuck!” Even panics while Isak sits on the toilet wrapped in a yellow towel, seemingly lost in thought but not nearly as worried as him.

Even will never understand his ability to remain calm and collected even in the most impossible situations.

“Only Elias saw. He closed the door almost immediately,” Isak whispers back.

Even can hear Adam, Yousef, Mutta, Mikael, and Elias in his living room on the other side of the door. Elias shouted, but the rest of the boys didn’t seem to notice, apparently.

“He’s gonna tell them.”

“I doubt it,” says Isak. “Elias doesn’t know about your, uh.”

“My what?”

“Your homosexual tendencies,” Isak replies, with his eyes fixed on the ground.

“No,” says Even, feeling slightly ashamed.

“Then he’ll keep it to himself to process it. He won’t just tell the others until he speaks to you.”
“What makes you say this?”

“He’s a good guy. He won’t hurt you.”

Even sits on the edge of a tub and thinks.

“Just go out there, entertain them for five minutes, then leave the apartment with them without them seeing me. Once you’re gone, I’ll get dressed and leave.”

“I can’t go out there.”

“Yes, you can,” Isak finally looks at him. “Elias won’t say anything. It won’t be weird. What’s weird is you locking yourself up in your bathroom while your friends wait in the living room.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Even mumbles.

“What?”

Even points to the problem between his legs. His arousal isn’t going away. Elias interrupted right as it was about to.


“What do you want me to do about it?”

“I don’t know. You were close. Just. Finish yourself off.”

“What? With you here?!”

Isak reaches for his phone and headphones. “I’ll turn around and listen to music or something. Won’t be the first time I see you in the act.”

And then he giggles. Isak actually giggles while Even burns from embarrassment. Right. Isak did catch him with a hand wrapped around himself once. Right.

It’s humiliating, but Even doesn’t have much of a choice. He closes his eyes, goes to the far corner and strokes himself while Isak keeps his back turned to him, refusing to take part in any of this when he’s the one who instigated it.

He’s listening to some rock song on his headphones with the volume turned all the way up. Even can hear almost all of it from where he stands. What an odd turn of events.

What a lovely back.

Even closes his eyes and faces away from him and his lovely back. He concentrates on the task at hand and feels empty when he finishes heaving.

“You done?” Isak turns to give him a curious look.

Even leaves the bathroom without looking at him, slamming the door after himself.

“Alright dude. What the hell was that?”

Even anticipated the words before Elias spoke them. He’s had some time to prepare for this
confrontation in the middle of a coffee shop. He spent hours perfecting the dialogue and the script in his head. He knew Elias would speak these exact words.

“It’s complicated,” Even mouths.

“He was sitting on you in the bathtub.”

“As I said complicated.”

There are many ways this could go down. Elias could focus on the fact that he was touching Isak, who cannot be touched, in the first place. Or on the fact that they were in the tub with their clothes on. Or on the fact that they were engaging in what looked like a sexual act.

Even is prepared for all three.

“He told me that he can touch people in water now,” says Elias, and it disarms Even for a moment.


“Yeah. He came over yesterday, caught up with Sana a bit.”

“He told you?!”

“Yeah, he said that thanks to you he realized that he can’t burn people in bodies of water or something,” says Elias. “We let the garden hose run until we were soaked and played basketball with Yousef. It was cool.”

“Isak played basketball with you and Yousef?!” Even blinks at him.

“Yup. He’s really good.”

Even doesn’t understand. But he knows that Isak went to the Bakkoush house to mitigate the incident in his bathtub. This was damage control and Even isn’t sure why he wasn’t filled in on it.

“Look, what you saw in the bathroom-” Even begins, but Elias interrupts him.

“It’s chill, man. It’s nice what you’re doing for him. Don’t worry.”

“What?”

“He told me.”

“Told you what?”

“That you’re doing experiments to help him understand his condition and what he can and cannot do,” says Elias. “He told me that you were helping him practice ahead of the summer.”

Practice?

“I told him we could find him a girl to do this stuff with though,” Elias lets out that rich and oblivious laugh. Even hears static. “That way he doesn’t have to wear his clothes in a bathtub.”

“A girl?”

“Yeah, poor guy has never kissed a girl. I know a few girls who wouldn’t mind messing with him in pools or something.”
Even walks home feeling depleted. In all the versions of this encounter that he ran through in his head, he always ended up coming out to Elias, always.

But Isak had other plans.

*Girls.*

How did Isak convince Elias that he sat on Even’s lap in a tub because he wanted to kiss girls? It makes no sense. Isak can be very manipulative, but who would believe this?

Suddenly, he’s angry. He’s furious. He’s furious with Elias, with Isak, but mostly with himself.

“I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL.”

Even thinks about the Isak who wrote the words in countless notebooks as if to brand them into his brain.

“I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL.”

Even wonders about Isak’s relationship with sex now. How does he rationalize the desire he feels. Does he release that tension when he’s by himself? Does he think about men? Women? Abstract concepts? Philosophers? How does he go by?

Isak repeated those words to him just a few weeks ago. “I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL.” And Even doesn’t know what to think or what to do.

“He’s never been with a girl. Maybe this is a good thing,” Eskild tells him over drinks along Karl Johan.

“Are you serious right now?”

“Why are you so jealous? I thought you were indifferent to him,” Eskild teases him.

“I’m not jealous. I’m worried about like psychological stuff happening to him.”

“He’s a big boy. He can handle himself,” Eskild smiles, then dips his straw into Even’s drink to taste it.

“But what if it makes him even more repressed?”

“Isak is not a fragile thirteen year old. He’ll be fine. Stop being so jealous. Let him figure things out by himself.”

Heraklit

14:09

Hey!
Elias invited me to come swim with you guys by the lake
Is it chill?
She’s pretty. She’s a first year, Isak’s age. Even has never seen her or her friends before, but Mutta is holding a conversation with her so she can’t be that bad. Even bailed on the boys a few times, so that’s probably when they became involved with this girl and her circle.

She’s petite, dark shoulder length hair, slim waist, has dimples when she smiles, her skin soft behind her ears when she tucks her locks behind them. She’s pretty in her orange swimsuit.

Her name is Sara. And Isak is making her laugh by the water in a ratty Led Zeppelin shirt while Even watches from the cabin.

“You good?” Mikael asks Even.

“Yup.”

“Isak is into girls now?”

“Isak can be into whatever he wants to be into.”

Isak finds him later that in the afternoon perched on a rock by the water with his headphones on. Isak
is drenched, wearing swim trunks and a regular black t-shirt instead of his tight wetsuits.

“Not swimming?” he asks Even who removes one of his earphones.

“Not feeling it.”

“Is it because I’m here?” Isak asks earnestly.

“No. It’s not because you’re here,” Even lies. “I’m just feeling funky.”

“Funky how?”

“I don’t know. In a mood.”

The sun is still high in the sky, but they’re under a tree and the wind feels exquisite in Even’s hair.

“What are you listening to?” Isak asks.

“Some rap. I don’t know.”

“Don’t you have a playlist for when you’re in a mood?” Isak turns his wet body to him, bringing his knees to his chest. His hair is dripping all over the rock and Even is so distracted by the way the sun gleams on his skin, the mark he left on his neck blue and hideous, yet Isak shows it off like he’s proud.

“Do you have one?”

Even gives Isak his phone and he navigates to a playlist on Spotify that he calls “the greatest Spotify playlist of all time”.

“Here you go,” he tells Even, and he’s smiling. He looks healthy, happy. It makes Even smile too.

“I don’t know about this. I’m not into noise and angry men screaming their feelings,” Even laughs, feeling his negative emotions leave him.

“Metal is not noise. How dare you,” Isak scoffs. “Besides, this is the soft playlist for people like you.”

“Soft playlist?”

“Yes. No screaming. Just good psychedelic and hard rock jams. From Led Zeppelin, to Pink Floyd, Yes, Janis Joplin, Styx, the Velvet Underground. That kind of stuff.”

“Hm. I don’t know,” Even grimaces.

“Just listen to it. Yeah? You’re not swimming. You might as well educate yourself.”

Isak grabs the other earbud and presses play beside him, his wet hair dripping on Even’s shirt.

“You’re staying?” Even asks, upon realizing that Isak is suggesting listening together.

“Is it chill?”

“I’m pretty sure Sara’s waiting for you.”

“I’m pretty sure Sara can wait some more.”
Now Playing: Led Zeppelin - Ramble On

The autumn moon lights my way
For now I smell the rain
And with it pain
And it's headed my way

Led Zeppelin is playing. Robert Plant is singing. The sun is shining. Even’s head is bobbing. And Isak is drumming on his thighs with his long fingers and smiling.

“Doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo!” Isak sings and Even bursts into laughter, barely paying attention to the quest of the song, Robert Plant searching for the ‘queen of all his dreams’.

“Isn’t it the greatest song?” Isak laughs too, his fingers never stopping on his thigh. And Even doesn’t know about ‘the greatest song’ but he nods, smiling and moving along to the strumming of the guitar, trying to keep up with Isak’s head bobbing.

Even is almost entirely soaked now thanks to Isak enjoying himself next to him.

“Are you done now, huh?”

They laugh until their sides hurts, until Even forgets why his chest was feeling tight in the first place.

Now Playing: Eric Burdon and The Animals - Ring of Fire

Love is a burning thing
And it makes a fiery ring
Bound by wild desire
I fell into your ring of fire

I fell into that burning ring of fire
I went down, down, down
And the flames got higher
And it burns, burns, burns
That ring of fire

Isak rests his head on Even’s shoulder while the song from the late 60s plays. And it takes Even by surprise. The closeness, the intimacy, Isak’s wet hair in the crook of his neck, the skin of his thighs brushing against his own, knowing that Even won’t mind, knowing that Even won’t mind at all.

Anyone could walk by and see them, any of the boys, any of the girls. But Isak doesn’t care.

Even realizes that he’s hurting in the middle of the song. Isak is hurting him.

“You like this song?” Isak whispers to him while the man sings and sings ‘Oh, right now I’m burning baby. I’m burning. I’m burning.’

“I didn’t know you listened to songs like these,” Even shrugs.
“What do you mean? You know I listen to rock.”

“Yeah. But all of these songs are about love.”

Isak stills, his head still on Even’s shoulder. He takes a deep breath.

“They’re not about love. They’re about chemicals.”

“Right. Of course,” Even rolls his eyes. “What are the chemicals linked with the emotional con job that is ‘love’ again?”

“All the good transmitters,” Isak replies like he didn’t understand that Even asked out of sarcasm. “Serotonin, Oxytocin, Dopamine. All the good stuff.”

“And you have a special playlist for these lovely transmitters, huh?”

“I mean it’s good music. Give me a break.” Isak presses against him a bit, chuckling.

“Why won’t you just call it love?”

“Love isn’t real. It’s just a man-made concept—”

“Like time?” Even muses, remembering Isak’s witty responses from before. “Is anything even real to you?”

Isak doesn’t respond. Even’s tone was a bit harsh. He’s hurting. He can’t help it.

Eric Burdon is still singing about his ring of fire, and Even doesn’t believe that Isak playing him this song is a coincidence, but oh well.

“Tell me your most burning secret, Even,” Isak asks him.

You’re hurting me.

“I don’t like that I’m no longer an exception.”

Isak breathes against his shoulder, sets the skin there on fire. It’s a warm day. Too warm for the beginning of May. The sky is blue. And Isak is wet and warm beside him.

Even no longer knows what to expect from him. So he barely reacts when Isak grabs his hand and leads it to the hem of his shirt right by his stomach.

Even panics when Isak lets their linked hands hover over his lap. Is Isak asking for? A hand job?

Isak presses Even’s hand flat against his stomach, under his shirt, and the panic subdues to make way for bewitching.

Even wasn’t prepared for skin. Even wasn’t prepared.

“Iss.”

Isak guides his hand higher on his abdomen, on his wet skin, his head never leaving the crook of Even’s neck. He moves Even’s hand until it’s lying flat on Isak’s chest.

“It’s here,” he whispers, his hand on top of Even’s over his heart.

“What is?” Even whispers right back.
“My ring of fire.”

*Is it a burn?* What Isak won’t let him see, but now will let him touch.

“I’ve never touched you here before,” Even says, his thumb brushing softly against the skin there.

“No one has. You’re still an exception. You see?”

Isak always finds ways to give him things that make him happy, but still add an edge of sadness and finiteness to it. Isak sometimes treats him like a child, like a puppy. Even wants a toy. Isak throws him a bone.

They sit there side by side, Isak leaning almost entirely on Even while Even strokes his chest under his shirt. He’s surprised to find that the skin is completely smooth. If it’s a burn, it couldn’t have been a deep one.

“Tell me your most burning secret,” Even asks him because Isak is beginning to dry, and he knows he will leave him the moment he starts feeling like he’s burning him.

“I can’t give you what you think you need from me.”

Sara comes to find them before Even gets to ask what Isak meant by that. *What do you think I need from you? Why would you say that? What are you talking about?!*

But it doesn’t matter. Because Isak is back to making Sara laugh and bat her eyelashes at him. And he’s never known that he had this much game. How could he have known? Isak spends the majority of his time secluded and away from people.

Did he read about this, too?

“You can only touch him when he’s wet,” Mutta explains to this Sara girl, and he’s completely serious.

“Same here,” says a friend of Sara’s. And they all burst into laughter, Isak included.

Adam nearly chokes from laughing too hard. And Isak doesn’t even take offense in the joke. He plays along, adds another joke to it. And Adam is crying now.

Everyone is laughing while Even struggles not to peel the skin off his bones. He observes from afar. Something unsettling and primal eating him on the inside. *Mine.* He wants everyone to know what Isak lets him do to him when it’s just the two of them. He wants Sara and her friends to know how wrecked Even makes him look with the right touches, how pliant and tender Isak is for him when he’s feeling like it. Even wants all of them to know that Isak lets him touch him in places others wouldn’t think of touching. Even wants and wants and wants.

But it’s not fair.

He heads back to the cabin and smokes until Elias joins him.

“You good?”

“Yeah why?” Even cocks an eyebrow.

“You look out of it.”
“I’m just not feeling this weekend.”

“Is it because of Isak?”

“What about him?”

“Do you have something going on with him?”

Even looks up, alarmed. He’s finally taking Elias in, finally sparing a real long hard look. This could be his chance. He could tell him that he likes boys too.

“No. Why would you think that?”


“Nothing’s going on,” Even dismisses him.

“I mean you two were kind of making out in your bathtub.”

Right. So Elias still has his suspicions. He didn’t just swallow Isak’s ridiculous excuses. Even doesn’t have the energy to play this game with Elias.

“A bro helping another bro.”

It’s not feelings. Or at least, it’s not romantic feelings. Even listens to Led Zeppelin in the living room, blowing lazy clouds of smoke above him. He’s listened to two of their albums now. He can see why Isak likes their music so much. Maybe. Or maybe he just enjoys things that Isak likes to feel closer to him.

Who knows.

He makes the terrible mistake of leaving the cabin to watch in the sunset and peering at the lake at the wrong time.

The boys are all chanting something in the water, then he sees Isak kiss that girl.

He sees it all from within a distance, so perhaps it’s not a kiss. Perhaps it’s just rubbing faces, or something. Who knows. Even tries to look longer, to stare harder, to just suck on his cigarette and focus on Robert Plant’s moans in his ears. He tries to take in the sight, to normalize it, Isak kissing a girl, Isak kissing someone who isn’t him. Even tries to get used to it, to stomach it. Just so that in case it happens again, it doesn’t make him sad or react weirdly in front of others.

It’s all good. Even stares until Sara wraps her arms around Isak’s neck and there’s screams and whistles and clapping.

‘I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL.’

I guess it fucking worked, huh.

Even feels sick.

He leaves the cabin for a walk.
Even is still listening to Led Zeppelin when he makes it back to the cabin. He knows all the words to \textit{Ramble On} by now. He even played air guitar on his way back. Isak is right. Listening to these songs somehow improved his mood.

He sees Isak and Mutta playing in the water which is probably cold by now. Even wonders why they’re doing this when he realizes that they’re playing some version of water polo. Isak is probably having the time of his life touching someone else in the water. And Mutta is probably too intimidated by his enthusiasm to say that they should head back.

At least those girls are gone. At least.

Even walks into the living room by the backyard and makes himself comfortable on a sofa chair with his headphones, blasting full volume. He doesn’t notice Isak coming in, dripping wet and leaving puddles of water everywhere, until he’s in his face.

Even realizes that he isn’t upset with him anymore.

“You’re dripping everywhere,” Even complains.

“I’ll clean,” Isak shrugs, grabbing a towel from one of the chairs to dry his hair, at least. “What are you listening to?”

“You’re playlist. And we both know you won’t \textit{clean}.’”

“You don’t know me.” Isak shoves him with the towel gently. He’s towering over him.

“Oh, don’t I now?” Even raises his eyebrow.

“You don’t know the \textit{new} me.”

“You kiss one girl and you’re a brand new guy,” Even scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Typical.” And it stings a bit, but whatever.

“You saw,” Isak says it like he’s just realized it, like Even wasn’t meant to see.

“I did. So? Enjoyed it? Did it fulfill all your fantasies? Did you find the queen of all your dreams?”

“You’re quoting \textit{Ramble On} now.”

“I guess I am.”

“Here. Listen to this one,” Isak says as he reaches for Even’s phone.

“You’re soaked!” Even complains, unsure about whether his phone is waterproof.

“Are you gonna state obvious things until tomorrow or are you gonna listen to the damn song.”

Isak lets him have both earbuds this time. He pulls a chair in front of Even and presses play, watching him.

\textit{Now Playing: Led Zeppelin - Thank You}

The instrumental opening is nice, soft, mellow. Even taps his feet along, then realizes that Isak is mouthing something to him.
“I can’t hear you,” he shouts over the song, making him laugh.

*If the sun refuses to shine*
*I would still be loving you*
*If mountains crumble to the sea*
*There will still be You and Me*

Even listens, tries not to bear any mind to the lyrics because “all songs are actually about chemicals”, and Isak watches him, his gaze tender. He’s smiling. He looks happy.

Even glances at the name of the song. ‘Thank you’. Isak is thanking him. For what? For running away while he spent the afternoon kissing some perfect girl named Sara? Is Isak just sharing a song he likes with him?

Even doesn’t know. He closes his eyes and focuses on the song, bobbing his head along now.

*It doesn’t matter.*

All Even knows and needs to know is that Isak looks happy. He’s healing. He’s smiling more and doing more. And if it hurts a bit to lose him like this, to lose him to a girl when he let himself hope rather selfishly that Isak wouldn’t be needing a ‘queen’, but a king or a prince, then it’s okay. Because Isak is happy.

Even if it hurts a bit, even if Isak never looked this euphoric and free and glowing after one of their kisses, it’s okay. He’s finally gotten what he wanted. It’s fine. Even will be fine. They weren’t even anything. Nothing but “Science partners.”

They’re still friends, too. It should count for something. Even fell for Mikael before and they ended up just fine. Besides, Even didn’t even “fall” for Isak. it was just a silly and confusing thing. Even will be fine. Everything is just fine.

*If the mountains crumble to the sea*
*There will still be you and me*

Isak’s hands find his face. They’re wet and cold on his skin, but it’s like magic. Every time Isak touches him of his own accord feels like magic.

And it’s odd not being able to hear anything but the music, seeing Isak’s smile and gentle stare, feeling his fingers on his skin, but not being able to hear any of it.

It’s so odd that Even doesn’t bother questioning why Isak is touching him in the first place.

Isak leans in and kisses him soft and tender just as Robert Plant sings, ‘*And so today, my world. it smiles*’.

Isak kisses him with both hands on his jaw, his thumb gently stroking and caressing his cheeks. And Even is speechless and stock-still. He does not move. He can’t do much but return the kiss with just as much tenderness and zeal.

Even lets himself be kissed by Isak, the mystery, the enigma. Then suddenly, he can no longer bear the distance. He tries to move, tries to grab him, bring him closer, on his lap maybe. Just. closer. He needs him on him again. But Isak’s hand finds his chest and shoves it lightly. He’s giggling. Even’s brain is short circuiting.

“You can’t touch me. I might be dry somewhere.”
Even wants to shout that he *can* touch him regardless. He wants to tell him about the night he cuddled him in his sleep, and how he hasn't been able to stop thinking about it ever since.

“I- What. what was that for?” Even asks, breathless.

“To compare and contrast,” Isak smiles.

*Compare and contrast? With the girl?*

“And? What do you think?”

Isak smiles again, cups Even’s face a second time and kisses him, his mouth open and wet and bold. He licks Even’s upper lip, actually flicks his tongue over it like a kitten and makes him whimper down Isak’s throat. Even cannot function.

He wants to get lost in him.

“I’ll let you know when I’m done with the experiment,” Isak breathes, pulling back again.

“Any early observations? Promising trends?”

“I might be seeing a promising trend, yes,” Isak smiles.

Even watches him leave, licks his own lips obsessively, tries to pick up his scent, remainders of him.

*Him. him. Him.*

Even’s brain is flooded with images of him when he’s right there still walking away backward, still smiling, smiling the goddamn sun. And Even’s chest hurts too. It hurts so bad.

And it hits him out of nowhere. It's undeniable, irrefutable. Even has never felt anything like this before.

*My most burning secret?*

*I’m in ‘serotonin, and oxytocin, and dopamine’ with you.*

Even is impossibly in love with him.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

*tw: it gets hot a bit; the depth of Isak's trauma is hinted at; a bad joke about conversion therapy; internalized homophobia.*

*dun dun dun.*

Even has finally opened his eyes (a bit). took him Isak kissing girls to get there. It might
not be Isak's fault btw. Even thinks Isak is now a free boy with all these new possibilities. He no longer feels special to him. Him realizing his feelings will throw him in a funk.

Isak (spoiler, kinda) thinks he can never be enough for Even. It doesn't even cross his mind to 'be with him'. Especially after the night he saw Adrian in his apartment late at night. "I can't give you what you think you need from me". Isak is protecting himself. But he's actually very lost in his head throughout this chapter.

Next chapter is titled 'Philosophy of Shame' OR 'Philosophy of Love'? guessss! Let's go.

As usual thank youuu for everything. I miss you too bbys, so much. Thank you for still being here and bothering to read and leave kudos and comments. I know many have left. Sending you the biggest hugssss.

Leave a comment if you felt something, anything <333
Philosophy of Shame

Chapter Summary

"Are we ever going to be even?"
"Perhaps, we don't have to be."

ft. cuddles, led zeppelin, a fire, a beach, tears, comfort kisses, SOFTNESS, sand, Isak's birthday, a festival, 21:21, 3 wishes, a reveal, a fight, a tent, a speech on monogamy, and a point of no return.

Chapter Notes

hello!!! my inbox has exactly 287 unanswered bflyt asks right now and I'm MINDBLOWN by your love, encouragement, questions, dedication, and support. ily.

Please check the TWs in the end notes! This is a tough a chapter for Even.

hope you like it <3 Isak is so sweet and kind here

(also! happy belated birthday to bbyy Nicole and Mel and Bea and to the lovely anons who were in my inbox this week <33 sorry i couldn't get this out earlier ilyyy)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The water remains.

Isak didn’t wipe the floor. He didn’t “clean” even though he promised he would.

Even stares at the puddle Isak left by his feet until it begins to feel like the sea, until the droplets Isak drenched him with during the impromptu kissing session begin to feel like marks, until the wetness on his lips, face, and clothes begins to burn.

Even is lost in thought, and it’s ironic how he finally understands what Isak meant by the relativity of time. Isak kissed him a few moments ago, or maybe minutes, maybe hours. Even cannot tell.

He leans back on the sofa chair where Isak has just cracked his chest open and thinks. Even thinks about the absurd realization that’s just befallen him.

He loves Isak. Impossibly. Undeniably. His brain and body are both bursting with it, the longing, the tenderness, the want, the yearning, the lust, the love.

It’s absurd because it feels evident, natural, almost soothing, as if it’s always been there inside of him. As if it’s a truth that’s been dormant under his skin and is finally blooming on the surface, finally breaking free.

It’s absurd but Even is not irritated. He’s almost relieved, the way one is when they finally recall a word that’s been sitting at the tip of their tongue, the feeling of accomplishment upon finally
knowing what it is triumphing over the frustrating times trying to remember it.

Even realizes that he’s been feeling this way for a while now, perhaps since Isak showed him the first ounce of kindness and vulnerability a few weeks after meeting him. Even realizes that this feeling has always been there. He’s just been giving it different names. Curiosity. Sympathy. Empathy. Pity. Bond. Experiments. Friendship. Chemicals. And now, simply: Love.

Even sits in his chair and thinks.

What now.

. Even can’t tell how long he’s been thinking and listening to the Led Zeppelin song in the living room when his mind finally wanders to the object of its worry and anguish. Isak.

He’s not with the boys around the fire in the backyard. He couldn’t possibly have returned to the lake, the water temperature bordering on freezing now. But then again, he's Isak. He’s wired differently.

Even stands, presses pause on his spotify and his thoughts, and goes out the front door.

There, he sees Isak’s lonely silhouette in the distant water, and something in him urges him to drop his phone and run to him, join him in the cold lake and kiss him senseless, tell him how he feels, pour his heart out to him and just tell him.

But Even cannot afford to act on a whim, especially when it comes to Isak. Careful, rational, and deeply cynical Isak. “All songs are written about chemicals. Time is a social construct. Love isn’t real” Isak. “I’m kissing you to compare and contrast” Isak. “I’m grinding on you in a bathtub to make us even” Isak.

Isak would drop him in a blink. He would cut ties with him, accuse him of insanity and delusion, and never reply to his messages ever again. Even can already tell how it would play out as he perfects the scripts in his head. They all have the same tragic and pathetic ending: Isak burns both of them with his overwhelming shame and rejects him.

Even cannot afford to act on a whim.

He should go join the boys around the fire, or maybe lock himself in the room he’s sharing with Elias and mindlessly watch a movie on Netflix.

Maybe.

He opts for grabbing a dry towel from one of the cabinets and waiting for Isak by the door instead.

Handing him a towel does not scream ‘I’m in love with you’. It could stem out of his annoyance with Isak not cleaning after himself and leaving puddles of water everywhere around the house. It’s neutral enough. Or maybe less so, as helping him dry himself is saying ‘I don’t want to kiss you or touch you right now’.

Isak is shivering when he makes it back to the cabin, hair wet and sticking to his forehead. Even can’t remember ever seeing him exhibit symptoms of feeling cold.
Isak is also no longer smiling. He’s fidgety. He looks nervous and guilty.

“For me?” Isak asks, looking and sounding colder than when he kissed him maybe half an hour earlier.

“For you.”

“Thank you,” Isak says politely before grabbing the towel from Even’s fingers and beginning to dry himself with urgency, as though afraid Even might pounce on him.

An irrational fear takes over Even as he momentarily entertains the possibility of Isak actually hearing his thoughts. But the truth somehow burns him more. Isak probably regrets kissing him earlier and is trying to prevent Even from finally responding to it, from maybe grabbing him and kissing him back.

It’s hurtful.

“Relax,” he tells Isak.

“I’m relaxed,” Isak counters, sounding irritated and beyond nervous now. He isn’t relaxed. He regrets kissing Even so much. Even can tell from the somber expression on his face.

“You sound vexed,” says Even.

“You sound vexed.”

Even takes a step back, too tired to argue, too spent and crushed by the weight of his own feelings, which have a name now, a real one. He leans against the wooden railing and lights a cigarette while Isak frantically pats himself with the towel like he can’t afford to miss a single drop.

It’s all very poetic and hurtful.

He eventually calms down while Even smokes silently, pulling out the earphones from his pocket to press play again.

“What are you listening to?” Isak asks.

“Still listening to that Led Zeppelin song.”

“Thank You?”

Even nods. “I like it. I like it a lot.”

It’s true. He does.

The silence that follows is deafening. It’s too heavy. Even cannot bear it. And Isak’s thoughts are loud, his discomfort even showing in the way he breathes now. Even almost wants to reassure him, to say that it’s okay, that he understands Isak didn’t mean to actually kiss him and bring him down, that it’s fine if he wishes to compare and contrast.

But other words make it to his mouth.

“We’re no longer even,” he tells Isak.

“Hm?”
“We’re no longer even,” he repeats.

The kissing. Isak told him in the tub that he was only kissing him so that they could be even again. They were, but no longer are. What excuse does Isak have this time around? Does he need to even out kissing other people, too? He kisses a girl, so he somehow has to kiss Even afterwards?

“I guess we’re not,” says Isak and a gentle and delightful flush begins to spread on his face.

“Are we ever going to be?”

This is probably making things worse, but Even can’t help but wonder now that the observation is out in the open. What’s Isak’s excuse this time around?

“Maybe we don’t have to be,” Isak says, genuinely surprising him.

He looks shy and vulnerable too, wrapped in his blue towel with his wet hair and eyelashes. It sounds like the truth, like Isak isn’t playing games. Perhaps Even misinterpreted his nervousness. Perhaps Isak doesn’t regret kissing him. Perhaps he’s just embarrassed for acting so out of character and is currently wondering if Even will hold it against him.

Even is surprised but delighted. He can’t help but crack a small smile.

“So we’ll keep going?”

“If it’s chill,” Isak shrugs like it’s nothing, oblivious to how Even’s entire heart catches fire every time they get too close.

“For how long?”

“I don’t know.”

They join the boys around the fire after Adam interrupts their rather intense chat. Even sits by Mutta’s side and watches Isak stare at the flames with the curiosity and awe of a cat staring at its reflection in a mirror: not understanding the similarities—the concept of reflection remaining foreign—but seeing and acknowledging that its actions are being mirrored.

Isak stares at the fire, his cheeks ablaze, and Even stares at him, helplessly. He’s so enamored of him, so entranced by him that he can’t believe it has only materialized in his consciousness now.

“Everything good?” Mutta nudges him, probably noticing that Even is completely out of it.

“Yeah. Everything’s chill.”

When he looks at Isak again, he catches him staring before quickly looking back down.

“You know what? We should make Isak a Youtube channel!” Adam declares. “We can make him light shit on fire. Can you imagine how many views we’re gonna get?”

Isak doesn’t get upset. And Even knows he’ll perform the ‘lighting a cigarette with his fingers’ number the moment he asks for one. Isak puts the cigarette directly in the bonfire instead of using a lighter this time around. They all laugh.

Isak laughs hard. The boys laugh harder.

He’s funny and complicated and smart and infuriating and kind and cruel and beautiful, Even thinks.

“No but seriously. There’s so many people doing all kinds of things on Youtube. I’m sure we can find you an audience, Isak!” Adam insists. “Like tell me something interesting about yourself. Something that might make someone go ‘oh, that can’t be random.’”

“Hm? I burn people?” Isak narrows his eyes and it makes the other boys laugh.

“Yeah, no but give me something else. I don’t know. What’s your zodiac sign?”


“What?”

“Hm. I don’t know about my zodiac sign. But I was born at 21:21 on summer solstice,” Isak shrugs. “Is that interesting enough?”

“Summer solstice? Like June 21st?” says Mutta.

“Yeah.”

“The day the sun shines the longest? Oww! We can totally make this work!” Adam declares with excitement.

“That’s like in two weeks,” Even blurts out and it makes Isak lock eyes with his.

“Hm. I guess,” he shrugs.

“Shit, what are we doing?! We should throw Isak a party!” says Adam.

Even thinks.

“I haven’t really celebrated my birthday since I was twelve, so don’t get too caught up on that,” Isak brushes it off with a smile.

It suddenly becomes critical that Isak celebrates *this* birthday.

“I’m serious,” Isak insists. “Don’t think of organizing something.”

The conversation quickly drifts to another topic, but Even’s eyes never leave Isak.

He just stares at him until the fire they’re all sitting around dies. But not the one in his heart.

Even pulls out his phone around one in the morning while Elias snores on the other bed. He types the words out frantically before he changes his mind.
Isak doesn’t reply, and Even immediately knows he’s crossed a line. But he needs to know. It’s suddenly the most urgent matter in the world. What are they doing? What is he to Isak? How long is Isak going to be comparing and contrasting? What happens after he’s done? Does Even get to stick around? Does he get to stay?

Isak’s reply comes a moment later and Even clutchesthis phone until his knuckles hurt.

Heraklit
01:10
For Infinity

It’s absurd. The words don’t mean a thing. Isak sounds intoxicated and incapacitated. Adam probably gave him alcohol earlier. What does he even mean? He wants to torture Even for all eternity? He wants to keep him around as a warm mouth to press his own to when things get lonely? For “science”?

What does he mean?

Even tries to be irritated, but he feels nothing but irrational giddiness. Is this what it means to bear feelings for someone? To be driven mad by every single thing they do or say? Even doesn’t understand, but he smiles to himself all the same.

And later, when he finds himself sneaking out of his own bed to head to Isak’s room, driven by nothing but urge and want, Even tells himself that he can act on a whim just once. That he’ll never do it again. That he can have this just for the night. That tomorrow, he’ll sneak right out and build walls around himself, too. Tall and impenetrable walls with no windows, just like Isak’s.

Yes, tomorrow, he tells himself.

Isak is sleeping with his back turned to the door when Even quietly pushes it open. It’s a lovely sight and Even doesn’t think much before joining him on the small twin-sized bed and embracing him from behind. Isak gasps in his sleep.

It’s almost too overwhelming. The contact. The warmth. Their bodies pressed with no water clinging to their clothes or their skins. The pressure of their muscles together. Chest to back, legs twined, arms locked around Isak’s stomach, chin latched onto his shoulder.

Even feels like a needy child with long and unmanageable limbs, and Isak feels too good in his arms. It sparks aching want in his lungs. Even wishes he could somehow get closer, somehow inhale him and the sweet warmth of him.

Even can’t recall ever falling asleep this effortlessly.
He’s brought back into consciousness a bit later. Even can barely make out whether it’s reality or a lucid dream, his eyesight fuzzy and blurry, his senses overwhelmed.

Isak is facing him, having somehow turned in his arms, and he’s kissing his neck, his jaw, his chin. It has to be a dream. It must be.

Even’s mind is brought back into focus when Isak kisses his mouth. He’s not dreaming. Isak is kissing him in his sleep, soft little needy closed-mouthed pecks that Even returns unconsciously and slowly, afraid of waking him or interrupting his sleep-filled endeavors.

It’s not until their mouths both drop open, until they’re panting into each other’s throats, hands traveling the expanse of the other’s body with urgency and need, yanking, biting, pulling, scratching, that Even realizes the cruel absurdity of the situation.

Isak is not sleeping. Isak is conscious and here with him. He’s kissing him. He’s touching him, squeezing and kneading wherever he can and panting against his skin. He’s taking what he wants under the false pretense of sleep. He’s licking into Even’s mouth and taking what he needs: chemicals that help alleviate the sorrows he refuses to share with him.

Even feels like the lithium pills he takes every day to stabilize his mood and keep from succumbing to his thoughts. He feels small and tasteless, like a means to an end, a necessity that one wishes they could do without, but a necessity all the same.

Isak knows that Even can touch him without water being involved. He knows. He’s just pretending not to, just like Even is. They’re both pretending, living out a lie that makes little to no sense when they could be rolling in each other’s arms whenever it pleases them.

Even understands everything when Isak falls asleep against his chest, his head buried in the crook of his neck and his arms around his back.

Isak knows that he can have him, but he doesn't want him, at least not always, not the way Even wants him. Isak wants rules. He likes the water rule because it guarantees that Even will never cross the line, that Isak will always be the one initiating things between them, forever, for “Infinity”.

Even feels used.

Tomorrow, he will build his walls.

Tomorrow.

Even heads back to his room in the dead silence of the morning. He doesn’t linger. He doesn’t dwell on it. He slowly rolls Isak—who clings and clings—off of himself and leaves his bed like they didn’t spend half the night touching and kissing.

He doesn’t turn around, very well aware that a simple glance at Isak is enough to shake him and melt his resolve away.

And if Isak looks slightly disappointed and upset during breakfast, Even actively does his best to ignore it and focus on the walls he needs to build.

“Milk?” Isak offers like he’s testing the waters when Even pours cereals into his bowl.
“I’m okay. Thanks,” Even replies mindlessly.

“You eat cereals without milk now?” Elias teases him.

“I guess I do.”

He excuses himself without sparing Isak another glance and walks around during the remaining hour they have at the cabin. He needs to sort out his thoughts before they get back in the car. Isak will sit in the passenger seat as he can’t share the backseat with the others, but Even will still feel him the entire time, still feel this crippling aching in his chest the whole ride back.

He listens to Led Zeppelin alone in the woods. He touches the trees and leaves as he passes them. He keeps replaying ‘Since I’ve Been Loving You’ by led Zeppelin, bopping his head along, pulling a leaf and feeling it between his fingers, anchoring himself. He stops to sit on a rock by the river, stretches his long limbs and looks up the lyrics to make sure he’s singing the right words.

It’s nice to take some time for himself. It’s comforting. Being alone is sometimes comforting.

He stands to make his way back to the cabin and removes his headphones. He wants to listen to the rustling of the trees and the branches breaking under his feet. He wants to listen to the birds chirping and the wind blowing. It’s nice.

It’s nice until he hears footsteps mirroring his own. And he could recognize those footsteps anywhere. It’s Isak. He’s following him.

“How long have you been following me?” Even asks when he finally spots him behind a tree.

“For a while now,” Isak admits.

“That’s creepy.”

“There’s only one trail. I just needed to stretch my legs too.”

Lies.

“We should head back,” says Even.

“Yeah, we should.”

Isak walks beside him and Even has his earphones back on. The tension is thick between them and he can feel Isak breathe erratically next to him, like some inner turmoil is currently tearing him apart.

He knows that Even was awake and conscious when they all but ate each other’s faces last night. He’s probably wondering why Even isn’t speaking a word, why he didn’t stick around in the morning.

Even cannot stand the silence. He pulls out one of his earphones and offers it to Isak.

“What are we listening to?” he asks.

They listen to that Led Zeppelin song. ‘Baby, since I’ve been loving you, I’m about to lose my worried mind.’ Walking side by side, silently, not touching, never touching.

“Even, is everything okay?” Isak asks, startling Even. He looks unsure, worried, remorseful.

And ‘everything’ could mean anything. Isak could be asking about anything, really. But Even knows
he’s asking about them. ‘Are WE okay?’

“Of course,” Even lies.

Even rides with Elias, Mikael, and Yousef while Isak heads back with Mutta and Adam. Isak gives him a look when Even jokes about Mutta being a terrible driver and wanting to be in Elias’ car this time around.

He knows Even is lying. He knows he’s trying to run away from him and his overwhelming presence. But the boys don’t dwell on it and Even asks Elias to drop him off directly at home, that way he doesn’t have to see Isak.

“Dude, is something wrong?” Elias asks.

“No, I’m just tired.”

The walls. He’s building his walls.

Isak is waiting for him by the exit of Elvebakken on Tuesday while everyone stares. Isak hasn’t been back since he left for the lab. Everyone spent months speculating and wondering about his whereabouts at school.

He looks delightful in a white shirt, a denim jacket, dark jeans, and a blue snapback. He’s not wearing gloves today, his hands are bare and he’s waving them at Even.

“You took your time,” Isak says teases but there’s a nervous edge to his voice.

“I stayed behind to talk to the art teacher about my project,” Even tells him truthfully. “Didn’t know you were gonna show up.”

“I would have messaged you, but you’ve been ignoring me lately, so I thought I’d just stop by.”

Even takes him in. Isak is smiling but his self-assuredness has a fake edge to it. He’s not half as cold as usual. It’s almost as if he’s opening a window through his walls and letting Even see that he’s actually feeling vulnerable.

And Even can’t turn him down, especially knowing that it couldn’t have been easy for Isak to show up to school like this.

“What’s up? Running low on dopamine?” Even teases him, tries to will away this tension building up between them.

“I wanted to ask if you wanna go swimming,” says Isak, ignoring his little jab.

“That’s ‘Isak’ for you’re running low on dopamine.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You have your own little language for certain things. You know. I’ve grown to learn your language.”

Even expects Isak to say something pretentious and quirky and deny that he misses him, but he
“So can you swim tonight or not?” he insists.

“I feel a little bit sick. Sorry.”

That’s not true. Even is lying. He feels a bit down, but he’s perfectly healthy physically. Isak looks down after seemingly scanning him with his eyes. He can tell that Even is lying. He looks disappointed.

“I see,” he mumbles.

Even doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like how they’re hurting each other. He needs to preserve himself but he can’t do it at the expense of Isak’s self-loathing, he realizes. It’s not nice.

“I’m gonna watch a movie at home, though. If you want to join.”

Isak goes from being lovely to ruthless in the span of seconds. His brows naturally draw together the moment he sees Adrian in Even’s apartment.

Even had no idea he’d be here.

“Julie let me in,” says Adrian before quickly kissing Even on the cheek, a gesture typically reserved for when they’re drunk or when he’s especially sad. “She needed help installing a shelf.”

“My mother called you to install a shelf?!”

“No, I showed up to see you and she said she could use another pair of hands to install the shelf.”

Behind him, Isak is seething and burning with silent rage, his stare vicious and cold.

“Good to see you again, Isak.” Adrian smiles at him before leaning in then taking an abrupt step back, as if he was about to embrace Isak as well then remembered that he can’t.

Isak’s entire demeanor changes. There’s no vulnerability showing anymore. His walls are high and the windows are shut tight.

“Likewise Adrian,” he smiles, sticking awfully close to Even for someone who burns people. “Looks like you’re here every time I visit. Do you perhaps not have a home of your own?”

“I just like it here better. Julie makes my days brighter.”

“She’s mine. I’m warning you,” Isak counters with a fake smile. There’s no friendliness in his voice, none of that sweetness he lets people see sometimes. Isak looks like he means it.

“What? Are you gonna burn me like you’ve been burning everyone or?” Adrian jokes and he’s being a child again. Even is going to have to ask him to leave before Isak actually does just that.

But to Even’s surprise, Isak doesn’t respond. He recoils and looks hurt. Even can’t quite believe his eyes.

“That’s not very nice, Adrian,” says Julie, and Even didn’t even notice that she’s been standing there the entire time. Her brows are drawn together and she looks deeply disappointed with Adrian.
“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that,” Adrian counters nervously, looking just as surprised by Isak’s reaction and Julie’s presence in the hallway.

“Adrian, you should apologize to Isak,” Julie insists, her righteousness taking over. She’s always fought for what was right, regardless of who’s in the wrong.

“It’s okay, Julie,” Isak finally speaks, and his smile is that of someone who’s just been deeply hurt but is simply brushing it off. “I’m used to it. It’s fine. He was just joking.”

“It’s not a joke if nobody laughs and it’s not a laughing matter, Isak,” Julie says with seriousness Even hadn’t heard in her voice in a while, now stepping closer to Isak as if to comfort him. “You should never let people joke about things that hurt you even if they’re your friends. You’ve come too far to let the obstacles you overcame become the butts of a joke. Okay?”

Adrian leaves after apologizing and Julie enlists Isak to help her make dinner.

It’s all very domestic. And Even’s heart would swell at the sight if it weren’t for the fact that Isak had just manipulated his mother into kicking Adrian out.

Even watches them while scrolling mindlessly through Instagram on his phone at the table. He texts Isak, just for good measures.

```
Heraklit
17:29

Manipulating my mother huh?
I don’t know what you’re talking about
You saw her standing there and let Adrian dig his own grave
I didn’t do anything
Looking all sad and hurt? That’s not you
Im busy rn can we do this later
Im literally standing in front of you
Also that’s sugar that you just picked up
Not salt
```

“Isak, darling, that’s sugar, not salt,” Julie sighs and it makes Isak blush and the tips of his ears color.

“I’m sorry,” Isak chuckles nervously before heading back to look for the salt. It's all very adorable.

“I’m not used to being in a kitchen.”

“Don’t you live in a Kollektiv? What do you eat if you don’t spend time in the kitchen?”
“Uh, well, my roommate Eskild is very nice and he makes me food sometimes.”

“More like you steal his food,” Even chimes in, and it feels like he hasn’t spoken in forever.

“Not true!” Isak frowns. “Besides, our kitchen is small and I stay out of my roommates’ way in case they want to use it, you know. I don’t want them feeling scared of accidentally touching me while they cook. I also don’t want to put them in that awkward spot whereby they want to use the kitchen but see me there, then feel obligated to stay so that I wouldn't feel awful. It’s just decency, same way I’ll never go to a concert because I would burn everyone around me.”

Even never really thought about that. Isak who loves music so much not being able to enjoy concerts. It breaks his heart a little bit.

His mind wanders to the fact that Isak knows he can touch him. Does he not know that Eskild and Linn can as well? Could Even ask his mother to try and touch Isak to test his theory? Is it too risky?

“You’re so sweet and thoughtful, aren’t you?” Julie gushes over Isak. “I’m sure your roommates would not mind you using the kitchen. When they welcomed you as a roommate, they were very well aware of what that entails. You’re just as entitled to use the kitchen as they are. Besides, I’m sure Even could take you to a concert sometime. He’ll make sure no one gets too close. Right, Even?”

She’s so sweet, his mother. Even feels so lucky in moments like these. Isak looks genuinely flustered by her words, as if he’s never felt this kind of motherly love and acceptance. It tears into his heart a little.

He can’t help but imagine taking Isak to a concert or to a music festival. Would it be his first?

“Oh well. None of the music I’m into is still being performed live nowadays,” says Isak. “Also it’s best I stay away from the kitchen as I could never make anything edible.”

“What are you talking about?” Julie scoffs. “Cooking is not a given. You can learn it. Aren’t you a chemistry genius? Cooking is mostly chemistry and a bit of intuition which I’m sure you have. Right, Even?”

“Oh. Yeah. Isak is a fast learner.”

It turns out he isn’t that fast, and Even has to step and help him with the pasta, mindlessly reaching for the spatula Isak’s been holding awkwardly.

They’re standing so close. They’re almost touching.

And he sees it then, the little smile at the corner of Isak’s lips. He’s smiling. This little shit. He’s probably pretending not to know how to stir, very well aware that Even would step up to help.

---

**Heraklit**

**17:43**

Why are you glaring at me from across the table

Because you’re being a little shit

Oh wow new nickname?

Warn a guy next time
You were pretending not to know how to stir so i could do it for you

Maybe i just wanted you to stand close to me
Maybe i just miss having you near

Even looks up from his phone and locks eyes with Isak across the table while Julie talks about one of her colleagues who just found out she’s pregnant at age thirty-eight.

And there it is, the window that Isak sometimes slides open for Even. Isak misses having him near and he’s resorting to childish tricks to get some of that closeness back.

“Do you always text each other while being in the same room?” Julie asks, noticing that both Isak and Even have stopped eating and are having a staring contest.

“We weren’t,” they both scoff at the same time.

It’s painfully awkward after that, and Even tries to think of ways to dissipate the tension and make conversation. But his mother beats him to it.

“Oh! You know what I miss?!” she declares, clasping her hands together and nearly jumping off her seat. “I miss the word of the day! We haven’t played in forever!”

Right.

“That’s true. We haven’t,” Even shrugs. “Want me to pull up the app?”

“Let’s come up with one right now,” she says, all giddy and cheerful.

“What do you mean?”

“It doesn’t always have to be a pretentious word. Maybe we can go for something simple this time,” Julie explains. “I’ll give you a letter and say the first word that pops in your head that starts with it.”

It feels like a trap.

“Uh, sure?” Even narrows his eyes.

“I’ll start,” she says.

“Okay.”

“The letter ‘i’.”

“Isak,” Even blurts out casually, before dropping his fork.

Fuck.

Isak gives him a surprised look, then he snorts.

“I mean he’s right in front of me,” Even adds with a nervous chuckle.

“The purpose of the game is to come up a word you don’t typically use and to apply it in a sentence. It’s to expand your vocabulary. I’m afraid ‘Isak’ and names in general don’t meet that criteria,” Julie says and it makes Even flustered.
“Maybe we should change the letter,” says Isak and he looks beyond amused. “Maybe the first letter of my name is too distracting for him.”

Julie and Isak both laugh at that, and Even fake-glares at them both.

“What about the letter ‘L’?” Isak adds.

*Good one.* Isak could pick ‘Love’ as it doesn’t exactly exist in his vocabulary.

Even groans at the fact that ‘love’ is the first word that came to mind.

“Yes. How about Lesbian?” says Julie, and it makes both Even and Isak spit out their food and momentarily choke, much to her delight.

“Mom!”

“What? It’s a word I don’t use nearly enough,” she says, and Even’s mind flashes to Eskild saying that his mother is interested in women, and he’s suddenly choking again.

Isak, on the other hand, is laughing. He’s laughing so hard, so fully that it’s filling Even’s lungs with want. He wants to reach over and kiss him. Not necessarily on the mouth, maybe on the forehead, maybe on the cheek, maybe on the nose. He just wants to touch him. He aches with it.

And when Isak catches him staring, they both flush and look down.

“Why did you freak out so hard when your mom said ‘Lesbian’?” Isak asks him later in his room. He’s sprawled on his rug on the floor while Even is at his desk, looking for a movie for them to watch.

Even wants to ask him why he isn’t freaking out when the word ‘homosexual’ makes him go into a frenzy. Is it only when it’s male homosexuality?

“Eskild is convinced my mom is a lesbian,” says Even.

“What? Oh god!” Isak topples over, laughing, before sitting up. “I mean, I’m not laughing at the possibility of her being a lesbian. There’s nothing wrong or funny about that.”

“Oh yeah?” Even challenges him and it makes Isak’s smile drop.

“I mean yeah,” Isak says then pauses to scratch the back of his neck. “Of course. It’s just that Eskild’s opinions on people’s sexuality don’t spare anyone. Not even your mother.”

“What’s his opinion on yours?” says Even and he knows it’s cruel when he’s well aware of how deeply rooted Isak’s issues with his sexuality are.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Isak, before lying back down on the rug and pulling out his phone.

*Right.*

“You should get on the bed. I’m about to put on the movie,” says Even, ignoring the way his heart topples inside his chest at the thought of Isak being in his bed again.

“Can we just chill instead?”
“Hm?”

“Right here on the floor. Let’s just chill,” says Isak.

“I don’t have a joint.”

“Not that kind of chill,” Isak laughs. “Just lie down. We can listen to music.”

They share Isak’s earphones, lying down opposite of each other in a ying yang position while staring at the ceiling, faces close but the rest of their bodies away from one another. It’s all very cheesy, but it was the least awkward position.

“What are we listening to?” Even asks because somehow he knows. Isak will either fill his heart or drain it with whatever he chooses to play him.

10cc - I’m Not In Love

I'm not in love
So don't forget it
It's just a silly phase I'm going through
And just because I call you up
Don't get me wrong, don't think you've got it made
I'm not in love, no no,

It's because I like to see you
But then again
That doesn't mean you mean that much to me
So if I call you
Don't make a fuss
Don't tell your friends about the two of us
I'm not in love, no no,

In one of Even’s other scripts, in one of Isak’s alternate universes, perhaps Even gets on his feet and leaves Isak and his hurtful song choice and his manipulative self alone on his bedroom floor. Perhaps, he makes a fuss, sits up and screams in Isak’s face. Perhaps, he cracks right then and there and tells him that it’s real for him, that this isn’t a game to him. Perhaps.

But in this script, in this universe, Even lies still and listens to the entire damn song. And it reminds him of the times he valued himself so little that he deliberately basked in pain. It reminds him of the version of himself he’s trying so desperately to leave behind.

Is this what it means to have feelings for someone?

Why does a simple song burn him more than Isak has ever burned his skin? Is Isak deliberately trying to burn through Even? Wear him out? Break him down?

“Eric Stewart wrote this song for his wife. Did you know?” Isak suddenly speaks, halting his spiraling thoughts.

“I have no idea who Eric Stewart is,” Even admits.

“He founded 10cc, the band performing this song,” says Isak.
“This guy wrote a song for his wife telling her that he’s not in love with her? What kind of nonsense were people on in the 60s?”

“It’s from 1975, actually,” Isak corrects him with a chuckle. “And if you listen carefully, the song is about the opposite.”

“Huh?” Even turns to lie on his side and look at Isak.

“His wife complained that in their eight years of marriage, he rarely told her that he loved her.”

“And his reply is to tell her that he doesn’t?!?”

“Will you let me speak!” Isak groans and it makes Even laugh.

“Basically, to him, the words ‘I Love You’ didn’t mean anything and actually cheapened what he felt for her,” Isak resumes. “So he got this idea to write a song titled ‘I’m Not In Love’ and then make it about how he actually is. Throughout the song, he says that he calls her, that he likes to see her, that he keeps a picture of her on the wall, and that he won’t give it back even if it doesn’t mean much to him.”

“That makes no sense.”

“But it does. She accuses him of not loving her. And instead of refuting her claim right away, he agrees. He assumes that her claim is true then seeks out examples to disprove it. He says, ‘yes, it’s true I don’t love you. I just want to see you all the time, and be with you, and talk to you on the phone, and touch you, and keep you close. But you’re right, I don’t love you’. It makes perfect sense. It’s proof by contradiction. It’s *reductio ad impossibilem*. No wait. It’s *reductio ad absurdum.*”

“And what the hell is that supposed to be?” Even lies back down.

“It’s latin for reduction to absurdity. It’s when you disprove a statement by showing that it leads to absurdity, that it’s contradictory. As in, ‘if I’m not in love with you, then what the fuck am I doing hanging pictures of you on my wall and refusing to give them back?’”

Even breathes through his nose while Isak presses play again.

He’s messing with his brain. Why would ‘Love isn’t real’-Isak share this with him.

“Why are you making me listen to this song? Did he cheat on his wife with her sister too? Does he prove that love isn’t real, too?” Even asks. He can’t help it.

“I don’t actually know what happened with his wife, believe it or not,” says Isak. “I just like listening to music with you.”

It makes Even pause and suck in a breath. Isak likes listening to music with him. Music is one’s most personal inclination at times. Sharing one’s music is akin to sharing a piece of one’s soul.

Even doesn’t respond, but he can’t help but picture how happy Isak would be at a concert.

“But to your point, I doubt their marriage lasted,” Isak continues.

“Why? Cause they ran out of chemicals?”

“Because monogamy is unnatural. And if a marriage survives, it’s usually because of outside factors, like societal norms, financial situation, religion, stigma, children, and so on. And he wasn’t under the pressure of any of these,” says Isak.
Even sighs. He would argue for the legitimacy of marriage, but he doesn’t have any real life examples he could provide, his parents’ marriage being broken, and the rest remaining ambiguous.

“Did you know that humans are naturally inclined to have multiple sexual partners?” Isak continues. He’s in one of those moods. “Monogamy is a human invention that appeared around the time humans started to farm, because of the concept of property. As men stopped sharing land, they also stopped sharing women. It’s fucked up, don’t you think?”

“Women,” Even echoes.

“Yes, women. Property laws appeared and so did monogamy. Marriage didn’t manifest until later, when powerful parties needed to justify a union through a contract. Like Cleopatra needing a co-ruler, for instance, or all those unions in Game of Thrones. Marriages were a way to end wars and seize more land. And those work best, because: external factors keeping them together. But then people started making marriage about feelings, about choice, about love. And it all went to hell then. Because love is a fleeting feeling, nothing but chemicals working together for a hot second and then leaving just as fast. You can’t build a lasting contract on a feeling as ephemeral as ‘romantic love’. It’s a shaky foundation. Because feelings change and that’s not a crime. Your body reacts to the same stimuli in different ways throughout time. It’s science. It’s natural. The quirky things you like about a person today will become things you cannot stand about them tomorrow. It’s human nature. It’s chemicals. That’s why there are so many divorces nowadays. You rarely hear of arranged marriages falling through because they’re not initiated and built on ‘feelings’. Those happen later, maybe, if they’re lucky. Those marriages are the unions of two families, so to speak, a contract. So they last. But the rest fall apart, and even if they don’t end in a divorce, they end in both parties being unhappy and irritated which leads to cheating and all sorts of headaches. It’s not natural. And neither is monogamy.”

“Fucking hell,” Even sighs.

“What?”

“You say the most depressing shit.”

Isak barks out a laugh while Even closes his eyes and places his wrist over his eyes.

“I’m just being real. Monogamy is not natural.”

“Well, neither am I,” Even replies.

When he removes his arm from his face, he finds Isak staring at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I like women and men. I’m not exactly ‘natural’. ”

Isak lies back down and presses play again.

“Men have liked men since the beginning of time, Even,” he whispers while Eric Stewart sings that he’s not in love. “Nothing about you is unnatural.”

Even lets the words sink in. Nothing about me is unnatural. Even knows this. He said it as a joke. But Isak’s reply still disarms him.

Why can’t you extend this kindness and wisdom to yourself?
"I went swimming with Jonas yesterday," Isak tells him after they’ve listened to the song five times in a row.

It feels like being pricked with a pointy object, with a thin needle. It stings, but Even barely feels it at first. It’s like when you hurt yourself and don’t feel it until a few seconds later, the brain delaying the response, or maybe time itself slowing. Even doesn’t really know the science behind it.

Even doesn’t react and the seconds stretch before them.

Isak went swimming with Jonas, the boy he loved Jonas, his former best friend Jonas. Yesterday.

Isak is comparing and contrasting. Monogamy isn’t natural.

Even doesn’t know what to say. He’s not jealous. He just feels like the older toys on Toy Story, no longer special, no longer shiny and glossy and interesting, no longer an exception.

Even doesn’t speak. He just stays there on the floor beside Isak while Eric Stewart repeats that he’s not in love, he’s not in love, he’s not in love.

“You’re not gonna say anything?” Isak asks, but he doesn’t sound exactly annoyed, just perhaps impatient.

“What do you want me to say?”

“What you think?”

“I don’t know what I think,” says Even, and it sounds pretentious, but it’s true. He doesn’t.

Later when the song becomes irritating because they’ve listened to it too many times, Isak speaks again, surprising him yet again.

“Even, do you ever cry?”

“What?”

“Do you cry?” Isak repeats, still staring at the ceiling above them. Even steals a glance, and he looks so cuddly and comfortable. In another universe, he’s cuddling him on the floor right now.

“What kind of question is this?”

“Crying is healthy. It helps release all the bottled up feelings and emotions and pressure,” says Isak. And Even knows this. He knows all of this.

“What’s your point?”

“The body remembers and stores how we feel. So if you feel sad or tense, chances are your body stores that tension. It’s why our necks get stiff sometimes, or our backs hurt when we’re under a lot of stress. It can also cause headaches and itchiness and joint pain. The body remembers how the brain feels,” Isak explains with a calm and detached, yet soothing voice, like in those meditation apps Even resorts to to sleep sometimes. “Crying can help release some of that tension.”

“There’s no tension.”

“I can’t read you half the time, but I know you, Even. I spent enough time with you to say this much with confidence.”
If you can’t read me, then what can I say about you?

“And what is it that you know about me, Isak?”

“That the more you feel, the less you speak, the less you show it. It all goes inwards.”

Even remains silent on his back beside him. For a moment, he dissociates. He’s not there anymore. He questions his reality. *Am I really here?* Perhaps he’s in his head.

He comes back quickly, but he’s just as shaken.

“If negative emotions don’t show on the outside, in the form of screams or punches to the wall or tears or words on a piece of paper or something, chances are they’ll manifest inwards.”

Even closes his eyes and breathes through his nose. He feels empty.

Isak waits. He doesn’t say more than that, as if he knows just how badly he’s cutting through Even right now.

“Ev,” Isak whispers softly into his ear and it takes Even a while to realize that Isak has turned to his side and is staring at him.

The nickname fills his heart with something soft, but it doesn’t hurt any less.

“What your mom said to me earlier about not brushing off friends joking about something that hurts me applies to you, too. You need to talk to the boys.”

Even wonders if Isak staged the whole thing to get Julie to say this to him so that Even could hear. He wonders why Isak is suddenly bringing up the boys in the first place.

“Okay?” Isak asks in a gentle voice again. “Ev?”

A nickname. So sweet.

He’s making himself a perpetual window through Even’s walls. A window with no shutters, no glass, no blinds. A window Even won’t be able to close when Isak leaves him cold and alone.

“Why don’t you apply these speeches to yourself? Why don’t you extend this wisdom and sudden loveliness to yourself?” Even blurts out.

But Isak isn’t hurt. He doesn’t look hurt. Even is worried for a moment when Isak leaves the floor. But he doesn’t look hurt.

“I didn’t mean to sound like a dick,” Even tells him at the door.

“It’s okay. Lashing out on me means it’s not going inwards. That’s good enough for me.”

Isak leaves like he’s accomplished a mission—getting Even to be mean to him—and Even contemplates life on the floor. He doesn’t want to leave his rug. It’s gross but it smells of him.

Even thinks of all the nice things Isak has ever told him.

*Ev.*
The rest of the week is tame. People give Even interesting looks at school following Isak’s visit, but he doesn’t pay them too much attention. Elias ambushes him on Thursday to ask if it’s okay to invite Isak to the beach on Saturday, and Even wonders why the afterthought, why is Elias suddenly paying attention to him and what he might or might not be okay with.

Elias has always been his friend, ever since they were much younger. But he’s never treated him this delicately. It’s like he sees something in him that Even wasn’t aware was showing. It’s like no matter how hard Even tries to hide the fissures and mask the brokenness, they still somehow see right through him. He’s been relatively open with both Mikael and Mutta, so he expects them to treat him differently. But not Elias.

Have they perhaps been talking about him?

The thought makes his skin crawl.

“Yeah it’s chill. Why?” says Even.

“No reason. Just wanna make sure you two are chill. I don’t know.”

Isak wears one of Even’s shirts. The one with JAWS on it and the boys notice, their eyes fleeting from side to side, trying to assess the situation. Even is too confused by Isak’s mixed signals to dwell on it.

He rides in a different car again for the short trip and laughs at Adam’s crappy jokes.

It’s all good. It’s fine. There are no girls accompanying them this time around. At least, Isak won’t be kissing some girl today.

The water is warm. Even sticks with Mikael most of the morning. They try to drown each other, race each other in the deep water, and just hang lazily on their backs.

In the distance, Isak is laughing at the top of his lungs, having a splashing war with Adam and Yousef, then diving off of Mutta’s shoulders. If Even wasn’t busy feeling a little bit jealous, the sight would warm his heart.

After a few more minutes of staring, it does anyway.

Isak looks so happy. It’s contagious.

“He looks like he’s having fun,” Mikael muses to Even, smiling as well.

“Yeah, you could say that,” Even shrugs.

The silence is awkward and Even can feel Mikael thinking hard beside him. He looks good like this. All muscles and tan and long hair. He looks good.

Even feels out of place, anticipating a fallout, an infuriating question. He just knows it’s coming. The concern, the babying, the ‘walking on eggshells’ part.

“Even, is everything okay?” Mikael asks.

There it is. It makes his blood boil.
“Why is everyone asking me this damn question?! Of course I’m okay! I’m at the beach with my friends! The sun is shining. I’m fine!” Even bursts.

He just bursts while Mikael stares at him with big round eyes. Even wonders if he can no longer hear anything but the beating of his own heart or if the splashing and laughter in the distance have halted.

It’s the latter, and when he turns, he finds the rest of the boys staring at him with an alarmed expression as if bracing themselves for the worst, as if they can anticipate more hurt about to spill and burst right out of him.

Even apologizes to Mikael for yelling then leaves the water altogether. He grabs the book he left on his towel and heads for a little stroll.

“Even!” Elias calls out for him, but he just smiles and says he’ll do some reading.

Isak was right. It all goes inwards.

He stops in the most crowded area of the beach and lies there to read about pretentious film theory. He doubts the boys will find him there in the middle of all the beach umbrellas and screaming children.

Even makes it back an hour later. Clouds have shrouded the sky and the temperature has dropped significantly.

He heads to the car to retrieve a sweater first and finds Isak there, reading a book in the backseat of the car Even rode in.

“Hey,” Isak greets him, sitting up almost immediately and dropping his book. It almost looks like he was waiting for Even.

“What are you doing here?” says Even.

“Was waiting for you.”

“How did you know I’d stop by the car.”

“It got cold, so I thought you’d come here to get a sweater or something.”

Right. Isak knows him like the back of his hand.

“You got me there.”

“Feeling better?” Isak asks, now sitting cross-legged.

“All good.”

“Did Mikael say something to you earlier?”

“No,” Even frowns, now rummaging through his bag in the front seat. “Why would you assume that he did?”

“I’m not. I just know that he’s worried about you.”

“What do you mean?”
“Nothing. Nevermind.”

Even pulls out a sweater and quickly throws it on. He has an additional one, but Isak is already bundled up in one of Mutta’s.

“Is this why you were waiting for me? To check on me post-outburst? To rub your theory in my face?” Even says, but he does his best to sound lighthearted, like friendly banter.

“No. I wanted to ask you why you’re avoiding me,” says Isak.

It makes Even’s head nearly snap.

“What?”

“Have I done something wrong? You’ve been like this since the cabin,” Isak continues. “I meant to ask you the other day at your place, then I convinced myself it was all in my head because you were acting chill. But now you’re back to not replying to my texts and you won’t look at me when we’re with others. Did I do something wrong?”

Even takes him in, unruly curls still damp from all the swimming. He looks comfortable in Mutta’s big sweater. And Even wants to tell him that he didn’t. It’s me. It’s me who couldn’t help but get attached when you’ve always kept me at an arm’s length. It’s all me. I’m too deep in my feelings and can’t get my head out of my ass. You’re absolutely right. I never let any emotions show, so it’s all eating me up from the inside. It’s me.

“Even, you need to tell me if I’m making you upset,” Isak pleads and there’s that sweetness in his voice again. “I don’t wish to sound patronizing, but if I make your moods swing in any direction, then tell me. I don’t want to cause you any mental strain. Please.”

Even will never understand him. Is he that oblivious to Even’s feelings? How can he care so much about his mood swings and not nearly enough about how he actually feels?

“I understand if you don’t want to keep doing the experiments for your mental health,” Isak rambles. “I totally get it. I won’t resent you or anything. I understand chemical imbalances and I know that it’s important to look after yourself.”

*Chemical imbalances. So pretentious.* Even wants him to stop talking, to ask him to stop talking about his bipolar like he could ever have a clue, like the books he reads could ever actually explain how Even feels. But he’s not sure how to respond to his words without losing a bit of himself. He’s about to just ask him to drop it when he hears the boys approaching the other car.

For some odd reason, both he and Isak hide in the backseat, ducking their heads instinctively as if they’ve been doing something suspicious.

Even shakes his head, realizing the absurdity of the situation as the boys will probably find them anyway. But just he’s about to come out of hiding, he hears Mutta whispering.

“We should just wait in the car until he comes back. He doesn’t like being chased around. It makes him feel like we’re worried about him,” he says.

“Newsflash Mutta!” Elias whisper-shouts. “I don’t know if you missed every single discussion we had about this, but we ARE worried. That’s the whole point!”

“Even is not a child. He can handle himself. We shouldn’t be making him feel like he’s being watched over. It must be annoying to him,” Mutta replies.
“I gotta side with Elias here,” Even recognizes Mikael’s voice. “I mean yes to not making him feel like he’s being watched over, but we still need to keep an eye out for him. I’m worried, too. He just threw a fit earlier cause I asked him if he was okay.”

“Try to put yourself in his shoes though,” says Mutta. “How would you feel if your friends suddenly start treating you differently and looking over you like you’re child?”

“I don’t know, but if I were fucking bipolar, I’d appreciate it if my bros looked out for me!” says Elias.

“Fuck off, Elias!!” Mutta hisses. “Being diagnosed with bipolar doesn’t mean he needs babysitting!!”

“I know that!” Elias sighs. “I’m not trying to be a dick. But I’m worried about him, okay? I feel like he’s starting to act strange again. I feel like he’s slipping and it’s on us to pick up the signs.”

“You’re just being an asshole. Nothing’s wrong with him!” says Mutta.

“Oh yeah? How do you explain his thing with Isak then? Like what are they even doing? Since when is he into dudes? Isn’t that what happened last time, too? When he went after Mikael right before losing it?”

“Elias, that’s not-” Mikael tries to cut him off but Mutta beats him to it.

“Since when is being into guys a symptom of mania? What the fuck are you talking about? Has it occurred to you that maybe he likes Isak?”

“Are you blind?!” Elias nearly shouts. “Are we just going to ignore the fact that Isak burns people and that Even has a thing for being burned and hurt?! Are we just going to forget that he set his house on fire last year? Are we just going to forget about all that shit because we want to be politically correct and spare his feelings?!”

Even watches everything from the other car, but he’s not in his body. He’s merely a spectator. For a moment, it feels like Isak is grabbing his hand, but he’s not sure. It couldn’t be. Isak would never touch him deliberately.

Even watches everything from a distance. Both from the boys and from himself. He watches Mutta grab Elias by the collar of the shirt he’s just put on. He doesn’t hit him. He knows he won’t.

“Fuck you! You don’t get to make what he goes through about yourself!”

“No! Fuck you, Mutta!” Elias barks in his face right back. “Fuck you and your self-righteousness! You think you’re so noble, but you weren’t there when Julie called me in tears to help her get Even checked into rehab because she was convinced Even was going to end up killing himself with all the self-harm! None of you were there! And it’s easy to make me look like the villain here. But I’m just worried, okay?! I wish it could all be like before, too! I wish he were normal. I really do! But he isn’t! And we need to look out for him!”

Mikael holds his head.

Even feels like holding his, too. The world is spinning. His throat is closing in on itself. His chest is too tight. It hurts too much. To have his closest friends talk about how abnormal he is, about how much of a burden he is. To have them argue over his story like this, like they could ever know, like the sides they’re preaching could even matter or be “right” in the first place.

The conversation makes his skin crawl and his heart bleed. Even remembers Eskild’s words about
one’s story being only one’s to tell. He finally understands it now.

They have no right to talk about him like he’s a fictional character, like he’s nothing, like it’s nothing, like his story belongs to them when it only belongs to him. They have no right to make him feel even more ashamed than he already does. They have no right.

Even is about to open the door and storm out, but Isak does it first.

He walks out and bursts.

“Fuck all of you,” Isak hisses. “Having a pissing contest when you all suck and think you can speak for him. Fuck all of you. If this is being “normal”, then I don’t want any of it. You can fucking keep it!”

Even doesn’t get to see their reaction. His vision is blurred. His breathing is erratic. His skin is pulsing.

He might be crying. He’s not sure.

He walks away.

His heart is shattered. The tears won’t stop. Finally. Tears.

Even walks away and no one chases after him. They all leave him be.

Isak finds him an hour later on the beach, sitting with his arms crossed over his bent knees. The nonsensical and uncontrollable crying has stopped. Now he just feels empty.

“Are you feeling better?” Isak asks in a small voice while laying a towel on the sand next to Even.

“I’m fine.”

“It’s okay to not be fine, Even.”

“Wow, thank you so much! I feel so much better now thanks to your bullshit! Wow!”

He’s lashing out on Isak when Isak hasn’t done a thing to him. He barely recognizes himself.

Isak is probably happy with this reaction. At least it’s not going inwards.

“I just want to help. Tell me how I can help.”

“Maybe just leave me alone? How about that?” Even snaps, and this isn’t him. This has never been him. He’s never been mean and vicious to Isak.

Isak stands and Even mourns his presence almost immediately. He wants to call after him and shout I’m sorry! Please stay with me. Don’t leave me. I feel like you’re the only person who treats me like a person and not like something they need to fix. I’m sorry. Forgive me! Come back.

But Isak is gone. He walks further down the beach, fast, really fast, while Even watches. He doesn’t stop until his feet are in the water.

Isak then dives right into the cold sea. He doesn’t hesitate. Not even for a second. He just dives right in.
Isak emerges from the water soaked from head to toe. He spends a few more seconds inside before leaving it altogether, then running back to Even as fast as he can.

Even doesn’t understand.

He doesn’t understand until he does, until Isak is back in his space and sitting on the towel he carefully laid out for himself earlier, as if he knew he was going to need it for this.

Isak is dripping, shivering, when he takes Even into his arms.

Isak hugs him. Even gasps.

He expects Isak to be cold, but he feels nothing but warmth.

“Hugs help in moments of distress,” Isak whispers against his hair, and he’s squeezing tight, so tight, it’s crushing his bones. “Hugs help because they release oxytocin and they help. Trust me they help. I read a lot about it.”

Isak holds him until Even gives up control and leans against him, reveling in the pressure of their bodies together, in the oxytocin and all the other fancy chemicals. He closes his eyes and breathes.

“They don’t mean it,” Isak whispers again, running his wet hands up and down his sweater, warming him up when it should be doing the exact opposite. “I know I just called them assholes, but they don’t mean it. They just don’t know how to navigate this. It’s too big for them. They’re being dicks, but they love you. They care so much about you. They just don’t know how to be your friends right now.”

Isak keeps repeating the words, like a mantra, as if to make the words stick in his brain, as if he’s manipulating him.

“I told you I was a burden. I told you,” Even mumbles with his eyes closed. “I told you.”

“No. Ev, it’s not true,” Isak insists. Ev. He’s being so soft and tender, it’s tearing through him.

Even feels tears in his eyes when Isak runs his hands through his hair then his neck, massaging the skin there.

“Don’t cry. Please don’t cry.”

Can Isak see through his eyelids too?

Even wants to say something along the lines of ‘What happened to it being healthy?’ but he’s too emotionally drained. He doesn’t trust his voice not to break.

“I jinxed it,” Isak adds and it’s cute. He’s sweet. So sweet when he’s like this.

Even holds him back, throws both arms around him and hugs him close, resting his head on his chest and snuggling up to him. They remain like that for a while, just rocking in each other’s arms, Even soaking up all the comfort he can get before Isak deems it’s enough, before Isak begins to dry.

Isak holds him until the fire in him dims and the anguish begins to leave his body, until his head clears and his lungs fill up with air again.

Even lets go reluctantly when Isak begins to detach himself, Isak who wastes no time getting back up.
on his feet.

“Don’t move. Be right back!” he says.

He runs back to the water and jumps right in, even faster than the first time. He almost trips and it makes Even snort for half a second.

Isak comes back and throws himself at Even again, holding him sideways this time.

“The more oxytocin, the better.”

Isak keeps surprising him with this caring and tender front. And Even knows that it’s not the first time, remembering how it felt to have his cheeks kissed the day he came out to his mother, but it doesn’t feel any less overwhelming.

“Why are you doing this?” Even asks the question that’s been burning at the tip of his tongue.

“Because I don’t like it when you’re upset,” says Isak, after pulling back to cup his face in his wet hands.

The words are spoken with acute precision, the way one would read the back of a cereal box, mindlessly and with no emotion. Even would disregard them if it weren’t for Isak’s soft touch on his face.

“If you keep doing this, I might start thinking that you actually care about me.”

“This obviously isn’t about you. This is for me,” Isak counters, as expected. Even braces himself for the elaborate scientific excuses, endeared by the unmistakable flush on Isak’s face. “Seeing you in pain makes my brain release negative chemicals, ones associated with unpleasant experiences. It’s not healthy for me to see you in pain, which is why I’m trying to alleviate it.”

*Reductio ad absurdum.* Isak makes no sense. He’s arguing for absurd things and he’s doing it on purpose. He’s doing what Eric Stewart did to his wife.

“I can just go be in pain somewhere else, you know?” Even smiles, relieved to see his mind focusing on something other than the scarring conversation they overheard. Even wonders if Isak is doing this on purpose, distracting him from the still fresh wound, turning his attention to the one he’s been nursing for a little while now, the one that has Isak’s name on it.

“Or you can just let me help you not be in pain,” Isak whispers, and there’s determination in his eyes. “I know something that’s even more effective than hugs.”

“Really? And how do you know that it’s effective?”

“I read about it. I’ll show you if you let me.”

“Sure.”

Isak presses a kiss to his cheek, and it makes a wet and loud sound against his skin and sends shivers all over Even’s body.

“You read about this?” Even asks after a moment with a faux amused tone to cover up for the fact that he’s undeniably flustered. “About kissing people’s cheeks when they’re sad?”

“I did,” Isak lies before kissing his cheekbone this time around, then lower by his jaw. “I can share the article with you later.”
“Yeah?” Even doesn’t realize his voice has gone higher until he utters the word. He’s suddenly out of breath, his heart toppling over inside his chest while Isak peppers him with soft kisses all over his face. “May I ask where you found this scientific article?”

“In a very prestigious academic publication,” Isak replies, pressing a kiss to the corner of Even’s mouth, teasing him, driving him wild, making his eyes flutter shut and his lips part on instinct alone. “Very trusted. Very successful results.”

“Yeah very.”

Even thinks Isak is going to kiss him, and he burns with the anticipation, with the nearly violent yearning for a denouement. But Isak kisses him everywhere else.

He kisses the corner of his mouth. He kisses his cheekbones. He kisses behind his ears. He kisses where his eyes crinkle when he’s happy. He kisses his forehead. He kisses his hair. He kisses between his eyebrows. He kisses the bridge of his nose. He kisses his chin. He kisses him everywhere else.

And when Isak is done, he presses their foreheads together and brushes his thumbs over Even’s cheeks. Slow and careful, back and forth, soothing him while Even pants, and pants, and pants.

“Better?” Isak asks and his voice is too tender.

Even can’t open his eyes quite yet, too afraid he might fall even deeper if he were to look into his green pools. He nods while Isak holds his face like it’s precious.

Even can’t open his eyes. It’s too much. The touch and sound are overwhelming enough. He couldn’t add the sight to it. Perhaps he understands what Isak meant when he felt overwhelmed by their touching. Except that Isak genuinely has trouble navigating a new sense while Even is simply in love with him.

He gasps embarrassingly when Isak’s lips press over his eyelids. Isak is kissing his eyes, kissing the tears away.

Even holds his breath and remains still in his hands until Isak pulls back, sounding hesitant and careful, as if afraid of having crossed a line.

When Even opens his eyes, he realizes that he’s free falling. Isak has him free falling.

“Swimming pool blue,” Isak blurts out, looking moved by Even’s reaction to his handy work. “Your eyes. They’re so blue when you’re sad. I can feel your hurt too.”

Even pulls him in by the waist and kisses him on the lips.

He kisses him urgently, fiercely. It sets his brain on fire, a fire greater than the one Elias and the boys lit through him. A fire all too consuming, it makes him forget about everything else, all the hurt, all the ache, all the hiding and concealing.

Even kisses him and Isak kisses him back.

It feels like their first kiss, like the day Isak got taken away from him and they crashed into one another. It feels desperate and big, too big for his chest. Even kisses him and it’s so rough and messy and passionate and emotional, it takes him a while to realize his hurt is bleeding through it. As long as it’s not inwards.
Isak is letting Even take what he needs, what he wants, to make sure he doesn’t internalize any of this. He’s letting him bruise his lips as long as it doesn’t go inwards.

Even slows down, pecks him on the mouth one more time and pulls back.

Isak looks like a revelation.

“I guess we’re even again now,” Even smiles, still trying to catch his breath.

“Not for long.”

Isak pulls him in again, both hands on his face, and he kisses him so softly that Even’s toes curl in the sand.

They kiss and only take breaks to look at each other and chuckle nervously before looking down.

It’s all brand new. They’ve kissed for multiple reasons, but never to make Even feel better.

This is new. So new.

Isak brushes his thumb over Even’s cheeks and smiles. It’s all very overwhelming, Even doesn’t know what to say.

“Better?”

Even nods and he feels intoxicated and exhausted.

“Seeing you sad fills me with a violent urge to hurt everyone who hurts you. You know?”

“Isak, please don’t murder my friends,” Even chuckles faintly.

“I want them to know that I only spared them because you asked,” says Isak before leaning in to kiss Even on the cheek again.

It’s nonsensical but it makes Even feel so loved, so cared for. His skin tinges with it. He remembers then that Isak was also there in the car with him, that he heard everything, that he heard what Elias said and that he’s still being a tender dream to him right now.

“It’s not true, by the way. What Elias said,” he blurts out while Isak holds his face. “I’m not doing this because I want you to burn me. I don’t do that anymore. I haven’t in so long. It’s not true. You never burned me. I mean except for the times I told you that you did, and the time I lied about it in the lab.”

“I know,” Isak replies with a soft smile like it’s nothing. “Don’t worry about it. I know. It’s fine. We don’t have to talk about that now.”

Their lips meet again, and Even has lost track of who kissed whom. Are they even? Will they ever be?

They make out on the beach like they’re in love, like they’re an entity, a viable partnership, when in reality it’s all just a byproduct of an emotional afternoon.

They kiss lazily and softly. They kiss until Even spots Elias, Mutta, and Mikael in the distance when he pulls back to take in and memorize the flush coloring Isak’s cheeks.

Even tries to shove him away, violent flashes of ‘I AM NOT A HOMOSEXUAL’ in Isak’s
handwriting and of Isak’s overall shame suddenly flooding his brain, but Isak clings and pulls him right back in.

“Isak, the boys—”

“I don’t care. Let them see. Let them see that it’s not a sickness, that it’s not a symptom. Let them see how beautiful we can be,” Isak says and Even loves him so much he could burst with it. “Kiss me.”

And it strikes him then, how Isak’s shame, how Isak’s deeply rooted shame which makes him burn inwards—and then outwards—the shame that makes him curl into a ball at night, that makes him weep in his sleep, that makes him loathe his own existence, no longer matters.

When Even is in pain, Isak’s shame no longer matters.

Even’s wellbeing takes precedence.

Even can’t breathe, and not only because Isak’s mouth is on his while his best friends are watching.

‘Let them see how beautiful we can be.’

Even kisses him. Even lets them see.

Even finally lets them see.

It’s freeing.

.

They drive back in Elias’ car. He leaves them the keys on top of two towels—one green and one blue—with a handwritten note spelling ‘I am so sorry, Even. I love you. You’re my brother, you know? I’m sorry for hurting you. I hope you forgive me one day.’

It’s sweet but the wound is still fresh. Isak takes the note and puts it in his bag.

“I’ll give it to you later. When your head is clear,” he says.

“Okay.”

“Are you sure you’re fine with driving?” Isak asks.

“It’s not like we have a choice here,” says Even, smiling.

“I’m sorry learning how to drive hasn’t been on my list of priorities.” Isak rolls his eyes. “It’s not like anyone was dying to teach me or whatever. My dad made me ride in the back of the damn car most days.”

“I can teach you if you want,” Even blurts out before thinking. It’s all so domestic, it’s terrifying.

Isak is blushing.

“I mean I can help you learn and stuff. You know. We can use my mom’s car or whatever.”

“I’m terrified of traffic. It’s not necessary,” says Isak.

“If you say so.”
Even drives with the windows down and they listen to ‘Ramble On’, ‘Good Times Bad Times’, ‘In The Evening’, then more Led Zeppelin songs. They also listen to Pink Floyd, Guns N’ Roses, The Velvet Underground, Jimi Hendrix and to songs that just make them bop their heads along and laugh. It’s so freeing. Even can’t recall the last time he’s felt this free.

And although he’s nursing another open wound, it feels somewhat liberating. It feels like breathing. Like something is finally out in the open. Like he can finally stop pretending with the boys. Like they can finally stop pretending with him.

They’ll have to talk about it. But for now. For now it’s okay.

Even will look up Rock concerts when he gets home.

.

He sleeps it off. He sleeps through all of Sunday, too drained to exist like a regular human being for the day. He sleeps until his brain and body deem that it’s okay for him to get back on his feet.

Heraklit
18:09

Hey!
How was your sunday?

Good

yeah?
What did you do?

Slept

Good!

Good?

Sleeping is good :) you’re recuperating. It’s good

Isak i wasn’t in a car crash

Emotional and mental hardship can manifest physically too
They can feel like a car crash too

You’re literally so pretentious

Hater

;)

Even smiles at his phone throughout dinner. His mom asks him why he made her lie to Elias about his whereabouts, and Even promises to tell her later.
He buys the tickets as soon as he makes it back to his room. He accidentally gets them using his mother’s ticketmaster account and she gushes so hard that it makes him lock himself in his room.

“Are you two boyfriends now? So cute!”

“Mom! We’re just friends. It’s just to thank him for being there for me and stuff.”

“You’re taking him to his first concert. That’s adorable! I’m so proud of you, baby. King of Romance!”

“I can’t deal with you right now. Oh my god!” he groans. “Besides, I might just return them. I don’t know what he’s doing that day and like he might feel uncomfortable and I don’t want to force him or guilt-trip him or whatever.”

“You can take my car, baby. I don’t mind.”

“You’re acting weird. Why are you acting weird?” Isak narrows his eyes while they walk through the city aimlessly, both in t-shirts after swimming. It’s later in the evening but the sun is still shining in the sky. Even doesn’t think he’s actually seen Isak in a t-shirt in the streets before.

“I’m not acting weird. What do you mean?” Even scoffs.

“You’re being very weird. Like you’re hiding something from me.”

“I am not!”

“Oh my god! You’re planning something for my birthday, aren’t you?! Or you know someone who is? You’re still not talking to the boys, so is it Sana? Is it Eskild?! Fuck, it’s Eskild, isn’t it? He made this weird comment when I paid my rent on time about how it will come back to me,” Isak groans.

“Uh-”

“What is he planning?! Tell me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t lie to me Bech Næsheim,” he tells him while waving his index finger in his face.

“Lying to you? What are you talking about, I am not lying.”

“You can’t lie for shit, honestly. I don’t know what I see in you.”

Even stops dead in his tracks and Isak does too.

*Did he just.*

Isak’s eyes widen and Even can immediately tell that he didn’t mean to say that.

But he did.

“Uh. I mean. As a science partner and stuff. You know. Like. I’m the master of bluffing and you need to keep up with me, but you clearly can’t and uh. You know.”

“You’re rambling,” Even smiles.
“I am not!”

Even feels like he’s living out that Imogen Heap song Sonja used to play all the time “Say Goodnight and Go”.

Why do you have to be so cute?
It’s impossible to ignore you

“Sure,” Even grins to himself and resumes walking.

He walks him to kollektivet and waves him goodbye with a smile. But he can’t leave. He needs to ask him. He needs to do it now.

“What are you doing smiling like that?” Isak smiles. “Go home.”

“So I can’t smile now?”

“I’m never letting you walk me home again.”

“Why? Can’t have people seeing you smiling at the door?” Even teases. “Must keep the stone cold act going for the neighbors in case a fight breaks, huh?”

“Where did I smile? Show me where I smiled. You’re the one smiling!”


“Seriously you need to leave before Eskild gets on my case again,” Isak pleads, the shy smile never leaving his face.

“Huh? How does me hanging by your door get Eskild on your case?”

“Whatever. Just go before he sees you. I don’t need him giving me shit tonight about ‘oh where’s your science partner tonight?’ I’m trying to finish a book.”

Even laughs while Isak whines.

“Alright, fine, fine. I’ll go.”

“Okay, bye. Goodnight.”

Even makes a step forward then turns back around.

“Isak?”

He expects a disgruntled and exasperated groan from Isak. He gets a gentle, “yeah?” instead.

“Hm. Wanna to go to a concert with me?”

“What?”

“I got us tickets to the Norway Rock Festival next week,” Even blurts out like he’s rehearsed it, scratching his neck nervously. “If you wanna come or something.”

Isak’s smile drops and he suddenly looks small under the doorframe.

“I mean it’s chill if you’re busy or don’t want to because of the burning. I heard it might rain though or something. And we can just stand all the way in the back away from everyone if you want. But I
can also find someone else to come with,” Even rambles.

“You got tickets to a Rock festival?” Isak repeats, blinking and looking floored.

“Uh, yeah.”

“You don’t even like Rock.”

“I do now.”

Even can hear the birds chirping and his heart beating against his chest. This was a terrible idea. But it was worth a shot. Whatever.

“It’s on my birthday,” says Isak.

“It is.”

“It’s in Kvinesdal. It’s like six hours away.”

Of course Isak knows everything about this festival already.

“I know,” Even replies nervously while Isak bats his eyelashes and looks speechless. “It’s chill if you can’t go or don’t want to. I mean it is on your birthday and I took my time to ask you because I don’t know. But yeah it’s-”

“I’ll come,” says Isak.

“What?”

“I’ll go with you.” Isak smiles and his whole face lights up.

“Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

.

The drive is a breeze. Even thought six hours on the road might wear him down. But Isak is an incredible travel companion, the best, really. He prepared extensive playlists and declares that today is about Guns N’ Roses.

He sings along with the windows down, his wild hair and skull t-shirt blowing in the wind. He drums to the beat with his hands, slapping them against his thighs and making Even lose it a little bit with each light hit. He does impressions, tries to hit those high notes, and laughs at himself for failing. He sticks his head out of the window and screams. He tells the most random stories about rock stars from another generation. He talks about philosophy and science. And he never stops talking, not even for a moment.

He even tells Even that he can see him rocking tight leather pants and longer hair like those guys in the sixties, and Even laughs, and laughs, and laughs. And his heart fills and fills and fills.

Time flies when he’s with him.

Isak and Even. Even and Isak. They’re nothing, but they’re everything all the same.

“I’ve never traveled without my parents before,” Isak tells him as they near the camping site. “I’m
very happy.”
“Yeah?”
“Yeah. It’s already my favorite birthday ever. By far.”

Even’s heart swells.

They park the car in the woods and set up their tent. They could sleep in the car, but it’s probably going to get cold at night. Besides, they won’t be able to both sleep in the tiny vehicle given that they’re still pretending that they need water to touch, and they both brought sleeping bags anyway.

“So like we’re going to piss and stuff in the wilderness?” Isak asks, worried.

“Uh, yeah? Never camped before?”

“Are you for real? Of course I’ve never camped before!”

“Geez, relax!” Even laughs. “Also I’m sure there are toilets inside the festival for you delicate princess.”

“Delicate princess? Are you perhaps trying to get me to send you to the hospital on this fine day?”

“What? You don’t like this pet name? Delicate princess? I thought you would.”

“Take it back! Take it back right now!” Isak frowns and chases him around, but there’s nothing but laughter and joy in his voice.

And it feels absurd to chase each other in the woods when they’ve implicitly agreed on not acknowledging the fact that they can touch again. It’s all very absurd.

They don’t touch. They come close, but they don’t.

“We should probably head down there,” says Isak.

“Yeah.”

Even doesn’t know any of the performers. Rock music has never been his scene. He’s never understood it or thought about listening to it. He doesn’t exactly consider himself a music snob, listening to about everything and anything from 90s rap to Pop Top 40. But Rock music seemed to belong to an older generation that didn’t quite capture what he looked for in music, what fed his soul. He was wrong.

And watching Isak enjoy himself feeds his soul in ways he can’t describe.

Isak’s happiness goes inwards and outwards too. Perhaps everything about him does. Isak burns on the inside, and thus burns on the outside too. Everything he feels is felt by everyone around him. Happiness, coldness, kindness, cruelty, warmth. Isak spreads everything he feels.

Everything bursts right out of him. And Even finds himself envying him and wanting to give him the world all the same.
So he does everything for Isak to have the perfect day. He stands behind him with both arms extended on either side, without touching him. He buys him beer because Isak asked. He jumps when Isak jumps. He laughs when Isak laughs. He yells and cheers when Isak does. He pretends to know the words to whatever song is currently playing and screams them right back in Isak’s face.

“I made a wish!” Isak confesses while he jumps around and dances, his curls damp from all the sweat. Even could probably get away with touching him now.

“You what?”

“I made a wish! I read that people make wishes on their birthdays.”

“Oh yeah? What did you wish for?”

“I can’t tell you.”

Even smiles and does everything to make Isak feel like any other festival goer, to feel normal. As normal as one can be, even if the mere notion hurts him and burns him. He wants him to not have to worry about a damn thing today. Today is his day. Today is for him.

And Isak jumps and shouts and sings and dances and yells and laughs, and Even doesn’t know what to make of his feelings.

He knows that they’re chemical reactions. He knows feelings are fleeting and ephemeral. He knows all of this. But Even doesn’t think Isak will ever leave the spot he carved for himself in his heart.

Even doesn’t register that it’s started to rain right away because he’s drenched in sweat. It takes him a second. It takes him a hot second.

Isak turns around and his smile is so wide. “Oh my god! It’s raining!”

Even was hoping it would. His weather app told him as much, but still.

“I guess it is.”

“Come on!” Isak grabs his hand and drags him through the crowd.

They can finally get closer to the stage. Isak can finally brush shoulders with other people and jump with other fans. Even no longer needs to shield him.

Still, Even remains behind him, his broad shoulders hovering over Isak’s. He likes their height difference. He likes it even more than he thought he did, Even realizes.

“That was my wish,” Isak tells him.

“Rain?”

“Yeah rain.”

And though absurd, it soothes Even to know that Isak could be rubbing against anyone in the festival right now, but that he’s still choosing to lean his weight against Even’s chest, that he’s choosing to remain close and to press against him right now. That although the rain gives him the chance to touch anyone, it’s only Even he craves.
It’s intoxicating and Even doesn’t fight it.

He wraps his arms around Isak’s stomach and brings him closer, so much closer. And Isak doesn’t resist it. He melts into him and crosses his arms over Even’s.

People jump around them, while Isak and Even rock in each other’s arms. It’s almost poetic, how they chose to slow down when they finally got close to the stage. Even can’t help but lean in and press a kiss to Isak’s neck, right below his ear, then to his shoulder, before turning his attention to the band playing.

He doesn’t miss the way Isak’s breath seems to hitch as his whole body tenses with it.

And Even can’t help but do it again and again, until Isak begins to arch his back and rock against him more pronouncedly, more hastily, until Even is lost in the friction.

A band is playing. People are cheering. Rain is falling. And Isak is in his arms, bending, panting, pleading.

Even turns Isak around fiercely and kisses him before he can dwell on his sorry and disheveled state. He kisses him and Isak opens up for him, breathing and moaning down his throat and fisting his hair.

It’s perfect. Everything is perfect. The Earth’s axis has shifted. It’s perfect.

“That was my second wish,” Isak tells him when they pull apart and breathe with their foreheads pressed together.

“You made more than one?”

“I made three. I heard people get three.”

“What was your third?”

They run back to the car. It’s muddy and gross but Even doesn’t care, because Isak is leading him by the hand and laughing and running and running.

They stumble into their tent and they’re both soaking wet, Even can’t help but wonder whose sleeping bag they’re about to ruin forever.

Isak pulls him by the neck and kisses him until Even forgets his name.

“Fuck!” Even mutters and lets his hands wander along Isak’s sides under his skull t-shirt, squeezing and kneading the flesh there. Skin. Touching isak’s skin is always disorienting.

He feels Isak recoil a bit and he knows that it’s instinctive, that he’s not used to being touched there in his upper body.

“I’m sorry,” Even mumbles to him, but Isak kisses him again and regains control.

He fists the hair by Even’s nape and bites his lower lip until he winces. He then reaches for the ends of Even’s shirt and begins pulling.

“Take this off!” he says with urgency while doing it himself and Even’s head is spinning. Is this really happening? Is Isak really undressing him right now.
“Isak-”

“You didn’t bring a change of clothes!” He explains to Even and it’s the most ridiculous excuse to getting anyone naked ever.

“Right.”

“Yeah, can’t have you going back to Oslo tomorrow in muddied up clothes,” says Isak while breathing through his nose, and he’s now fighting the button and zipper on Even’s jeans.

Even can’t breathe.

“Yeah we can’t have that.”

Even lets Isak undress him. He lets him touch him and kiss him. He lets him have his way in their giant tent, just running his hands all over Even’s chest, stopping on his collarbones and on his heart, his ribs. Even just does his best to keep his knees from buckling under him.

Even is in his briefs and Isak is still fully clothed, still dripping. It’s too much. He lets out the most embarrassing sound when Isak’s hand curls around his waistband while still kissing him, his other hand resting around his neck. And he nearly combusts when Isak shoves his hand in his briefs and takes him into his palm.

They both moan into the next kiss.

Is there any coming back from this? Can they ever come back from this? Is this an experiment? Is it just the rush and adrenaline from the concert? Is it another ‘thank you’ for getting tickets in first place? Is this Isak still trying to cheer Even up after the whole incident with the boys? Is this Isak acting out because it’s his birthday and he’s far away from home and he can be anyone and anything? What are they doing?

“Stop thinking, Even. Stop,” Isak tells him between kisses, and Even tries. He tries. He does his best until his best is no longer necessary, until Isak begins teasing him and stroking him working his hand in precise motions, twisting his wrist methodically and panting like he’s enjoying it just as much as Even.

Even who can no longer return the kisses, too consumed by all his blood rushing south and Isak’s hands on him. He can’t return the kisses but Isak’s mouth is on his skin, on his neck, licking him, ruining him. He isn’t sure, but he thinks Isak takes his hand back for a second to lick his palm before returning to him again. And it spends him. It wrecks him.

Even spills onto Isak’s hand like a thirteen year old. And it would be embarrassing if it weren’t for Isak’s hardness pressing against him, for his whole body begging to be touched and released.

Even kisses him and pushes him down until Isak falls backwards on his sleeping bag, his eyes scared but full of lust all the same.

“Take this off!” Even says as he kneels in front of him and begins to pull at Isak’s pants.

Isak lets him. He looks embarrassed but he lets him. He opens his legs and makes space for Even between his thighs, and he lets him pull the jeans off of him and throw them over his shoulder.

“Can I?” Even asks because this is Isak, and he doesn’t want to break him. “I want to see you.”
"I want to see YOU."

There’s no going back. This is the point of no return, Even realizes. This is it. He doesn’t think Isak has ever let anyone see him in his briefs, let alone completely bare.

“Yeah. You can. Yeah,” he pants, and Even wastes no time curling two pairs of fingers around Isak’s waistband on each hip bone.

He wastes no time pulling the gray briefs down along his thighs, along the smooth skin of his thighs, marveling at every bit of skin, every inch.

Isak’s face is flushed and shame is bleeding through his eyes, his chest rising and falling impossibly.

Shame. Shame. Shame. It’s all about shame. Isak and he couldn’t be more different, but they also couldn’t be more similar. Their shame defines them. Both of them. Isak’s shame burns him and people around him, and Even’s shame renders him lifeless in the eyes of those who love him.

“You’re so beautiful,” Even tells him and he feels the emotion and lust burn through Isak. He feels it all.

He’s done asking questions. He can ask them later. Questions are for later.

Blowjob now. Emotional breakdown later.

He dives right in and takes Isak into his mouth. He’s never done this before. He’s never tasted another boy before. He’s never felt anything like it and he only has porn as template. But still. He doubts Isak will judge him too hard. He’s probably even less experienced than him.

Blowjob now. Insecurity later.

Even wraps his lips around Isak and blows him. It’s sloppy. It’s desperate. It’s a mess. He’s probably using his teeth there at some point, but judging from Isak’s thrashing, he’s enjoying himself. He’s not hurting. He’s not burning.

Even uses his hands, and licks, and sucks, and kisses, and it’s one giant mess, but he feels nothing but pride. Isak warns him about a minute or two later with a hand fisted in his hair and a broken “Ev-
"

And Even knows he’s close. He’s here. He tries to stay around him, to taste him even further, even longer. He tries to swallow around him, but Isak pushes him off with his hands and lets out a low pornographic groan that burns itself through Even’s brain.

“Oh god! Oh my fuck-”

Even climbs Isak’s body to kiss him and hold him through his orgasm. He kisses him and holds him until Isak’s chest stops heaving and his breathing finally slows down.

Wow.

WOW.

Even’s vocabulary seems to have shrunk. He breathes in Isak’s neck, now lying on top of him in his briefs while Isak is in nothing but his t-shirt. And he’s too spent to dread Isak’s reaction now that the ‘chemicals’ are starting to leave him.

He still braces for the worst.
“Did we just have sex?” Isak asks like he’s genuinely wondering, and it makes Even burst into laughter right then on top of his chest.

“Oh my god.”

“I’m serious! Fuck. Are fellatio and manual sex considered sex?”

Fellatio and manual sex. Who the hell calls them that?

“No, they’re obviously friendly, platonic acts like gardening or knitting. Obviously,” Even snorts and it makes Isak bark out a laugh too.

Is this afterglow?

“I’m asking so I know what to categorize this as. You know when I write the report later to summarize this experiment,” says Isak. “For reference. For later. This has always been on my list by the way. To like try and see.”

“Oh shut up!” Even shoves him on the shoulder and laughs harder. He feels high and incredibly giggly. He feels like he could laugh for days.

“I’m serious.”

“Oh yeah? Make sure to write down that you got your spunk all over my sleeping bag. Very important detail.”

“Shut up.”

They ride the afterglow. Even uses his shirt to wipe both of them clean and says he’ll just buy a band t-shirt tomorrow. It’s fine.

They cuddle in Isak’s sleeping bag through the afterglow. They cuddle until insecurity creeps in, until the questions make their comeback.

What the fuck did we just do.

Even can’t even ask or joke about the homosexual nature of their actions because he’s not sure how to navigate Isak’s trauma after the notebook discovery. Is there coming back from this? Can Isak ever look him in the eye again and tell him that he’s “NOT A HOMOSEXUAL?”

What are they doing? What is this? Are they going to ignore each other next week when it’s no longer Isak’s birthday? Was this Isak’s third wish? Is Isak ever going to tell him what’s on his mind? Are they going to acknowledge that they can touch without water now? Are they together now? What is this?

“I know you think you have feelings for me right now,” Isak says like he’s in his head, and Even stills under him. “Dopamine, endorphins, serotonin, oxytocin. All that good stuff is released when you reach peak sexual pleasure. It makes you think you’re ‘in love’ or whatever, but it’s not real. It’s just your body and mind playing tricks on you.”

Isak leaves his embrace then. But for some reason, his nonsense doesn’t tear through Even this time around. It doesn’t make him resent Isak. He doesn’t sound half as convincing, half as cold. It almost sounds like he’s trying to convince himself, not Even. Trying to gain back a little bit of control after giving all of it up.
“I don’t have feelings for you right now,” says Even, tells him what he wants to hear. “It’s just a post-fellatio and manual sex high. Zero feelings involved.”

“Good.”

“Yeah, good.”

*Reductio ad absurdum.*

Isak stands and puts on his briefs very quickly, like he’s embarrassed and self-conscious. And despite the little glance at his butt, the sight moves Even in a foolish way. Isak simply putting on his underwear moves him. He can feel his shame all the way from here.

Even thinks about Isak’s shame. Then he thinks about his own.

It might not manifest the way Isak’s does. He might not burn people or chase them away or lose his sense of touch. But it’s there in him. His shame. It lives in his bones, too. It lives under his skin, too. It burns him, too. His shame.

Even is ashamed of his mental illness. It’s true. It breaks his heart to think it, but it’s true. The reason he doesn’t open up to Elias and the boys is because of his shame. The reason they don’t know how to treat him and how to “look out for him” is because of his shame. Because of his silence. Because he never talked to them about any of it. Because he showed up after everything went to hell and never told them how he felt or how he currently feels. He let them come up with their own theories, with their own harmful and hurtful explanations because they don’t know any better.

It’s all because of his shame, the ugliest and most crippling feeling that could ever be. A feeling that makes one do anything to defend it and hide it, either by becoming extremely passive, feigning indifference to everything, or by becoming aggressive and proud and doing one’s best to show that one is not ashamed while burying all of it inside. Inwards. Shame.

Even is ashamed, so he resorts to ignoring the problems staring him in the eyes.

He spends so much time analyzing and judging Isak’s shame, but it’s because he’s running from his own.

Even needs to stop running. He needs to stop hiding and burning inwards. He needs to come out of his hiding and stand up for himself. He needs to lash out on Elias and Mutta and Mikael and the rest of the boys and tell them that they should not treat him like a broken thing, that his mental illness does not define him. That it might be a part of him, but that it isn’t all of him. That he might have it harder than most, but that it doesn’t make him any less normal. That his mental illness is not a sob story. It’s not for them to exploit and ponder on and explain and interpret. It’s his and his alone.

Even will talk to them when they get back to Oslo.

And he’d pursue his train of thought even further, but Isak proceeds to unzip their tent.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

Isak leaves the tent and Even watches him stand with his arms wide open facing the sky. Isak is getting drenched under the rain.

“Gotta stay wet if we’re going to do more dopamine and oxytocin releasing,” Isak says and Even guesses that at least one of his questions got answered.
Isak comes back inside and sits on the ground.

“We’re going to ruin Julie’s car on the way back if we don’t find a shower,” he says.

“Or a lake or something.”

“Yeah. I guess,” says Even, still lying on his back on the sleeping bag.

Isak joins him dripping wet in his briefs and t-shirt. He lies on his chest.

“What time is it?” Even asks. “You have a plastic watch.”

“It’s 21:19.”

“It’s almost your birth minute,” says Even.

“My birth minute,” Isak chuckles. “Is that a thing?”

“It could be. If you want it to be.”

The following two minutes are spent in silence. Isak lies on Even’s chest and Even runs his hands through Isak’s hair until 21:21.

“Time is a social construct, a human invention, a perfect introduction into the theory of relativity. But this is most probably the best minute of my life,” Isak murmurs. It’s faint like a whisper.

Even leans in and kisses him on the mouth again. What they are doesn’t matter right now. Even won’t ruin the best minute in Isak’s life.

“What was your third wish?” He asks when it’s 21:22.

Isak remains sprawled on Even’s chest for a little while, like he’s thinking, like he’s weighing the pros and cons of telling him.

He then sits up and looks down at his hands like he’s trying to convince himself of something. Even sits up too, suddenly worried he might ruined it, yet again.

“Iss?”

“My third wish was-” Isak says as he reaches over behind himself and slowly pulls his skull t-shirt over his head, and he sounds terrified and scared and unsure. He sounds like he’s convinced he’ll drive Even away for good, like Even is about to run out of the tent and never spare him another glance.

And Even can only stare, feeling amazed, terrified, and worried all at once. He doesn’t realize that Isak is baring his chest to him until the shirt comes off.

“For you to see me.”

Isak is finally letting Even see him.

_Him._

Even finally sees him and his deeply-rooted shame. Even finally sees Isak in all of his heart-wrenching and bewitching beauty.
And his heart, it bleeds.

“His name was Helge. And I was thirteen when my mother caught us.”

Chapter End Notes

TW: heavy mentions of past self-harm and potential SA //not// relayed by Even himself + ableist views. Lots and lots of internalization and heavy shame, emotional hurt/comfort. It can be a bit upsetting to read so please proceed with caution. love you <3

PS: i know the norway rock festival takes place in July but just for the sake of this chapter, bear with me <3

this chapter was about Even realizing the extent of his OWN shame. I know most of this story is spent on figuring out Isak and just how damaged he is. but it's mostly told from Even's POV, and it's easy to ignore our own problems when someone's symptoms show PHYSICALLY. Even's shame might manifest inwards, in silence, suppression, repression, internalization, disconnect from life and friends, indifference and disinterest. but it's not any less true, any less real, any less painful. Even gets through some of that this chapter.

the bandaid also gets ripped off, as the boys never really confronted him about any of the things that happened in the past. my mind flashed to that scene between Sana and Yousef which upset many of us because we didn't get to see Even tell his story himself. it's upsetting but it's how things take place in real life unfortunately. people will talk about our illnesses and ailments and afflictions like it's something they have a right to. but it's no one's business but our own. if you've struggled or still are struggling with shame, please know that you're amazing and i love you.

anyway i’m ramblinggg!!
Isak is opening up but their relationship is still vague. still in denial. what they did this chapter is most definitely homosexual though, so good luck Isak rationalizing this next chapter. sorry for the cliffhanger. we'll find out who helge is next and Isak and Even cross another BIG experiment off their list.
Thank you for all your support and comments, you don’t know how much it means to me and thank you katyazhuravlik for the song recs i love Paramore

thoughts on who Helge is and what happened back then?
thoughts on next chapter title?

As always, leave a comment if you felt something, anything <3
love ya <33
Philosophy of Feelings

Chapter Summary

"Is there a label for when you're only attracted to one person?"
"Yeah, it's called being in love."

Chapter Notes

last time i updated the heat was unbearable and now it's snowing. long time no see <3
this is for the anons who never left my inbox. thank u sm. ily

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What are you doing here?”

It’s a simple question. A question Isak should be able to answer without feeling his throat closing in on itself. But he can’t and he’s currently staring at Even as though he’s swallowed his own tongue.

Yes. What am I doing here?

“I mean, it’s good to see you. I’m glad you’re here,” Even adds immediately, his body moving like it has a mind of its own, like he hasn’t really thought this through. And two strides later, he’s in Isak’s face, all long limbs, sun-drenched blue eyes, soft hair, and forbidden skin.

Isak wishes he could touch. Desperately, the urge pulsing uncontrollably under his fingertips. And he almost does. But the crease between Even’s eyebrows makes him look down at his feet, for Even is wearing the very expression that’s made Isak’s skin crawl for years, the one expression he’s been wishing with all his might to never see reflected on Even’s features: pity.

Even feels bad for him. Even thinks he is pitiful. And he has ever since Isak bared his soul out to him, two nights ago in the tent under the rain.

Somehow, it feels like weeks have gone by.

“It’s your last day of school,” Isak finally speaks. The words come out strained, but he manages. He’s practiced them before leaving kollektivet.

“You remember.” Even smiles, his eyes crinkling at the corner Isak loves to kiss, and he feels his heart rate pick up right under the burn.

“I promised you kebab.”

Isak shrugs and tries to hide the fact that his face is burning up. He tries not to think about the circumstances of that promise. Tries not to think of their bare legs twining and un-twining on a dirty sleeping bag in a humid tent that reeked of sweat and sex, of the strong hand that played with his hair until he dozed off, of the bruises Even’s thumbs left pulsing at his sides while they kissed and
breathed into each other’s mouths, of the ghost of his tongue on his lips. Isak loves the way Even
tastes the most, and it’s embarrassing. His thoughts are embarrassing and he wishes they could stop.

Isak tries not to think about it.

“I didn’t think you meant it,” Even says, smiling still, but he sounds nervous too. He sounds like he’s
trying not to think about it either. “I totally expected to be stood up again.”

And this white long-sleeved shirt looks good on him. It looks like it was made for him. Specifically
for him. Isak can’t imagine this shirt on anyone else.

“I didn’t want to break your heart the one time you graduate from Bakka,” Isak counters. He goes for
the joke, smiling even. “Doesn’t happen every day.”

“I thought only love can break your heart.”

The silence only lasts a few seconds, but it feels like time has deliberately chosen to stretch before the
two of them to make Isak suffer. It’s awkward, but he trusts that Even will rectify his mistake judging
from how his face has fallen.

“I mean, like in the song. I’ve been listening to your playlists, and uh, there’s this song titled ‘Only
Love Can Break Your Heart’,” Even explains after he clears his throat, his right hand reaching
behind him to grab at the back of his neck, a nervous tic Isak has noticed before. “I didn’t mean to be
weird. I’m sorry.”

“Neil Young. 1970. Solid record,” Isak replies in a heartbeat. He can’t afford to let this tension and
awkwardness last longer. This

And he could comment on the fact that he’s noticed Even listening to his playlists on Spotify—
mostly because he’s his only ‘friend’ on the app—but he chooses not to. He’s not sure how it makes
him feel, Even listening to the songs that tame his racing thoughts, the closest Isak has ever come to
deliberately being vulnerable before him.

“Uh, yeah. That song. Cool song. I like the riff,” Even adds, making Isak wonder if he even knows
what a riff is.

“So? Kebab?”

“Sure.”

“Congratulations on finishing High School,” says Isak, just as they sit on the stools with their kebabs
by the large windows. They’re sitting side by side, their knees nearly touching. Isak has to
consciously put his hands on his own to keep them from reaching and bumping against Even’s.
“How does it feel to be done?”

“You sound like my mom.” Even smiles as he takes a messy bite out of his kebab and causes sauce
to run down his chin.

I wish I could be that damn sauce.

Isak looks away.

“I don’t mind the comparison,” he shrugs.
“What’s next? Are you going to ask me about Russ and if I feel like I missed out?”

“I’m not interested in knowing how you feel about not participating in a government sponsored incestuous orgy.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Even snorts, his brows furrowing to signal confusion and amusement.

“Inbreeding. Did you know that the probability of hooking up with a first or second cousin is high in Norway? All that Russ stuff makes those chances even higher.”

Even laughs. He throws his head back and closes his eyes and just laughs. Isak takes him in, allows himself to look a bit. Just a bit.

“Do you hear yourself talk sometimes? Inbreeding? Really?”

“You know what I mean!”

“Are you happy?” Isak asks when they’ve finished eating, their feet still dangling from the stools. The question is vague but he feels like asking it.

“I’d be happier if we had graduated together,” says Even. Together. Isak feels odd thinking of himself included in this togetherness Even speaks of. Togetherness has never been for him. He’s always lived on the fringes, in the shadows. It’s odd and Isak doesn’t know how to interpret the comforting sensation it fills him with.

“It doesn’t matter and you know that,” says Isak. “I was only in school this year because my dad was being insufferable about it.”

“So you won’t go back next year?” Even asks, frowning a bit as he uses his fingers to wipe some leftover sauce off his face.

Isak hands him a paper towel and tries not to think about how he wishes he could lick Even’s fingers clean himself.

“I’m going to try and enroll in University directly,” says Isak.

“You can do that without graduating secondary?”

“Doctor Carlsen is working on figuring something out.”

“Who?!?” Even turns abruptly and almost knocks against Isak’s knees.

“Carlsen. From the lab. I already told you about her.”

“You mean the woman who tortured you until you collapsed and had to be taken to the freaking hospital?!”

Isak pretends to be annoyed with Even’s nonsensical concern. But he isn’t. Not even one bit. He loves it when Even gets worked up over the smallest things. It makes him feel cared for.

“No, I mean the brilliant woman who testified in my favor during my emancipation filing and who runs a revolutionary national lab where she thinks I’d be a great fit and a good asset on the research
“team,” says Isak.

“You’re gonna be her freaking lab rat?!?”

“No. Jesus. Just calm down. Will you?” Isak rolls his eyes then digs his fork into his kebab. “I’d be working in the lab. I’d be taking classes like a regular student but also working as a research assistant. Like Geir.”

“Geir? The guy who hurt you with his needles? The guy who was there the day-”

“Even,” Isak interrupts him because he’s acting like a child.

“I don’t like this.”

“You don’t have to like it.”

*We are not together. There is no togetherness binding us. You don’t have to like what I’m doing with my life. You are not my parent nor my family. We are nothing.*

“Where is all of this happening? Would you have to go to Trondheim?” Even asks and it sounds bitter, as though Isak’s words stung.

“If it works out. Yeah. But I don’t know yet. I might just take a year or a semester off.”

“I see.”

Even sounds upset. And Isak has been trying out this new thing whereby he voices his observations out loud.

“You sound upset,” he says.

“I’m not,” Even sighs as he stares ahead of them through the glass. Isak is glad he’s not looking him in the eyes. “I’m just processing.”

“Processing what?”

“This new information. I don’t know how I’ll deal with it.”

“Deal with what?”

“With you,” Even turns to look into Isak’s eyes, his voice dropping an octave lower, “being so far away from me.”

Even says the words with so much earnestness, it leaves Isak dumbfounded and disarmed. His throat is closing in again.

Even does it then. Breaks into the biggest grin, his smile larger than life itself, stretching from his ears to his nose. He smiles and lets out that hearty laugh that leaves Isak disoriented sometimes.

“You okay, Iss?” Even laughs.

*Iss.* Isak doesn’t know when they started using nicknames for one another, but it’s a thing now. He’s Iss and Even is Ev. It should be a point of concern, but Isak shoves it in the back of his mind as he does with everything else he does not have a rational explanation for.

“Ugh, fuck off,” Isak mutters quietly, turning his attention away to the window in front of them and
trying not to smile.

“Is that a smile?” Even laughs again.

“Shut up.”

“Oh yeah, looks like a smile to me.”

Isak rolls his eyes then dips his snapback over his face to hide it.

“Who’s going to make you smile in Trondheim, huh?”

“I didn’t say I was going!” Isak huffs.

“So it’s true? I make you smile?” Even breaks into another blinding smile. It’s painful to talk to him when he’s like this, all charms, sunshine and affection radiating out of him. Isak can’t handle him when he’s like this. “You acknowledge my ability to make you smile?”

And hurt and laugh and want and need and scream.

“I’m not acknowledging shit,” Isak says instead.

“I love it when you leave your pretentious vocabulary behind and start swearing like a motherfucker. It love it when you let yourself show some vulnerability.”

“Vulnerability? Did you mean annoyance? Do you have any idea how unbearable you are?” Isak rolls his eyes, trying to will away the heat he feels over his cheeks.

“What happened to not breaking my heart on my graduation day?” Even pouts, his eyes still crinkling at the corners Isak loves to kiss when he’s not paying attention.

“What happened to only love can break your heart?”

Isak catches himself just as the words roll out of his tongue and his chest is burning up now. But it’s a soothing burn, a comforting burn. Even stops laughing, but the smile remains there on his face, like he’s about to do something outrageous. And he does.

Even doesn’t answer the absurd question. He just presses his knee against Isak’s. Silently, without a word. He presses their knees together and Isak’s whole body catches fire along with his thoughts.

Even then leans in until they’re face to face, until Isak can hear his breathing and his breathing alone, until he can almost taste the air between them.

“If you go to Trondheim, I go to Trondheim,” Even whispers.

And it burns Isak with shame and guilt. The simple contact, their knees touching, the solemn promise, Even’s sincere smile. It’s absurd, but Isak wants to believe it. He wants to believe that Even would follow him if he were to leave this city which bears the most painful memories. And it scares him. It terrifies him because he doesn’t understand it.

He doesn’t understand why Even won’t bring up the fact that they can touch now whenever it pleases them. Why he’s still pretending that they need rain or a pool or a shower to touch. Why he only ever touches him when he knows Isak needs it the most. Like right here, right now, over kebab talking about how he didn’t get to finish the year and graduate like everyone else.

It’s his most embarrassing thought, but Isak needs Even. And it scares him.
“You can’t possibly leave without your science partner. Right?”

Isak slides his leg along the inside of Even’s thigh and presses. They look at each other until something burrows deep within him and settles there.

It hits him then, the realization that Even is being extremely careful because of Isak's almost confession the other night.

_You can’t leave if I never let you in. You can’t leave if you were never in._

“You don’t need to save me or whatever it is you think you’re doing. You know?” Isak confesses when the silence becomes too much. “I don’t need saving or whatever.”

“Maybe you’re the one saving me.”

Isak rolls his eyes and leans back. “Even—”

“I mean you’re literally keeping me company on the last day of school when every single person I’ve ever known is out there partying and having fun without me,” Even smiles. “Maybe you’re the one saving me.”

It makes no sense, but Isak drops it. It was the reason he suggested taking him out for Kebab in the first place, after Even mourned the fact that he still isn’t speaking to the boys and how they always got kebab on the last day of school.

“You could talk to the boys.”

“I will,” says Even. “Just not today. Today I have kebab with you and talk about hypothetically leaving Oslo one day. For science. You know.”

“For science,” Isak repeats, narrowing his eyes. “You’re willing to relocate for science.”

“Yes. It’s mindblowing what people do for science these days. I heard some people are out there having manual sex and fellatio for science.”

Isak shoves him with his bag while Even chokes on his food, laughing.

.

Isak walks Even home. Julie is taking him out for dinner tonight to celebrate the end of high school. It warms his heart a little to know that Even has at least that to look forward to.

“You can come with us,” Even tells him when they’re a few streets away from his apartment. “I’m sure mom would love it if you joined us.”

“I, uh, I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“You won’t be intruding. You know she adores you.”

Isak’s face heats up and he hates that his skin gives everything he feels away. He hates it so much.

“Tonight is supposed to be about you,” he attempts rather weakly.

“Yes, and I want you there,” Even says. “Come on. You’re like my only friend right now.”

_Friend._
Isak has never considered himself to be Even’s friend. Their relationship has always been either transactional or purely physical. Friendship entails another dimension he hasn’t even stopped to think about. Friends? They’re not friends. Friendship implies trust and love and concern and—

“I’ll even let you have some of my fries.”

They sit next to each other with Julie facing them around an oval table with nice cutlery. It’s a fancy restaurant with long velvety curtains. Isak can tell that Julie is proud of Even and that she’s trying to show him off and reward him. She’s wearing a lovely turquoise dress and earrings. She has perfume on and her hair is in an updo. She looks lovely and sounds emotional despite laughing at every single thing Even says.

Julie loves her son so much, and Isak burns with envy, but it’s never malicious. He’s proud of Even, too. Even in his dress shirt and formal pants and styled hair. Both Even and Julie dressed up for the occasion, and Isak would dwell on the fact that he’s feeling inadequate if he weren’t too busy feeling endeared by their interactions. It’s what one would describe as wholesome.

“Thank you for coming, Isak,” Julie tells him with a smile.

“Thank you for inviting me.”

He sips on his water and hopes she hasn’t noticed that he ordered the cheapest thing on the menu on purpose. He eats Even’s fries and goes on a rant around genetic editing after Julie mentions having read an article about it. They talk about the latest blockbuster movies while Even brings his palm to his face, feigning exasperation. They talk about some of the 70s and 80s music Even has seemingly been blasting around the house lately. And Isak smiles when Julie suggests that his influence on Even is starting to affect their relationship with their neighbors.

The dinner is perfect up until Mutta and Yousef walk into the restaurant with their families. They both come to their table and kiss Julie on both cheeks. Isak can’t help but feel envious of the silly gesture. Even stands up to greet their respective parents and siblings and hug the boys. It’s all very painfully awkward and Isak wishes he could do something to make this less hurtful.

“Good to meet you,” Isak repeats with both hands behind his back. He feels Mutta’s eyes on him. They’re carrying questions he doesn’t have the answers to. But he reckons that it’s quite the odd scene, Isak having dinner with Even and his mom.

“Isak is uh, he’s my uh-” Even struggles when Yousef’s parents ask.

“He’s family,” says Julie and it makes Isak’s heart thud in his chest. “Isak is family. Right, Isak?”

Isak looks to Even, feeling like he’s overstepping, but he finds him smiling quietly to himself like he’s just heard a funny joke. He gives him a questioning look, to which Even mouths “inbreeding”. Isak snorts so hard, he nearly knocks his drink on the table. They both giggle until Even’s face becomes grim and dark again.

And later when every group has regained their respective table, Isak finds himself staring at Even’s lonely hand by his side. He wishes he could hold it. He knows he’s hurting. He can always tell when Even is hurting. He gets quiet but reacts to everything excessively. His laughter gains a plastic quality to it. His eyes crinkle but not the same way they do when he means it. He tries too hard. Isak can tell when Even is hurting and he wishes he could touch him and help him release the neurotransmitters he needs right now.
Julie beats him to it. She grabs the hand Even left on the table and squeezes it.

“I’m so proud of you, baby,” she says, before bringing his hand to her mouth and kissing it. “So so proud.”

“Stop it,” Even chuckles, pulling his hand away.

Isak finally understands what the warm feeling bubbling at the pit of his stomach is: pride. He feels proud of Even, too.

Julie drops them off at Kollektivet and Isak can’t help but flush when Even says he’ll spend the night with him. He can’t even look Julie in the eyes, let alone Even.

They walk for a little bit to wait for Eskild to run off to his date of the night without interrogating them. And Isak nearly trips while climbing the stairs with Even so close behind him. They haven’t been alone together in a closed space since the tent, Even having given a ride back to Oslo to two other festival goers who never stopped talking. Isak feels nervous and unsure.

He struggles with his keys while Even waits patiently behind him, leaning casually on the wall and watching him with a curious expression.

“Breathe, Isak,” he teases.

“Shut up.”

Isak was apparently taking so much time to open the door that Linn decided to leave the comfort of the couch and come to the rescue.

“You forgot how to use your key or-” she pauses when she sees Even. “Oh. I see.”

“Uh, we’re gonna hang here a bit,” says Isak, suddenly feeling extremely defensive.

“Nice. Hi Even.”

“Hi Linn. How have you been?” he responds, smiling, always smiling. Can he stop smiling?

“Same old. You?”

“Same old.”

“Does it hurt?”

Even asks quietly and out of nowhere. He’s lying on his side, his head propped on his hand, his elbow on Isak’s favorite pillow. His chest is bare because he apparently didn’t wish to ruin his nice shirt. And he’s watching Isak who’s lying on his back in the comfiest sweater, eyes fixed on the pattern on the ceiling because it’s getting hard to breathe while sharing a bed with him, his bare skin so close.

‘Does it hurt?’

The question is vague. Isak could pretend not to know what Even is talking about. He could pretend that they never had that conversation. But he doesn’t want to.
“No,” Isak replies just as quietly. “Not right now,” he adds.

“When does it typically hurt?”

“I don’t know,” Isak lies. It hurts the most when his thoughts race, when he’s overwhelmed with helplessness and memories he wishes to keep buried.

“Do you always sleep with your clothes on? Even when you’re alone?”

“Yes,” Isak replies. He tries to ignore how intrusive Even’s questioning is.

“Because you’re more comfortable that way?”

“Because if I don’t see it, then it’s not there.”

The words are simple, but Isak only realizes their philosophical meaning once they leave his mouth. It’s an analogy for everything else. Not just the burn on his heart. It’s everything else. Everything he runs away from. Everything he chooses not to look at.

“But it is there,” Even murmurs in his deep sleep-filled voice. It’s so soothing. It feels like a hand in his hair. “Denying its existence is called denial and repression.”

“You spend too much time with your shrink, Even.”

“Maybe if you accept that it’s there, it’ll stop hurting.”

“Is this why you wanted to sleep over? To get to the bottom of my psyche and save me from my supposed repression?”

“No. I just wanted to sleep with you.”

Isak’s breath hitches and his body can’t help but tense up on the bed.

“I mean beside you. Next to you. Not like ‘with you’ with you,” Even rectifies immediately. “Not like I want to have sex with you.”

Isak’s heart picks up inside his chest, Even’s words making things worse. The room is spinning a little bit, his skin burning under his sweater. He thinks about it. Actual sex with Even.

“Well, that came out completely wrong,” Even sighs. “I’m not saying I don’t want to, as in ever. I mean I wouldn’t mind having sex with you. As in I would enjoy it a lot. Not like a charity thing. I would definitely be an active participant, you know. I’ve enjoyed our experiments so far and stuff. It’s just not I’m here for right now. I just-”

“Even, please stop talking. I’m getting second-hand embarrassment,” says Isak.

“I sound like a complete fucking idiot, wow,” Even chuckles, his cheeks are flushed and he looks genuinely nervous.

“It’s chill. I get what you’re saying. Don’t worry.”

“I just sleep better when you’re near. That’s all,” Even says, and it sounds like a confession. A sweet, sweet confession.

I sleep better when you’re near, too.
“I can sleep on the floor.”

Even doesn’t sleep on the floor. He sleeps right there beside him. He curls to the side and sleeps as if any of this is a regular occurrence, two boys sharing a bed for science, inches apart, not touching.

But Isak can’t sleep. He closes his eyes and tries, but in vain.

He sits up sometime later and hugs his knees to his chest. He watches Even sleep on his stomach, his head propped on his crossed arms over Isak’s favorite pillow. The street lights cast a subtle shadow over his face and his back, but Isak can still see most of him. He can still see the muscles over his shoulder blades and the smooth skin that hugs them. He can still see the way the gray sweatpants Even borrowed are hanging low around his hips. He can still see how his body moves when he inhales and exhales.

Isak can still see him. And Even is tall and sturdy and safe.

Isak watches him until he feels his own body begin to shift uncomfortably. He looks down onto his lap and fills up with guilt and shame as blood flows downward. Until it becomes undeniable. His arousal.

He’s aroused and there are no external factors or stimuli to blame this on other than Even lying beside him, asleep and vulnerable and bare.

It’s undeniable. Isak fumbles for an explanation in his thoughts, but none comes to mind. His body is reacting to the sight before him and he’s not inebriated. His judgement is not clouded. He’s not emotionally compromised. There is no physical bond urging the blood south. No, Isak has no excuses. His brain is in perfectly good conditions.

This experiment only proves one hypothesis, one theory.

But Isak isn’t ready. He won’t admit to it. It can’t be.

Perhaps this is a remnant of their bond. Or perhaps it’s simply Even. Perhaps he’s attracted to Even alone. Perhaps his atoms are attracted to Even’s atoms due to whatever chemical reaction governs their interactions.

That’s it. Maybe Isak is attracted to Even, not because he is a boy, but because he is Even.

And if he waits it out, this attraction will subside because of entropy and he will be free and functional once again.

Maybe.

But it’s not true. This has happened before. It has happened so many times before.

Isak remembers how he felt then and how he feels now. It’s the same type of urge, blood rushing, head spinning, skin prickling, sweat dripping, muscles contracting. His body was smaller then, but it’s the same type of want, the same forbidden desire.

He thinks back to those times and he hasn’t thought of them in so long. He’s done his best to bury them deep down. Because if he can’t see it, then it’s not there.

But he feels it now. He remembers it. The thrill of a larger body brushing against his own from
behind, of an undeniable erection pressing against his lower back, of male hands on his hips. Helge. He remembers how much he liked it, how naïve and happy and clumsy he was, how much he yearned for it and looked forward to it, how much he loved standing in crowds with him and going to concerts with him. How much Helge made him love his long golden hair. Isak remembers.

He also remembers how much it burned when it all ended, when he got thrown under the bus.

It burns still, the memory is so violent and bright that it tears his wound right open, his arousal long forgotten. Isak brings a hand to his own chest and tries to will away the hurt.

He focuses on Even.

*Even would never do that to me.*

Isak watches Even until his heart settles again.

“Are you gonna stare at me all night?” Even startles him with his deep and groggy voice, his eyes closed still. He’s awake. How long has he been awake for?

“I can’t sleep,” Isak admits.

“C’mere,” Even mumbles before rolling to the side and holding his arm open for Isak to “c’mere”.

Isak doesn’t question it. He turns around, lies down, and lets Even spoon him.

He’ll deal with it tomorrow. Tonight, they can touch. Tonight, they don’t pretend.

“I used to sleep in sweaters, too, you know?” Even whispers behind him, his warm breath brushing over the back of Isak’s neck. “I used to think that if I didn’t see it then it wasn’t there, too.”

“What changed?” Isak asks, feeling grateful the way he always is when Even opens up to him.

“I decided to stop lying to myself,” says Even just as he loops both arms around Isak’s stomach and squeezes. “I decided to admit and accept that it’s there. You know. That I did those things to myself and to my body. That it happened. That sort of stuff.”

Isak closes his eyes and breathes through his nose. His body is desperate for some type of release but his thoughts feel heavy in his mind.

“You like sleeping naked better now?” Isak asks.

“No, I still sleep in sweaters when I’m alone.” He can feel Even smiling behind him. “As I said earlier, I just didn’t wanna ruin my shirt and all.”

*You’re doing this to me on purpose. I could lend you a damn shirt.*

“Interesting,” says Isak. “Is that what you do now? Sleep naked in people’s beds to preserve your shirts?”

“How do you expect me to wear clothing when you're lying here looking so fucking hot?”

“Shut up!” Isak elbows him, suddenly feeling extremely embarrassed.

“Don’t get cocky. I mean you’re literally hot right now, as in your temperature is very high. I'm sweating over here.”
Isak tries to leave Even’s hold feigning annoyance, but he gets pulled back into his arms with laughter bubbling up inside his chest.

“Let’s just sleep. Hm?”

“Okay.”

They sleep.

Isak wakes to the sound of a camera shutter. It takes him a moment to recognize the sound, and an even longer one to open his eyes.

He finds Eskild standing over his bed with his phone pointing at him and Even, taking pictures, several pictures.

“Eskild!” Isak groans, immediately leaving Even’s hold and sitting up in bed. “Delete them right now!”

“You guys! My heart. My heart is bursting. I can’t deal with this!” Eskild exclaims in a high-pitched voice.

“Give me your phone!”

“I’m going to print these pictures and hang them all around the apartment. This is a dream come true for me. You have no idea!”

“Eskild!”

“I told you, baby jesus. It’s the gays. All the gays can touch you! Your condition only applies to the heteros. You’re a gays only event! You should totally come to Pride with me this week! Oh my god, how funny will it be when you burn those hetero girls who love to hang out with gays cause they don’t have to wonder why we’re not interested in them. Finally, a literal gaydar!”

Isak grabs his pillow and groans into it while Even wakes up laughing beside him. He’s laughing so hard, Isak almost breaks into a grin himself.

“I’m going to kill you,” Isak sighs.

“You can do that when your guest leaves,” Eskild smiles.

“So I’m a guest now, huh?” Even laughs.

“Not you, Austin Butler. Yes, you might be tall and gorgeous and I’d love to see what’s under those sweatpants, but not everything is about you, okay?”

“Eskild!” Isak shouts again.

“Fine, fine. Whatever. But you might wanna do something about your sex hair before leaving your room, Isabelle.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You have a guest waiting in the living room,” says Eskild.
“A what?”

It’s Jonas. He must have texted but Isak forgot to check his phone the previous night, too focused on Even and his big day.

“Hm. Your hair looks... interesting,” Jonas jokes.

“I toss around a lot in my sleep,” says Isak, embarrassed. “You know that.”

“Does Even toss around, too? Cause his hair-”

“Oh my god!” Isak takes his face into his hands, mortified.

“I mean hey. I’m happy for you.”

“It’s not what you think! He just-”

“He just kissed your cheek before sneaking out.”

Fuck.

Isak hasn’t even taken the time to properly process that, Even’s overflowing affection.

‘What was that for?’

‘For kebab and for everything else yesterday.’

Isak can still feel the kiss burning on his cheek. It was a tender kiss. Plump lips on burning skin. It was a thank you.

“He did that to annoy me! He’s been doing that ever since he figured he could touch me again. It’s no big deal.” Isak feels like a child uttering the words. He’s embarrassed. He’s burning up.

“Maybe he’s your soulmate,” says Jonas.

The sun is hot and merciless on their skin where they’re currently lying on the grass. They walked to a park by Jonas’ house and Isak started playing some tunes on his phone while Jonas rolled them a joint.

“You haven’t even had two puffs,” Isak snorts. “Is the sun too hot for you?”

“I’m serious. Maybe he’s your soulmate or some shit and that’s why he can touch you.”

“Eskild can touch me, too,” Isak confesses before Jonas goes down that rabbit hole. He doesn’t want to entertain that thought, not even for a second.

“Oh.”

“I mean I don’t let him just in case I do end up burning him but yeah he got me drunk once to let my guards down and cuddled me to the floor.”

“I didn’t know. Wow. That’s great. I’m happy for you.”
They finish the first joint and Jonas proceed to roll them a second.

“Wanna try?” Jonas asks.

“Try what?”

“Touching.”

“No. Not really,” says Isak.

“Why not?”

“Don’t wanna burn you.”

“You won’t. I’ll be careful.”

Last time Jonas was careful, they ended up at the hospital. Isak would rather avoid a repeat of that night.

“I’d rather not know. I don’t wanna be disappointed again.”

“I understand.”

They smoke in silence until Isak feels like he’s floating. They never used to do this. They were too young and Jonas always considered Isak as this fragile thing after he lost his sense of touch. He never smoked with him. He never tried to corrupt him. Perhaps it was because of his mom. Or perhaps it was because Isak’s company was no longer enjoyable. It’s not fun being around self-deprecating people who over-analyze and loathe everything. Isak isn’t sure.

“Eva and I are back together.”

“I wasn’t aware that you two broke up again.”

“We were on a break,” says Jonas. “But I love her and she loves me and it doesn’t make sense for us to not be together.”

Isak feels jealousy and envy fill his blood.

“I’m happy for you,” he says.

“What about you?” Jonas asks.

“What about me?”

“Are you interested in anyone?”

“Hmm, let's see,” Isak muses. “Recently, I’ve become quite interested in Arthur Rimbaud, especially his work ‘A Season In Hell’. It left a great impact on surrealists and even inspired the existentialist movement. Sartre drew a lot from his poetry. Did you know that he published all his work before age 21?”

Isak rambles absently because he’d rather die a thousand deaths than have this discussion. But this is Jonas, and if there’s one person who can hold a conversation with Isak when he’s being difficult, it’s Jonas.

“Rimbaud also had a torrid love affair with Paul Verlaine and made him leave his wife and son for a
life filled with poetry and excess,” says Jonas. “He was only seventeen when he made a grown man fall madly in love. A true legend.”

Isak remains silent. He forgot about Rimbaud’s homosexual tendencies when he casually slipped the name. Of course.

“He was very attractive, too. A real heartthrob.”

“What the fuck?” Isak snorts, choking around the joint a little.

“What? It’s true,” Jonas laughs. “I don’t know why he wasted his time on Verlaine. He could have done much better in my opinion. A legend in queer history.”

Isak winces every time Jonas utters the word ‘queer’. He can’t handle it. But he’s grateful to Jonas for trying, for noticing. He’s always known. He’s always cared. And he’s never judged.

“Can you be attracted to only one person?” Isak blurts out, his eyes following an awkwardly shaped cloud above them.

“What do you mean?”

“Like sexually and intellectually. I know everyone is obsessed with labels nowadays, gay, straight, pan, bi, bla bla. But can you only be attracted to one person? Want to talk to and do things only with one person? Is there a label or a word for that?”

“Yeah. Of course,” says Jonas.

“Hm?” Isak turns to look at him.

“It’s called being in love.”

Isak chokes again, only this time he has to sit up as his eyes begin to water, while Jonas laughs.

“That’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard!”

“I know you don’t believe in love. But you could consider me proof if you want. I love Eva. I really do. I wouldn’t lie to you. It’s real. Proof by example. If one instance exists, then it is real.”

“But there’s no instance of it. You think there is. Right now you do because of all the hormones and chemicals in your body and brain. But you might break up again when they subside. You know this better than anyone,” says Isak.

“So what? Sometimes things don’t work out but it doesn’t mean it wasn’t real while it lasted.”

“That’s a logical fallacy in and of itself. How can a concept rooted in the promise of ‘forever’ and its constant graph ever be real when its infinity is proven to be finite?”

“Life isn’t a mathematical equation or a continuous line graph, Isak. Love isn’t supposed to be a constant graph. It’s more like a sinusoidal function.”

“Right, as if the highs and lows are proportionate.”

“The fuck?” Jonas frowns.

“A sinusoidal function is a smooth periodic signal with equal amplitude. You probably mean a non-sinusoidal periodic function.”
“Jesus Christ, Isak. Can you stop being a giant loser for a second and just get my point. You know I don't fuck with science as much.”

Isak laughs at that. At last, he’s won one of their impossible intellectual debates.

“Fine. Love is a chaotic non-sinusoidal unicorn-looking curve.”

“You’re impossible,” Jonas smiles to him before taking a drag of his joint.

“And you’re a hopeless romantic who will one day be exposed to the bitter truth.”

“At least I don’t deny how I feel.”

“I'm not denying anything!”

“I’m just saying that whatever you feel comfortable with, whatever you choose to do, and whatever you allow yourself to feel, I'll always be right here rooting for you. Okay? It’s what best friends do.”

Isak looks into Jonas’ eyes and sees nothing but sincerity and kindness. Having him back is one of the best things that have happened to him this year. He couldn’t be more grateful.

But their relationship feels different. Isak cares for Jonas unconditionally, but he can no longer call him his best friend.

Isak can’t help but feel like he’s lost his best friend years ago when the foreign pseudo-madness started clouding his judgement, when he started confusing the chemicals that filled his brain whenever he spent time with Jonas with “feelings”.

He’s never had “feelings” for Jonas. He had just become dependent on him and latched onto him the way a person who’s been deeply betrayed does. Helge had cut him deeply and Jonas was there to pick up the pieces. They never talked about it, but Jonas always knew. And Isak confused that comfort and care, which morphed into a blind need, with “feelings”.

Isak lost his best friend the moment the burning started.

Guns N’ Roses’ November Rain comes up on shuffle, and Isak doesn't realize it until he catches Jonas staring.

“What?”

“This song,” Jonas muses.

“What about it?”

“You used to throw a fit whenever it came on.”

“I guess I no longer do,” Isak shrugs.

“What changed?”

“I did?”

It’s the world’s most curt conversation, but it’s the most they’ve spoken in years. He could tell him that the song started randomly playing when he was in the car with Even on the way to the festival, and that he didn't want to skip it because Even was enjoying it. He could tell him that he re-learned to love this song and that it's now attached to a different memory. But he won't. It's too personal.
“Have you seen him at all lately?” Jonas asks.

“Who?”

“You know who.”

“He’s not Voldemort, you know. You can say his name,” says Isak.

“Fine, then. Helge. Have you seen him?”

“No. Why would I?”

“I heard he’s asking for you.”

_Fuck him._

“Interesting,” says Isak, with as much nonchalance as he can muster. “And where did you hear that?”

“He might have shot me a message on facebook. I think he heard you no longer speak to your parents and he’d like to come down to Oslo to talk to you.”

Isak takes a moment to gather his thoughts. Anger burns bright inside his chest, but he won’t let it show. Not because Jonas would judge him for it, but because Isak has too much pride to even admit to himself that he’s affected.

“I’m about as interested in speaking to him as I am in sucking on someone’s toes right now,” says Isak.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“What the hell? That I’m absolutely not interested at all?” Isak scoffs.

“I don't know, man. To each their kinks. I don't judge.”

“Ew!” Isak bursts into laughter. “What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with _you_! Who even comes up with such an analogy?”

“Leave me alone. Yeah?”

They laugh until Isak feels at ease again.

“So I take it you won't be meeting him?” Jonas asks.

“Nope.”

“Good.”

“Good?” Isak turns to the side and smiles.

“Yeah. I kind of told him to go fuck himself. It would have been awkward if you actually wanted to speak to him.”

Isak bursts into laughter again. “You? Jonas the pacifist telling someone to go fuck themselves? Wow. What’s going on?”
“My pacifist fist will be having an interesting meeting with his nose if I ever see him. You know that.”

“Geez. You sound like Even,” Isak mentions casually before realizing what the observation means.

“Even?” Jonas sits up. “You told Even?”

“Not exactly, but you could say he’s aware of certain things,” says Isak.

“Oh, okay. Nice.”

“Nice?”

“I mean it’s good that you told someone,” Jonas explains.

“I told you.”

“You didn't tell me. I found out. It's different.”

“You focus on rather meaningless things, Jonas.”

“Do I?”

“Are we gonna spend the entire afternoon using rhetorical questions or?” Isak rolls his eyes.

“I don't know. Are we?”

“God!” Isak groans. “Fine. I give up!”

Jonas laughs and gives him a smile. “We’re 1-1 so far.”

“Oh you just wait.”

“And what did Even say to the things you told him?” Jonas asks.

“Smooth transition there.”

“Is that what he said?”

“Shut up,” Isak laughs.

“2-1. You need to catch up, Issy.”

“Don't call me that,” says Isak, but he’s smiling.

“Sure. So what did Even say?”

“He stopped me and said that I didn’t owe him truths or whatever,” says Isak. *Then he kissed me so deep and so hard and for so long that I forgot my name.* “But he’s like a child when it comes to things like these.”

“Being upset someone you love got hurt isn't childish, Isak.”

“Jesus! I’m not ‘someone he loves’. We have a very rational arrangement going on. Stop preaching your romantic idealistic agenda to me. It sounds like a Christmas carol to me.”

“I love Christmas carols.”
“I know you do. That's the point,” Isak smiles.

“So he’ll beat up Helge if he sees him?”

“Even isn't violent. He’s all about peace and forgiveness. Besides, I never got to the part that would make him want to hurt Helge,” says Isak. “Also, if anyone’s beating him up, it's gonna be me.”

“I see. I see,” Jonas muses. “So everything is chill now between Even and you?”

No. He pities me.

“Yup. We're science buddies as we've always been.”

“Is that how the kids refer to it these days?” Jonas snorts.

“You're really annoying.”

“3-1. I win.”

“I got free weed. Who really won here, huh?”

“God, I missed you!” Jonas sighs, but he’s smiling fondly.

I missed you, too, Isak wants to say. But he can’t. He won’t. He doesn’t know what it means anymore.

Ev

16:29

? Just saw this and it made me think of you :)

Ok

You really need to get better at texting

? You’re so annoying

}:)

Still with Jonas?

No im almost home
Wanna hang out?

I just saw you this morning

I miss you

You miss oxytocin and the dopamine/serotonin neurotransmitter kick you get when you’re with me

Right
Whatever you wanna call it
Wanna swim?

Tomorrow?
I have to do something tonight

Ok :)
Text me

Why?

What do you mean why?

Why do you want me to text you? Is there a reason?

why are you so literal??

Isak needs some alone time. It’s not that Even’s presence is burdensome. He just needs to process the events of last night. The spooning, the unwelcomed tenderness, the cheek kiss in the morning, the little messages.

Isak is worried. He’s worried because Even might have interpreted their moments in the tent as crossing a new line in their ‘partnership’. He’s talking about ‘sex with him’ and being an ‘active participant’. He’s sending him silly texts and saying absurd things like ‘I miss you’. Isak can’t help but worry about boundaries moving forward.

He’s aware that it’s his fault, that he’s initiated this at the festival in their tent. And he craves the physical contact and daydreams of Even’s mouth wrapping around him again. But he’s not comfortable with what it would turn their ‘partnership’ into. He’s not comfortable stripping in front of Even again without the adrenaline and rush of a sold-out concert under the rain.

And isn’t officially engaging in sexual acts with Even the very admission of homosexual tendencies and desires? How would he explain it if it’s no longer a one-off?

Isak knows he’s not a homosexual. He knows that his attraction to Even is an aberration and that it’s the result of some sort of anomaly in their chemistry. He knows that this will ultimately go away, and that the urge to get physical with him and be with him is only a byproduct of the fact that Even is the only person who ever dares to touch him this carelessly.

Isak knows all of this. But he’s afraid of what Even thinks. He doesn’t wish to cause him any anguish. He’s aware of how fragile his psyche already is and he doesn’t wish to add to it.

He needs to think.
Ev
21:28

What time do you want to swim tomorrow?

Hm 15:00?

Which waterfront?

Can we go to the pool instead?

Our regular covered pool? Why? It’s warm outside

At least no one pees in it

How do you know for sure

gross

Or do you just want to swim alone with me? :p
Wanna engage in an experiment in private?
Will it involve sucking on things?

Are you done being a child?

Nevermind
What are you doing right now

Thinking

About what?

Genome editing and what Proust would think of it today

So you’re jerking off?

EVEN

What? Lol

I have to do something now
Talk to you later

Ok text me :)
and don’t say ‘why’

Isak is watching a random show on TV with Linn when Eskild comes in wearing glitter and mascara, sounding and looking even more jubilant than usual.

“Were you in a unicorn’s insides or what?” Isak groans when Eskild sits next to him and tries to hug him.

“How did you know?” says Eskild.

“My god, Eskild!” Linn exclaims and it takes Isak a little while to catch up. He freezes a bit in his
“So? Will you come to Pride with me?” Eskild turns his attention back to Isak.

“Uh, no. Why would I?” Isak frowns.

“Do you need a reason to do everything?” Eskild sighs. “Because it’s fun, maybe?”

“Fun is relative. What’s fun to you may not necessarily be fun to me. Besides, why would I go to an already crowded event when the agenda doesn’t speak to me?”

Eskild sits up, his smile falling a little bit. “What agenda are you talking about exactly, Isak?”

“I don’t know. The gay agenda?”

“The ‘gay’ agenda?! So you’re suddenly anti-gay now?” Eskild frowns.

“No. You can just be indifferent to something. You know? I don’t go campaign for agriculture workers rights in front of the parliament, but it doesn’t mean I’m against them.”

“But you’re not an ally. Is that what you’re saying?” says Eskild.

“I just don’t see what my presence would contribute to in such an event. That’s all.”

“It would contribute to making me happy,” says Eskild. “You can come support me. Walk with me, for me, if you can’t think of anyone else.”

“Eskild.”

“No one will think you’re a flaming gay if you go to Pride once, Isak. You know? You won’t auto-destruct if you set foot there. You won’t die from it. You can just be supportive. That could be your agenda for the day.”

“I-” Isak opens his mouth then closes it.

He doesn’t know when his attendance at Pride went from being a joke to a point of contention and emotional turmoil. Eskild looks hurt and upset, Isak feels like he’s about to burst into tears.

“Just. Let me think about it. Okay?”

Isak has always had an interesting relationship with sleep. And after tossing around for about two hours, he starts wishing Even were there with him. He sleeps better when he’s around. It’s true. He can’t deny it.

He throws the covers off of himself and heads to the kitchen to drink some water. He turns his bedside lamp on and grabs a random book from under his bed, but it’s too late into the night to focus on Schopenhauer.

He gets on his feet and begins preparing for tomorrow. He checks his black wetsuit to see if it’s dry or if it smells weird the way it does when it hasn’t seen the sun for days. He feels the fabric between his fingers and already dreads the moment he’ll have to put it on. He’s never been fond of or comfortable constricting his skin or layering up. He feels as though he’s suffocating most of the time, but it trumps feeling exposed and vulnerable. His life has been a series of trade-offs so far.
The truth is that he loves swimming bare the most. He loves feeling water over his burning skin, soothing it, comforting it. Isak loves swimming, floating, letting go. He’s always felt free in the water. And sharing a pool with Even has somehow made him love it even more.

Isak runs his fingers over his wetsuit then brings them over his own stomach. He’s wearing a thin orange shirt and he can almost feel his own skin under the cotton.

‘Ignoring that it’s there is called repression’.

Isak walks to the bathroom hesitantly, hoping the urge to conduct this experiment will somehow die down by the time he rounds the corner. But it doesn’t. He stands in front of the mirror after locking the door and lifts his shirt before he can change his mind.

His heart always drops at the sight. Always. He can’t bear it.

‘I’m rotten inside. I’m so ugly.’ Isak remembers saying with such clarity, and he shivers at how pathetic he must have sounded for Even to utter his next words.

‘Isak, do you have any idea how beautiful you are?’

So cheesy. Such pointless words. Typical ad-libs after an orgasm. Isak knows better. But those words comforted him. In the moment, they did.

Ugly. Isak doesn’t think he’s ever referred to himself using that word out loud. Ugly. Rotten. Perhaps he wrote them in one of his old notebooks when words were his only solace. Irreversibly ugly. He can’t remember. He doesn’t even remember thinking it. His thoughts are as controlled as the words he utters, except for when he’s intoxicated to the point of losing his motor skills.

He only allows himself to see the cruel irony that lives between his bones when he’s particularly faded. And it stays with him for days at a time, always. Like the night he realized that his brain and body are actually protecting him, that the burns he inflicts on people and the physical distance they impose are shielding him and sparing him the burden of having to be seen for what he truly is. For no one would ever dare come close enough to make him want to shed his layers and take off his clothes. No one would ever see how ugly and rotten he is if they run the risk of getting burned upon contact.

But Even.

Even.

‘Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?’

Such pity-filled words. Isak can’t help but squeeze the sink, his knuckles nearly white from holding on so tight. He wants to remain cynical and logical, but the memory of Even saying such absurd things makes him feel vulnerable and naked.

Don’t get swayed by empty, meaningless words.

But he can’t help it. Words don’t mean much to him, but being called ‘beautiful’ moves him in the most impossible way. Not because he appreciates it or yearns for it, but because it never even crossed his mind, being called beautiful. Isak is anything but beautiful.

And yet, the one word that came to Even’s mind to comfort him that night was ‘beautiful’. What are the odds of you being sincere right now? Isak knows Even’s vocabulary isn’t as vast as his own, but his imagination has always run wild. Even could have thought of other words, other qualitative subjective descriptions. Why beautiful? Is there a slim chance or possibility that Even thinks it,
believes it? And why does it matter?

Isak wonders, but he knows why.

He had expected to be filled with shame when Even finally laid eyes on him that night, all of him, when he finally saw what Isak worked so hard to conceal. But he felt nothing but relief. Relief and freedom and ease. Isak had never realized how tired he was of hiding and concealing until that moment. Isak was tired of feeling ashamed.

And he still is. The sight still burns him, for in his mind it is not there. But the longer he stares, the less he minds. It protects him, the burn. It always has.

His thoughts make no sense.

Isak runs his fingers over his chest, his skin, over the most shameful part of him, and he realizes that, ironically, perhaps it’s the part he hates the least about himself. He turns on the cold faucet and runs his hand under the cold water before bringing it back to his chest. He sighs upon contact and it almost sounds like a moan.

It feels good. He feels nothing but relief.

He’ll swim bare-chested tomorrow. He’ll wear regular shorts tomorrow.

Isak gets to the pool early. His anxiousness and tendency to overthink every single variable that might affect the events of any particular day lead him to pack the wetsuit after all, just in case he has a change of heart or if someone else gets the brilliant idea of going to a covered pool in the middle of summer.

He’s alone in the changing room, staring at the wetsuit which seems to have grown a pair of eyes of its own, judging him, watching him. He feels nervous and unsure, like someone on their way to the airport with a gnawing feeling that they’ve forgotten something important behind. Not even his analogies are making sense. The confidence he worked up at home and on the way to the complex seems to have left him, doubts flooding his mind once again.

Isak ends up putting on the wetsuit, but he doesn’t zip it up entirely. He walks to the pool, fast, and wastes no time jumping into the water. Water has always made him feel brave. And it works.

After an intense fifteen minute long debate inside his own head, Isak finally unzips the wetsuit while holding onto the small ladder by the edge of the pool. He takes it off hastily, but remains concealed, water reaching his lower lip. He floats and waits to feel comfortable.

He waits until his skin is no longer crawling.

Free. At last.

Even should be here soon. Isak made sure to wear a plastic watch to keep track of time and Even is never late to one of their swimming dates.

So he doesn’t think much when he hears rattling in the changing rooms in the distance. Because it must be Even. It has to be. Isak turns his back to the entrance and decides to surprise him. It’s silly, but he thinks Even will appreciate Isak baring himself to him again. Even loves feeling special after
all.

Isak remains with his back turned until he hears a condescending sneer behind him. His blood immediately runs cold in his veins.

“Well, well. I guess you do show skin sometimes after all?”

Isak turns around in panic, his eyes searching for his wetsuit only to find it in Erik’s hand.

Fuck.

Erik and some guy whose name he never bothered to learn (Nils? Mats?) are standing on the edge of the pool, grinning to themselves. And Isak feels small in the water, smaller and more exposed than he’s ever felt because: he’s bare and he is wet.

He cannot hide nor can he defend himself. His best option is to keep his panic from showing, to remain cold and composed. They don’t know that he’s currently vulnerable and defenseless. He should just keep it that way.

“Erik,” Isak breathes calmly, bringing both arms to hide his chest. “What brings you to an indoor pool in the middle of summer? Feeling insecure about your body again? Did you get rejected from a modeling gig again?”

Perhaps if Isak annoys him, he’ll just leave. Erik loves to run his mouth, but he’s always taken Isak’s words to heart and always run for the hills when they got under his skin. Isak never had to use his hands to burn Erik. Words were just as effective.

But Erik just grins a bit wider like he’s holding back. It makes Isak’s heart rate pick up inside his chest, his calm demeanor now barely an option.

“We’re actually here to see you, Isak,” he says with a chuckle.

“Oh really?” Isak scoffs, but it’s weak. “Keen on having your self-esteem take a hit again? Are the rumors true? You’re a masochist? You enjoy being degraded?”

Erik’s smile falters a bit. He’s visibly annoyed. But Isak doesn’t have time to let out a relieved breath, for Erik begins to smile again.

“It’s funny that you ask. Cause I’m actually here to check if the rumors about you are true,” says Erik.

What rumors.

“I still don’t swing that way, Erik. I’m afraid you can’t suck my dick. I’m sorry,” Isak mutters as a last resort. He knows Erik feels most insecure about people calling him gay because of how much he cares about his appearance.

Erik lunges forward like a disgruntled child and jumps into the water. And it would be comical if Isak weren’t so busy worrying about the fact that his chest is completely bare and that Erik’s friend (Nils? Lars?) has joined them in the water as well.

“You fucking asshole!” Erik shouts as soon as he comes out of the water. For a moment, Isak wonders if he can even swim as he watches him struggle to keep water out of his mouth.

“It so easy to wind you up. You’re so predictable,” Isak sneers as he swims a bit further.
But Erik and the other guy just continue to swim closer and closer. It’s almost as if they’re no longer afraid of the inevitable. As if the one thing that’s protected him this entire time is no longer there. They’re approaching him like they’re not afraid of touching him.

“Boys, do I need to remind you that-” Isak starts, but his words die in his throat the moment Erik’s hand lands on his wet shoulder.

For a moment, nothing happens.

Then Isak’s entire world begins to crumble before his eyes.

“Holy fuck!” Erik shouts, exhilarated, and he’s laughing now, too. He’s laughing while Isak’s insides wither, air no longer making it to his lungs. “Oh my god! So it’s true?! You can’t burn people underwater? This whole entire time you’ve been acting all high and mighty when we could have just drowned you, when-”

Erik stops, and Isak wishes he would continue. Please. No. Not this. Anything but this.

“Jesus, what the hell is that on your chest?!”

No.

Isak blanks out. He leaves his body for a bit. Erik’s eyes are wide and staring at the one place no one’s ever allowed to look. And it hurts him. It burns him beyond repair to see the look in Erik’s eyes, the disgust, the pity.

“Dude, come see this!” Erik motions to Nils or Lars, and Isak wonders how he’s still floating in the water when his brain has stopped functioning.

“Jesus, how are you allowed into a pool with that shit on your chest?!” Erik cackles and he’s so cruel. Isak has never felt this crushed. “You’re literally rotting from the inside out. I’m making a complaint to the pool. This can’t be sanitary.”

Isak can’t come up with anything. His throat is dry. Words have left him. His brain is stuck somewhere between rage and shock and hurt.

“This whole time you’ve been giving me shit about not being good-looking enough when you’re this repulsive? Is that why you wear all those layers? Cause you’re fucking deformed?”

‘Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?’ Isak’s thoughts flash to Even’s words. Beautiful. Even called Isak beautiful when faced with the same sight. And Isak finds himself shaking with anger and shame, because Even is a Liar. Everything he says is a lie.

What burns the most, however, is that Isak knew better. He knew that those words meant nothing, but his reaction to Erik’s disgust is living proof that he let Even’s words get to him.

Beautiful.

He let himself believe it, entertain it, hold onto the mere probability of it being true.

Isak’s ears begin to ring. He doesn’t want to hear it. He doesn’t want to hear how ugly and repulsive he is.

He knows this. He doesn’t need a recount of his mother’s words. He doesn’t need to hear any of this. Isak leaves his body.
He leaves it until his lungs begin to burn, and burn, and burn, and burn. And it takes him a while to realize that he’s no longer breathing. That his lungs are burning because of the lack of oxygen, not because of the hurt inside his heart. That he’s underwater and he can’t breathe. Erik is trying to drown him.

Isak thinks about it for a fleeting moment, giving up, letting go. Wouldn’t it be nice? Letting go. Being free, at last. Erik would spend his days behind bars and his mother would die from heartbreak. Wouldn’t it be nice? Helge would probably hear the news and hate himself even more. Everyone who’s ever wronged him would probably bear a scar. Wouldn’t it be nice?

And it’s not like Isak would be missing out on much. A life filled with agony, hurt, and shame. A life filled with disappointments and loneliness. A life with no light and no comfort. A life so empty that only escaping into books, loud music, and philosophy makes it bearable. A life so dull, so painful, so pointless.

Wouldn’t it be nice? Who would mourn him? Who? His sister hates him. Jonas would probably get over it after a week. He has Eva. Who does Isak have? Who does he have besides two roommates who probably bear the same type of hurt he does and a boy whose smile makes even the darkest of days feel like a Spring afternoon.

A boy who calls him beautiful. A boy who-

*What the fuck am I doing.*

The rest is a bit of a blur. Isak dissociates. It has happened before. But never with this much intensity, this much heat and rage. Something takes over. Something else, another entity that bears no resemblance to him. It’s the burn. The burn itself leaves his insides for a moment and breaks free. The cold water suddenly feels like lava, only Isak doesn’t burn inwards. He burns outwards.

He sets fire to the water. His heart burns and the water burns along.

He doesn’t realize he’s choking Erik, leaving deep, deep burns around his neck until he comes to, until the touch that always soothes him, always brings him back, always grounds him, is on him, all over him.

“Isak, stop! Please! It’s me!”

It’s Even. He’s in the pool. He’s behind him, trying to hold him.

Isak lets go immediately. He lets go and struggles to see, to breathe. He misses all of it. Erik and his friend climbing out of the pool, both visibly burned. Even dragging him out of the pool. The pool’s staff intervening because they heard shouting. The shaking and shaking and shaking.

It won’t go away. Even finishes reassuring the poor girl working the front desk and Isak is still drifting, still dripping. He stays under the shower for ten, twenty, thirty minutes. He won’t calm down. He has no idea how long he’s been in the pool’s communal showers for.

"Isak," Even finally whispers behind him, a safe distance between their drenched bodies. And it’s kind how he’s tried to give him time to process.

His voice is soft and careful, a quality that’s befallen all of Even’s actions and words since the festival, since the tent and the confessions and the senseless affection that followed.
Isak can’t form thoughts quite yet, but he isn’t sure he hates it, being treated with this much care, as if he's bendable and might break at any moment.

He'd learned to dread people's pity and the natural imbalance in all of his relationships early on, when his condition first manifested. And he worked hard on restoring that balance and making sure that no one looked down on him by being as shrewd and manipulative as possible.

Isak has always hated being at the receiving end of this much gentleness. But he'd lie if he said that Even treating him with care didn’t make him feel treasured at times.

"Isak," Even repeats, less hesitant this time, and it brings Isak back, reminds him of their whereabouts and circumstances, reminds him of the reason he's standing with his back turned to Even, of the reason his throat feels so tight.

His brain is drifting with all the possible outcomes of what just happened. He tries to focus on one thing, tries to file the rest of his thoughts away while he sorts one of them out. But he can't focus. He can't breathe. He can't even see.

"Fuck. You're shaking," Even sighs behind him. Isak hears him step away and focuses on that thought. He tries to guess where Even will go, what he will do to stop his shaking, if he will in the first place.

Isak wonders if Even will think less of him when he stops to reflect on what he's just witnessed, if he'll stop treating him with care. Isak wonders if Even saw that he left burns around Erik's throat while trying to choke him and drown him in a fit of rage. Isak wonders if Even is fond of this side of him, the untamable, unstoppable, unquenchable rage and desire for retribution that live inside him and color his skin.

Isak wonders if Even has left the pool altogether, if he'll have to walk home alone after this. He wonders if Erik and his friends will be waiting for him outside, if the news broke and everyone knows what Isak has been working so hard to hide and conceal.

He's so lost in his thoughts that he doesn't hear Even's steps coming back into the locker room. He feels him, however, behind him. So close. Always.

Even puts a large towel around his shoulders and Isak resists the urge to jump away from him. He's still shaking, still drifting in his head, still waiting for the rage to subside and leave his body. But he's afraid it will only make room for anxious thoughts and senseless suffering.

"Erik will tell everyone. Everyone will know. Everyone.

Even's hands are still on his shoulders and Isak doesn't understand until Even pulls him into his chest and hugs him from behind, wrapping the towel around Isak’s chest and his arms around his stomach.

Isak can't help the gasp that escapes his mouth when Even hooks his chin over his shoulder and tightens his hold.

"I read that hugs help in moments of distress," Even speaks into his ear and it melts Isak's racing thoughts, and only leaves one glistening in the darkness of his mind: Even doesn't hate him. "I also read that they can stop a person from shaking," Even continues as he begins to rock both of them to some melody in his head.

Isak realizes he hasn't uttered a word since Even dragged him away from the pool. Maybe he doesn't need to. Maybe he can let his body do the talking.
He leans back against Even's chest and accepts the comforting touches. He brings his hands to rest them atop Even's arms. He's grateful and worried and scared and devastated all the same.

"It's gonna be okay," Even tells him. "We'll figure this out. It's gonna be okay."

Isak's fingers dig into Even's bare and wet arms as he soaks up the soothing words and lets his body bask in the chemicals Even knows how to trigger in his brain.

"I'm sorry," Isak finally mumbles when he remembers shoving Even in the face to push him away. "I fucking lost it!"

"It's okay," Even replies and holds him closer.

Isak then remembers that he burned Erik in the water and tries to untangle himself from Even's hold.

"Even, I burned him," Isak explains, his voice cracking. "We were in the water and I still burned him."

"I'm fine," says Even, pulling him back. "I'm not burning. You only burned him. It's fine."

Even then puts his lips on Isak's skin, where his neck and shoulder meet, a soft and tender kiss that fills him with calm and tethers him back.

They rock steadily in a loving embrace that Isak will work hard to forget later, just like he did and does with everything he's failed to understand and interpret rationally and scientifically so far. But for now, he's in distress. Even is paying him back for comforting him at the beach and for the kebab and everything else. Isak will take it. Right now, Isak will take anything.

"You know what I do when everything is shit and I can't think?" Even whispers against his skin, his voice soothing and mellow.

"What?"

"I focus on getting past that minute and I tell myself that the next will be better," Even replies, still rocking them, still holding him. "I just focus on breathing for that one minute. If you breathe for a whole minute and block everything else, things will get better. It's guaranteed."

It isn't. Isak knows that no science backs Even's claims, but they feel like a silver lining.

"Just one minute?" Isak hums.

"Just one. It's all you need."

He breathes for a minute, and then another, and another, until the anguish begins to leave him.

And when Even turns him around to look into his eyes, to cup his face in his big and gentle hands, looking at Isak's bare chest without flinching then moving to the rest of his body to check if he's hurt, Isak is filled with a fierce urge to embrace him again, to be held by him again.

"You're not hurt. That's good," Even says after his careful examination. And Isak wishes he could tell him that he feels hurt nonetheless. That it might not show, but that his heart is burning.

But maybe he doesn't need to say it, for Even looks him in the eyes again, his thumb brushing softly against Isak's cheekbone, and asks, "More oxytocin?"

Isak nods, expecting another bone-crushing hug.
His heart soars when Even kisses him on the mouth. With care. With love. Isak’s mind is scrambling to understand the fireworks currently being set in his chest and mind when they’ve kissed thirteen times so far. Thirteen. He’s counted every single time. He’s been counting. It helps him focus, compartmentalize. What counts as a kiss? Is it every instance of their lips meeting regardless of the length of intervals in between, or is it every time they do it anew, every time they ‘make out’ after a long period of not making out. It’s thirteen if he counts separate occasions, forty nine if he counts every time their lips parted before meeting again, every nip, every swipe of the tongue.

Why is his brain on fire? Why is he so flustered when he’s just nearly drowned two boys in a pool on his own?

Where’s the entropy? Why doesn’t the second law of thermodynamics apply to this, to them, to Isak and Even? Why isn’t Isak getting bored of these kisses? Why do they still leave him speechless and powerless when they’re just an exchange of bodily fluids?

Isak opens up for him and gasps when one of Even’s hands lands on his bare side and squeezes. He flushes when Even grunts into his mouth and pulls him closer. There’s something so undeniably attractive and distinctly titillating and dizzying about Even despite his gentleness. His hands, his scent, his voice, his kisses, so rough and raw and male and sweet.

Isak has already come to terms with the fact that, for some reason, his atoms are undeniably attracted to Even’s. The weak nuclear force between them is incontestably strong, and the electromagnetic force keeps them revolving around one another. The strong force even turned Isak into a mess when Even was ignoring him after the cabin. He couldn’t handle it, being ignored by him. It’s all chemistry. Sizzling chemistry. But simple chemistry nonetheless. But where is the entropy? Where is the deterioration of this senseless bond?

Isak’s head is spinning as he wonders why entropy won’t save him, why the weak and strong nuclear forces controlling his particles won’t lose their interest in Even’s particles, why his need for Even only grows stronger with time.

“What are you thinking about?” Even asks when their lips part and they try to catch their breath, and he looks so fucking beautiful like this, all flushed cheeks and droopy eyes, his lips red and swollen. Isak loves the way Even looks after kissing him the most.

“Entropy,” Isak admits.

“What’s that?”

“Measurement of deterioration, disorder, and randomness in a thermodynamic system.”

“Isak,” Even pulls back a little and chuckles. “I just had my tongue in your mouth and the whole time you were thinking about thermodynamics? Hurtful.”

“I just want to understand-“ Isak starts then pauses.

“Understand what?”

“The fireworks,” Isak blurts out.

“The what?”

“This.”

This fire in my brain.
Isak wraps a hand around the back of Even’s neck and kisses him until his heart only burns with yearning and want, and no longer with rage and hurt.

*Maybe you just love him.* Isak feels intoxicated, and the thought burns bright in his mind. He latches onto it, he wears it and he lets it wear him. And he hopes that it won’t linger later.

*Maybe you just love him. In this minute, you love him, and it’s okay. Just for one minute.*

Isak focuses on the hysterical thought burning bright in his mind. It’s the only one not making his skin crawl and his hurt spread. It’s the only thought keeping him sane, keeping him here, focused, in one piece. The fire Even’s mouth is burning through him is stronger than the one taking his brain apart. Isak won’t let go. He doesn’t want to. Not this minute.

He tries to have more. He tries to run his hands down Even’s torso and to get lost in the friction. He tries to get down on his knees when Even finally breaks their endless kisses with a very careful ‘baby, wait’ that makes him stop and blink in panic. Isak tries to make this about heat and tension and sex and scary things he wouldn’t normally do. But Even doesn’t let him.

“Let’s just get you home, okay?”

“I’m fine, Even,” Isak challenges him, annoyed and embarrassed and doing his best to ignore the ‘baby’ that slipped. “You’re not taking advantage of me or whatever. It was just a minimal altercation with doucheface Erik. It has happened before and it will happen again. No reason to get all weird on me now.”

“I don’t want you to blow me just so that you can forget about what happened today and focus on the shame that comes with having a dick in your mouth for the first time, Isak.”

Isak blinks, at a loss for words, but Even just smiles and leaves his space altogether.

“I require full attention and psychological well-being from anyone sucking me off. I have a very demanding dick,” Even shrugs.

Isak can’t even laugh at Even’s ridiculous words. He just flushes from ear to ear. He hadn’t even thought about it very clearly, taking Even into his mouth. He can almost taste him.

“Come on. Let’s go home.”

Isak doesn’t sleep much that night. Even doesn’t stay over. He says he has to watch a new TV show on Netflix with Julie, but Isak knows he’s not telling the whole truth. He’s giving him space to make sense of his thoughts and Isak is grateful.

He’s grateful because as painful and anxiety-inducing that first night was, it was necessary. Isak couldn’t avoid his thoughts. He had to face them head-on. He didn’t know much, but he wrote down what he knew for sure.

1. *Erik touched me underwater and I didn’t burn him*
2. *Erik saw my chest*
3. *I burned Erik underwater*
4. *I didn’t burn Even underwater*
5. *I didn’t burn Mutta and the boys either*

**Hypothesis:** I was able to burn Erik underwater after he saw my chest. He made me angry. Anger
Isak stares at his notebook. Even has made him angry before and he never burned him when they were underwater. He thinks about staging an experiment. But how can Even anger him when he’s well aware that it’s an experiment and how to convince Even? ‘Hey, can you piss me off while we’re swimming. It’s for science.’

He sighs, closes his notebook, and tries to go to bed. He closes his eyes and pictures Even’s familiar weight on the mattress beside him. But he can’t keep doze off for his thoughts shift back to Erik’s face when he saw his chest. Even didn’t even flinch the first time, but then it’s because he had expected worse. Erik didn’t get a forewarning the same way Even did.

Isak throws the covers off of his body and lets a hand wander under his shirt. He’s not used to touching his chest or his upper body, because touching is to be physically aware of their presence. He’s always surprised to find his skin smooth under his fingertips. The touch and sight don’t exactly match. One would expect his skin to feel rougher, more damaged, more burnt. But it isn’t. It isn’t because the burn is under his skin, not on the surface.

It doesn’t make sense, but that’s what the dermatologists and plastic surgeons came up with. The bright red mark spattered across his chest looks like a hemangioma, a birthmark that appears in babies during their first year of life but then eventually goes away before age ten. It’s the skin’s way of dealing with excess of blood vessels in it. Except that Isak was never born with it and that it’s not a birthmark -- unless he counts that day as a rebirth which it was in many ways: the birth of Isak, the boy on fire.

Isak knows his ‘birthmark’ isn’t a hemangioma, but he likes that there’s a scientific condition less informed people can hold onto to explain it. He doesn’t like to think about it, because it brings back those memories, and most of all, because it scares him. The condition might be at rest and it might live under his skin, but it changes color sometimes. Sometimes the red is fierce, sometimes it’s barely there, and sometimes it’s so dark it almost looks purple. It looked purple at the pool with Erik. It looked bright red in the tent with Even.

Isak still remembers what the first doctor said when she saw it. “It’s like his heart exploded in his chest.” It was ridiculous, but that did happen that day. Not his heart as in the muscle that pumps blood to his body, but his heart where his ‘emotions and feelings’ used to live.

For a moment, Isak is back to that awful day, to that awful week, and his throat is closing on itself again. His thoughts whirl and spin until he’s no longer in his bed, until his breathing is no longer his own. Isak is self-aware enough to realize that he’s having a panic attack, but he’ll bear through it. He cuts through the memories head first.

“Mamma, it’s my fault. Helge didn’t do anything wrong. I asked him. I wanted it.”

Isak is back to that awful day. He’s in a closet. A literal closet that barely fits his awkward limbs, his long blonde hair, the bruises on his knees.

Isak is in a closet and he’s thirteen. He’s thirteen and his heart is broken and he’s repeating the words to himself like a mantra, like a spell, a hymn. I am not a homosexual. Repeat after me, Isak. You are not a homosexual. He’s thirteen and he repeats the words as he sobs. He cries so hard, his lungs burn and burn and burn. Everything burns. His heart, his eyes, his chest, his knees, the bruises on his face, the marks on his soul. Everything. He doesn’t know how long he stays in that closet. Hours? Days? Does he ever leave? Does his father really find him a day later or does he just remain stuck in a self-made simulation, a hellish continuation of his life in his own mind? Has he ever made it out?
“Mamma, I think I like boys. Helge didn’t do anything wrong. It was me. It was my idea.”

“Don’t worry, son. I will help you. I will fix you. I will fix this. You’re not a homosexual.”

She helped him. She really did. Isak has never made it out. Isak is still in that dark closet, he realizes. He never left. His father never found him and his notebooks. Isak has never made it out. That’s right. Never making it out makes more sense than being found in an utter state of shock with a mysterious burn or hemangioma on the chest and an even more mysterious ability to burn everything and everyone.

It probably makes more sense than his shame and his hurt being so colossal and so unbearable that they burned him from the inside out, burning his heart and turning it dark, so dark that his skin never recovered. ‘It’s like he’s rotten inside. His dark and deviant desires consumed him and inflicted a dark scar on his chest. God is punishing him for his sins. God is giving him a chance to repent. Until then, he will remain an abomination.’ Isak remembers his mother’s insane ramblings.

Never making out makes more sense than his father hiding what happened from the police to protect his mother during a severe psychotic episode. It makes more sense than Isak suppressing and forgetting everything, everything but the absolute fact that he is not a homosexual and that he could never be, the only truth to ever matter.

The vehement negation and denying never made much sense. *Reductio Ad Absurdum.* One only ever defends things this fiercely when they make no sense.

*I am not a homosexual.*

Isak is back in his bed and he feels like letting out a sob, the urge fierce in his chest. He hates revisiting these memories the most because they always leave him breathless and weak. But Even was right. He can’t afford to repress them, not anymore.

So he remains in bed curled around himself until breathing becomes easier, until it no longer burns and burns and burns. He just hopes that the morning won’t be as brutal. Mornings have always been the worst.

Even is right there beside him with soft strands of hair falling over his face when Isak awakes. The sight surprises him. It surprised him so much, he lets out a low yelp.

“What are you doing here?” Isak asks, with little to no regard to whether Even was actually asleep.

“Morning to you too,” Even mumbles, his face still buried in the blue pillow, his voice filled with sleep.

“Even, when did you get in?”

“An hour ago?” Even groans.

“It’s seven in the morning.”

“I wanted to be here when you woke up,” Even says very casually, as if it’s something regular people say. *I wanted to greet you when you woke up. I wanted to ease the crash, to help tame your thoughts after a traumatic incident. I wanted to help you with your anxious morning thoughts. No big deal.*
Isak sits up and tries to brush it off, but that warm feeling stays with him all day.

Even is careful. He’s kind and caring, but never overbearing. Isak expected him to be a nuisance after the pool incident, especially since he’s convinced Isak doesn’t know how to cope and that he represses everything. But Even gives him space. He’s a stable presence but he doesn’t hover. He doesn’t pry or ask or judge. He’s just there in the background of Isak’s conversations, on the foreground of his thoughts. He’s there. He calls him ‘baby’ between hot kisses, but he doesn’t touch him unless Isak asks and agrees. And he doesn’t withdraw when Isak turns him down or when he panics and asks for space. Even catches Isak counting as they kiss, but he lets it slide when Isak denies, and denies, and denies.

But a few days later, Isak is finally able to pinpoint what that gnawing feeling at the pit of his stomach actually is. It’s just a pity that it took seeing the last person he wanted to run into to identify it. It’s: shame, deep and all too consuming shame. Isak has been ashamed since he was thirteen years old and he hasn’t stopped. He probably never will.

He’s with Even when it happens. They’re walking past the Solli Plass stop to take the tram when Helge materializes in front of them.

Even would have never realized that something was wrong if it weren’t for Isak blindly reaching for his hand behind his back. The gesture is pathetic and hysterical, but Isak needs something to hold onto. He needs Even’s heat to anchor him if he is to keep a straight face through any of this.

“Isak,” Helge speaks when he finally stops in front of them, and it makes Isak hate his own name. He hates it so much, he can’t think.

Helge looks older. Of course he does. He’s lost the remainder of his baby fat and his skin has even started to wrinkle around his smile lines. It must be the stress of living a constant lie, Isak thinks.

Even holds out his free hand to shake Helge’s. He must have picked up on Isak’s panic, at least according to how Isak is crushing his other hand behind his back.

“I’m Even,” he introduces himself, and Isak is always in awe when Even emits this threatening aura. Even is nothing but sweet and warm with most people.

“Uh, I’m Helge,” Helge replies nervously, his face twisting with guilt and fear.

Isak feels Even tense up beside him. He didn’t tell him everything about Helge, but he did start out by saying his name, so Even’s reaction is rather expected.

Isak doesn’t say anything. Words keep failing him lately. He never expected his confrontation with Helge after years of pain and anger to take place like this, right here, with Even right beside him.

Isak can’t think of a witty one-liner. He can’t think of anything to say to Helge. All these years reading books and perfecting his cold stare and his witty tongue prove useless in front of him. Isak is a shell of himself, empty and useless on the pavement, like the day Helge punched him in the face in front of everyone for suggesting that he had feelings for him. Isak is almost thankful for that sobering punch now. Thirteen year-old Isak didn’t know that feelings don’t exist in the first place. That punch pushed him closer to the truth.

Isak is still lost in thought when Even surprises him. He always does. Always. Even turns his wrist behind his back and gently forces Isak’s hand open. He then laces their fingers together and squeezes.
It’s so sudden and so unfamiliar that it snaps Isak out of his trance. It brings him back. It distracts him from his utter shocked state with another shocked state.

“Oh, I didn’t realize-” Helge mumbles because he finally notices Isak and Even’s twined fingers.

“You didn’t realize what?” Even asks coldly.

“Nothing. Uh,” Helge pauses. He looks as shaken as Isak.

“How old are you?” Even asks like he can’t help himself, and he looks so much taller like this, his stare threatening and angry. Isak has never seen him this worked up talking to a stranger.

“Oh twenty-two. Why?”

Isak can almost see Even’s thoughts. He can hear the whirring and the calculations taking place inside Even’s head. And he’s not surprised when Even squeezes his fingers even tighter. Even is angry. He’s livid. And Isak makes a mental note to explain that it’s not what he thinks, that it’s not like that.

Even doesn’t reply and Isak knows that it’s taking him everything not to. Helge, on the other hand, understands his cue and begins to retract.

“Oh anyway. It was good to see you, Isak,” he says. “I’m in Oslo for Pride this week, so if you want to meet up or something. Let me know. Jonas has my contact info.”

Pride? You’re here for fucking Pride? You bash a thirteen year-old’s fucking face in for telling you that he loves you and then you show up to fucking Pride?!

Then he’s gone.

Isak and Even remain at the stop, holding hands, both breathing heavily in silence. Even looks and sounds angry, but he doesn’t ask. He just keeps holding Isak’s hand until Isak takes it back on the tram and lets it fall on his lap.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Isak finally speaks two stops after the one where they were supposed to get off.

“Hold your hand? You held mine first.”

Isak doesn’t reply. He pushes the stop button and gets up to leave, Even close behind.

“You going to Pride?” Even asks as they near Kollektivet.

“No, you?”

“Nope. I’m not exactly proud of much lately.”

They walk in silence until they get to the building.

“You’re not gonna ask?” Isak finally cracks as they near Kollektivet.

“You hate it when I do.”

“Since when do you care about what I hate?”
“Since we started hooking up?”

Isak flushes at that. He still hasn’t gotten used to Even’s bold statements lately. Besides, they’re not hooking up.

“We’re not hooking up.”

“Experimenting,” Even corrects.

“Don’t use it as a verb. It makes it sound-”

“Gay?” Even interjects again and this time, it makes Isak look up.

“I’m not a homosexual,” Isak blurts out. It’s almost second nature.

Even doesn’t laugh. Anyone would laugh, but Even doesn’t.

“I am though,” he says with honesty and sincerity while Isak watches. “I mean not exactly homosexual. I’m pansexual. You know this.”

“Yes, and I have no problem with that. But we’re not hooking up.”

“We’re conducting experiments. You’re always counting. Yes, I know.”

“If you know it, then don’t call it hooking up” Isak shoots back, embarrassed that Even knows he’s been counting their kisses.

“Things can mean different things to different people, Isak.”

It’s the closest thing to a confession Isak has gotten from Even. He’s had his doubts and theories about Even’s recent motives, but he’s never had anything tangible to base his hypotheses on.

“What are you saying?” Isak asks and he regrets it immediately.

“You know what I’m saying,” Even replies, unwavering.

Isak doesn’t want to hear him say it, so he says it for him. Perhaps it’ll deter him.

“You don’t have feelings for me.”

“Don’t tell me how I feel, Isak.”

“Somebody has to if you’re gonna keep saying stupid things that make no sense and-”

Even moves forward until he’s in Isak’s space. He’s so close, Isak can smell his shampoo. It’s Eskild’s shampoo and it smells like lavender. Isak begins to wonder if Even showers more at his place than at home. It’s a useless thought but he hold onto it, because Even is too close.

Isak gasps when Even silently reaches for his hand, eyes never leaving his own. Even moves their hands and brings Isak’s to his chest. And before Isak can understand, he’s feeling Even’s heartbeat under his palm. Even placed Isak’s hand over his heart.

And his heart is hammering inside his chest. It’s beating so fast and so hard, Isak can’t believe it’s not showing on Even’s face. Isak’s always bursts into flames when his heart picks up.

“What are you doing?” Isak asks, because he doesn’t understand and he’s having trouble breathing
“Giving you scientific evidence,” Even responds, his expression serious and composed.

“What-”

“You’re doing this to me right now,” says Even as he squeezes Isak’s hand over his chest. “This is for you.”

It takes Isak a second to understand what Even is saying. It’s so absurd, Isak is tempted to shove him.

“You’re heart rate can pick up when you’re angry or agitated. This isn’t for me. I didn’t ask for this. You’ve been angry since the tram stop.”

“This is how it always is when I’m with you,” Even replies calmly.

“Because of anticipation, because of the bond, because-”

Isak’s words die in his throat when Even presses his free hand against Isak’s chest. It shouldn’t affect him this much. It shouldn’t, but his heart is about to leap out of his chest and Even can tell, for he can feel it too.

“I’m just agitated!” Isak defends himself before Even can place a word. And it shouldn’t be a contest, but it feels like one. Isak feels cornered.

He braces himself for Even’s next words and accusations. He prepares a speech in his head with lots of philosophical references and scientific theories. He braces himself because he can’t have Even thinking that Isak bears feelings for him. Isak does not have feelings for Even and he never will. He prepares himself for the worst but it still isn’t enough. He watches something break in Even’s stare.

Even just breaks.

“I love you,” Even says like it’s the most evident thing in the world. And Isak stops breathing altogether.

"Ev-" he tries, because he can't hear it. He doesn't want to hear this. This can't be happening.

“I love you and I don’t think anyone has ever told you that they love you. So I love you. And I think you should know it just in case there’s doubt in your mind.”

It feels like being punched in the stomach, except it a hundred times worse. The floor has gotten swept from under his feet and Isak is free falling, tongue tied and limbs numb. The words mean nothing, but they still leave him speechless.

“For a guy who thinks they’re stupid words, you sure do seem affected,” Even chuckles, but he sounds nervous and afraid.

He lifts his hands until he can cup Isak’s face, and his eyes are so blue that Isak wonders if a piece of the sky got sprinkled over them.

“I’ll wait for you,” Even mouths and Isak doesn’t understand what he means, but he accepts the promise without a word.

*I’ll wait for you.* For some reason, Isak feels like he’s waiting for himself as well.

Waiting. His whole life has been waiting. Waiting to be cured, waiting for things to hurt less, waiting
for his mother to finally acknowledge that she’s damaged him beyond repair, for Jonas to realize that there’s no salvaging their old friendship, for his father to maybe choke in his sleep for his passivity, for Lea to be old enough to understand everything that happened. Isak has been waiting for mornings to get less painful and for sleep to come easier, waiting for the day he will no longer burn, the day his anger will no longer consume him. He’s been waiting for his guards to start going down, for his walls to get shorter, for feelings to become more meaningful. Isak has been waiting for this to get easier. This, them. Isak and Even. For things to start making sense. But they don’t. They never have. They never will.

Isak has been waiting for his heart to stop hurting and for his red scar to leave him. He’s been waiting and waiting and waiting. But he doesn’t see an end to his self-made hell. He doesn’t see one.

Why is Even so convinced there is an end to his hurt?

“I’ll wait for you,” Even repeats, his thumbs caressing Isak’s face. “Okay?”

Isak can only manage a nod. And when Even kisses him, he closes his eyes and lets him.

‘I love you’. The most meaningless words. But in this minute, he treasures them more than anything else in the world.

“Twenty,” Isak counts out loud when Even finally gives him a second to breathe.

“Twenty-one,” Even echoes before pressing their lips again.

-------

Chapter End Notes

**tw:** internalized homophobia, references to emotional abuse, panic attacks

i know not many of you are still here but i hope you get to this. i miss you too <333
Philosophy of Pride

Chapter Summary

"Need a dopamine kick?"
"No. Need you."

it's finally PRIDE in Oslo and Isak has multiple revelations and experiences 1st times.

Chapter Notes

hey! thank u for still being in my inbox. ily <3

will they? won't they? a lot happens. finally.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I love you.”

Isak does not sleep that night. His thoughts won’t dim, his brain on overdrive since he parted ways with Even hours ago.

“I love you.”

The words are ridiculous and meaningless, and yet so consuming that he barely thinks about his anticlimactic encounter with Helge, as though it never even happened. All he can think about are Even’s pale blue eyes, his unruly blond hair in the wind, and the stupid words he uttered with so much ease. Like ‘hello’, like ‘goodbye’. “I love you”.

His flustered state soon turns into irrational anger, because how dare he? How dare Even throw such words to his face while being fully aware that Isak would have no defenses against them? How dare he corner Isak when he was clearly emotionally compromised after running into Helge, after reaching for Even’s hand with shame filling up his chest?

Isak is burning up. His heart is pounding and he can hear it. He can feel his blood coursing through his veins. And how dare Even leave him after that? Kiss him senseless by the Kollektiv door, throw in a few other meaningless promises he cannot keep, then leave him to his thoughts and demons. How dare he?

Where is he?

Isak tosses around until he can no longer bear it, then finds himself in the kitchen with a tall glass of water.

“Can’t sleep?” Eskild startles him.

He’s wearing the red and gold silk robe Noora got him for his birthday. It’s too extravagant for Isak’s liking, too colorful and with too many prints and patterns for his sore eyes. But it makes Eskild
happy, so Isak finds himself refraining from making remarks in his own head.

“It’s too hot. We should get a fan,” Isak deflects because Eskild’s face is carrying a look. That look.

“Where is Even tonight?” Eskild preens, pulling a chair to sit opposite Isak.

“I’ll have you know that while my intellect far supersedes that of most of the population of in this town, I still don’t have the ability to track random people’s whereabouts,” Isak deflects again. He’s too irritated to be interrogated right now.

“You and I both know Even isn’t random people, baby Jesus.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Isak frowns, his hand locking around the glass to anchor himself.

“I saw you kissing downstairs earlier,” Eskild explains, but there’s no judgement in his voice, no mockery, no malice. He just says it like it’s a fact. Like he’s offering to listen if Isak wants to talk.

But Isak doesn’t. He runs out of words because he has no idea what they must have looked like down there. He’s never seen himself getting kissed or kissing anybody. He blanked out for most of it, too. He can’t bring himself to deny and pull his usual “It’s not what it looked like.” Because he has no idea what it looked like.

But he guesses that it wasn’t exactly flattering. Isak knows that something within him always gives in and gives up when Even’s mouth is on him. He knows that something in him unlocks and leaves him leaking.

He can’t meet Eskild’s eyes. He doesn’t want to talk about this. He’s too mortified.

“Are you coming to Pride?” Eskild asks, as if there’s a correlation between the two, as if Even kissing him at the door and Isak kissing him back in broad daylight would somehow change how Isak feels about the absurd concept of Pride. It brings Isak back.

“Just because I experienced a momentary bout of insanity and let Even shove his tongue down my throat doesn’t mean I’m going to wear tights and mascara and go make a clown out of myself down Karl Johan,” Isak nearly barks.

His words feel like knives as they leave his own mouth. Isak regrets them instantly. And Eskild’s face contorts with something closer to disappointment than hurt.

“Is that what you think of me?” says Eskild. “You think I’m a clown?”

“I. No. That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean, Isak? Please enlighten me,” Eskild asks, his voice lower than Isak’s ever heard it before, his stare hard but calm.

Isak squirms. He would never admit to it out loud, but he’s grown to hate disappointing Eskild. “I meant that if I do it, I’ll look like a clown. Not you. It’s not the same. I have nothing against you wearing tights and mascara.”

“And what makes us so different, Isak? Please tell me.”

“I’m-. I just,” Isak mumbles, lost and remorseful. “This is not a personal attack on your character. Okay? I lashed out and I take it back.”

He doesn’t dare look into Eskild’s eyes after that. He can’t bear the hurt probably roaming them. Isak
doesn’t enjoy hurting Eskild, but he somehow always ends up bruising him, one word at a time. And he knows Eskild wasn’t just born proud and happy. But Isak doesn’t know how to admit that a pair of hands lock around his throat whenever this topic is brought up. He doesn’t know how to tell Eskild how hard it is for him to even entertain these thoughts.

Eskild gets up and leaves his chair quietly while Isak stares at his glass of water.

“I’ll always support you, Isak,” he says calmly. “And I’m rooting for the day you finally free yourself from whatever you got going on right now. But I won’t let you make me feel lesser than you or like something’s wrong with me on your way there. I won’t just give you a free pass and let you stomp all over Pride and what it means to so many of us.”

“Eskild—”

“No, Isak. I don’t feel like listening to you right now. Sorry.”

Fuck.

Eskild walks away, his long robe swiveling until the red and gold get swallowed by the darkness of the apartment along with Isak’s thoughts.

He sighs, his chest feeling tight. He needs to apologize. He can’t afford to get kicked out of Kollektivet right now. Not that Eskild would force him to leave. Isak feels awful and finds himself missing the times when he felt nothing for people around him, when he could say the most hurtful things and still have a clear conscience. He misses not feeling anything. He misses feeling numb to everything.

But that’s probably a lie.

Isak’s phone buzzes and he jumps in his chair, his heart picking up right then and there, because what if it’s Even. What if Even can’t sleep either.

It isn’t. It’s Mutta.

Why is Mutta messaging him in the middle of the night?

**Mutta: Can we meet tomorrow? It’s about Even**

Isak panics, his mind immediately latching onto the worst case scenario. Someone must have seen them kissing outside Kollektivet. It was broad daylight. Anyone could have seen them. Or worse. Maybe someone saw them holding hands in the tram. *Fuck!*

Everyone knows now. Everyone knows and Isak is about to be delivered some terrible news again. *“I love you”*. Someone might have heard what Even said and asked Mutta to tell Isak that Even doesn’t mean it, that it’s one of his “kinks” again, that Isak is being played again. Maybe it was Arvid.

**Mutta: The boys & I wanna apologize to Even for the stuff at the beach. We were dicks and we really need your help. If you want. Please.**

Relief rushes over Isak. And he’s always considered himself able to hold onto more than one thought at a time, but he begins to doubt it. It’s as though his mini panic attack in the middle of the kitchen never happened.

He immediately replies with ‘Ok’ then feels extremely self-conscious about how fast he made up his
mind, about how he didn’t overthink this one when he tends to overthink everything.

Even’s friends want to mend their friendship, and it’s all Isak needs to know to say yes. He doesn’t even hesitate. Mutta probably thinks he’s pathetic.

**Mutta: thanks man. Will text you a meetup place. Don’t tell Even pls**

Isak folds his arms over the table and rests his head on top of them. Sleep is starting to fill his bones but his thoughts are still racing despite the exhaustion. He almost wishes Eskild would come out of his room again and try to pry information out of him. Maybe he’d give up a thought or two. Maybe he’d tell him what’s really on his mind, what’s really eating him up. Maybe.

*He said that he “loves” me.*

*Nobody “loves” me.*

“How have you been?” Mutta asks nervously. And his discomfort makes Isak feel more at ease.

It’s hot, way too hot. Mutta is in a tank top and Isak feels slightly jealous. He would very much like to get rid of the jacket he’s currently wearing. But he doesn’t trust himself and his skin around people just yet. Burning Mutta at a KB early in the morning isn’t on his list of things to carry out today.

“Same old,” Isak shrugs.

Mutta looks guilty, nervously fiddling with his own fingers on his stool. Isak almost wants to reassure him that, if anything, he knows that his words at the beach were out of genuine worry and friendship. But Isak doesn’t let it slip. He has the upper hand now. He wants to know more about Mutta’s plan to earn Even’s forgiveness.

“Last time I saw you, you called me a fucking asshole,” Mutta finally speaks, chuckling nervously.

“I don’t remember using those exact words,” Isak muses nonchalantly. “You sure?”

“Maybe I just felt like a fucking asshole to be honest.”

“Self-awareness is a powerful thing,” Isak huffs in that bored tone of his. He’s had years of practice to perfect this cold and unbothered stare, this detached voice. It feels odd having this ability back. He feels like Even and Eskild have stripped him of some of his most basic survival tactics.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to,” says Isak.

“I know.”

“So what’s the plan then? How are we going to get Even Bech Næsheim to take you back as his rightful squad?”

“We?” Mutta repeats, surprised.

“I’m not here to listen to you wallow in self-pity. You clearly called me here to ask for help. What is it that you need me to do?” Isak blinks, eyes hooded, a half yawn escaping his mouth. He’s insufferable like that. “Also how long are Elias and Mikael gonna hide behind that wall for? I don’t have all day.”
They all watch him with a mix of guilt and pride in their eyes. It must feel ridiculous, asking a guy who’s known their best friend for barely a moment to help them mend their lifelong friendship.

Isak maintains his bored stance while Elias grits his teeth. He’s almost tempted to reassure him that he’s not trying to steal Even, that he wouldn’t be here if his goal was to take their spot.

“So we were thinking—” Mikael starts

“Oh you were? Congratulations,” Isak interjects, unable of helping himself.

“You’re being a dick,” says Mutta.

“Fair,” Isak rolls his eyes. “Continue.”

“As I was saying,” Mikael sighs. “We were thinking of doing something for Even.”

“Groundbreaking, guys,” Isak interrupts again, this time with an eye roll. “We’ve been here for twenty minutes and you still haven’t told me a thing.”

“Isak…” Mutta sighs.


“Are you like this with Even too?” Mikael mutters, annoyed.

“Are you gonna tell me what your plan is today or should we resume? Eskild is making soup for lunch today. I can’t miss it—”

“For fuck’s sake,” Elias rolls his eyes while Isak tries to hide his smile. “What Mikael is trying to say is that we thought about it and we want to do something super extra for the embodiment of extra, aka Mr. Even Bech Næsheim himself.”

“And let me guess. You need my help figuring it this super extra thing you want to do for him?” Isak muses.

“Nope.” Mutta grins. “We just need you to bring him.”

“Bring him?” Isak scoffs in realization. “Your amazing idea is to throw him a party? Really? Are you being serious right now?”

“Not just any party,” Mikael chimes in.

“Uh?”

“The biggest party,” says Mutta.

“In all of Oslo!” Mikael adds.

Isak frowns then rests his chin on the palm of his hand, elbow on the table.

“Sorry guys. But if you think some Project X type of bullshit is the way to get Even to stop being cranky, then you might as well—”

“God, dude, you’re really unbearable. What happened to the chill dude from the cabin?” Elias sighs
The chill dude from the cabin would really like to know what this is about so he can go home and eat some soup, so-

“Pride!” Elias nearly shouts, as if even uttering the word is taking all of his energy.

“What?” Isak blinks.

“We’re going to the Oslo Pride parade. All of us. And we need you to bring Even.”

This is a terrible idea. A colossal mistake, really.

“You don’t have to if you don’t feel comfortable,” Mikael even whispered to him when he had him alone.

A statement that made Isak’s cheeks burn and his chest fill up with shame and outrage. Why wouldn’t he be comfortable? What is Mikael implying? Isak is perfectly capable of leading Even to the center of the city. He’s perfectly capable of “bringing him”. Hell, he “brought” him multiple times before, manipulated him endlessly, played him and bent him over as he saw fit before. Why is Mikael assuming that Isak would feel uneasy carrying out this simple mission? And why is he looking at him like that? Like he feels bad for even asking him.

Isak said yes. He doesn’t know why he said yes. But he figured that saying no would confirm the supposed discomfort the boys seem to think he’s bearing. Isak is not uncomfortable because there’s nothing to feel uncomfortable about.

So he said yes. Just like that. “Sure. Whatever. I’m going for Eskild anyway.”

He lied and he said yes. And now he regrets it. He regrets it and he’s overthinking it. It’s almost dinner time and he hasn’t been able to stop overthinking it.

What if Even feels uncomfortable?

Fuck.

Isak was so caught up in his own unease that he forgot to think about what actually matters: how Even would feel about it. Being manipulated into attending the largest and most crowded event of the year then paraded to ease the guilt of friends who’ve deeply hurt him.

What if Even doesn’t want to go to Pride? What if Even would rather have an honest discussion with his friends before being forced to shout and perform his sexuality for other people’s entertainment? What if Even ends up hating Isak for manipulating him? Isak hasn’t purposely toyed with him in ages. Would Even still say those words then? Would he-

Even comes through the door right then and there while Isak tortures himself at his desk. He just walks into the bedroom as if it’s his own -- a half truth lately; his drawings clumsily taped to the wall, his crumpled jeans on the floor, his socks in the hamper, his toothbrush and hair products in the bathroom, his books and laptop on the desk, his scent in the sheets.

Isak has never paid attention to how much Even there is in his room now. And he would otherwise pin it on him if he weren’t currently wearing one of Even’s shirts. The Jaws one.
The thought seems to be shared by the two of them, for Even smiles softly when he sees him, making Isak’s heart pick up in his chest.

“Hey you.”

Isak has become acutely aware of it lately. His heartbeat. How fast it thuds. How hard it it pounds when Even is around. ‘You’re doing this to me right now. This is for you.’ Isak knows that Even’s heart doesn’t beat for him and that neither does his own. But it’s hard to find another reason for his shortness of breath, his jumbled thoughts, his wild heart when they so much as lock eyes.

*It’s just nerves. It’s because of what he said. Because of those words.*

“Hey yourself,” Isak replies casually.

“Missed me?” Even asks with a teasing smile before letting his backpack drop to the floor and throwing himself on Isak’s bed like a child.

“If verbal validation is what you’re seeking, Eskild’s door is to the left.”

“Physical validation will do.”

Isak’s head snaps as he finally turns around to look him in the face, and Even is smiling so wide.

“As I said, Eskild’s door is to the left,” Isak replies, trying to hide how affected he actually is, then turns back around to the book he’s holding in his hands.

“We could cuddle? Scientifically? I haven’t seen you in almost twenty four hours. I know your dopamine reserve has depleted.”

“My dopamine reserve is doing just fine,” Isak says with the same bored voice.

“Well, mine isn’t,” Even replies, turning to the side, elbow on the bed, cheek in his hand.

Isak turns around again, worried this time. *Has Even met with the guys? Did he have a bad day?*

“You okay?” he asks tentatively, then adds “what’s wrong?” when he doesn’t reply right away.

Even opens his arms then, silently asking for a hug while lying on his side on Isak’s bed. He looks tired but content. He looks soft. There’s no other way to describe it. Him, right now. In his dark jeans, white shirt, and wild hair he hasn’t cut in a while.

“C’mere?” Even asks like he’s giving Isak a choice, as if Isak has the option to say no.

Isak stands up and gingerly walks over to his own bed, his knee heavy when it lands on the mattress, his face hot as he tries to avoid Even’s intense stare.

For a moment, he thinks Even will reach for him and grab him by the waist, claim his hug, pull him down and wrap him in his arms. But he doesn’t. Even scoots further to make Isak some space in his own bed until they’re lying face to face, not touching.

“What’s up?” Isak asks, concerned.

“Nothing,” Even almost whispers, his smile is still there, but just barely.

“What did you do today?”
“I, uh. I waited.”

Isak can’t help the gasp that catches in his chest. Even spent the day waiting. ‘I’ll wait for you.’

Even is waiting for him. And Isak doesn’t know how to tell him that he doesn’t know how to get off the platform, how to get on the train to make it to him. He doesn’t know.

“And you?” Even asks softly, still whispering. “What did you do today?”

_I schemed. I met up with your friends behind your back. And I tried not to think about you._


Even moves closer and Isak is struck by the ghost of Even’s lips on his own. He remembers how long they kissed yesterday. Just yesterday. How long and how desperate their kisses were. How Even held his face in his hands like he was precious while he pushed him up against the door. Isak blushes.

“Missed you,” Even says, his hand coming up to Isak’s face to cup his cheek.

Isak nearly purrs, accepting the touch, his eyes fluttering close. It’s not pitch dark outside yet because it’s summer, but it’s late in the day. If this were February, Isak wouldn’t feel as self-conscious letting his walls down right now.

Isak doesn’t know how to say ‘I missed your touch too’ out loud, so he moves closer to Even’s chest until they’re wrapped in each other’s arms. They both sigh as if something has just clicked, has just unlocked inside of them. Isak no longer feels anxious, and worried, and stressed. He just feels warm.

Even was right. His dopamine reserve was definitely depleted.

They cuddle. _Scientifically._ At least Even can’t see that his eyes are closed in this position.

“What are you doing July 1st?” Isak finally works up the courage to ask later, both of their faces flushed, hair a mess.

“That’s a Saturday, right?” Even mumbles, his chin resting on top of Isak’s head.

“Yes.”

“Uhm. I don’t really know. Why? Wanna do something?”

“Wanna go walk around Grønland?”

“Grønland?” Even repeats, surprised. “Next saturday? Isn’t that-”

“Pride parade. Yes, I know,” Isak blurts out.

Even remains silent. He’s thinking.

“It’s uh, it’s for Eskild,” Isak resumes. “I said mean things about Pride and I want to say sorry by showing up and supporting him. He’ll be on one of those dance trucks or trailers with his group. They’re gonna be dancing and stuff.”

Even doesn’t speak, still. Isak panics.

“You can say no,” he whispers.
“And let you go by yourself?”

“Eskild says I don’t burn gay people. So it won’t be a problem given the nature of the event,” Isak says with a small smile. It’s a joke. Even smiles back. “And I could drag Linn with me,” he continues.

“She’ll probably be up there with Eskild. He’s probably teaching her some choreography in his spare time that she’ll eventually sit through.”

Isak laughs, and it feels good to laugh against someone’s chest.

“So you’ll come with me?”

“I’ll come with you.”

“What if someone sees us?” Isak asks, then realizes it’s as much a question for himself.

“Then someone sees us.”

Isak feels Even’s lips on his forehead just as he slips into deep slumber.

Isak wakes up to the sound of pencil to paper. It’s frantic and fast, not the way tracing lines sounds. It’s someone filling up an area on a drawing.

He cracks an eye open.

Even is towering over him in bed in a seated position, one knee drawn to his chest and a notebook propped on it.

Even is drawing.

“What are you-” Isak mumbles, still half asleep.

“Don’t move,” Even interjects, his brows furrowed in concentration. “Need one more minute.”

“What the hell?”

“I’m drawing you. If you move now, I might fuck it up.”

Isak blinks, confused, but he obliges. He stays in the same position, on his side, cheek on the pillow, hands tucked under his neck, for a full minute. He counts to sixty, focuses his gaze on a random object on his nightstand. It’s Even’s pencil case. Isak stares at it until he memorizes all the random drawings on its surface.

“It’s been a minute,” Isak mutters, trying to feign annoyance, but actually doing his best not to seem self-conscious.

“It’s been a minute and thirty six seconds actually,” Even says with a smile. “And yes, I’ve been done for a while, just wanted to stare at you like this for a little longer.”

Isak shoves him with the pillow he was lying on, frowning while Even laughs. Who laughs this early in the morning?

“It’s fucking six in the morning! And who gave you the right to draw me in my sleep? Do you
realize how creepy that is?”

“It was either that or jerking off,” Even shrugs. “Weighed pros and cons and figured your reaction to being drawn wouldn’t be as dramatic.”

“What’s wrong with you!” Isak shoves him again, but he can’t help but smile, muffling his own laughter.

“I’m sorry that sleeping next to you makes me feel some type of way, Iss. Some of us are very homosexual, you see.”

“This is it. I’m never letting you sleep over ever again,” Isak huffs as he leaves his bed.

“I barely slept if that’s of any consolation,” Even shrugs. “Also don’t be upset, but I took a cold shower earlier because I was horny and I had to borrow one of your boxers.”

“You what?!” Isak turns around to glare at Even, mortified.

“I’ll wash them and return them, I promise.”

“Are you for fucking real right now?!”

“Iss, you’ve been swearing a lot lately. I’m worried about your vocabulary,” Even pouts, his notebook still in his hands.

“I’m going to-” Isak starts in a bout of anger and embarrassment as he walks back to Even to straddle him.

Even is quick to toss the notebook aside and grab him by the waist, his gaze piercing but composed. Time stills and a gasp escapes Isak’s mouth once he finds himself seated on Even’s lap, Even whose arousal is still very much a thing of the present.

“I forgot to mention that the cold shower didn’t really help,” Even speaks in low voice that makes Isak’s blood instantly flow south.

“Even-”

Even pulls him closer until their stomachs are touching, then raises his eyebrows when he realizes how quickly Isak got affected. He has the self-control of a pubescent teenager. He really does.

He remains in a flustered state, unable of moving because he’s afraid his impulses might take over and make him do something incredibly reckless, like maybe grind down.

Even leans in with a knowing smile and that same intense gaze while Isak holds his breath. It’s fucking six in the morning. Who is this affected by another person at six in the morning?

“Something tells me you need a cold shower, too,” Even whispers.

“I-”

Their faces are so close, they could be kissing. They can. They should. It always feels so nice when they do. It’s a win-win activity. It doesn’t have to be complicated.

He’s about to kiss Even. He’s about to ask Even to kiss him. He wants to, so why can’t he? Why shouldn’t he? His brain can almost taste the dopamine kick he’d get from it. He wants this so much, his bones ache with it.
“I should go,” Even whispers a beat later as he lets go of Isak’s waist, the loss of the anchoring disorienting. “I have to do some stuff today.”

“Uh, yeah. Okay.”

Isak nearly trips on his way to the bathroom, his legs wobbly and his breath short. He can’t even yell at Even, too afraid his voice might come out higher than usual.

When he comes back to the room, Even is gone but a note is carefully laid out on Isak’s pillow.

‘Have a good day :)

PS: wearing your underwear feels like our dicks are touching all day. romantic.’

---

Ev

Don’t ever touch my underwear EVER AGAIN
Also feel free to burn those when you’re done

Already changed out of them
Couldn’t go around walking with a mess in my pants :)

<3

Isak groans at Even’s reply, exasperated but also beyond frustrated. He tries not to think about it. He tries, but the simple visual makes him nearly scream into a pillow.

Even has been so much more open with his thoughts and urges and feelings since the incident in front of kollektivet. He doesn’t hold back anymore. He doesn’t filter or censor himself. He doesn’t overthink. He just says whatever feels right in the moment.

But his jabs are limited to words. He doesn’t go beyond that. He always backs down when it gets intense, right before Isak is about to give up and give in. He drives him to the edge then pulls back and leaves him hanging.

‘I’ll wait for you.’

Even is waiting. And Isak wasn’t aware that waiting was synonymous with this newfound abstinence. Even teases him endlessly but he doesn’t relieve him. He no longer touches him the way Isak craves to be touched. He no longer kisses him.

Isak is making Even wait.

And Even is making him wait right back.

‘So we’ll meet at my place because it’s closer to the commotion, then we’ll walk to Spektrum. We could take the tram, but I’m sure there will be some closures and I don’t feel like being confined in a small space with human unicorns. And no, before you even try to suggest it, we are not going to Grønland. I would rather poke my eyes out than go through Grønland. And yes I know I’m the one who suggested it at first, but that was before Eskild told me how things usually go down. Also, his group is marching, or I should say dancing, with the first batch, so we can just catch him when they round that weird church. It’s not like we need to follow him the entire time, you know? He just needs
me to be there to validate his fairy godmother status and to write “I forced my foster child Isak Valtersen into going to Pride” on an Instagram caption. I just know he’ll do it. He’s been constantly taking photographs of me. I think I should start to feel worried actually. Also, what a weird concept Pride is. Don’t you think the ones who insist on showing pride are those who are most prone to shame? Similarly to those who constantly boast about their possessions because they’re emptiest inside, to those who post the most on social media because they’re the loneliest at heart? Insisting on showing off one’s supposed greatness is a concept I will never-,” Isak pauses his rambling, suddenly aware that his speech has increased in speed and incoherence and that his voice is the only thing filling the sweet midsummer air in the cafe.

Even is sitting across from him, head propped atop his folded arms on the table before him, a wild golden mop of hair covering his face. He isn’t moving and Isak realizes that Even dozed off during his frenzied speech. He’s almost relieved, too embarrassed by how nervous he actually is.

Isak stares for a bit. Even has been all over him lately, talking too much, smiling too much, laughing too much, taking too much. Isak couldn’t do much but look away and hold it in. He hasn’t had a chance to just look in a while -- for every time he does, he remembers Even’s ridiculous words from last week -- So he looks.

Isak doesn’t really know what to call the feeling that overcomes him watching Even with his eyes closed and a half-smile curling his lips. Isak doesn’t think he’s ever smiled in a dream. How is it so easy for Even? How does Even look so peaceful sleeping? So at ease, so... pretty.

Time stills enough for little specks of dust to hang suspended in a narrow beam of sunlight filtering through the windows. And for a moment, Isak questions the source of light: the sun is hot and unyielding today, but for some reason, a sleeping Even shines brighter.

No!

Isak catches himself mid-nonsense and blinks away the ridiculous thoughts. He sits up straight, kicks Even’s chair ever so slightly, then speaks again.

“Are you sleeping? Really, Even?” Isak scoffs, and his voice is almost shaky. It’s pathetic. He swallows and continues. “You pick logistics debrief to finally sleep? You haven’t let me sleep in days and now you want to sleep?”

Isak is beyond nervous. He’s self-aware enough to know and to admit to himself that he’s nervous. But he tells himself that it’s because of what he’s actually doing, not because Even is sitting across from him. And it’s true. Isak doesn’t plan routes for navigating the Oslo Pride Parade every day. The thought alone is filling him with an extreme urge to flee and lock himself in his room for at least a month. But he can’t. Not this year.

This year he has Eskild to think about and Even to drag to Pride. This year is not about him. Having a mission keeps him focused. He’s going because Eskild kind of emotionally blackmailed him and because Mutta asked him to bring Even without telling him. He’s on a mission. He’ll be fine. He’s fine.

Isak is about to kick the chair again when Even speaks.

“Not sleeping,” he mumbles, his voice groggy but soft. There’s a smile there, too. His whole voice is smiling. Isak tunes him out.

“Uhm, not to be annoying, but last time I checked, closing your eyes and suspending your consciousness is called sleeping, Even.”
“See, that’s where you’re wrong. My consciousness is anything but suspended,” Even chuckles, his face finally turning to blind Isak. His eyes are crinkling and it’s all very nerve-wracking. Isak can’t think.

“Oh, so did your eyes just happen to close themselves while I was relaying some very important information to you or?”

“I closed my eyes because I wanted to hear you, like really hear you,” says Even, his chin awkwardly laying on his folded arms now. His eyes are sparkling with something close to happiness or euphoria, like simply sitting in a cafe with Isak and listening to him complain about exactly everything is filling him with joy.

“Are you saying my speech is too contrived or are you saying that you need a hearing device?” Isak huffs again, because he can’t really hide his nervousness unless he’s being insufferable.

“I’m saying that I love listening to you speak the most, and that when I close my eyes I feel like your words penetrate me even deeper.”

Isak is grateful that he didn’t decide to take a sip from his coffee because it would probably be all over Even’s hair by now. He chokes on air instead while Even laughs.

“Jesus Christ!” He coughs while Even’s warm laughter fills his bones.

“You have such a dirty mind, Valtersen.”

“Dirty mind?! I am just appalled by your choice of words because they make absolutely no sense. My words penetrate you deeper? Which books do you even read? I can’t deal with you!”

“I’m just telling you how I feel,” Even replies with no hint of humor or teasing in his voice. He’s smiling but it looks like it’s out of sincerity, not mischief. “I love hearing you talk. I could listen to you all day. It’s just how I feel.”

The earnestness in Even’s voice leaves Isak feeling vulnerable. He knows they’re meaningless words and they almost have a child-like quality to them. It feels like Even is just speaking the thoughts that cross his mind without applying the glossy filter that comes with being a calculating grown person who’s experienced the downsides of speaking too quickly, too recklessly. Even is being reckless, and Isak doesn’t know how to handle him anymore.

He blushes and looks away, his mind scrambling for a rational thought to latch onto and a witty comeback to end this dumb conversation.

“Noted,” Isak mutters then rolls his eyes, his hands reaching for the notebook where he drew their itinerary. “Never wake you up when you’re taking a nap unless I’m ready to listen to you speak nonsense. Noted. I won’t do it again.”

He steals a short glance to check if Even is offended, but he’s still smiling, still hugging the table and smiling.

“Where was I again? Before I woke you from your deep slumber, huh?” Isak continues.

“You were talking about how you don’t understand Pride. And how only people who are ashamed insist on showing that they’re proud,” Even replies in a heartbeat, still smiling, like he’s about to burst with it.

“Uh, okay. So I guess you really were listening, huh,” Isak remarks nervously.
“You penetrate me. I told you. All this philosophy talk gets me.”

“Shut up!” Isak rolls his eyes while Even chuckles, then decides to focus on what he knows best, on the only thing that calms him down: his facts. “Anyway, I wasn’t even really talking philosophy there, just my personal opinion. Or I guess that counts as philosophy, too. But if you’re actually interested in knowing what old scholarship has to say on the matter, Aristotle is very known for his take on Pride. He actually thinks Pride is a virtue unlike most monotheist religious texts. Pride is weirdly defined, but a recurring definition is that pride is what is felt when a person thinks they exhibit greatness, so long as they actually do exhibit greatness. There’s a difference between thinking you’re great and being great, you know. So yeah, Aristotle says that as long as you’re great, it’s okay for you to think that you’re great and to show it off. But I don’t really agree with him. I think you can just be great and—”

Isak pauses. He’s rambling, meandering, blabbering. He’s nervous and he can’t stand it. He looks at Even and finds him staring, just staring so intensely. Isak wishes he’d go back to sleeping.

“But yeah, I don’t want to bore you with all these things,” Isak shrugs and goes back to staring at his notebook. “I guess if you want to learn more, you can just go to the library or consult your favorite resource: Wikipedia, as the predictable and basic person you are.”

Even doesn’t react to his unnecessarily mean jabs, so Isak keeps talking. He’s grateful for his ability to just speak nonsense for days at a time and make it sound like it’s a deliberate stream of consciousness. He’s grateful for that ability because nothing he’s saying is making sense right now. He’s probably mixing up philosophers and references, and the only absent consciousness here is his own.

His mind is too busy trying to fight off the only words that have been playing in his head since last week, the ones Even uttered so shamelessly in front of kollektivet, so easily, the unspeakable ones, the maddening ones.

He wonders if Even regrets uttering them, if he’d like to take them back. Isak probably wouldn’t mind if Even asked. They were quite ridiculous. The least Isak could do was help restore their partnership up to that point and forget Even’s mild slip-up. He could do that for him. He really could.

“Anyway, to wrap up this long rant, Pride makes no sense if you really look at it from a socio-economic lens. As in it’s just a huge capitalist holiday disguised as social activism. And all these big corporations and businesses couldn’t care less that Sigve from East Oslo got bullied in middle school for being gay. They just want your money, and—”

Isak pauses again. Is Even smiling because he finds him ridiculous and is enjoying watching him fumble and trip over his own words? Can he read his thoughts? He hasn’t kissed him since they “made out” against the kollektiv’s blue door after Even said he’d wait for him. Even has been ecstatic and outrageous all week now, but he hasn’t kissed Isak in six days and 3 hours and 17 minutes and Isak can’t stand it anymore. He just needs to stop feeling so much. He just needs—

“What?!” Isak finally cracks. And he’s breathless and probably flushed from ear to ear. But he can’t just sit here and pretend that everything is fine when Even is looking at him like that. He can’t. He just—

Even reaches for him with one hand, his chin still propped on his other arm. And time stills again until Even’s thumb brushes against Isak’s cheek.

Time stills.
“I love you,” Even says like it’s the most evident thing. And Isak’s mind catches fire, “I do.”

Hearing it a second time hurts more.

It hurts more than Isak thought it would. Not that he hoped he’d get to hear the words again.

Still, it hurts. It feels like his insides have turned into paper and that they’re being crumpled by the very hand caressing his face so tenderly.

*Nobody loves me. Nobody’s ever loved me.*

It hurts. It hurts because nobody has ever said these words to him before and meant them. It just hurts.

The discomfort and utter devastation must show on Isak’s face because Even has now left his chair -- Isak must have blanked out for a few seconds; nobody can move that fast-- and is cupping his cheeks with both hands while towering over him, the table still separating their bodies.

“I really do,” Even says solemnly before leaning in and pressing his lips to Isak’s. Right there in the middle of the Kaffebrenneriet right by kollektivet, like it’s nothing, like this is nothing, like this is a thing they do every hour of every day, kiss in public spaces.

Isak kisses back. His body is conditioned to it by now. It’s just a kiss, just lips. But it drains him all the same. His head is tilted dramatically upward, nearly in a 90 degree angle with his throat exposed and vulnerable, to meet Even’s lips. It’s just a kiss, but it drains and empties him all the same. He’s waited too long for this kiss not to return it.

“You are loved,” Even whispers to him when he pulls back, a giant smile on his face. And Isak can’t help the loud squeak that escapes him when Even leans down again to press his lips to his neck.

Isak stomps the entire way back to kollektivet--livid and angry at Even for “acting on his hormones” and pulling such a stunt in public, and trying to ignore the gnawing feeling in his chest, the utter sadness and heartbreak--while Even follows closely behind, laughing and laughing and laughing.

Later that night, when Isak tries to go to sleep while Even works on some project in the living room at an ungodly hour because he’s “too horny to sleep next to you right now”, he finds three new words lining up to haunt and comfort him all the same.

‘You are loved.’

*Lies.*

*It’s the hormones.*

*Nobody loves me.*

“Can we talk?” Eskild says after knocking on Isak’s door, making Isak’s eyes go wide and words tumble out of his mouth.

“You don’t want me to come, don’t you? It’s okay if you don’t. I respect that. I just want to come support you, but I understand if you’re still angry and don’t want to see me on such a happy day for you. I don’t want to make you upset, so if it’s what you want, I won’t come. It’s okay. I really
understand. You don’t have to—"

“Isak, can you please stop talking?” Eskild interrupts his nervous rambling with a little smile. “That’s not what I want to talk to you about. I want you there. We already talked about this and you already apologized twenty thousand times. I’m fine.”

Isak squirms by his desk, embarrassed.

“Okay,” he mumbles. “Sorry. You started with “Can we talk” so I just assumed it was going to be one of those heavy conversations again.”

Eskild laughs. “Well, I can’t promise you that what I want to talk about isn’t heavy.”

“Hm. Okay?”

“It’s about Even,” Eskild says and it makes Isak’s chest falter and his thoughts go wild.

“What about Even?” he frowns.

“Now, forewarning: this is going to be a very uncomfortable conversation. And I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable, but I feel like we need to have the talk.”

Isak’s eyes widen. “Uh, what exactly are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about sex.”

“What the hell?” Isak scoffs in disbelief. “What even are you implying? Have you lost your mind?!”

“Are you having sex with Even?” Eskild asks calmly, ignoring Isak’s tantrum. “Or thinking about sleeping with Even? Which stage are you guys at?”

“Eskild!” Isak nearly shouts. “Just because you saw him kissing me downstairs once doesn’t mean we’re doing that! What the-”

“I’m going to interrupt your angry outburst before you say something extremely insensitive again and hurt my feelings just because you want to deflect things from yourself,” Eskild reasons.

“I- I wouldn’t.”

“I just want you to be safe and okay, alright? You two share a bed most nights and I’ve caught you kissing more than just that one time, for the record.”

“It’s because I can’t do that with anyone else! He’s just helping me out because of my condition. It doesn’t mean anything! And making out sometimes doesn’t mean that-”

“That you have sex. I know,” Eskild interrupts him. “I’m just telling you in case you’re thinking about having an experiment or whatever you two call what you do. I don’t know if you’ve had oral sex yet. But I hope you’re being safe. As for, uh, anal, I hope you don’t rush into it. I mean I know you aren’t. At least according to Even’s-”

“What?!” Isak interrupts him again. “You talked to Even about, about this stuff?!”

“No. I didn’t need to. I used Even’s laptop to google directions to this party I was going to and the tab that was open led me to certain discoveries. Now I wasn’t spying or anything. And I do feel bad for snooping around. But I just had to look out for you. Both of you.”
Isak’s stomach drops as he reads through Even’s search history, his eyes nearly bulging out of his head. He didn’t want to see but Eskild took a picture and all but forced him to look. He physically cringes at the visuals that flood his mind.

“I know this is really fucking uncomfortable, but I’d rather have this talk with you now than later after you get “caught up in the moment” and end up hurting all over.”

“I do not wish to be part of this conversation and you cannot force me to sit through it. Taking a picture of Even’s search history is a felony and you could get into legal trouble. Not only that but it’s also ethically wrong and I expected more from you, Eskild.”

“Deflecting by talking about my morals, now?”

“Eskild!” Isak snaps. He’s nearly heaving, his poker face failing him.

“I’m not trying to accuse you of anything. If consensual and pleasurable gay sex hasn’t crossed your mind, it seems that it has crossed Even’s. And I just want to make sure you’re equipped for the situation if it arises. I’m assuming you’re the second person in his searches because he’s always here around you. Unless it’s me he’s interested in, but I think the entire universe knows that I’m way past my “first time”. Anyway, I’m gonna send you some materials so you can study. You like to study and understand everything. So why not gay and anal sex? You know, for science maybe?”

Even enters his room just as things start becoming interesting in the 101 article that Eskild sent him, and it makes him nearly throw his laptop away in absolute panic.

“Hm. Were you watching porn?” Even laughs as he drops shopping bags on the floor.

“I was not!”

“That’s quite the extreme reaction to me entering your room. Were you buying something embarrassing online?”

“No, you just startled me. That’s all.”

“Okay.”

Isak turns around to assess the mess in his room.
“What did you buy this time?” he sighs.

“Guess,” Even smiles.

“I’m afraid I still don’t possess that power.”

Even laughs as he pulls out underwear from one of the shopping bags. Boxers and briefs and shorts.

Isak is mortified.

“What the hell?”

“I used up your underwear. It’s only fair for me to buy you replacement.”

“Even! You can’t buy me underwear!”

“Well, if you don’t want them, feel free to return them. I left the receipts in the bag,” Even shrugs.

“Also I’ll be a little hurt cause I made sure to get us matching pairs. The lady at the store said it was a thing.”

Isak pulls out his headphones and puts them on, blasting Led Zeppelin to drown out Even’s nonsense and to will away the flush on his face.

He keeps up the act, facing away from him until Even’s hands land on his shoulders, until Even’s bends over and places a kiss to the crook of his neck, making him squeak.

“Also wanted to say that I won’t sleep here tonight,” Even says when Isak removes his headphones, stunned.

“Uh, okay,” Isak mumbles.

An ugly thought suddenly sticks to his mind. Where does Even sleep when he’s not with him? What if those Google searches are about someone else? Isak has never expressed interest in doing any of that. What if this is for someone else.

“I don’t know if I can just sleep next to you any longer,” Even whispers against Isak’s skin before pressing another wet kiss to his neck.

Oh.

Even keeps kissing the skin there and Isak can’t function. “Even-”

“Do you know what you do to me?” Even nearly moans, his mouth right below his jaw. “You drive me crazy.”

“I-” Isak tries to turn around, to look at him, to memorize the look on his face as he says these words, these unspeakable and unthinkable words.

But Even moves away before Isak can touch him. “I’m sorry,” he blurts out. “I’m the fucking worst. I’m just- I’m sorry. I’m just gonna leave.”

.

Even leaves and Isak is feeling so hot that he can’t help but retreat to the shower to relieve himself. His mind is immediately flooded with images of Even. Just Even.
He’s so consumed by lust and want that he no longer cares that it’s Even’s face and voice he’s getting off to. He’s no longer ashamed. Shame does not exist when primal urges takes over. Biology trumps feelings of indecency and societal norms.

Isak touches himself under the shower, an activity he’s never purposely performed before, an activity he’s never enjoyed before. Isak knows about biology. He knows about biochemistry. He knows about sexual needs and urges and impulses. Isak knows. He reads and studies and acquires knowledge in most things. So he knows. But this particular act has always made his skin crawl because of the implications, because of the shame that follows, because of the self-hatred that ensues.

But he feels okay right now. He feels good. Because Even’s face in his mind is encouraging and overwhelming, and most of all kind and safe. Isak feels so safe that he doesn’t even avert his gaze from his own chest. He doesn’t hate it, the burn, the red splattered all over his upper body, right above his heart. It’s red now because he’s consumed with lust, with madness. It’s not purple the way it was when Erik made him feel like an abomination. No, it’s red, almost pink. He almost looks flushed. Just flushed.

Isak touches himself, well-aware that he won’t be able to live it down later when the high leaves him, later when all he has left is the pang and hurt inside his chest. But he can’t stop. He doesn’t want to. Not right now. Isak touches himself and gets braver. His fingers trailing down to where they’ve never ventured before.

He just wants to know what it feels like. He just wants to know if what they say in the books and the online forums is true. He just wants to educate himself.

It’s not comfortable. It’s not pleasurable. If anything, it’s painful and awkward and he doesn’t know why anyone would want anything up there. But then he pictures Even touching him like this, touching him right there there, seeing him this, panting and broken down, and suddenly it’s all over.

He makes a mess all over the shower wall and is left spazzing for a good minute before he can breathe again.

That night, the only face that keeps him company in his thoughts and dreams is his mother’s. She’s disappointed and angry and sad that Isak would do such a thing to himself. And frankly, Isak is too.

He doesn’t sleep.

Isak cannot look Even in the eyes after the shower incident. He can barely retort with something witty or participate in their banter. He becomes a jumble of nerves and awkwardness and instant irritation. He stares at Even’s fingers until his chest feels like it’s about to burst from the inside out. He flinches when Even tries to touch him. He begins hoping that Even will find excuses to sleep in his own home.

Even now maintains a safe distance between their bodies. He steals glances and looks guilty, hurt, concerned.

“What’s going on?” Even asks a couple of times before dropping it because all he’d get is ‘Nothing, why?’

Nothing.
I just put my fingers inside the most intimate part of my body while thinking of you. Nothing.

They’re walking to Julie’s apartment to pick up Even’s outfit for Pride—because “if I’m going, I might as well look the role!”—and Isak can no longer stand the tension between them.

They run into Erik as they round an unsuspecting corner, and Isak is relieved because it gives him something else to feel torn about, an outlet, a reason to finally lash out without having to feel awful about it.

He stands his ground as Erik approaches them, but his body betrays him. It recoils. It recoils because it remembers. One might think it’s the memory of the drowning in the pool or remnants of the violence that followed. But it isn’t. It’s shame. Isak’s hands fly to his chest just as Erik’s eyes land on it, remembering how it felt to have Erik see him.

Isak burns with it. The shame. Erik calling him names. How ugly Isak felt. How angry he was at Even for suggesting he was anything but ugly.

Isak’s body recoils and his shame only burns brighter when Even holds out his arm and steps in front of him as if to protect him, as if Isak needs his protection, as if he’s a fragile thing and not a weapon in and of himself.

“Haven’t I made myself clear last time?” Even speaks in a low voice Isak has grown to hate. It’s the voice Even uses when he suspects that Isak is hurting, the voice he uses to sound threatening. Isak hates this voice. He loves this voice.

Isak makes a mental note to ask Even about what supposedly happened ‘last time’.

“Listen, man. I’m not looking for trouble,” Erik starts. “I just wanted to tell Isak that-”

“Isak is not interested in listening to you right now,” Even continues, and it bothers Isak to no end. This little arrangement they’ve gotten themselves into. Isak standing behind while Even fights his battles for him because his words keep failing him.

“Actually, I am,” Isak chokes out with a cold stare and a deep frown as he steps in front of Even. His poker face won’t fail him in front of fucking Erik. He can break him any time he wants. He doesn’t need Even’s protection. “What the fuck do you want, Erik?”

“I, uh. I just wanted to say sorry.”

“Why?” Isak steps closer. “Is someone blackmailing you? Did someone get the security footage from the pool and threatened you with it? Did your agency find out? Or wait,” Isak snickers. “Did your daddy enroll you in some new therapy session that starts with seeking empty apologies? Did he say he won’t let you keep up with the stupid modeling gig if you don’t come apologize to me to avoid legal drama? I heard your father is against your aspirations. You should probably listen to him. If I were you, I’d-”

“I think you should leave,” Even tells Erik and interrupts Isak’s angry rant. “Just fuck off, yeah?”

Even is silent behind him. He looks disappointed, and Isak would care if he weren’t so livid.

“We need to talk,” he says as soon as they make it to Even’s room, his voice strained.

“I’m listening,” Even replies.
“You can’t do that anymore.” Isak finally turns around and he looks away immediately because Even’s pupils are blown out and he’s sweating from their short hike up the stairs. Isak can’t think.

“Can’t do what?”

“That. What you did just now. What you did last time with Helge. You need to stop doing that.”

“Telling people who hurt you to fuck off?”

“They didn’t hurt me,” Isak frowns.

“Not the point.” Even moves to touch him then stops himself when Isak flinches.

“It is the point, Even. I don’t need you to do things for me. I don’t need you or anyone for that matter, and I’m not about to start.”

“What is this really about?” Even cuts to the chase, moving to crowd Isak against the door, perhaps unknowingly.

Isak is ashamed that Even’s hard stare is making his pants feel tighter. It’s attractive. His body can’t deny it.

“What do you mean?” Isak stares hard right back, his gaze cold.

“You only become mean and throw tantrums when something’s been under your skin for a while. This isn’t even about Erik,” Even speaks very matter-of-factly. “What’s really going on?”

“What’s really going on?!” Isak scoffs. “What’s going on is that you keep doing this.”

“Doing what?” Even challenges him. “Caring about you? What’s wrong with caring about people that matter to you?”

“What’s wrong is that you keep looking at me like this and saying stupid shit that means nothing just because you can’t tell what’s real from what’s a fucking basic chemical imbalance and I just-”

Something shifts. Isak realizes that he misspoke almost immediately, for every muscle in Even’s body tenses.

“I don’t say stupid shit, Isak,” Even lets the words out as if he’s choking them out, his stare unwavering and his breathing frantic. He’s no longer calm. He’s no longer okay.

“You know what I meant, Even.”

“Yes, and it’s not stupid shit,” Even insists, moving closer until Isak’s back is against the bedroom door. “My feelings are not stupid shit. My feelings are NOT a fucking chemical imbalance.”

*Even’s feelings.* Isak doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t believe them. Even’s feelings. He could never believe them. They’re just feelings after all. They’re not truths. They’re just the byproduct of arbitrary chemical reactions. It’s just chemistry. It’s just momentary insanity. It’s not real.

Isak wants to defend himself, to explain that that’s what he meant by chemical imbalance, that he didn’t mean to bring Even’s bipolar into this. But he keeps his mouth shut, knowing that he’ll just end up hurting him further.

“They’re my feelings and you don’t have to return them. But they’re not stupid shit. They’re *my* feelings.” Even chokes out, his voice breaking in a way that’s just so unlike him, in a way that seems
so distant from how he was acting just a minute ago. It’s like a switch got flipped.

Isak watches him, too overcome with guilt and shock to chime in. Even sounds so honest and earnest and hurt that Isak is left heaving against his bedroom door. He suddenly feels jealous. He’s jealous because Even can afford to want so openly. To crave. To burst.

Isak wishes he could just want what he wants, crave what he craves. Instead he just yearns. Some might find the words synonymous. But they’re not. They could never be.

His yearning is endless, boundless. He just yearns. He’s yearned ever since he took his first breath. Isak just yearns. He doesn’t remember a time when he didn’t yearn.

“I’m sorry.” Isak mumbles when Even’s bruised stare gets too much. “I won’t say that again.”

Even doesn’t reply. He just keeps looking at Isak with this hurt expression, like he doesn’t know how to interpret Isak’s cold response. He looks disappointed, as though he thought his outburst would make Isak say nicer things, as though he hoped Isak would reassure him that one day he’ll return them. His feelings.

“I’m sorry,” Isak repeats, driving the knife deeper into Even’s heart. But then his hand moves of its own accord and lands on Even’s face, cupping his left cheek. Even instantly relaxes under his touch. “Even, I’m sorry.”

“I’m not stupid shit,” Even repeats like he needs Isak to confirm it, like he needs the verbal validation. “What I do. What I say. What I feel. It’s not a chemical imbalance. It’s real. I’m a real person.”

Isak pulls Even close and kisses him on the lips. He kisses him because Even being too raw and too vulnerable and Isak doesn’t know how else to reassure him. He’s never been good with comforting words.

Kissing Even has proven comforting in the past, so Isak resorts to it, to soothe him, to placate him. Kisses have always put out the meanest fires within them while igniting the wildest between them. So Isak kisses Even. Gently. Like the day at the beach when he stopped his tears.

Even kisses back, holding onto him with so much need, Isak will feel his fingertips and the guilt for days.

They kiss until Even’s lips stop quivering against his own.

“We should go,” Isak says when the silence stretches out for too long, their foreheads burning against one another.

“Yeah.”

They don’t talk about their little fight.

Even takes his new sewing machine with him to kollektivet -- something about last minute touches to his outfit. It’s more like an accessory, but it took him so much time to make that Isak considers it an outfit. It’s angel wings in the colors of the pansexual flag with actual synthetic feathers and meshes and layers of fabric.

It’s eclectic and very Even.
Even bought linens and tissues in different colors until he found the fabric he liked best. He cut through cardboard, measured tissue for hours at a time, and spent his nights sewing. He’s been working on it since Isak said he wanted to go.

Eskild is enamored when he sees the final product. “It’s so gorgeous, Even! Did you order it online?”

“He made it,” Isak chimes in casually with a bored voice and droopy eyes. He doesn’t know why he wants Eskild to know that Even spent time and effort making it. He just does. “He hasn’t slept this past week.”

“Are you serious?” Eskild gapes at him.

“Yup!” Even grins while Isak watches Eskild marvel at the quality. “My mom would have helped but she’s out of town this week, so I just figured I’d just do it myself.”

“Are you kidding? This is perfect! Did you do it by hand?”

“No, I used a sewing machine for some things. I found some cool tutorials on Youtube.”

Eskild spends a good ten minutes fawning over Even’s sewing machine, asking if he can borrow it one of these day, then interrogating him about how he was able to afford it. “This stuff is so expensive!”

Isak retracts to his room because he needs to breathe. Because an hour ago Even was proclaiming his so-called feelings in what looked like a mental breakdown, and right now he’s in his living room grinning about a freaking sewing machine.

Isak needs to breathe.

“Ready for tomorrow?” Even smiles softly, their earlier fight long forgotten. Isak wonders if Even is just acting like nothing happened, like he wasn’t shaking in his arms while they kissed against his bedroom door, or if he’s just over it.

Even keeps smiling, his fingers brushing strands of hair away from Isak’s face, and Isak doesn’t know what to do. They’re face to face, lying on their sides.

“It’s just another Saturday,” Isak shrugs.

“It’s just another Saturday. We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah we’ll be fine,” Isak echoes as sleep begins pulling at him. “Unless the sun is too hot. I hate that.”

“The sun,” Even repeats, like he’s just remembered something.

“Yeah, the sun.”

“Do you ever think about how sad the sun gets?” Even wakes him some time later.

“Hm?”
“You remind me of it. The sun.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The sun. It shines, you know?” Even muses.

“I heard that it does that sometimes,” Isak replies with a smile.

“Yes, but it also burns. You know? It’s constantly burning, not just objects in the vicinity but also itself. No one can get close to it without burning. And yet it makes days brighter and warmer. It makes people happier from afar. People love the sun when it’s not too close, but they never look at it with a naked eye. They squint and their eyes hurt when they try, so they put on shades, on smokescreens. They never see the sun for what it really is. And it must hurt the sun a lot. The sun must feel so lonely. Because it doesn’t know that it makes people happy and warm. Because all it sees is people squinting and burning. Because no one will look at it or get close to it. It makes me so sad, Isak. I hope you don’t feel like that.”

Isak is confused and overwhelmed. Even is rambling and comparing him to the sun at two in the morning. Who does that? He pretends to have fallen back asleep.

But he can’t.

“The boys are coming tomorrow,” Isak blurts out a moment later instead.

“How?”

“Mutta, Elias, Mikael, Adam, and Yousef. They’re all coming to the parade. They want to surprise you and apologize for the beach.”

There’s a pause. But Isak doesn’t regret telling him. He can’t stand the idea of Even feeling hurt and betrayed that he would plot this behind his back. Even who compares him to the freaking sun. Even who’s much more sensitive than he lets on.

“I can tell them to leave you alone,” Isak adds. “I can tell them to fuck off.”

“No. It’s okay,” says Even. “Thanks for telling me.”

“You’re welcome.”

Isak has been so focused on carrying out his mission that he didn’t stop to think about how he would actually feel walking down the streets of Oslo on such a day. He never stopped to think about how overwhelming everything would be. The music, the people, the colors, the movement, the energy, the happiness, the loneliness, the anxiety.

Isak cannot handle crowds because of his predicament. He’s in a thick jacket just in case, and he’s sweating and questioning his entire existence when a third person runs into him and nearly sends him toppling on the floor.

“Hold onto me,” Even says. “If you want. You can hold onto me if you want.”

He looks so breathtaking, Isak can’t even look at him. His quiff is styled dramatically, meandering in gravity-defying ways -- courtesy of one of Eskild’s friends -- with glitter sprinkled all over it. Eskild painted the pansexual colors on both of his cheeks, mirroring the wings on his back. He’s in a regular
white shirt and pants under that, but it only makes the wings more prominent. His features somehow look more pronounced, more dramatic. He looks taller, healthier, stronger, happier.

He looks like he *belongs*. He belongs right here on this day.

Isak, on the other hand, looks like he’s trying to disappear into thin air in his oversized jacket, his dark shades, and the black snapback dipping into his face.

Even looks proud while Isak looks ashamed.

“Uh, anyway. The boys talked to one of Eskild’s friends so they’ll be in one of the vans with the people dancing. They’ll invite you to come up, so just try to act surprised when you see them. I’m sure they won’t forgive me for ruining the surprise. But hey, whatever. They’ll get over it.” Isak rambles without looking at Even. “Anyway, I’ll skip right before the inflatable balloon with the unicorn because they’ll be two cars behind. I’ll just find a way to leave this commotion. Text me if you need anything. I’ll probably be at that tea place we went to last time if something happens. And don’t worry if you want to stay with the guys. I’ll just read a book and leave in about three hours if I don’t hear from you or Eskild. So like, don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine and—”

Isak pauses when Even’s hands cup his cheeks, forcing him to look up, forcing him to look, to want, to *yearn*.

*Fuck.*

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with?” Even asks in a sweet and considerate voice, their faces almost touching.

“I, uh, yeah.”

“I could just ditch too. If you want. We could just go home?”

“Don’t be silly,” Isak frowns, embarrassed, before pulling Even’s hands away. “You haven’t slept all of last week to make the wings. Just stick to the plan and we’ll be fine. Also, let me know if Adam says something dumb. I’ll come right back and burn his face off.”

Even laughs. “Okay.”

“Alright. I’ll see you soon then? I think I see the unicorn.”

“Yeah okay.”

They smile at one another. Isak lets himself smile. The music is loud and people are louder. But the moment stretches to only fit the two of them. In that moment, Isak only sees Even. Only hears Even.

Isak thinks he understands some of it now. *Pride.* He feels it. For him.

“What?” Even asks, probably because Isak just keeps smiling.

“You know what Aristotle said about Pride?” he asks. “How only those who are great can proclaim their greatness? That pride is only a virtue for those who are actually great?”

“Uh, I remember you saying that, yes.”

“Well, I hope you feel proud, Ev,” Isak says with a sincere smile. “I don’t think I know anyone who deserves to feel pride more than you do.”
He didn’t mean for his words to sound so heavy, so pathetic. But he means them. He means them so much.

He looks away because Even is- Well, Even is tearing up, his blue eyes glimmering and brimming with tears as if Isak’s words have rattled them. Isak should probably stop talking. But he pushes himself to say one more thing. Just one more.

*I’m not the sun. You are.***

“I’m not the sun, Even. You are.”

“Isak...”

“See you later!”

Isak turns around and sprints in the opposite direction before Even can place a word.

He walks until he’s sure that he’s lost him then stops around a corner behind a few American girls to catch his breath, to calm down and sort his thoughts.

He finds another corner to watch the rest of the parade and waits for Eskild and the boys’ respective fleets. He pulls out his phone to check the battery. It’s still charged. He would like to take some pictures if he can. Not for himself though. Julie would probably like some pictures. She’s heartbroken about missing the event because of work in the first place.

So Isak waits, feeling anxious and inadequate in his dark clothing among the colorful and gleeful crowd. Every time someone so much as makes eye contact with him, he cringes and wraps the jacket tighter around himself. Perhaps he should have gone with Even.

He waits.

Eskild’s group marches first. And Isak surprisingly finds himself smiling and cheering along despite their outfits which he would normally avert his gaze from. Eskild is in nothing but a shiny pair of pink shorts, but he looks like he’s having the time of his life. He looks grand. He looks beautiful and Isak wants nothing more for him.

He ends up pulling out his phone to film the moment. And Eskild spots him easily and blows him a few kisses which Isak returns reluctantly, embarrassed.

“Is that your little brother?” he hears someone ask Eskild.

“Yes,” Eskild says very matter-of-factly, as if it were true. It makes Isak’s chest ache. He misses Lea. He misses her and it leaves him devastated on an already devastating day.

Isak follows Eskild and his group for a bit then stops when the crowd gets too smothering. He stops and decides to wait for Even and the boys.

Isak wasn’t prepared. The sight knocks him out, kicks him in the guts.

He feels like a child in a happy home on Christmas day, like a festival goer watching his favorite artist perform live for the first time.
The adrenaline rush makes him lose touch with reality for a bit, leaves him disoriented, smiling wide with his face, but also his heart.

Even looks like a revelation on the deck of the dancing bus, his wings flapping proudly in the wind with every movement of his shoulder blades, his laughter echoing through the streets of Oslo.

He looks happy. He looks whole.

“I’m coming out. I want the world to know. Got to let it show.”

Diana Ross sings and Even performs, stands tall and proud, with a grin on his face and his best friends by his side. They’re all dressed in skimpy outfits, even Elias who looks mortified but still happy to oblige. Even, ironically, looks the least outrageous.

Isak guesses that their talk went well. But he’s too enamored by Even’s performance to entertain a full thought. He just watches him in awe. From afar. Like everyone else who’s stopped to admire Even right now.

Isak yearns. But he’s not alone yearning. Everyone around him is enraptured, taking photos and recording videos and waving at Even who just laughs and waves back like a child at a school play.

He spots Isak then, at last, and waves in his direction. A gesture that Isak returns a bit too eagerly with both arms flailing awkwardly like a teenage girl finally being noticed by her crush.

Even keeps waving at him with the widest of smiles until Isak reaches for his phone to capture and immortalize the moment. He takes several picture then realizes that his brain is taking snapshots too. He will never forget this moment. He just knows it.

He follows Even’s bus until he no longer can. He follows him through the crowd, careful not to brush against anyone until he no longer can, until it gets too crowded and Isak feels way too hot and too worn out.

Time stills for a bit. He feels dizzy.

Fuck.

What is he doing putting everyone in danger just because he wants to look at Even a bit longer? When did he even start running after the bus? Why does he feel like screaming?

Isak stops dead in his tracks and watches the bus get further and further away from him, Even’s smile escaping him, leaving him behind. The physical distance between them a cruel analogy for them.

Even is ahead of him. Even is waiting, but he’s ahead of him and the distance between them keeps stretching. Isak can run but what if he can’t catch up? What if he never catches up to Even? Even who googles things that Isak can’t even think about without bursting into flames. What if Even gets tired and bored of waiting?

His heart breaks. He doesn’t know what he’s doing here in this crowd right now with the very people he’s spent years desperately trying not to associate with.

Isak’s heart breaks because he’s dressed in black. The color of his heart. The color of his scars. And he doesn’t belong here. He will never belong here. He can’t stay here.

“Are you okay?” a blonde woman with the lesbian flag on her cheek asks him nicely, her hand on his shoulder. She looks older and her warmth instantly reminds him of Julie’s.
“I, I’m fine,” Isak replies.

“Are you here alone? Do you want to join us?” she says, pointing to another woman Isak guesses is her partner and three other people.

“No, I, I’m not here for that. I don’t- I’m not-”

*I'M NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I'M NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I'M NOT A HOMOSEXUAL. I'M NOT A HOMOSEXUAL.*

A small reassuring hand wraps around his own, and the caring nature of the touch makes him shudder in shock. “I was the girl in black clothes and shades ‘supporting my friends’ a few years ago,” the stranger says with an empathetic and knowing smile, as if she’s in on some secret. “You should walk with us. We like ‘allies’.”

Isak feels hollow and see-through. It hurts to feel this see-through, to watch his walls crumble in front of total strangers.

He walks with them in silence, feeling numb and dumb. He doesn’t even bother giving them his name or memorizing their faces. He just walks looking down and fighting the urge to cry or exhibit another irrational reaction. He walks with them and feels like he’s struck by lightning every time he catches sight of the woman and her partner holding hands.

They bump into another group a street later and Isak finds himself getting hugs from strangers covered in glitter. Everyone in the group gets a hug and a kiss on the cheek, and Isak is flabbergasted. He’s never been at the receiving end of so much gratuitous touching, so much free and uncalculated affection. He’s never felt this embedded, this normal, this accepted. These people don’t know a single thing about him but embrace him all the same. They just wrap their arms around him and embrace him like he’s one of their own.

“Do you have a husband?” a little boy he hasn’t even noticed asks to his right, his head cocked to the side.

He has blond hair and green eyes and doesn’t even reach Isak’s hips. He’s wearing a t-shirt that reads ‘Love Makes A Family’ in the colors of the rainbow.

“Huh?” Isak exclaims, mostly to himself before looking up to look for the child’s mother.

“Or do you have a wife? Daddy says people can have both,” the kid says, absently reaching for Isak’s hand. “Which one do you have?”

Isak has no idea how old he is. After Lea became a teenager, he’s become unable of telling children’s ages.

“Where is your mommy?” Isak asks, his arm swinging as the kid plays pulls at it.

“I don’t have a mommy. But I have two daddies.” He declares proudly, holding up three fingers in the air as if to demonstrate the number.

“Oh, uh. That’s nice,” Isak stammers.

“He loves interrogating strangers. Sorry about that,” a tall man then says out of nowhere with a warm smile on his face. Isak turns to his left to take him in. He looks like he’s in his forties. Isak deduces that he’s the boy’s father.
“Oh, it’s uh, it’s alright,” Isak mumbles timidly.

Another man with a rounder face carrying a little girl on his shoulders joins them and Isak watches as the two men join hands.

Isak stares at the couple’s clasped hands and finds himself yearning for one in his own.

“Don’t be sad,” the little kid says as if he can feel Isak’s anguish. Science suggests that children are sensitive to sadness in adults, that they can feel it even if they can’t understand it. “Why do you look sad?”

Isak is not sad. He’s devastated but he’s not sad.

He lifts his head then and starts watching the crowd around him. The crowd he dismissed earlier because it’s too colorful, too gleeful, too self-absorbed and vain. Too proud. Isak lifts his head and finally takes his surroundings in, finally lets the smiles, and laughter and joy fill him and ring through him.

Isak finally lets himself see the love, the happiness, the pride, the simplicity. He lets himself see the shy couples holding hands, the cheeky kids with two mommies and two daddies who want everyone to know, the drunk groups of friends, the proud grandparents, the reluctant siblings who were dragged here by proud parents who probably took a while to accept their child’s sexuality, the dancers, the pets, the tourists, the allies, the Eskilds, the Linns, the Evas, the Nooras, the Sanas, and the Evens. The Evens.

Isak finally opens his eyes and sees. And his chest feels too small for the havoc erupting inside of him. He walks and watches until it tears through him. Until he breaks.

Isak breaks.

He weeps silently. It’s too hot and too crowded and he can’t breathe. So he cries. He cries like he’s been cracked open and left leaking, wiping his tears with the free sleeve of his jacket.

He doesn’t weep because he’s sad. He weeps because he doesn’t know how to exteriorize the chaos in his mind without exploding, without the burning coming back, without his chest cracking in two. He doesn’t know what to do, so he weeps while a nameless child holds his hand through a hot Saturday afternoon.

Still, he smiles. It’s hard, but he smiles as he weeps. It feels like a scar he wasn’t aware of is healing inside of him.

It hurts but he smiles.

Isak feels Even before he sees him. And for a moment, he thinks that they got their bond back, for his chest instantly catches fire. His brain lights up. His heart soars.

He wants to run to him but he can’t. He’s too drained. So he just watches Even make his way out to him, run to him, his wings flapping in the wind, his hair curling. He looks ridiculous and it makes Isak smile.

“How can I not look?” the kid, Lukas, exclaims.

*How can I not look?* Isak wants to say. Everyone is looking.
Everyone.

Isak looks.

“You ran. That’s my thing,” Isak smiles, nervous when Even is finally in his face. He knows he looks like a mess.

“You cried. That’s my thing,” Even replies, a hand coming up to cup his cheek.

“Did not,” Isak denies despite Even brushing his tears right now. “It’s just really hot. The sun. I told you.”

“C’mere.”

Isak melts into Even’s strong arms right as they wrap around his back. He closes his eyes and hugs him tight, so tight.

Being right here with him, with all these people who refuse to be anything other than who they are, feels like taking his first full breath after years of suffocating, years of drowning.

“I’m sorry I left you alone.”

‘I don’t need you’. Maybe I do. Maybe it’s okay for me to need you. A little bit.

“Don’t let go,” Isak pleads against his neck, his eyes shut tight.

“I won’t.”

Isak wasn’t aware that attending the parade carried more obligations, more festivities. Eskild forces all of them to an after-party.

“If I’m going, you’re going!” Elias barks in his face, still in his tight yellow shorts and nothing but suspenders across his chest.

Isak laughs at the threat because he’s still riding his high, because Even’s fingers are still wrapped around his wrist, anchoring him, making him feel okay.

“I’m going to make you dance,” Even grins, raising his eyebrows in mischief.

“Like hell I’m gonna dance,” Isak rolls his eyes.

“You’re gonna fucking dance. I’m telling you.” Even insists as he puts his hands on Isak’s hips and pulls him closer.

“Even-” Isak protests, looking over Even’s shoulder to check who’s watching. “People are watching.”

“So what? Let them see,” Even smiles bright, too bright. “Let them see how beautiful we can be.”

Isak blushes, embarrassed by the memory, by his own words to Even at the beach when he comforted him with wet hot kisses.

“Dance with me,” Even whispers hotly into his ear before pressing a kiss to his cheek then pulling him off the wall again.
“Ugh!”

The song is atrocious. It’s one of those top 40 electronic music tracks with the same repeating beat. But Even sings along, smiling and lifting Isak’s arms.

There’s a fire in my soul. It’s the gasoline in you.
Make me burn out of control
There’s a fire in my mouth. Only you could put it out
Come on over put it out

So fitting. Isak brings his hands to his face to hide his second-hand embarrassment. But Even doesn’t care. He dances around him, sings for him, and makes him laugh.

Even laughs at Mutta’s outfit, and laughs with Yousef, and even offers a very detailed and graphic description of gay sex to Adam who’s asked a dumb question yet again. The wings are a prop but it truly feels like Even is floating, hovering above them. He’s so happy, Isak can’t help but let his shoulders down and smile right back.

“Hey, can I ask you a question?” Elias corners him while Even poses for a few selfies with Adam in the background.


“Uh, uhm, how do I say this,” Elias mumbles.

“That’s two questions already and you still haven’t said anything substantial.”

“Fine. Fucking hell,” Elias sighs, frustrated. “How long has Even been like this?”

“Like what?” Isak frowns, anger building up in his gut.

“Like that,” Elias points at Even who’s laughing out loud by the corner while Eskild presses kisses to his cheeks. “Like a ticking bomb.”

Isak’s face goes hot with rage. He will not let anyone ruin this day for Even. He won’t.

“Is he not allowed to be happy? He’s fine! Leave him alone,” Isak responds with a hard and unwavering stare. “Let him fucking breathe.”

Isak is on his third beer. He’s not very good with alcohol given his lack of experience, but the day has worn him out. He feels exhausted so he drinks. Even seems to be letting loose too, downing shots with Eskild’s friends and dancing with men and women Isak has never seen before just because they asked.

Isak is not jealous, the concept being foreign to him. He just feels a bit left out. Even could say no. Why isn’t he saying no. Besides, it’s not fair that Even can do these things with so many people when Isak is only limited to him.

Not that Isak wants to have many options. It just doesn’t feel fair that Even does.

Fuck. Isak feels dizzy.

He accepts a shot of something pink and sweet then crashes on a couch next to Linn who’s about to fall asleep.
“I wanna go home,” she laments.

Isak lets his head fall against the back of the couch. For a moment, he thinks he sees Helge around the corner of his eyes.

“I’m drunk,” he admits, huffing loudly. “I’m seeing ghosts.”

“Wanna finish my drink?” Linn suggests.

Isak finishes her drink, then walks around the massive house hosting the party in search of things to analyse, to understand. Helge is definitely here, he concludes. He catches sight of him again. But his heart doesn’t pick up. It doesn’t ache. Or it aches, but not because of him. Isak finds himself staring at Even for the most part, his drink attached to his bottom lip, yearning building up in his chest.

Yearning.

“Didn’t expect to see you here,” Helge appears by his side.

Isak doesn’t remember walking over to this wall. But here he is, leaning against it with a drink attached to his hand and with the grown version of the very boy who turned his life into hell five years ago.

Helge’s wearing a yellow shirt and dark jeans, and his hair is short, too short for anyone to run their hand through it and actually enjoy it. Helge is also shorter than him now, Isak notes. It feels weird thinking that this very body used to overpower and overwhelm his.

Isak decides that he hates him. He despises him.

“Why didn’t you expect to see me here? Cause you punched the fag out of me?” Isak responds casually, without looking at him, surprised by his own vile words, but not letting it show.

“Don’t say that word.” Helge winces.

“I don’t recall you having a problem using that word back then.”

“I- I’m sorry. I was in a bad place. I was going through a hard time and I-”

“You left me bleeding on the sidewalk. Forgive me if I’m not exactly interested in hearing about your sob story.”

“I was young!” Helge cries out in frustration. “I was-”

“No. I was young,” Isak replies calmly. The alcohol is making him strangely sleepy. He can almost picture himself shouting the words instead. But he lacks the energy. “I was thirteen. You were, what? Eighteen? Seventeen? You don’t get to use that excuse.”

It’s so strange having such a cathartic conversation in a completely monotone voice and with loud bass thudding in the background. It’s much more chaotic and loud in his mind. Much more hurtful. Isak is surprised the words don’t come out strained, that they flow with ease, as if they were discussing the weather, the sun.

“I’m sorry,” Helge utters dumbly, like he doesn’t know what else to say.

“I’m over it,” Isak shrugs.

“Are you?”
“He’s not. Far from it.”

“I don’t owe you answers,” Isak retorts.

“You don’t.”

Isak turns his attention back to Even and finds him staring right back across the room, with a deep frown creasing his forehead and hands curled in fists. He probably recognizes Helge. Isak shakes his head as if to tell Even to stand down.

“He’s quite something, that guy,” Helge says after noticing the object of Isak’s gaze.

“You go anywhere near him and I’ll break your jaw,” Isak blurts out.

The violence in his own words shocks him, yet again. But Helge only reminds him of concrete and broken noses and bruised ribs. So it shouldn’t be surprising that picturing him near Even is enticing violent reactions within him.

“I, what? I’m not gonna- I’m not gonna hurt your friend!” Helge protests, horrified by Isak’s brutal response.

“He’s not my friend. Friends don’t do what we do.”

God. Isak is drunk. He’s so drunk. Maybe Even should come and save him from this mess.

“Oh, so he’s your boyfriend?” Helge presses.

“No,” Isak shakes his head violently.

“No?”

“No. But it’s him I think about when I touch myself.” What.

Helge shifts, visibly uncomfortable, and Isak begins to wonder why Helge is here. If he’s a homosexual now or if he’s just here as an ‘ally’, for ‘work’. Isak likes it, however. That his words are making him uncomfortable.

“I started touching myself again recently. You know?” Isak slurs his words, leaning his head against the wall and turning to the side to stare at Helge’s face.

“Uh, okay…”

Helge downs a shot of something and Isak watches him. He’s not even handsome. He’s just a fist. He’s nothing but a fist that drove through his jaw.

Isak feels dizzy and out of control.

“You broke my jaw,” he says before reaching for Helge’s hand, Helge who begins to breathe hard. Isak brings the hand to his own jaw. “You broke it with this hand.”

“Isak-”

“And you broke my heart,” Isak continues, bringing Helge’s hand to his chest. “You broke my brain, too. I can’t even jerk off without feeling like I’m gonna die.”

I said I love you and you shattered me and left me bleeding on the sidewalk.
“I’m sorry,” Helge pleads, as if any of this matters to Isak, as if Isak is telling him this to get an apology. “There isn’t a day I don’t feel like shit about it. Not a single day, Isak.”

“You never even kissed me,” Isak chuckles mostly to himself. “Some days I felt like I would have been okay if you had just kissed me. Why didn’t you kiss me? Instead, you broke my jaw.”

Isak hates that he’s leaking like this. He sounds like Even. Why does he sound like Even?

“Tell me what to do and I’ll do it,” Helge offers.

“I want to burn you like you burned me.”

“What?”

Isak squeezes Helge’s hand and focuses on the darkness and hurt inside of him. He focuses hard like before, when he was trying to make all of this go away in his bedroom right after the burning started. Isak focuses hard and keeps focusing until Helge winces in pain, until his face contorts and reflects hurt, the hurt Isak is inflicting.

Isak looks down at their hands and sees Helge’s turning red.

Isak is burning him. And Helge isn’t pulling away. He isn’t protesting. Does he know that Isak can do this? Burn people just by touching their skin?

“Does it hurt?” Isak asks.

“Not nearly enough.”

“Maybe this will.”

Isak pulls him in by the shirt and kisses him. He closes his eyes and kisses Helge. He takes it, the kiss his thirteen year old self craved more than anything. He just takes it. His kiss. It’s his kiss. He’s earned it. It’s his kiss.

Helge’s hand meets his neck and Isak pushes him away instantly. He doesn’t want it. He doesn’t want him.

“What was that?” Helge blinks, shocked and confused. Isak wonders which part he’s referring to. The kiss or the burn.

“You’re not even good at it,” Isak observes.

“I have a boyfriend, Isak.”

Pft. Of course.

“When was that?”

When Isak pulls back to lean against the wall again, Even’s eyes are there to lock into his own. He looks like he’s just gotten his jaw broken. Like he’s just been left bleeding on the sidewalk. He looks devastated.

Isak peels himself off the wall and walks to him, leaving Helge behind, not even bothering to spare him a glance. He just walks because everything in him is telling him that he needs to walk, that he did something wrong that needs fixing even though he knows he hasn’t. He doesn’t owe Even a thing. They don’t owe each other anything. They’re nothing. Isak doesn’t need Even and he’s never
promised him a thing. But he walks to him. Because maybe he did. Maybe he does.

Even’s back is turned when Isak gets to him. His back is turned and cold and he’s talking to a group of people Isak doesn’t recognize.

Isak hovers behind him, silently asking for attention, forgetting that their odd bond no longer exists, that he has to use his words if he wants to get to Even now. For a moment, he becomes convinced that Even is angry with him, that he wants him to go away, that he doesn’t want to talk to him right now. Because Even is not turning around, because he’s not sensing and responding to Isak’s presence.

He’s about to leave him alone and go sit next to Linn again when Even’s hand silently slides into his own. Even reaches for him blindly without turning around or interrupting his conversation and just clasps their hands together. It feels like coming home. It feels like kicking off shoes after a long day and lying on the couch. It feels like home.

Isak doesn’t know what to do, so he stands there, waiting behind him, just waiting and holding Even’s hand right back while Even talks and laughs and talks about how he wishes there was another parade with no children where he could just walk naked and free.

Isak listens to Even ramble still standing behind, feeling comforted by the touch, by their palms pressed together, by Even not denying him this. He feels dizzy so he rests his head against Even’s shoulder blade.

It feels nice. Having someone to lean against when the room won’t stop spinning, when everything is too much, when the day is long and draining.

“Wanna go home?” Even asks, finally turning around to assess the situation.

“I didn’t get a dopamine kick from that,” Isak mumbles, letting his head rest against Even’s cheek because the room is still spinning.

“From what?” Even asks.

“I kissed him. Helge.”

“I saw that.”

“I didn’t get a dopamine kick from it,” Isak repeats. It feels like an apology.

“What about serotonin?” Even asks with a smile, to which Isak responds by shaking his head. “Oxytocin?”

“Not that either,” says Isak before blindly reaching for Even’s hand. He brings it to his own chest, on top of his heart. “My heartbeat was fine, too.”

“So a failed experiment?”

“I’d say inconclusive, not failed,” Isak shrugs.

“What were you hoping to conclude?”

Isak moves closer, so close that they’re now sharing the same breath, almost. His face grows hot and so does his blood.

“Why I only feel like this with you,” Isak confesses with Even’s hand on top of his now hammering
heart. A few seconds of closeness are enough to send his heart rate through the roof. “This is for you.”

“For me?”

“For you.”

“Who’s saying stupid shit now?” Even smiles, but it’s weak.

Isak gets it now. How hurtful it is to hear someone call one’s words ‘stupid shit’ when it’s taken everything to even say them. The weight of the day, of the world, suddenly comes crashing on his shoulders. How much more does he need to be cracked open today? He doesn’t want to deal with it. He doesn’t want to weep again. He doesn’t. So he pulls Even to his chest and hugs him.

“Wanna go home?”

“Yes.”

The ride back to Even’s apartment is long and bumpy. Isak wonders where they were and why he didn’t notice how far out from the city center the party was. Perhaps it was because they rode there in a van with ten other people who wouldn’t stop singing along to whatever was playing on the radio.

But it’s nice that the ride back home is taking so long. It’s nice because it’s just the two of them. Because it’s dark. And because it’s warm. Because Isak is still inebriated, so it’s okay for him to lean against Even’s shoulder and nuzzle his neck, to lock both arms around his body and silently ask for a kiss by tilting his head up.

“Need a dopamine kick?” Even jokes.

“No. Need you.”

Even kisses him with both hands cupping his face and and Isak feels numb and broken. Because Even’s kisses are sweet and hot and free. Because Isak knows deep in his heart that he can search the whole world and still never find a person to kiss him the way Even kisses him.

“I’m sorry about Helge,” he mumbles when they break apart at last, spit still connecting their mouths. “I don’t care about him.”

“The same way you don’t care about me?”

It’s a joke, but Isak knows that it isn’t. Even is hurting. He’s hurting because Isak keeps dismissing them, his feelings. The feelings Isak refuses to acknowledge because they will go away one day. Because they won’t last. Because they’re the results of their atoms reacting to one another. Because tomorrow one of the guys Even was dancing with might start having that same effect on him. Or it could be a girl. Who knows? Even has so many options.

And yet, it’s Isak he chooses to kiss in a tiny taxi on the way home. It’s Isak he chooses to hold hands with in crowded parties. It’s Isak he chooses. Right now, it’s Isak.

And shouldn’t that be enough? What is real, anyway? How does one define reality? How can one verify the veracity of ‘feelings’? Why does their ephemerality dismiss them completely? Why can’t ‘Even loving Isak’ be a truth right now, just because it might stop tomorrow? Why is truth tied to infinity? Why can’t a truth be true now, just now, right now in this moment, in this cab, in this
universe? Why isn’t it enough? Why is Isak tearing the one person who’s ever cared to say those words out loud to him just because no one else ever has?

Why can’t Even love him?

Even loves him.

He’s holding his face right now and he loves him.

“Iss?”

Isak pulls him in by the shirt and kisses him. It’s a wet and open-mouthed kiss. An unapologetic kiss. A rough yet tender kiss. Isak fists his hand in Even’s hair and pulls.

“Slow down,” Even pants into the kiss. “Isak-“

“I don’t want you to just sleep next to me tonight,” Isak blurts out, his face hot and red, his chest cracked open.

“What?”

The car stops then, with Even blinking at him in disbelief, his hair a mess, his mouth bitten and glistening. They pay and huddle out of the taxi into the night. The night that’s barely night because it’s summer.

Isak is nervous taking the stairs but Even isn’t. He surprisingly isn’t. They kiss in a dark corner until Isak’s intoxication becomes solely caused by Even, by his hands and his scent and his smile against his mouth.

Isak smiles too. Then when they trip and Even pulls him by the waist, Isak sits on his lap in the stairs two floors below his apartment and kisses him until his head hurts, until he feels himself sober up.

They’re a mess of tangled limbs and bodily fluids when the neighbor opens the door in a beige robe squinting and wondering out loud what the noises in the stairs are coming from. They run up, holding hands and muffling their giggles until they get to the door. The door. Isak’s heart hammers in his chest as he follows Even inside, his earlier request replaying in his head.

‘Don’t want you to just sleep next to me tonight’

It could be interpreted in a million different ways, but not when said with that voice, with that tone.

Isak doesn’t visually process the trip from the front door to the bedroom, their eyes shut, their lips locked, Even’s hands on Isak’s hips. It’s all a blur. A bout of passion. A byproduct of the sexual tension and frustration and want they’ve built up the past few weeks. It’s hazy and distant. Isak doesn’t recall their exact steps, their path to Even’s bed.

But he’s lying on his back now. And Even is between his legs. They’re kissing. Isak is in Even’s bed. Even is on top of him. They’re kissing. It’s frantic. No words are spoken. It’s just moans and groans and soft whines. Isak melts into the sheets before he regains control of his limbs and moves to straddle Even instead.

Even sits up too until they’re face to face, returning Isak’s heated and sloppy kisses tenderly until they’re nothing but soft kisses. Time stills and Isak doesn’t know how they went from biting each
other’s faces to kissing slow, so slow. The soft street lights shining through window are dancing on
to skin and Isak can’t tell where his own ends and where Even’s begins.

“I love kissing you like this the most,” Even whispers, one hand on Isak’s side and the other at the
back of his neck.

Isak lets Even cup his face in both hands and kiss him slow, tear him apart one peck at a time. Slow,
so slow. Isak sits there with his eyes closed, his breathing ragged, his mouth slack, his limbs numb.
He can’t even hold onto Even, for everything is too much. He sits there on his lap until Even pulls
back and asks “Is this okay?”

Isak nods, then his heart stops when Even takes his hands away from his face and brings them to the
hem of his own shirt then lifts it over his head.

Even tosses the shirt aside while Isak hyperventilates. He’s seen Even shirtless countless times
before. But tonight he feels ashamed and scared. Tonight he’s hard and sitting on Even’s lap, and
Even is calling the shots. Isak can’t think. His desire is all too consuming. And his body shakes with
it. It shakes and it shakes and it shakes and he thinks about the search history, about the things Even
wants to do, the things Isak might want to do, too.

“Relax,” Even hums before kissing Isak’s palm then his neck. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m not,” Isak lies.

“I would never hurt you. You know that, right?”

It’s like Even can read his mind, his deepest thoughts, his most shameful secrets.

*You couldn’t hurt me if you tried.*

It takes a lot of kissing to calm Isak’s racing heart, to bring him back. So much kissing. By the time
Isak reaches for the hem of his own shirt, Even’s mouth is red and bitten at the corners, and Isak
can’t wait to have it on his skin, on his heart.

“You’re so beautiful,” Even lies to him, right to his face. But Isak is too aroused and vulnerable to
care.

He lets Even kiss his burnt chest, his burning heart, and he moans like he’s never been touched. Isak
feels *touched*. In both the literal and figurative sense of the word. He’s *touched*.

“Does it hurt?” Even asks, careful.

“No. It’s just a lot.”

“Wanna stop?”

“No. God, no.” Isak replies immediately before pressing their lips together again.

It’s as though madness has taken over. Isak can’t take it, bearing this much want in his chest. He
needs more. So he takes more. He puts his hands in Even’s pants, right past their matching
underwear, holds him, then strokes. He strokes and chases the friction for his own pleasure,
unashamed, unbothered.

Even’s hands venture down Isak’s jeans by his lower back, and they cup him and knead the skin
there. Isak’s mind goes blank. He can’t think. No one has ever touched him there. It never occurred
to him that it would feel so good to be touched like this. But it’s Even. And Even cares so much. Even’s touch means so much. Even’s touch does so much. Isak is so embarrassed when his orgasm is ripped out of him, he hides his face in the crook of Even’s neck while riding out the remainder of the friction, the heat, the passion. He’s dizzy and disoriented as he tries to catch his breath, now on his back in bed. But Even doesn’t give him time. He gives him no time. He takes both of their pants off until they’re naked and bare, body and soul. And Isak doesn’t understand until he realizes that Even is still aroused, not having reached his release yet.

Oh.

Even is suddenly between Isak’s legs, tearing a condom with his teeth. And Isak can’t breathe. Oh my god. Oh god. Is this happening?

“I love you,” Even says before rolling the condom on Isak whose desire is swelling again, so fast, so damn fast. Even rolls the condom on Isak, not himself.

“Even, what are you doing?”

“I love you.”


Isak sees it as Even offers his body to him completely and unequivocally. Isak sees it as Even kisses his stunned mouth before lowering himself onto him, with no preparation, no second thoughts, no helping hand, and no wincing, not even once.

Isak feels it then. His heart shattering inside his chest for good. The entire world just crumbling at the feet of the very bed that’s felt like his home for weeks now. Everything crumbles. Everything hurts. Isak watches Even and realizes dumbly that his worst fear has always been with him, that it’s here with him in bed, hugging his waist and clinging to his frame. His worst fear, the truth he’s been preaching all along, the sad ironic truth he’s been fighting for all along.

It’s all chemicals. It’s not real. It’s momentary insanity. It’s stupid shit. It's a chemical imbalance.

He's been right all along.

Even doesn’t love him.

Even is in the middle of an episode.

- The next time Even says them, the words Isak has always hated but grown to secretly love these past few weeks, Isak commits them to memory. He brands them on his heart, on his wrists, on his skin, on his chest, because he knows he will never get to hear them again.
“Isak, I love you.”

Isak will never hear them again. Because he is Isak after all. Alone, cursed, and unlovable Isak with a big scar on his chest and an even uglier heart underneath.

He is Isak and Isak is not made for love.

Because some people yearn for love, but simply aren’t made for it, aren’t meant for it.

Isak may yearn. But he may never love.

And if in the midst of the chaos, all he can think of while staring up at Even’s loving and flushed face is ‘I love you, too’, then no one else needs to know.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: they didn't go all the way. they didn't sleep together.

EDIT 2: Isak is not going anywhere

tw: internalized homophobia, Isak saying and thinking stupid things

sorry i've been gone for a while. seasonal winter tough time has been kicking my butt. i hope some of u still care about these two.

thank u for the comments. ily sm!
Philosophy of Language

Chapter Summary

"I'm not going anywhere."
the end is here. Even goes through the motions. Isak is there for him in his own twisted way
tenderness. loving. caring. bickering. denial. firsts. tantrums. alter love.

Chapter Notes

*speaks into microphone in an empty room*
it's been 86 years. is anyone still here?
the end is near. the end is here.
ily <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hey you.”

Sonja’s warm voice fills the corners of the dark and cluttered room. It’s barely there. It’s her ‘Even is not okay’ voice.

Even had grown to hate it towards the end of their relationship. But he finds it comforting now -- to know that despite all the pain he’s put her through, she still has a voice that’s reserved for him, just him. He also finds it soothing because it’s not laden with pity or judgement or pain. His mother’s voice may be just as sweet, if not more, but it’s filled with pain and guilt when he’s feeling like this broken down.

He doesn’t reply. He knows that Sonja doesn’t expect him to.

She makes her way to the bed and sits next to where he’s curled around himself under the comforter.

“Brought my diffuser. Will make breathing easier,” she says in that gentle and quiet voice again, like she knows that he can’t handle any noise right now. “You can keep it until you feel better.”

Feeling better. Even wishes he won’t. He doesn’t deserve to. He’s in the self-loathing stage.

“Wanna talk?”

“No,” Even finally mutters.
“Okay.”

She stays. She keeps him “company” for several hours. Even can’t tell for how long for he kept dozing off. He finds her reading a book with her brows furrowed when he finally gets way too hot to bear the weight of the comforter on his face.

“Feeling hot?” she asks.

She stands up before hearing his answer and walks to the closet where she takes out one of the lighter covers. Even lies there while she replaces the heavy comforter.

“I could have done that myself,” he mumbles, his mind still a jumble from all the sleep and exhaustion.

“I know,” she shrugs.

“You can go home, you know?”

“Thank you for your permission,” she says with a flat smile.

“Whatever.” Even rolls his eyes before covering himself with the sheets again.

It’s silent for a moment before Sonja speaks again.

“Is it just me or is this much easier when I’m not your girlfriend?”

Even doesn’t reply. He knows he’s being awful, but he can’t exactly be anything else when he’s feeling this low. And maybe part of it true. He doesn’t feel half as guilty as when they were together.

*Together.*

His mind flashes to toned thighs around his waist, to wanting hands on his bare chest, to warm and wet lips opening up against his mouth, to starved skin soaking up all the touches it can get.

Even falls asleep thinking about how it felt to have Isak in his naked arms.

He falls asleep thinking about how it felt to break his heart.

The guilt he bears this time around is for Isak, and Isak alone.

.

When Even wakes up, Sonja is no longer there.

.

“It could have been worse.”

“It’s good that we caught it when we did.”

“It’s not a major episode. You got lucky.”

“You made the right decision coming in that morning.”

Even cringes every time the doctor repeats the euphemisms he knows his mom will spend the day reciting later.
“It wasn’t that bad.”

“It could have been worse.”

Even doesn’t think it could have been worse. Nothing could top that. Nothing.

“You should be very proud of yourself, Even,” the doctor says and it makes him grit his teeth.

He’s in a mood. In one of those sour moods that make one want to inflict pain on others to avoid drowning in one’s own.

“Do you hear that, Even?” His mom repeats. “You’re doing great. You caught it so early this time. It’s great—”

“I’m not doing fucking great,” Even hisses, unable of containing himself any longer.

Julie flinches, visibly surprised, as if she’s forgotten his foul moods when he’s down. How could she forget? His doctor, however, remains unphased under her thick glasses.

“I didn’t do shit. It was Isak who “caught it”. It wasn’t me,” Even continues because he’s not sure when he’ll have this much energy to speak his mind again. “If it weren’t for Isak’s obsession with over-analyzing every fucking thing I do, the house would probably be on fire right now and you know it.”

It should feel cathartic, but all Even feels is empty, irritated, and numb.

He leaves the doctor’s office well aware that his mother is probably filled with dread and embarrassment, but he can’t be bothered to care. He trudges along until he gets home and collapses in bed for the rest of the day.

. 

His phone wakes him out of a dreamless slumber. No thighs around his waist this time around.

Incoming call from ‘Isak <3<3<3<3’

Even is close to feeling something. Mostly guilt and shame.

He rejects the call and goes back to sleep.

He’ll change the display name tomorrow.

. 

Isak is there in the morning with broken up homemade cookies and wilting flowers. Julie sounds over the moon at the door as she greets him.

Even buries his face under the pillow. He decides that he’ll keep it there and pretend to be asleep. But something deep inside of him awakens and catches fire the moment Isak steps into the room, and he can’t help the gasp that leaves his mouth. He doesn’t even need to look up to know it’s Isak. He just knows it.
Perhaps their bond is still alive somewhere under all the brokenness.

“Eskild baked you cookies. I wouldn’t eat them if I were you.”

The detachment in Isak’s voice nearly moves Even. It may not be as sweet and careful as Sonja, but it fills him with just as much accidental comfort. Because it’s the same voice Isak has always used with him. It’s the same detached voice from before all of this.

There’s no nervousness, no pity, no disappointment, no fakeness. It’s just Isak’s voice.

“The flowers are from Linn. I think she forgot to water them last night, so now they look like shit,” Isak adds. “As for me, I brought you a book. An audiobook. I read that reading isn’t really a given when you’re depressed.”

The way Isak says the word ‘depressed’ is so dry that it cuts through him. It’s as though he’s speaking of a fever or some other minor physical ailment.

“It’s about a pretentious entrepreneur telling you how to succeed in Silicon Valley or something,” Isak muses, his feet shuffling around Even’s room as if he’s rearranging things. Even realizes sometime later that Isak is cleaning, picking things off the floor as he rambles purposefully. He’s secretly decluttering Even’s space, their space. “Obviously, it’s condescending self-absorbed garbage, but I read that listening to e-books can help block out negative thoughts, because it requires inherent and passive focus, which you’ll give it absentmindedly, like when you’re listening to music with lyrics and your brain tries to make out the words.”

Isak won’t shut up. It’s unbearable. It’s like he knows that Even is playing dead, so he’s doing his best to rile him up to get a reaction out of him.

Even will later realize that it’s exactly what Isak was doing, that Isak is always two steps ahead.

“Can you leave?” Even bites out harshly while Isak is vividly describing a random fact about a fallen CEO of some corrupt pharmaceutical company.

“I guess I can,” Isak replies calmly. “I mean I do have two functioning legs. Leaving is something that I can do. I do possess that ability. Why?”

Even doesn’t want to deal with Isak’s sassy replies or get into one of those quick-witted back-and-forth arguments with him because he doesn’t have the energy to even entertain a full thought right now.

“Just go home,” Even mumbles from under the duvet. “I don’t need you here.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you still here? Just leave me alone. I don’t need your pity.”

It’s rude. It’s mean. It’s unnecessary. Even knows it. But he doesn’t know how to navigate his negative emotions when they’re this intense, this big.

“I read about disagreeable moods. But I never thought I’d get to experience them firsthand,” Isak muses clinically, like he’s observing an isolated phenomenon, a wonderful occurrence that will further his knowledge, as if this is one of their stupid ‘experiments’.

Even groans into his pillow out loud. He wants to say worse things, meaner things, drive him away, wound him so irreversibly that he never comes back, but he knows that Isak is… Isak. And Isak
won’t bite. He just won’t. If anything he’ll just internalize Even’s attacks and make a point out of staying by his side.

“Anyway, would love to chat more but I’m afraid I have some engagements back at kollektivet,” Isak declares, once again surprising him.

Even hears him gathering his things around the room and is filled with relief, at last. Isak is leaving of his own accord. Even can close his eyes and breathe again.

But then it comes back in full force, that helpless feeling of warmth and longing and brokenness. Even feels Isak getting closer to his body, too close, until all he can feel is him, until Isak’s scent overwhelms his brain as he sits on the bed beside him.

It’s all too much. Even presses his eyes shut and holds his breath.

Memories from that night, on this bed, flood his brain. But Isak doesn’t let them go too far for he covers Even’s entire body with him own. He hugs him over the covers. Isak just hugs him.

It’s silent for a while. Even breathes through his nose and Isak runs his hands up and down his back, comforting him rather mechanically. They stay like that until Even’s breathing evens out.

“What the fuck did I do that night?” Even asks out of nowhere because he decides that he needs to know.

“Nothing,” Isak replies immediately, like he knows how important this is and how crucial his answer is.

“We were in bed until morning. I remember how it felt. It wasn’t nothing.”

“We didn’t go all the way,” Isak says, clearing his throat, the first sign that he’s affected by this whole situation. “I put a stop to it.”

“What does that even mean?!”

“There was no penetration,” Isak says flatly. “I didn’t penetrate you and you didn’t penetrate me.”

Even wishes the ceiling could fall apart and knock him out. “Jesus Christ!”

“It was an emotional day. It clouded both of our judgements. I recognized your symptoms in the middle of the act and talked you out of it. That’s all that happened.”

“So you’re telling me that you talked me out of sitting on your dick? Oh, thank you so much, Isak!” Even realizes he’s shaking with embarrassment and anger when the words leave his mouth. He’s on his back now and Isak is still holding him, still towering over him.

They look at each other for the longest second he’s had to live through.

“Don’t be crude,” Isak says, his voice cracking.

“You’re the one talking about penetration.”

Even realizes that Isak’s shortness of breath and flushed face are symptoms of nervousness, that his voice might be composed but that his body is betraying him. Isak is just as mortified. He just doesn’t have the luxury of feeling empty and hollow the way Even does right now.

“We weren’t in our right minds,” Isak whispers, holding Even’s gaze still. And it hurts. It stings. It’s
like Isak doesn’t even understand the stigma and sharp blades in his own words.

“No shit. I was fucking manic,” Even bites back, making Isak actually flinch, his expression hardening.

“Stop trying to hurt me with words, Even.”

“You first.”

They both breathe hard and fast. And how ridiculous they must look right now, Isak leaning over the bed to hold Even who’s under the covers up to his chin, both of them throwing daggers at the other without meaning to, but unable of leaving each other’s embrace.

“I’m not the best at using words and you know it.” Isak says it like it’s a confession.

And perhaps it is one, because Isak is the master of words after all. He’s the one with the superior vocabulary. He’s the one who knows how to qualify and describe any phenomenon at any time.

For Isak to admit his deficiency, his inability to use the words he knows to convey what he means could count as a confession. Maybe.

Even feels depleted by the time Isak takes his hand into his own and places it on his chest.

“What are you doing?” Even mutters, but he knows.

Isak’s heart is hammering in his chest. It’s beating so fast, Even would otherwise blush if he were able to feel things right now.

“I can’t breathe right now,” Isak says quietly, his voice not matching the urgency in the words or the beating of his heart. “I’m saying stupid shit because I can’t breathe right now.”

Maybe the Even from before all of this would be delighted at Isak showing him this much vulnerability, letting him feel his heartbeat, letting him see just how much his words and actions aren’t in sync.

But not right now. Even just wants to sleep right now.

“I’m tired,” he says. “You should go.”

“Okay.”

Even sleeps in one of Isak’s shirts.


Isak is there again the next day. And the day after that. And the day after that one, too.

Even makes peace with it, mostly because Isak keeps Julie entertained and he stops trying to talk to Even about the most random things. He’s there, but he doesn’t press. He doesn’t clean or try to declutter the way he did on the first day. He’s just there. Like he’s waiting for Even to need him.

Isak is waiting.

On the fourth day, however, Even wakes up with dread at the pit of his stomach upon seeing a notification light up his phone screen.
Drumset Delivery

Fuck!

He leaps out of bed with newfound energy fueled by panic and alarm, and navigates to his mailbox to finally take inventory of all his whimsical purchases. He types ‘drumset’ into the search bar and has a near meltdown when he remembers the price and circumstances of the order.

He dials the phone number at the bottom of the order and bites his nails through the dial tone.

“This order was cancelled two days ago. We sent a confirmation email to Isak Valtersen.”

Even hangs up.

Great.

Isak <3<3<3<3

You had no right to go through my email?

The drumset

oh
you put me as recipient. I got a notice of delivery 2 days ago to confirm i’d be home
Didn’t think you’d be too thrilled to realize you spent 3 month’s rent on buying me a drumset so i canceled it
Didn’t mean to violate your privacy

Even is mortified. Perhaps feeling nothing trumps mortification.

His doctor may have been right. It could have been worse, theoretically. He could have blacked out and forgotten everything he’s done while he was on a bit of a high.

But somehow Even finds himself yearning for that alternate reality. Remembering everything is so much worse.

Isak is quiet in his next visit. Eskild is there too, his high-pitched voice bouncing off the walls the same way Even’s must have a couple of weeks earlier. It’s like a breath of fresh air. Even is surprised when he realizes that it’s not making his skin crawl, that he can bear loud and high-pitched noises now without throwing a tantrum.

It’s also nice because Eskild gives mean hugs and he doesn’t pry much. He doesn’t ask Even how he’s doing or if he’s feeling better. He doesn’t treat him like something broken. He’s just there. He’s just Eskild.

Even catches Isak staring, looking nervous and worried, as if Eskild might say something out of line or divulge a secret that’s not supposed to see the light of day. Even is almost curious, almost.
Eskild is in the middle of another poem praising Elias’ abs when the numbness takes over Even. He just needs to know.

“Did Isak tell you?” he asks dryly.

“Huh?” Eskild’s eyes widen in surprise, looking a bit taken aback and nervous, clearly not expecting Even to just bring it up. The elephant in the room.

“What I did to him.”

The words feel like blades in his mouth. So sharp. Bitter. Hurtful.

Eskild’s expression changes to something soft and sad, and Even does his best to stay still when Eskild brings a hand to his shoulder.

“You didn’t do anything to him, Even.”

“I did. He trusted me and I just went ahead and traumatized him because my brain decided it was time to go off the rails.”

“You didn’t traumatize him. Isak is not some fragile flower. You of all people should know that by now.”

“I do, but still-”

“Is that why you’re being so hard on him?” Eskild interrupts, making Even’s world stop and tilt.

“You’re treating him like shit because you think you somehow traumatized him?”

He blinks. Is he being that obvious? Is he really treating Isak that badly?

“I don’t- I’m not-”

Eskild shakes his head. “It’s okay. We don’t have to talk about this stuff, hm? I’m sorry if I misspoke. Isak did specifically threaten to burn one of my hookups if I don’t behave today.”

Even tries to smile, but the muscles around his mouth won’t lift.

“How is he?” Even asks dumbly after a moment of silence. “Isak, I mean. How is he?”

“You see him every day,” Eskild retorts, surprised. “He’s here every day.”

Even remains silent, suddenly overwhelmed with shame. It’s true. Isak is here every day.

“But you don’t see him,” Eskild muses in realization, looking around the room to find Isak secretly looking at the two of them from the back of the kitchen. “You don’t even look at him.”

“I feel like shit every time I do,” Even confesses.

Eskild lets out a long exaggerated sigh and Even braces himself for the lecture and reprimanding tone.

“Take your time,” Eskild says with a smile instead. “He’ll wait for you.”

“How do you know?”

“You waited for him. He’ll wait for you. He’ll wait forever if he has to. He’s loyal like that, our
Even finds out that Isak has done more things for him while he was sleeping it off. He finds out -- through Jonas, of all people -- that the receptionist at their pool got in trouble for deleting the footage of Isak burning Erik under water at Even’s request. He also finds out that Isak took the blame for that once he found out.

“You didn’t have to do that.”

“Does anyone ever have to do anything?” Isak retorts nonchalantly from his loveseat, a book on ‘black swans’ on his lap.

“Spare me the philosophical bullshit.”

“You’re gonna need to stop abusing me verbally before you end up hurting my nonexistent feelings,” Isak snaps back.

“You took the blame for something I did. Why?” Even asks, ignoring him.

“I created the situation in the first place,” Isak shrugs. “If I hadn’t burned Erik, that footage wouldn’t have existed in the first place and you wouldn’t have felt the need to do what you did.”

The need to do what I did.

“I didn’t feel the need to do anything,” says Even. “I acted recklessly because I was on the verge of mania. Nothing to do with you as I’m sure you know. You, on the other hand, didn’t have to protect me.”

Lies. Even wonders why he’s lying to Isak’s face with so much composure, why he’s trying to convince him that he was out of his mind when he was just trying to protect Isak back then. Back then. Isak seemed so vulnerable and lost back then. And all Even wanted was to make sure he was okay.

“Quite a nice role reversal. Don’t you think?” Isak finally speaks.

Even sinks back into his chair. Their conversation makes no sense but it does all the same. Isak is protecting him the same way Even did him. It’s what they do. They protect each other at the expense of themselves then brush it off like it’s nothing.

And it kicks him in the stomach out of nowhere, the realization that the need to protect Isak is still very much there under his skin, under his pulse. It’s there, still. That violent need to keep him safe and make sure he’s okay. Despite everything, despite his mean jabs and harsh tone, it’s there. More alive than ever.

It just hurts when the thing he needs to protect Isak from is himself.

Isak leaves him alone for a couple of days after that.

“Alright. What do you call a person who’s afraid of Santa?” Julie’s voice finally breaks into the deafening silence.

“What?” Even and Isak interject at once, a glimpse of their long forgotten oneness.
The air gets thicker around the room, Isak’s gaze too heavy on his skin. Even burns with the simple admission and realization that he’s missed Isak these past two days, and he doesn’t know how to exteriorize it without undoing what he’s been working towards, being nicer, being less angry, less empty. The couch suddenly feels too small for Even’s limbs. He’d go back to bed if it weren’t for Julie and Isak all but forcing him to “hang out” in the living room.

Even looks away first.

“That’s not a thing,” Even mutters, trying to look disinterested but hoping that his looking away hasn’t wounded Isak.

“Says who?” Julie adds.

“I don’t know. But it’s not a thing,” says Even.

“It’s a thing if one person feels it,” Isak chimes in, and this time Even can’t help but meet his eyes.

They’re the same eyes. Still green. Still cold. Still warm. Still indecipherable. Even wants to reach out and shake him to see if they’d rattle, if he’d rattle. Isak who never rattles. Isak who’s still here, sitting at the other end of the couch and pretending to study -- who studies in the middle of July? Isak who stops by every day to babysit Even and teach him words he’ll never use as if to fill the void in his brain and stop madness from creeping in again.

Even wants to rattle him.

“Whatever,” Even mumbles harshly then looks away again, guilt seeping through him and settling in his bones.

Guilt is all he feels, all he’s felt since that day, since that night. But Isak doesn’t react. He doesn’t show any emotion. He’s just there every day to hover, to keep him mindless company, to share random facts in differential psychology and pretend that everything is fine. Nothing’s fine.

“Claus-trophobic!” Julie breaks the silence once again, this time with nervous enthusiasm and forced laughter.

“What?” Even frowns, confused.

“A person afraid of Santa! Claus-trophobic! Get it?”

It takes Even a full second to bring his palm over to his face.

“God! Mom...” he laments.

He doesn’t laugh. Normally he would. On a different day, this lame joke would send him in a fit of contagious giggles, but not today. Not right now. Right now, it’s hard to do most things.

He hears it then, soft and reserved laughter. The laugh of a person who doesn’t laugh often, but who laughs with their whole heart when they do.

Isak is laughing, giggling, caught off guard. And it’s the most entrancing sound and sight.

Julie and Even both watch him until the last giggle leaves him.

“Sorry,” Isak says as he clears his throat, a smile on his face still. “Just wasn’t expecting that. Sorry.”

The silence stretches for a while and Even finds himself wishing he wasn’t putting on a tough act,
wishing he could tell him that he shouldn’t apologize for laughing. That the fact that Even can’t laugh right now doesn’t mean Isak can’t laugh either. Isak is allowed to laugh.

“Don’t apologize for laughing, honey,” Julie speaks as if having read Even’s mind. “It was a terrible joke, but you can still laugh.”

Isak looks at Even, his eyes still green, still cold, still warm. He’s telling Even a thousand things with those eyes, but Even doesn’t speak their language.

Even almost blurts out the unthinkable. Almost bleeds right there and then on his couch right in front of his mother and his almost lover.

_I’m sorry. Forgive me. I miss you. Touch me. I need you._

They stare at each other until Even snaps out of it and speaks, finally contributing to the stupid game Isak and Julie have been playing for over thirty minutes now.

“What do you call someone who forces their presence on other people even when it’s not wanted?” Even bites, gauging for a change in Isak’s calm demeanor.


Julie bites her lower lip as if she’s anticipating the worst while Even stares back at Isak who doesn’t even flinch.

“No reason,” Even shrugs. “Just thought I’d take a stab at this word lover thing or whatever.”

“Logophile,” says Isak.

“Huh?”

“The word for someone who loves words. It’s logophile.”

Even feels hurt. He doesn’t know why, but everything Isak does hurts him.

“Yeah? And what’s the word for someone who enjoys watching another person experience failure, trouble, and humiliation and never takes a hint that maybe they should leave?”

“Even!” Julie’s voice sounds less warm than it did a few minutes prior. Even takes it as a sign that he’s crossed a line.

But Isak doesn’t budge. “Schadenfreude,” he nearly whispers.

“What?”

“The word for that is schadenfreude.”

“That’s not a thing,” says Even.

“It is. Google it if you want.”

Even is tempted to pull out his phone. But he knows that Isak is right. He knows that Isak could do this all day and all night. He knows that there’s no beating Isak at this game.

“I should go,” Isak says after Even fails to respond. “It’s getting late.”
“Oh, you should take some food with you back to kollektivet!” Julie jumps to her feet, relieved that the cold war between Isak and Even is about to go into ceasefire for the day.

Isak comes into Even’s room after assisting Julie with tupperware activities and the guilt comes back in full force, leaving him feeling vulnerable and raw sitting on his own bed.

Even wants to apologize for being awful, but he doesn’t know how to.

“What do you call someone who wants to apologize for being a dick, but who doesn’t know how to stop being a dick right now?” he tries.

Even is always overwhelmed with tenderness when Isak is in his room, by his bed. And he can finally see him, all of him right now, in skinny jeans and a black Ramones shirt that’s too big for him, his hair a mess of curls Even hasn’t run his hands through in far too long. Isak looks lovely.

He also looks big and safe towering over Even by the foot of the bed right now.

Even gasps when Isak’s hands come up to cup his face, his gaze warm and soft and kind.

“Someone who’s doing their best,” Isak says, and it takes Even a moment to realize that he’s answering his question. “You’re doing your best.”

Even would cry if he weren’t feeling so hollow and beaten inside. He would cry. He would cry for hours. He would cry for days. The simple words provide him with so much comfort, he feels tension leave his body instantly.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers into Isak’s hand, leaning into it and closing his eyes. He just wants to breathe.

“It’s okay,” Isak whispers right back, his thumbs caressing his cheeks, soothing him, reassuring him.

Even looks up when the guilt settles in his gut once again. He wants to ask Isak how he’s doing, how it feels to be alone with him in this room again, the very room where Even tried to make love to him just a few of weeks ago. He wants to ask, but he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t know how to ask for time.

“I missed you,” Even confesses at last. “These last couple of days, I missed you.”

Isak blushes. “I thought you needed space.”

“I did. I still do. I really do.”

“But you missed me,” Isak repeats like the words are making him happy, like they’re filling him with hope.

“But I missed you.”

Isak’s thumbs draw circles on his cheeks and Even lets his head fall against his stomach, shutting his eyes.

The moment stretches until his breathing evens out, until he feels safe.

“What do you call someone you’re probably cosmically bonded to?” Isak asks, making Even’s eyes blink open and his heart pick up in his chest.
“Cosmically?” Even repeats with a small smile, his face still cupped in Isak’s hands, Isak who’s standing between his legs now. “Like in space?”

“In space and time and other dimensions, yes.”

“I don’t know,” Even mumbles, looking down, suddenly feeling nervous and hopeful, something he hasn’t felt since Pride, since they took a cab together and Isak kissed him with so much abandon and need that they were both in tears by the time they pulled apart. “You call them your science partner? I don’t know. What do you call that person?”

Isak smiles as he shakes his head. “Even. I call him Even.”

Even almost asks Isak to stay the night. Almost. But he stops himself at the last minute because he dreads a mood switch in the morning. He’s accepting Isak’s tenderness now, but he’s not sure he will tomorrow.

And it’s too early to latch onto Isak like this. It’s way too early. He’s still resentful. He’s still angry with himself and with the universe. He still needs to process what happened. He still needs some time with his thoughts. Even still needs time.

Isak is gone, but the ghost of his touch lingers on his skin, in his mind. And later that night, he nearly aches with it, the need to touch him, to be near him, with him again.

Their bond is back.

Even wakes up with the odd realization cemented to the back of his head. Their bond is back, or at least a variation of it. It’s not as blinding as before, but it’s there. He knows it. The feeling is unmistakable. It’s keeping him warm. Isak is keeping him warm from across town. Their bond is back. He pulls out his phone and types.

Isak <333333
08:53

Is the bond back?

Took you long enough

Why didn’t you say anything?

I wasn’t sure if you felt it too

I didn’t up until last night. What about you?

1st time i came to see you after pride

What? That long?
I don’t know

Is that why you came to see me every day?
Because u needed to be around me?

No
Just in case you needed to be around me..

The first time it manifested i really needed to be near you
All that serotonin made me feel better
thought maybe it would help with your depression if i was around
Just physically around
I don’t know

You let me treat you like shit just in case i got a serotonin kick out of it?

You didn’t treat me like shit

You’re depressed
I’m not expecting anything else from you

You’re gonna need to work on your delivery

Does it bother you when i say that you’re depressed?

Of course it bothers me Isak
I’m fully aware of my depression
I dont need to be reminded every 2 seconds

Ok… i’m sorry
I won’t do that again
How are you feeling today?

I don’t know
A bit weird

Want me to come over?
Serotonin experiment?

No it’s ok
Mikael and Sonja are gonna be here

:) 
All your love interests

You mean all my babysitters

Sonja cares about you. She’s really nice
Uh?

I’ve grown to like her

How do you even know her

We’ve been chatting a bit lately
She’s nice

What?
Chatting about what?
Has she been giving you tips on how to deal with me when I’m being a piece of shit?

Among other things
She seems to think I’m her replacement

Wtf
Feel free to ignore her. I’m gonna have a word with her

No it’s actually nice talking to her

??
Who are you??

A very dedicated science partner :)

“He’s sweet,” says Sonja, her long fingers carding through Even’s hair as she braids it while he lays on her thighs on the couch. “Very cute and concerned. He was taking notes on an actual notebook at one point.”

“Isak? Isak was?”

“Yes, Isak.”

“Why?”

“Uh. I don’t know? Why are you asking me? Cause he cares about you, maybe?”

“What are you talking about?” Even scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest like an angry and ungrateful child. “Have you met him?”

“Yes, and he was very determined to get it right and be there for you. Very cute. I told him that you probably need space, but he said that he didn’t want you to think he was abandoning you.”

Even sighs. His heart tightens in his chest. Despite everything, Isak doesn’t want him to feel abandoned. He doesn’t want him to think that he’s overwhelmed or walking away.

This dumb boy.

“He thinks everything is a scientific experiment,” Even shrugs. “He was probably taking notes to add to all the lab reports he writes about me or some shit.”

“Dude, you sound like him,” Mikael finally speaks, his voice coated with exasperation. “You’re both so annoying.”
“What are you talking about?”

“This kid would go to war for you and you’re sitting here acting like a dumbass trying to find excuses for his behavior instead of just being with him.”

In another world, perhaps, these words would rattle Even in different ways. Mikael, his best friend, listening to him talk about a boy who’s been sharing his bed, a boy he’s professed his love to and gotten nothing in return, a boy who breaks and mends his heart like no one else ever has or ever could. His best friend, his prior home, Mikael, accepting him and giving him advice about a boy. Even is almost grateful for the impossible situation.

“He doesn’t want to be with me,” Even blurts out after a minute, trying to keep his eyes fixed on the ceiling when he feels Sonja’s fingers stop threading through his hair. It sounds sadder than it did in his head.

He doesn’t want to be with me. I know he doesn’t.

“How do you know?” Mikael asks.

“I just do.”

“Have you asked him?”

Even thinks about it. Has he? No, he hasn’t. But he’s professed his “love” more than once. He’s professed his love countless times. It keeps him up at night, the number of times he’s said those words to Isak when his mind was flailing about, floating high, unreachable, untamable. “I love you. Isak, I love you.” He must have sounded so unhinged. He must have scared him, so. He must have scared him even more so.

“He’s not interested,” Even breathes through his nose. “He hangs around me with me for science or whatever. He doesn’t want me like that.”

Sonja resumes gently stroking his hair. It’s so soothing. So so soothing. And what an absurd situation, his ex-girlfriend and his ex best friend mending his heart on his couch on a rainy afternoon. It’s so absurd.

“I like boys too, by the way,” Even says after a while.

Sonja chuckles first. Mikael joins her an awkward second later.

“We know. We were all there at Pride, remember?”

Even doesn’t remember Sonja being there. But he keeps it to himself.

“I was manic at Pride.”

“And?” Mikael interjects.

“And I know you think I do stupid shit when I’m on a high, but that part was real,” Even rambles, his chest suddenly feeling tight. “The part where I like boys. The part where I’m pansexual, I mean. That’s real. That part is real.”

It’s silent again after that, and Even’s thoughts are loud so loud.

“We know that, Even,” says Mikael.
“Oh, do you, now?”

His tone is reproachful. It’s bitter. Even realizes he’s still bitter.

“Of course we do. I wore spandex for you. Elias now has a Grindr account because a guy made him believe it was just a cool app to meet new people. Of course we know it’s real, Even.”


Even closes his eyes.

“Anyway, let’s go back to talking about your boy, Isak,” Sonja chimes in at last to break the tension. “Which one of you tops?”

“Sonja!” Mikael chokes on air.

“What?”

“God!” Even brings his arm to cover his eyes. He feels dizzy again. *I tried to impale myself on him.*

“What? Is this like something I shouldn’t ask? I’m just curious.”

Sonja isn’t curious. He’s watched her lecture people who ask insensitive questions countless times throughout the years. She’s trying to distract him, take his mind off of things, direct his annoyance towards herself.

“You’re the worst,” he sighs.

“Forgive me for assuming you have the sex part figured out with how in love you two are.”

“We’re not in love. Fuck! Are you even listening?”

“I am and you’re an idiot,” she says gently. “If you think that kid doesn’t care about you like you care about him, you’re an idiot.”


Even is an idiot. And it’s okay for him to be an idiot right now. He’s still feeling down. He has trouble leaving his bed the following day, the emptiness inside of him weighing him down, his limbs feeling heavier as though he’s carrying the weight of the world with him inside his head.

He’s locked inside head. He replays the events leading up to the night in bed with Isak incessantly. Memories of him standing on a dancing truck in the middle of Pride with no care in the world suddenly blind him. He’s overwhelmed with shame and worry because anyone could have seen him. He thought he was over feeling ashamed of who he is, but part of him still clings to that darkness, that ugliness. His mother’s friends could have been there among the curious bystanders. Mikael’s family could have been walking by. Hell, he’s been so emotionally manipulative with his friends that they all felt forced to attend Pride for him; that Sonja, the girl whose heart he’s broken and stomped on for years, somehow felt compelled to be there to support him only for him to forget; that Isak, the boy whose trauma and repression made him develop an unprecedented condition, felt the need to attend Pride for him.

He makes everyone do so much. And for what? Even is so unworthy. He’s so ashamed.

His skin is crawling with guilt and it feels as though his chest is being ripped apart under his shirt. He can’t breathe. He can’t stop his spiraling thoughts. He’s locked up in his head and it hurts. It just
hurts to be in this body, wearing this skin, bearing these scars. He can’t escape. His friends can keep him company, but in his brain he’s all alone. He’s all alone.

Even makes it through the day. He makes it through the following couple of days too, alone in the dark as he wished. He asked for his mother and for everyone else to leave him alone and they did. They just did. The thought of calling Isak and leveraging their “bond” crosses his mind, but he doesn’t succumb to it.

Isak, however, notices as soon as he crosses the door to his room later on the third night.

“You look like shit,” Isak says flatly, closing the door behind him and proceeding to take off his shoes and his jacket.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“I’m sorry I can’t look irresistible at all times, Isak.”

“Nothing to do with that. You know I’d still take you right here if you asked.”

Even throws the covers off of himself in disbelief. What.

“Huh?!” he sits up, frowning in confusion. Isak is there grinning proudly at him at the foot of the bed.

“Well, that got your attention.”

“Ugh!” Even groans before sinking back into bed.

“Would you like that? An endorphin kick? Some dopamine? Serotonin? A quick blowjob will do the trick, you know. Or a handjob, maybe?”

“Who the hell are you and what have you done to my Isak?!” Even groans again as he pushes the covers down to his chest before gasping at what he’s just said. My Isak.

Isak blinks as brief shock takes over his features. It only lasts a second, however, for a moment later he’s back to looking unphased and bored, his demeanor cold and composed as always. Even decides to look away and pull the covers back around himself, but Isak beats him to it by joining him in bed and wrapping himself around his body in the blink of an eye.

“Isak!” Even’s interjection sounds more like a whine than a groan now.

“Yes?”

Even’s breath catches in his throat upon seeing Isak this up close. They’re face to face, legs entwined, Isak’s strong arms around his waist, one hand around the back of his neck. Even can’t quite breathe. Isak looks beautiful in his arms. Always has, always will.

“I’m not in the mood for jokes.”

“Do I look like I’m joking, Ev?” Isak asks hotly against his cheek, the nickname and the whispering making Even shiver under his duvet.
He nearly cries out in relief when Isak presses closer until they’re chest to chest, Isak’s arms holding him so close he can barely breathe, his fingers playing with the hair on the nape of his neck. It’s soothing. His body is going pliant, but he tries to push him away. He has to.

“I don’t need this,” Even protests weakly. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Isak!”

“Even.”

Isak surprises him by leaning in and kissing his cheek, the tenderness making something hard shatter inside of him, like a piece of himself breaking apart from the rest. It leaves him baffled and defenseless.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Even breaks. He closes his eyes and whimpers, or maybe he sobs. He doesn’t know.

“Shh,” Isak whispers into his ear, holding him closer, impossibly closer. “It’s okay. It’s alright.”

Even latches onto him then. He hugs him back, holds him back, perhaps even harder, even closer. If Isak was breathing before this, he probably can’t now. Even buries his face in Isak’s neck and breathes him in. And how much he’s missed his scent, his warmth, his softness, the inane tenderness that pours out of him when he lets it.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Isak repeats until Even accepts it, surrenders to it. “I’m not leaving.”

“Being alone is nice when you need to think and clear your head, but it can be destructive when you’re dealing with things. Our brains are very powerful, and recursive thoughts can lead to chaos in your mind. Sometimes, you need to talk about it, cry it out, put some of those thoughts into words and exteriorize them. Otherwise, it’s like your teeth grinding on nothing and eroding themselves. Your brain can wear itself out. It can set itself on fire if you don’t let some of the steam out, if you don’t chew on something. And uh, you can, uh, you can lean on me for stuff like this. I’m your partner for these things. We’ve done far more embarrassing things to cope with what our brains subject us to. You can lean on your science partner to prevent brain erosion.”

“Brain erosion,” Even mumbles. “You sound like my shrink but with worse analogies.”

He’s sprawled on Isak’s chest, his chin over his collarbone, his arms around Isak’s body while Isak holds him close and plays with his hair.

“I sound like my shrink, then.”

Even tries to smile, but he can’t. He plays with the strings of Isak’s hoodie instead, while Isak gently cards his fingers through his hair. They stay in his bed for the longest time, just breathing and listening to the other breathe. Isak doesn’t say a word. He just waits. Isak waits.

“I feel like I’m suffocating,” Even lets out with a heavy sigh, shutting his eyes to come up with the words. “Every time I leave bed or stand on my legs, I feel like I’m carrying another body on my
back. Like. I don’t know. I feel like I’m carrying this other person, this other dude who’s clinging to my shoulders and wrapping his legs around my stomach. Just clinging. Like a Koala, you know? But less cute. And that guy won’t let go and he just whispers things in my ear as I try to go on about my day. Things like ‘you’re not worth shit’, ‘you’re a burden to everybody’, ‘nobody really loves you’, ‘you’re a failure’, ‘you’ll never be happy no matter what you do or how hard you try’, ‘you’ll always be sick in the head’, ‘you hurt everyone you care about’. Shit like that. And I’m trying to shut the guy up and ignore him, but somewhere along the way I just accept it and accept what he’s saying. I start believing him. And the loathing gets too much, so I just stop trying to carry him around. I just go to bed and lie down instead because I’m tired. Because even if he doesn’t leave me alone, at least I’m lying down in bed and I can just close my eyes. And if I manage to fall asleep I do my best not to wake up, because if I do then he’s there again. He’s always there with me sitting cross-legged on top of my chest in the morning when I open my eyes, staring down at me. And then I realize that that guy is me. The dead weight is me and he won’t leave me alone. He’s with me in my head, but it’s so heavy that it manifests physically too. My thoughts won’t leave me alone. And it sucks because in my head I’m all alone. I can’t escape him. He’s always there with me. And I just. I don’t know. I suck at analogies too. I guess.”

Isak doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t interject with some philosophical saying. He doesn’t quote Aristotle or Kant or Hume or Rousseau or Plato or Sartre. He doesn’t talk about chemicals and hormones and neurotransmitters. He just listens and strokes Even’s hair.

“You’re not gonna say anything?” Even asks when the silence stretches out for too long. “Or let me guess, you find it absurd. You think I’m talking out of my ass. You probably think—”

“I feel that way, too,” says Isak. “Not always, but I do. It’s not absurd.”

Even clings to Isak and Isak clings to him.

They cling to one another. They sleep.

Even wakes up feeling warm and well-rested in ways he hasn’t in a while, with Isak’s arms around his stomach, chin hooked over his shoulder. Isak is spooning him.

Isak is spooning him. It feels surreal.

Even doesn’t reject it. He doesn’t move. He stays there in his arms, feeling warm and well-rested.

When he comes to again, Isak is straddling him, both thighs either side of Even’s stomach, his hands rubbing Even’s chest in tiny gentle circles. It’s soothing. It’s also confusing.

“What are you doing?” Even asks, his voice groggy and deep.

“Sitting on your chest.”

“Why the hell?”

“Heard some other dude likes to claim this spot when you wake up in the morning. And I’m quite possessive. I’m sure you’ve heard.”

Is Isak flirting? It sounds like he’s flirting.

“I know you don’t straddle a lot of guys, but that’s not my chest you’re sitting on, Iss.”
“Ugh, shut up,” Isak orders, but it’s playful. He’s smiling.

Even tries to smile back, but then Isak slides down his legs, making himself comfortable right above Even’s knees, his hands wandering lower down his abdomen before stopping right over his crotch. Even gasps.

“What are you doing?” he warns.

“Did you know that your body can produce dehydroepiandrosterone on-demand sometimes?”

“Huh?”

“DHEA,” Isak continues, his fingers circling the waistband of Even’s sweatpants with nervousness rivaling his confident tone. “It does wonders for moods. It has good antidepressant effects.”

“Isak, can you stop sounding like some American infomercial.”

“Okay,” Isak whispers now, just as he pushes his hand into Even’s pants, cupping him over his underwear like he does this every day. Even feels overwhelmed, but mostly ashamed. He hasn’t showered in days.

“Have you lost your mind?” he shrieks, his breath shortening, his pulse soaring.

“I want to make you feel good. Help you release some DHEA, some endorphins. Will you let me? Is this alright?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because you haven’t left your bed in days and I think this could help.”

“You realize that this is insulting, right? You realize that sex doesn’t magically make depression go away? You realize that I have zero sex drive and that-’” Even stops himself when he feels his body finally reacting to Isak’s endeavors.

“You talk too much.”

“I talk too much?! Me?!”

“Your penis is erect. I will take care of it. You will relish in that oxytocin and serotonin and all the endorphins, feel good for three seconds which is better than zero, then you’ll feel so disgusting that you’ll finally take a shower. After that you’ll make me eggs because I miss that and because sexual climax triggers food cravings. Also because I can’t cook for shit and cause Julie is out after I kindly asked her to leave me alone with you. Now, will you let me do my job?”

Even’s mouth hangs open for a good minute until he can put two words together.

“It’s not your job! Are you- Isak, are you for real right now?”

“You want my hand or my mouth?” Isak asks curtly and Even notices that he won’t even look him in the eyes. Isak sounds confident and unphased, but his hands are almost trembling.

“Isak,” Even says his name with the same tenderness he once bore for him so openly. “Isak, look at me.” He says again, this time gently reaching for his wrist. “Hey.”

“Let me help you!” Isak sounds frustrated, but mostly with himself, like he knows deep down that Even can tell he’s not ready, he’s too nervous.
“I don’t want to release endorphins right now.”

“Even, your penis is erect!”

“God! Can you stop saying it like that?!” Even bursts, and it makes Isak let out a nervous chuckle. Even eventually laughs too. He can’t remember the last time he’s laughed.

“Sure. Your intromittent organ is in an excited state, then.” Isak smiles.

“I can’t with you!” Even shoves him with a smile, throwing his head backwards.

“My membrum virile is perpendicular.”

“My membrum virile? My membrum virile?! Are you making shit up right now?”

“Nope. Look it up.”

Even sighs. Isak is still on his lap, his hand still trying to align with his words. Isak looks scared and determined at once, torn between making Even feel good and succumbing to his own internal shame.

Even wants to help him. He wants Isak to be able to accept his sexual urges without feeling the need to coat it with scientific lexicon. He wants Isak to be able to say “Even, you’re hard and I want to make you come.” But until then, Even will follow his rules and use his weird phrases. Until then.

“My membrum virile will be fine. It’ll come down on its own, Isak. Never lasts when I’m still feeling like shit.”

“But we can just use this to make you feel better.” Isak blinks at him, sounding genuine, like he’s thought about this a lot.

“There are other things that can make me feel better.”

“Like what?”

“Bodily fluid exchange via Labia Oris?” Even suggests and blushes a bit at the fact that he’s remembered the entire scientific name for-

“You want to make out?”

“Can we?”

“You want to?” Isak asks like he’s surprised. Why does he look so surprised that Even wants to kiss him.

“Yes?”

“Why are we having a conversation in questions?”

“I don’t know. Why are we?” Even replies.

“Does the first person who doesn’t answer with a question lose?”

“Lose what?”

“It was a rhetorical question,” Isak rolls his eyes, and Even becomes painfully aware of his hand still cupping him under his sweats.
“You just lost.”

“Fuck off.” Isak pushes himself up on Even’s legs and lets go, at last.

“No, you fuck off.”

“Right now?”

Even surprises himself by surging forward to a sitting position and grasping both of Isak’s wrists. They’re face to face. Isak is sitting on his lap and Even is dizzy. He’s so dizzy.

“You lose,” is the last thing Even hears before Isak cups his face with his restrained hands and kisses him on the mouth.

Isak kisses him and Even shivers with the realization that he truly believed he would never get to feel this again. This. Whatever this is. This blankness. This emptiness that swallows him whole every time Isak shows him tenderness, shows him gentleness. This emptiness that takes over his own. That mutes his worries, and his demons, and his sadness.

This emptiness.

Even wouldn’t give it back for the world.

It takes Isak pulling back ever so slightly for Even to realize that he hasn’t kissed him back yet.

“Forgive me. My mind went blank.”

“Hm?”

Even pulls him in, this time throwing an arm around Isak’s waist to hold him close, and bringing a hand to his soft face to deepen their kisses.

Their kisses. They’re so soft, so sweet, so hungry.

Isak grinds down on him and Even pulls him down to bed where they roll around just kissing, and touching, and whimpering.

Even feels oddly touch-starved with Isak’s hands and mouth on him. He feels depraved because he’s been refusing touches and human contact ever since he crashed. So every touch feels electric. He feels over-sensitive, so he whimpers and moans into Isak’s mouth and shivers when he realizes that Isak is whimpering too.

They must look like lovers finally getting to quench a mutual desire that’s been burning for far too long. Because who makes such noises just from kissing and touching?

Just kissing. They kiss with their whole bodies until Even freezes, his muscles contracting, his breathing turning into hard panting. But Isak doesn’t stop kissing him, doesn’t stop running his hands up and down his body.

Even doesn’t understand what’s happening until whiteness takes over, until every muscle in his body freezes. Then silence.

Deafening silence.

Oh. Did I just-
“Your membrum virile is no longer perpendicular,” Isak says flatly, still catching his breath on the other side of his bed. “And I didn’t even have to touch you.”

“God!” Even groans, closing his eyes and letting Isak’s laughter fill up his chest.

“You’re welcome.”

“And you’re unbearable!”

“I think you meant to say ‘best science partner ever’.”

“No,” Even mutters, his limbs finally coming back to him as he pulls Isak towards him again, a hand on his cheek. He’s warm. He’s blushing. He’s cracking jokes, but the usual flush on his face is back. Isak is all but melting in his arms. “I meant to say thank you. So thank you.”

Even can’t help himself. He kisses him again. And it’s bittersweet this time because Isak is flustered. He’s flustered and no longer on a mission. What does this kiss mean? Even can hear his thoughts creeping back over the serotonin and short-lived bliss.

“Uh, you’re welcome,” Isak stammers, flustered and looking away, his face almost as red as it used to be when they first met. He pushes himself to a sitting position, running a hand through his hair and face. “It’s no problem. No big deal at all. I told you.”

“Okay.”

“Yeah, okay,” Isak repeats nervously, throwing the covers off of himself. “Uh, you should go shower now. I think you need it.”

“Piss off.”

“Yes, I’ll do that after you make me food. Eggs, preferably.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Shut up.”

“Now you’re verbally abusing me. Everything is back to normal.” Even smiles, finding it hard to care that there’s a mess in his pants with this amount of endorphins in his system.

“Ugh.”

Isak eats his eggs then heads for the door.

“You can stay,” Even says, surprised to realize that he means it this time.

“I have things to do today.”

“Okay.”

“But before I leave,” Isak pauses, one hand squeezing the door like he needs courage to say his next words. “Before I leave, I wanted to say something.”

“Okay.”
“Uhm. You can stop being mean to me now.”

“Huh?” Even’s brows furrow.

“You can stop pushing me away and stuff now. I get it. You don’t have to do this anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The stuff you said to me before all of this. Those things you said at Pride and the week leading up to that, and that, uh, that night. What you tried to do and those words that you said. I’m not- I won’t hold that against you. I know that you didn’t mean your words and your actions. You can take them back now if you want. You don’t have to keep pushing me away. I get it.”

What.

“I know that you don’t love me,” Isak says bitterly, as if the word ‘love’ has just burned his tongue, his eyes fixed on the ground. “And frankly, I’m glad. I’m so glad. I’m so relieved.”

Oh.

It feels like a stab to the chest after a rather nice morning.

“We can just go back to being Isak and Even. Even and Isak. It doesn’t have to be complicated and emotional and weird.”

Complicated and emotional and weird. If Even had a dating profile, he would have edited his bio to these words.

“We can just be us again,” Isak says, lifting his eyes at last. “We can forget about all of that.”

And there’s something there in his eyes that’s very rarely there. There’s doubt, nervousness, uncertainty, hope? Even doesn’t speak their language, hasn’t mastered Isak’s language yet. He doesn’t know what those wet doe eyes mean. He doesn’t know what Isak is trying to do breaking him right here on his doorstep again. He doesn’t know why Isak is looking at him like that, what he’s asking of him, if there’s hidden meaning in his words. Even doesn’t know and he hasn’t mustered up enough energy to try and find out. Even doesn’t know.

“Okay.” Even mumbles at last, his voice sounding as empty as Isak’s usually does.

And Isak looks lost and rattled for a minute. He looks rattled. Even wishes he could capture it.

“Okay?” Isak blinks.

“Yeah okay.” Even swallows. “It’s cool.”

“Cool?”

“Yeah, it doesn’t have to be awkward anymore. You’re right. I’m glad you’re willing to forget the stuff I said.”

Isak doesn’t reply right away. He looks taken aback, as though he’d expected Even to fight back, to say those words again, to defend his feelings again.

Even doesn’t want to. He’s too tired.

“Thank you, Isak. Really, thank you.”
“Uh, I- You’re welcome.”

“And don’t worry. I’ll never say stupid shit like that again. I’ll keep up with my meds, I promise.”

.

Even isn’t sure why it felt like he broke Isak’s heart right back that morning. But that feeling doesn’t leave him. It just won’t.

He tries to test his theory, the very poorly formulated and weak theory that perhaps Isak was wishing for a different outcome to that conversation. Perhaps.

But Isak is back to his old self the next day, with the same cold stare and mechanical gestures, the same sharp words and bored tone. Isak is back with his high walls and calculated contributions.

He lies on Even’s chest in the morning. He nods his head and says ‘at the count of three’ before kissing him senseless, like they’re about to press a button or conduct some elaborate scientific experiment when it’s just making out in bed at the same time every day.

Isak overwhelms him with hot kisses that take the emptiness away then leave him even emptier to brave the day. But something is no longer there. The vulnerability and hope aren’t there anymore. Isak looks like he’s just quit his job and is fulfilling his duty for the last two weeks he’s obligated to stay until they find his replacement.

Something shuts down in Isak’s green eyes. Something shuts down and Even doesn’t know how to speak his language, so he doesn’t ask. He leaves him be.

It’s just them. Isak and Even. Even and Isak. Without the complications and emotions and weirdness, until Even begins to feel better, lighter, safer. Until he goes back to feeling like himself.

“We’re gonna have to stop soon,” Isak tells him one morning in the kitchen in two of Even’s mismatched socks.

“Stop what?”

“This.” Isak gestures between them.

“This?”

“You’re starting to feel better. You don’t need the serotonin anymore.”

Even leans back against the kitchen counter, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Isak, do you perhaps think that you’ve cured my depression? Because that’s not how it works.”

“You know that that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“I mean that we need to stop before the weirdness comes back. We had a goal before and I don’t want these chemicals to start clouding your judgement again.”

They’re back to hurting each other. Even seems to have missed the ‘memo’.

“My judgement is fine, Isak. I won’t jump on your dick. Don’t worry.”
“Jesus Christ!” Isak groans then heads for the room to grab his things, as if Even’s choice of words was his cue.

“What?”

“Fuck you. That’s what!” Isak glares at him, his face red, so red, before trutting to the doorway.

“Right here? Right now?”

Isak slams the door behind him.

Even angrily makes it back to his room and lets himself fall on his bed. He can’t recall the last time he felt this riled up and let himself show it.

“No Isak today?” his mother’s warm voice fills up the room. She’s standing under his door frame with a kind look on her face. She’s been walking on eggshells lately, leaving them alone every time Isak visits.

“We had a fight,” Even admits, feeling guilty. “I think I said mean things again.”

She makes her way to the bed and plops down next to him, her kind hand coming up to his hair.

“I’m sure it wasn’t that bad,” she says.

“I don’t know why I keep doing this. But he’s just- He’s driving me crazy!”

“You hate that word, honey,” Julie says, wincing at the word ‘crazy’.

“Mom, I’m serious.”

“So am I.” She smiles, carding her fingers through his hair. “You need to be patient with him. You know that.”

“I know that. It’s just. I don’t know, but sometimes I feel like I have no idea what he’s saying. I mean, he’s so good at twisting words and going on these elaborate rants that it always leaves me feeling so so stupid. I don’t know what to do to understand him better. Maybe I’m just too dumb.”

His mom is still smiling above him, still playing with his hair.

“Remember when we watched that obscure Chinese movie last year that one day I had a terrible day at work?” says Julie.

“Hm?” Even tries to recall. “Oh, I think I do. Why?”

“It didn’t have any subtitles and we didn’t understand anything. Remember?”

“Yeah,” Even chuckles, finally remembering. “Yeah, I do. That was a terrible idea but the cinematography was too good to just not watch it.”

“It was, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. But why are you bringing this up?”

“Did you feel stupid for not understanding what they were saying?”
“Uhm, no?” Even furrows his brows, failing to grasp the meaning behind the throwback.

“Why not?”

“Uh, cause I don’t speak Mandarin and there weren’t any subtitles?”

“Exactly!” Julie exclaims, looking proud of herself.

“What is your point? Are you saying that Isak is speaking Mandarin?”

“No, I’m saying that you’re trying to watch a foreign movie in a language you don’t understand without subtitles. I’m saying that you don’t speak his language.”

Even blinks. It’s absurd, but it makes him think.

“You don’t understand what Isak is trying to say because it’s in a different language from your own. But it’s his language. It’s the way he copes. And you of all people should be able to understand that, honey. No?”

Even lets her words sink in. *It’s his language.*

“But how do we communicate if we’re just speaking different languages then?” he asks. “I can’t just learn Mandarin because I want to watch a beautiful film.”

“But you could get subtitles. No?” she offers with a smile, as if it’s the most evident thing in the world.

“You’re almost worse than I am at metaphors” He smiles back.

“What can I say? It’s not in our genes.” She kisses his forehead and stands back up. “But I’m sure you’ll figure it out. You always do,” she says before handing him a book.

“What is this?”

The cover reads ‘Falling In Love’ by Francesco Alberoni. *Explores the phenomenon of romantic love, describes its forms and stages, and discusses how love dies when it fails to establish new value sets.*

Even sits up, confused. “Why are you giving me this?”

“Isak left it behind. He was reading it,” she says with a smile.

“Huh? Why would Isak read this?”

Julie smiles and her eyes shine with emotion and pride he hasn’t seen in a while. She brings a hand to his cheek.

“What?” he smiles back, feeling suddenly flustered.

“I think he’s trying to learn your language, baby,” she says, stroking his face.

Even reads the book cover and its short description again. It makes no sense. He scoffs, but deep down, he’s panicking.

“That makes no sense. He’s probably just curious or he ran out of books to read or something.” Even shakes his head. “I bet it’s one of those books that deconstruct emotions and break them down into
predictable cause and effect relationships. It’s probably what he uses to rationalize stupid human emotions like ‘love’. I mean, it’s Isak we’re talking about.”

He chuckles nervously at the end, although he has no idea why he’s chuckling. There’s nothing funny about this.

When he looks up, his mother is smiling still, her thumb stroking his cheek still. She looks endeared, like she knows something that he doesn’t.

“What?”

“It’s almost like the entire world knows that Isak is in love with you, except Isak and you.”

Even can’t go on about his day. It makes no sense. Isak is not in love with him. Isak barely tolerates him. Why is everyone convinced of such an absurd thing? Have they met Isak? Is this one of Isak’s most recent ploys? Is he manipulating people into thinking that he bears feelings for Even? But why would he do that? What is Isak up to? Why is he doing this? What is he doing for people to think that he has feelings for Even?

Iss <3<3<3<3<3

Didn’t mean to slam the door and leave like that yesterday
It was childish of me
I’m reading some Natsume Soseki and realizing it now

Is that anime?

NO! Ugh
He’s a super famous Japanese author
Do you even read

You know very well that i dont

Whatever
My point is i need to be better at not slamming doors
Only children and animals fail to control their impulses like that

And mentally ill people i guess

Even…

Jk
And im sorry too btw
Sorry for talking about your membrum virile in my kitchen

Wtf

It’s cool if u wanna stop our scientific experiments
I have enough serotonin to last me for DAYS
from all the face sucking we’ve been doing
Oops sorry. Labia oris sucking
I hate you

<3

Wanna go for a walk?

Are you going to be an asshole again?

No. i promise

Ok then

Also look. A philosophy meme :’)

Im shocked that you understand this meme

I changed my mind
I will be an asshole again because disrespecting my philosophy knowledge

Shut up

“So you’re watching anime now, huh?” Even muses nervously. They’re in a random park by the river.

It’s the first time Even has initiated a physical activity since Pride. Isak has been the one forcing him to take walks when he didn’t feel like it so far.

“I already told you that I’m reading a freaking Japanese novel!”

“Freaking. That’s a cute word. New addition to your vocabulary?” Even teases him. It’s nice to be able to come up with these jabs and deliver them so effortlessly. It’s nice that Isak doesn’t win every tongue twister now.

“Where is all this sass coming from?” Isak scoffs. “I am baffled! Who are you and what have you done to my Even?!”

Your Even.

Isak stops and blushes instantly. Even smiles to himself.

“What do you mean? I’m right here.”

“Shut up. It just slipped.” Isak rolls his eyes and shoves him before resuming to walk ahead of him.

“You know what else just slips?” Even runs lightly to catch up.
“I swear to god I’m about to shove you into this body of water!”

“Body of water,” Even bursts out laughing. “It’s like you want me to make fun of your speech.”

“Ugh!”

Isak walks faster.

“I’m joking. Don’t be mad,” Even pouts, smiling now.

“I’m not mad.”

“Okay. Then slow down and tell me more about this Sasuke guy.”

“It’s not Sasuke! What the fuck! His name was Natsume Soseki.”

“Was? Did he change his name?”

“No. He’s just dead.”

“Oh.”

“He died like a decade ago. He’s from the Meiji period.”

“That literally rings zero bells for me. Sorry Iss.”

“You’re insufferable.” Isak rolls his eyes again.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been keeping up with my literature homework. Been too busy trying to catch up with the biology requirements of this partnership.”

“Forget it. I’m not telling you shit,” Isak says before he starts jogging away.

Actually jogging. Even feels as though he’s stepped into a parallel universe.

“What are you doing?!” he calls out after Isak.

“I’m running! You’re in a shit physical form and you can’t talk out of your ass when you’re focusing on running. So I’m running.”

“It’s August,” Isak states flatly after they catch their breath on a random bench.

“It is,” says Even.

“Soon, it’s going to be September.”

“That’s how months work I think. Yes.” Even teases.

“You’ve been stealing my lines all day. I can’t do this anymore.”

“How are they your lines?” Even laughs.

“I’m the one with the sassy replies in this relationship.”

“In this scientific partnership, you mean.”
Even turns to look at Isak to take his reaction in. He’s speaking his language. Isak smiles and nods.

“Anyway, as I was saying, next month is September.”

“Yes, why is this a thing we’re discussing right now?” Even asks because a sense of dread is starting to build at the pit of his stomach.

“School starts in September,” says Isak.

“Sometimes it starts in August or in October.”

“My school starts in September.”

“Your school?”

Even stops walking to look at Isak again. He looks guilty, nervous, worried.

“My school in Trondheim,” says Isak.

Oh.

“Oh,” is all that Even manages to let out.

“School year is starting. Doctor Carlsen needs me there the first week of September.”

“You got in? You got admitted?!” Even blinks in disbelief.

“I did.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

“It didn’t feel important,” Isak shrugs.

“What?! Isak, this is huge! You got in. You got admitted without taking your secondary exams. You just got in!” Even exclaims, elated in an odd but warm way. He feels happy, proud even. He feels proud of Isak.

“I didn’t want to burden you or take away from you. I don’t know. It didn’t feel important—”

Even surges forward and takes Isak into his arms. He holds him until Isak holds him back.

“I’m so proud of you.”

“You are?” Isak mumbles into his hair.

“What?” Even pulls back. “Of course I am.”

“But I’m going to Trondheim.”

It dawns upon Even then. Oh, right. Isak is leaving. The plan was to leave together, but Even is so far behind, so much farther behind because his mind decided to press pause on a hot July afternoon.

“So what?” Even smiles. He forces himself to smile. “Why are you sad? You’re moving to Trondheim. That’s awesome!”

“Right.”
“We need to throw you the biggest party before you leave.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.” Elias nearly shouts.

“Come on, man. Don’t be mean,” says Adam.

“Mean?! I’m the one that’s mean? Even is out here telling Isak that he’ll throw him a party instead of saying he’ll go with him and I’m the mean one?”

“Why does Even have to go with him? Why can’t Isak just stay?” says Mutta.

“Because Isak is a genius and his genius brain is needed in Trondheim,” says Mikael.

“Does Oslo not need genius brains? I’m sure he can just stay,” Mutta replies.

“He wants to move away to forget or something,” says Adam. “Right? Cause everyone treated him like shit all his life here or something.”

“That’s not true. We didn’t treat him like shit,” says Elias. “He’s all over my Instagram feed.”

“Everybody is all over your Instagram feed, Elias,” Yousef finally chimes in, laughing.

“You know what? I don’t need this negativity in my life.”

“And you know what?” Even finally breaks his silence, standing up from the couch where they’ve all huddled. “Neither do I. You all need to leave.”

“It can’t be an intervention if we leave,” says Mikael.

“This isn’t an intervention. I don’t need this. Isak is moving to Trondheim and I’m staying here cause I have no idea what I’m doing with my life. That’s all there is to this. There’s nothing to discuss besides the fact that you all need to get your smelly feet out of my house.”

The boys all look at him in disbelief until he starts to fill up with guilt.

“What?”

Elias stands first and nearly smothers him with a hug. Mutta, Mikael, Adam, and Yousef join in next until Even is all but squished.

“Stop it!” Even laughs while the boys press stupid kisses to his face.

“We missed you, man,” says Elias. “We missed your moody tantrums.”

“What tantrums? How dare you?”

“We missed you, the no-filter, no bullshit you,” says Adam.

“I think you might use a filter actually, Adam.” Even retorts with a grin.

“No, but for real.” Yousef stops him by the door later. “I hope you know that whatever is going on, wherever you are in your mind, you don’t need to pretend to be anything other than just that. Whatever is going on, you can lay it on us. We’re not going anywhere. You’ll never be alone again.”
“Bro, this is so fucking cheesy.” Adam whines behind them.

“Shut up, Adam!”

Even laughs until his apartment empties out. And it’s not forced or calculated. It’s just laughter. Even feels home among his friends for the first time in a long time.

Even spends the following few days reading about Natsume Soseki and eventually caving in and buying ‘Botchan’, one of his most renown novels.

It starts out as a project to get “subtitles” for Isak’s language, but it ends up being so much more. Even sees himself in Botchan’s loneliness and alienation, in the struggle between values and morality. He finds himself oddly invested in this odd novel and can’t quite put it down. He reads more about the author himself and tries to find other connecting threads, other things he can use to understand Isak better.

“You’re reading Natsume Soseki? Is Isak forcing you to?” Mutta asks when he notices the book on his nightstand.

“No. Why does everyone just assume that Isak forces me to do things?”

“I don’t know but Japanese novels from the Meiji era seem a bit out of character for you.”

“Am I the only one who doesn’t know anything about the Meiji era?” Even questions while Mutta laughs.

“No. I just like that stuff.”

“Since when?”

“Since last year, I think? I got into Japanese culture and literature and stuff after one night binge-watching youtube videos about self-improvement or whatever.”

Even sits on his bed and blinks at Mutta. He realizes that the previous year has been a blur. He has no recollection of the last time he talked to Mutta about Mutta.

“I had no idea,” Even admits.

“I’m going to Japan next year. Been saving for it.”

“That’s amazing! Wow.”

“Yeah, I’m super excited.” Mutta smiles genuinely. “I guess we haven’t been talking much lately but yeah. It’s something that makes me happy. I can give you other book recommendations if you want. I’m sure you’d love Osamu Dazai.”

What was supposed to be a Fifa night turns into a long night of just talking and catching up with one of his best friends. He’s missed him, Even realizes. He’s missed them all. He should do this with each one of them individually, just catch up. A lot can happen in a year. Even has been so focused on his own demons that he forgot that people exist and feel just as intensely as he does.

It feels nice, just catching up.
“You could always just follow him to Trondheim, you know?” Mutta says while Even does the dishes in the kitchen.

“That’s absurd,” Even scoffs.

“There’s that film school that you like there. No?”

“I have no credentials and no portfolio and I didn’t even apply. Remember?”

“I’m just saying.”

“I’m not going to uproot my life for a guy who refers to me as his science partner.”

The statement doesn’t feel fair. He did once promise Isak that he would go anywhere with him. But would Isak care if he breaks that promise? Did it even mean anything to him? Probably not.

“You know what’s beautiful about Japanese literature from those older eras?” Mutta interrupts his spiraling thoughts.

“What?”

“It’s almost like it’s in a different language, even if it’s translated to English or Norwegian.”

“What do you mean?”

“Natsume Soseki is very known for this myth that has no traceable origin and that westerners are now using to romanticize the Japanese language,” says Mutta.

“What does that even mean?”

“When he was an English teacher, one of his students once translated the English expression “I love you” to the literal equivalent in Japanese. Natsume Soseki saw that and made a weird revision to the translation. Instead of ‘I love you’, he suggested ‘the moon is beautiful’, as in what you would say to your lover sitting on a bench and staring at a full moon and feeling everything but without having to spell those words. And when asked why, he said that Japanese people never use those words, “I love you”, that it’s not in their culture, that it’s not a comfortable thing for them and that the literal translation would never work in real life.”

Even blushes. He’s not sure why. He just does.

*I’m not very Japanese, I guess.*

“Sounds like bullshit,” says Even.

“Might be. As I said, there’s no proof he actually said this, and the urban legend started in the 70s. Also, I guess you could say it’s the same thing for us in Norway as well. We don’t really go around saying ‘I love you’ unless it’s like this huge thing. Same thing in a lot of other cultures.”

Even resumes doing the dishes, feeling a bit self-conscious. He wonders if Mutta witnessed him overwhelming Isak with the “I love you”s during or before Pride.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“I don’t know,” Mutta shrugs. “You seem interested in Natsume Soseki. And this is a very famous
anecdote that anyone who’s read his books or knows about him would know.”

“Uh, okay.”

“Just saying.”

Iss <3<3<3<3<3<3<3

Wanna go swimming?  
It’s nice out  
It’s been a while

Pool?

Beach?

Which one?

I’ll pick you up

Even knew that his hunger for Isak was nearly uncontainable. He knew that he was burning with the need to put his hands on him, but that he didn’t know how to initiate it while “trying to learn Isak’s language” and respect his boundaries. He knew that his hands itched and that his heart tripped over itself at the mere thought of Isak. Even knew this.

And he still somehow picked swimming as a platonic activity. Swimming! Wet, naked, bodies, exposed.

Isak surprises him by taking off his shirt with no hesitation, whatsoever. He just takes it off with little regard to the scar on his chest. And Even wonders how long it took him to get to this point. He wonders what happened during the weeks he was unattainable and Isak had to do this on his own, to do this for himself.

“You look hot,” says Even because, it’s true.

“Shut up.”

“You look like a snack.”

Isak chases Even down to the edge until they both jump into the water with laughter bubbling in their chests. Even can’t tell who pushed or pulled whom. But it doesn’t matter. They’re in the water, together.

There are a few people around them, a few drunk high schoolers clinging to the illusion of eternal summer, a few older people just as drunk, just as disillusioned, just as euphoric.

And then there’s them. Isak and Even. Even and Isak. With no emotions, or complications, or weirdness.

Even pulls Isak closer to his chest by wrapping an arm around his waist under water, and he feels Isak flinch and his body harden instinctively at the touch.

“It’s just me,” Even reassures him, bringing one hand to Isak’s face to push his wet hair off his forehead. “Just me. Your science partner.”
Even gets it now. He gets it when Isak relaxes in his arms and lets out a deep breath Even hadn’t noticed he was holding. He gets it now, the importance of language, the importance of choosing words that make the other feel safe and cared for.

“It’s just us. Just me. Hm?” he repeats.

“Just you,” Isak echoes, bringing a tentative hand to Even’s face, prodding.

“Just me. Even.”

“My Even.”

Even’s heart skips a beat. It does. He’s so sweet. So vulnerable. So unsure, but so sweet.

“Your Even,” Even confirms, his hand coming up to cover Isak’s. Yours. Your Even. “Just me. Just us.”

Isak pulls Even closer and kisses him on the lips, leaving him disheveled, his mind going blank once again, just blank from all the fire in his chest.

Even kisses back, just as passionately, just as softly, following Isak’s rhythm, following what he feels comfortable with in the moment. He pushes when Isak pulls, and pull when Isak pushes. He kneads skin when Isak moans into his mouth and lets Isak do the kneading when he pulls back. Even just follows. Even gives and only takes when Isak gives back.

“We’re making out,” Isak pants when they finally take a second to breathe, foreheads pressed together, eyes still closed.

“Fluid exchange via labia oris. Yeah.” Even replies, still trying to come down from his high.

“No, fuck that.” Isak shakes his head. “We’re kissing. We’re making out. We’re making at the beach like two horny guys.”

Even pulls back and laughs, not because he thinks Isak is being ridiculous but becomes he finds him endearing. It’s endearing. But when he takes him in, he realizes that Isak is dead serious, that this is colossal for him. Isak is speaking Even’s language.

His heart pinches a bit.

“We’re making out.” Even says, cupping Isak’s face. “I’m horny. You’re horny. And we’re making out at the beach.”

“Not because I need an endorphin kick to function well, but because I want to. I just want to.”

Even nods and laughs into the kiss Isak plants on his face next.

“Kiss me,” Isak demands.

Even kisses him. He kisses him and he touches him and he makes him blush and whine and tremble, right there in the water.

“I’m burning up,” Isak confesses while Even is nibbling at his ear, making him nearly moan. “Can we go somewhere else?”

Oh.
“Yes.”

“This is a handjob,” Even whispers hotly into Isak’s ear in his mother’s car.

“Oh, okay.”

“I’m gonna give you a handjob in my mom’s car.”

“I don’t need it spelled out to that level of detail,” says Isak.

“You said to walk you through it. I’m walking you through it.”

“God, stop talking!” Isak pulls him into a bruising kiss while Even works him with a hand in his swim trunks.

“That was…” Even starts while Isak is dry-heaving in the passenger seat.

“I feel awful. My god! I can’t believe I let you do this to me in Julie’s car. Oh my god!”

“Sorry to disappoint, Iss. But the post-orgasm shame never really goes away.” Even laughs.

“I hate you!”

“I hate you too, baby.” Even leans over to kiss him, a bit stunned by his own choice of words.

Isak is still blushing when he pulls back.

“Want me to drive you back to kollektivet?” he asks.

“No, please leave me here with jizz in my pants to take public transportation and embarrass myself,” says Isak. “Of course drive me home, Even!”

“Aw, you said jizz. That’s so cute, baby!”

“Ugh! Stop calling me that!”

It’s sweet, short, but so sweet. Those last few weeks are pure bliss. Just pure bliss. Isak is glowing and Even is re-learning how to breathe, to function, to live, to crack jokes, and to throw tantrums when tantrums are to be thrown. Even is Even without any compromises. He doesn’t apply a glossy filter to his emotions and rather lives them to the fullest. He doesn’t feel bad for feeling down and doesn’t question it every time he feels happy.

It’s just easy.

The boy now sitting on his chest every morning doesn’t hate him. He doesn’t share his face. No, the boy he wakes up to every morning has green eyes and pearly skin that never gets enough. The boy he wakes up to has the loveliest smile and the snarkiest tongue and the warmest hugs.

It’s easy for a while. It’s jokes and kisses and lessons in human pleasure and self-acceptance. It’s Even kissing the crook of Isak’s neck and explaining what he’ll do with his hands and his mouth. It’s
Isak learning how to ask for things without using scientific jargon. It’s Isak finally using his mouth and his hands, finally saying “yes, I like that”, “no, that feels funny”, “I will smack you if you do that again”, “no don’t stop”.

It’s a few weeks of “baby” and tenderness and laughter, just laughter. So much laughter. Even doesn’t question any of it. He doesn’t let himself think about the impending doom awaiting them. He doesn’t think about it. He just keeps Isak in his bed, tickles him until he tears up, and makes him laugh however he can.

It’s pure bliss. For the longest time, it’s just pure bliss.

.

.

.

.

Even laughs at Adam’s distasteful joke. He throws his head back and laughs, letting the late August air fill his lungs and expand in his blood. It feels good. He feels good. His limbs feel lighter. He feels good.

When he opens his eyes, he finds Isak smiling back. He’s chatting with Sana who’s wearing a beautiful yellow hijab. Isak is watching him and smiling. He looks like a completely different person on this roof deck. His unruly hair is billowing in the wind. He looks free and happy. He looks good. He’s going to drive so many men in Trondheim wild. Even knows it. He can’t wait to hear about it.

fuck.

His heart breaks under his white shirt. His heart breaks while his mouth stretches into a wider smile.

Don’t go.

Isak starts walking toward him, and Even quickly ends the conversation he was having with Adam, his legs moving on their own.

They meet in the middle.

“That looked like a very funny joke,” says Isak, a glass of something pink in hand.

“It’s Adam. So how funny can it be really?”

“So were you just putting on a show for me laughing like that?”

“For you?!” Even scoffs. “Who said anything about you?”

“It’s my going away party. Everything is for me.”

Isak smiles, a hint of a dimple there. The wind keeps ruffling his hair and Even wants to touch. His chest is burning with the need to touch him, to be impossibly near him. Their bodies are nearly pressed together now and neither of them has even made a step forward.

Their hips just somehow meet in the middle. Even’s breathing goes uneven just as Isak’s face flushes.

“You feel it, too?”
“Understatement,” Isak whispers back.

“This is kind of gay,” Even jokes.

“Fuck you.” Isak rolls his eyes.

“Now? Here? I don’t have condoms.”

“Literally, fuck off.”

Even laughs. Even wants to touch.

“I want to touch you,” he blurts out.

“You are, touching me, right now,” Isak replies with a warm but steady expression, pointing to their joint hips.

“No. Without everyone around.”

“Sure, let me kick everyone out so you can perform homosexual acts on me on my roof.”

Even slides his hand around Isak’s wrist and presses his thumb on his pulse until he lets out a squeak. So cute.

“Was that for me?” Even smiles.

“Fuck you.”

“Right here? Right now?!”

Isak rolls his eyes then turns around, shaking his wrist off of Even’s hold as he walks away.

Even follows him immediately.

“Where are you going?”

“Thought you didn’t want anyone around?”

Even buries his fingers in Isak’s soft hair and pulls him close, closer, melting into his embrace when Isak’s arms close around his back and squeeze with so much want, so much need, that Even whimpers. They’re kissing on top of the new mid-century modern media console Eskild carefully picked out for the apartment.

Even is between Isak’s legs, tongue in his mouth when Isak’s friend Eva walks in and yelps in what sounds like delight mixed with “I knew it!”

Isak stands very calmly, flips her off, then drags Even by the shirt back to his room.

“Wow. Did that just happen?”

“Me letting you lick the inside of my mouth for an hour, or Eva letting out something absurd just now? Be more specific,” says Isak.

“Are you okay?”
“I’m gonna need to visit a dentist to make sure you didn’t suck one of my teeth out, but other than that I’m alright. Why?”

“You just- Your friend just caught us engaging in homosexual activities.”

“The way I see it, it was more like a dental examination, a thorough cleaning.”

“I can’t stand you.”

“Sure you can.” Isak moves to straddle him on the bed.

They kiss until the moment that always dawns upon them, that sweet moment when everything stops and their kissing goes from messy and hot to soft and needy. The moment when lust makes way for feelings. Feelings.

Isak looks so vulnerable in his arms, so scared, so torn. Even just wants to hold him through it.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” says Isak with a sigh.

“You are.” Even says dumbly, because he doesn’t know what else to say.

He can’t ask Isak to stay. He can’t follow him. He doesn’t know what they’re doing, what they’ve been doing for the remainder of the summer. He doesn’t know if this means anything at all or if Isak is just using him to get rid of the last remnants of internalized homophobia he still clings to, if he’s just letting him do all these things to him because he doesn’t trust anyone else.

“I have a thing to ask of you,” Isak confesses nervously, kickstarting Even’s heartbeat again.

“Uh, okay.”

Isak buries his fingers in Even’s hair and pulls, then in what looks like a moment of uncertainty leans down to kiss Even again, as if afraid he won’t be able to after placing his request.

“What do you want?” Even asks, dazed and dizzy, chasing Isak’s mouth when it finally leaves his own. “Just tell me. Anything you want. Whatever you want.”

Isak kisses him again and Even can’t quite breathe because he feels his heart expanding and constricting at once in his chest. The tenderness, the sweetness, the emotion. It’s all killing him.

“Tell me,” Even whispers, kissing Isak’s jaw, and neck, and chin. “Tell me, baby.”

Isak pulls back and fishes something out of his pocket while Even struggles to re-learn how to breathe.

Oh. Condoms and lube. Oh.

“Oh.” Even blinks at a very flushed and disheveled Isak.

“Maybe,” Isak clears his throat, looking more nervous than Even has ever seen him. “Maybe, the only way to get you out of my system is to have you inside of me.”

Oh.

Oh my god.
“My god, Isak!” Even can’t help himself. He almost makes a mess in his pants right then and there. “You can’t say stuff like this.”

“I’m serious.”

Even knows Isak is serious. He can tell by the look in his eyes, by how prepared and determined he looks.

“I’m prepared. I’m ready. I just want to get it over with,” he says, still seated on Even’s lap.

“Isak, this isn’t some homework assignment. This is—”

“Homosexual penetration. I know,” says Isak with that same determined look in his eyes. “Eskild has taught me a lot.”

“Eskild did what?!?”

“No! Not like that! Oh my god. What the fuck. I meant, he sent me reading materials and stuff.”

Even sighs, his heart still beating erratically inside of his chest, his blood still flowing south, his hair still a mess, his mouth still bitten red, with a boy on his lap asking him for “homosexual penetration”.

“I can’t leave without knowing.” Isak says in a quiet voice, like he’s embarrassed he’s having to resort to this.

“You can just not leave.”

“You know that’s not an option.”

“You can stay with me.” Even can’t believe he’s pleading him to stay. He can’t believe he’s saying these stupid words.

“And engage in scientific experiments for all eternity?” says Isak. “No thanks. I think you deserve to feel that thing you crave so much.”

“What thing?”

“’Love’,” Isak says, using both hands to air quote.

*But I already feel it. I’m feeling it now. I’m feeling it right here.*

“It’s just a word,” says Even. “I’m over it now.”

“Liar.” Isak mumbles before cupping his face and kissing him again until Even loses sight of himself. Until all Even feels is dizzy and dazed and full of want and need.

He brings Isak’s hand to his chest and rests it there above his racing heart in an attempt to make Isak stop or slow down, but he doesn’t. Isak kisses him deeper, with more passion, more tenderness than Even thought was possible.

“Make love to me,” Isak whispers. “Baby, make love to me.”

And it’s the last thing Even hears before his mind goes blank again, his synapses catching fire, his whole being igniting with something akin to magic. Even doesn’t have a better word for it.

Their bond just erupts all over his being.
Isak weeps for the longest time in his bare arms until Even gets choked up and cries too. They just cry. It’s absurd but they cry. It feels like the end, like the consummation of the rawest of desires, like the last boarding call for a one-way flight.

Isak clings to him and Even clings right back.

And it could be the artificial bond assigned to them by the universe, or it could be the bond they formed afterwards -- the one that doesn’t necessarily link them physically but that compels them to care for one another, to look out for the other, to make sure the other is safe and sound. Even isn’t sure. But he knows that it won’t go away just because they’ve finally decided to unite in the flesh.

Even hasn’t made love to many people throughout his life but he knows that nothing will ever come close to this, this feeling of wholeness, safety, tenderness, passion, love, caring, longing, and want. Nothing could ever come close to how Isak feels around him, how he looks under him, how he tastes on his tongue, how he bends and melts at his touch.

Nothing. Nothing could be as powerful and intense and tender and gentle as this.

And it breaks his heart to finally see Isak without his walls, without his guardrails, without his armor, and without his layers. It breaks his heart because all he sees is a boy who wants nothing more but to just be loved and cared for.

A boy who’s never felt loved, a boy who’s never been touched, a boy who’s never been loved.

Even kisses Isak’s body until his skin stops reacting the way a person who’s never been touched would. Even kisses him and loves him and treasures him until Isak’s body begins to accept his touch, accept his gentleness, accept his love.

Even treasures him until he stops fighting the tenderness.

Until he stops burning for his touch.

Isak cries in his arms, in the crook of his neck, at the bottom of his heart, until he no longer burns for his touch.

“That was very homosexual, by the way,” says Even.

“Alright. Maybe, it was a little,” Isak replies. He’s smiling. He’s glowing.

It’s late at night, probably one or two, certainly not four, because that’s when Isak has to start packing to make his train.

They’re standing in the balcony, Even in nothing but one of Eskild’s silky robes and Isak in jeans and a t-shirt already. Even is smoking a cigarette while Isak stares at the full moon.

“Wanna play a game?” says Isak.

“Uhm, a game?”
“Yeah.”

“What game?” Even asks, puzzled.

“Tell me what I want to hear.”

“Hm?”

“That’s it. That’s the game. Just tell me something I want to hear. It’s my last night. So it might be a nice way to part ways.”

*Part ways.* Even’s heart pinches.

“What? Like ‘oh, Isak, you’re the smartest and bestest science partner I’ve ever had’?” Even teases.

“Yes, but in a more grammatically correct way,” says Isak.

“You’re annoying.” Even rolls his eyes.

“You kind suck at this game already. I don’t really want to hear that.”

“Fine,” Even huffs. “You have the most beautiful skin I’ve ever touched, then.”

Isak turns around to glare at him.

“What!” Even laughs. “Now your turn.”

Isak takes a deep breath then turns his attention back to the moon. Even remembers Mutta’s story about the Japanese author and the moon and waits with hope in his chest.

“I’m glad it was you,” Isak mumbles quietly.

“Hm?”

“I’m glad my first time was with you. I don’t think anyone else would have treated me the way you did. So I’m glad it was you.”

It’s quiet. Even gets choked up. The occasional group of drunk teenagers walk below them before melting into the night with the distant cars and waves and wildlife.

It’s quiet.

It’s heavy.

Even doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

This is the end. Isak is moving to another city and Even will probably never see him again, unless he tags along with Eskild or Jonas or another person close to Isak. He wonders if Isak will text, if he’ll send Christmas updates, if he’ll reactivate his Heraklit Instagram, if he’ll update his Spotify playlist. He wonders if he’ll hear from him or if he’ll just retire into the world of science and drown in it.

Even wonders if he should ask him these questions now, if he should ask “what happens to us now”, “is there an us?”, “we fucked, now what?” If he should ask about what to expect, whether to expect anything, or if it will just be radio silence.

He wonders if this is the end of the “science partnership”, if this a graduation ceremony, if his
theories have been confirmed.

Even wonders if Isak is as changed by him as Even was by Isak. He wonders if Isak feels as full as he is feeling right now, as empty as he is feeling right now.

Even chokes on the fucking cigarette and tosses it in the receptacle, watching its light dim through the night, a metaphor for how he’s feeling inside, like a fire is being put out, like a piece of him is losing its only source of light.

Even stares at Isak’s serene and calm side profile with tears in his fucking eyes and he wants to scream how he feels, but it’s not allowed. He’s not allowed because Isak doesn’t speak his language. Because just like the Japanese in the Meiji era, Isak doesn’t know what to do with literal displays of affections. Because Isak is staring at the moon and he’s not bursting into tears the way Even is behind him right now. Because Isak is staring at the moon and he’s not saying ‘the moon is beautiful’. He’s not, because he doesn’t feel it, because he’s never felt it.

“The moon is beautiful.” Even chokes out, his voice hoarse, the lump in his throat making it hard to breathe. “Isn’t it?”

And he’s pathetic, but be it. He’s pathetic, but he feels those feelings and he wants to let Isak know. He wants Isak to know, so he’s telling him in his language. Because he’s done hiding how he feels, because he loves Isak and Isak should know, because-

“I love you.” Isak breathes out quietly.

It’s so quiet that Even has to blink to make sure he’s not dreaming.

What.

“I’m terrified,” Isak adds in a flat voice, turning around to face Even but keeping his eyes on the ground. "I'm really fucking scared, but I love you."

Is this a joke? Is this a game? An experiment? Is Isak telling him what he wants to hear because he’s leaving? As a parting gift as a pretty bow to end their chaotic story? Is Isak pulling his leg?

"Isak, what are you-

Isak pulls him into a searing kiss, a bruising kiss, a blazing kiss. Part of him bleeds into that kiss. Part of him will always remain and live in that kiss.

And when they finally pull apart, when Isak's mouth finally leaves his own, when Isak's hands finally leave his face, his green eyes are shining with tears, rattled by the emotion Even has always wanted to see reflected in them.

"Goodbye, Even."

.

"Goodbye, Isak."
this took me months because it's so hard to write happy things for a sad character when you're stuck in a bottomless pit of despair

i miss Isak and Even SO MUCH
hope a few of you still care about these two. i'm sorry i'm never here anymore

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!