

You can call me Wille

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You can call me Wille

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Summary

Simon Eriksson had always been a troubled boy. And not in the cheesy, cliché 'bad boy' way, like he was parading around town with a motorcycle and worn leather jacket. In the 'he has absolutely no regard for himself or others' type of way. In the 'he doesn't care if he hurts himself or others' type of way.

Wilhelm Bernadotte had always been the good boy and, quite literally, in the cheesy, cliché way: sweater vests and straight A's and in the front row at the church where his dad preached at every Sunday.

The two boys couldn't have been more different- they weren't supposed to talk, to form a friendship.

They weren't supposed to fall in love because Wilhelm was already fine with living his life the way he wanted until he died and Simon was fine with destroying his.

But they did anyway. They fell in love even with the little time they had left together.

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A Walk to Remember AU

Chapter 1

Simon Eriksson had always been a troubled boy.

And not in the cheesy, cliché 'bad boy' way, like he was parading around town with a motorcycle and worn leather jacket.

In the 'he has absolutely no regard for himself or others' type of way.

In the way that he doesn't care if he hurts himself in an attempt to prove he's the best nor does he care if he hurts anybody in the process with his words or fists.

This all started fairly early in his life, showing questionable behaviors at the ripe age of 11.

11 was also the age Simon was when Micke started to spiral, when the abuse was becoming too much at home and his father had overdosed three times before his 12th birthday - but no one knew.

Not a soul. Troubled, bad boy Simon wanted it that way.

It started with skipping class, asking to go to the bathroom and then meeting his friend's outside on the field; there had never been a child sent to the principal's office as many times as him that year.

By middle school, it had quickly escalated.

Vandalizing obscene objects and words onto the bathroom stall or spray painting on the back of the school.

He was intelligent, both naturally book and street smart, so he knew to wear black attire and a mask; he was only almost caught once and it's because Henry is a fucking idiot.

His last few years of high school now consist of fighting.

He was skinny and shorter than most of the boys in his grade but that didn't matter. Not with all the boiled up rage and anger Simon harbors deep within him.

He wouldn't deny it, he didn't like who he was.

He didn't like the shit hand he was dealt with and he didn't like the way his shit self chooses to deal with it.

Wilhelm Bernadotte had always been the good boy and, quite literally, in the cheesy, cliché way: sweater vests and straight A's and in the front row at the church where his dad preached at every Sunday.

He didn't seem to mind his simple, solitary life, as far as Simon could tell.

Wilhelm came to the school right after Simon's 12th birthday and it was clear the two boys couldn't be more different:

Wille's long straight blonde hair to his black unruly curls.

Wille sitting in the front row with five pens and five sharpened pencils to his drool on the back desk from sleeping.

The new boy's weird, strange belief that everyone was good and there was good in the world to Simon believing, when it really came down to it, no matter what, people just didn't give a fuck about you.

Simon never looked Wilhelm's way again while Wille couldn't seem to look away.

No one knew, though, not a soul.

And not only because Wille had no friends but because he was ever so quiet and sneaky about it.

He knew that if Simon ever even *thought* that Wilhelm liked him that way, he would beat the fuck out of him.

Not because he's a boy, Simon has been out since middle school, when he unabashedly grabbed an older boy's hand and pulled him on his lap at lunch, but because of who Wilhelm is - the weird loner and preacher's son who prefers to spend his time alone reading.

He knows what kids at school say about him, has known since he was the new boy, but he doesn't care. He's never cared.

He likes to live his life the way he does, has memories of his older brother and mom and his dad still beside him, and that's all he cares about.

He does think Simon could use some care, though. He's always thought that. There's a darkness behind his eyes that someone so young shouldn't have.

Wilhelm found himself in the library as he usually does after school, tutoring the younger kids in an effort to help the teachers heavy workloads.

The library was stuffy and smelt like dust but he still liked to come.

Liked to help the teachers and especially liked to help the kids who struggled and were convinced they couldn't do it; he was in the middle of explaining the pythagorean theorem when he spotted Simon.

He walked in with the blank expression he usually wore, chiseled jaw clenched and his piercing brown eyes wandering over the room like it was his first time in the library.

He knew he had to look away but he couldn't, the boy leant against the front desk, distaste and annoyance radiating off of him.

"Mr. Eriksson, you must be lost," a snarky older teacher said to Simon, Wilhelm focusing his attention back on his student. "What are you doing here? Do you plan on cursing me out again?"

Simon felt that hot burst of anger rush through him, this dickhead of a teacher the one who used to kick him out of his class everyday during his second year.

"I could, if you really want me to," he mutters, eyes meeting the teacher. "But I'm supposed to be here for tutoring."

Because, apparently, at this fucked up school, the third strike for starting a brawl in the cafeteria is either a two-week suspension or helping out the understaffed, depressing after-school programs and a mandatory extra credit assignment.

"How long?" Simon asks the headmistress, a kind woman who, for some god forsaken reason, still looks at the boy in front of her with kindness in her eyes.

He knows at this point he could be expelled, could've been expelled months ago, so why not? What's her angle?

"The rest of the year, Mr. Eriksson. We need tutors year round."

Simon sat there as he truly considered suspension, expulsion even he'd put on the table, because then at least he'd be sleeping in and not doing eight months of excruciating 'volunteer' work with bratty preteens and mundane class work.

It's decided then, he thinks, getting up with a sarcastic wink.

"I'll take the suspension, ma'am, see you in two weeks."

The woman laughed like she was told the funniest fucking joke on the planet, rising from her seat and walking over to half-pat, half-pull Simon's shoulder back.

"I'll see you in the library on Monday."

He sees the Mother Theresa incarnate headmistress peek her head in just as he sits down with the student who needs help with math, not sure which one of them is more pissed off about being here.

They sit in an awkward silence for five minutes, the boy looking down and twiddling his pen as Simon bounces his leg, swirling the silver ring around his finger.

"So, what exactly do you need help with?" Simon finally blurts out, leaning back in his chair and raising an eyebrow at the scrawny, scowling boy.

"I don't know," the younger boy snaps, already getting under Simon's skin. "I don't even need this stupid help. They forced me to be here."

"Well, that makes two of us," he mumbles, his eyes moving to the test paper sticking out of the boy's backpack marked with red x's. "But it seems like you do need help, kid. A 42 is

shitty.”

Wilhelm's eyes widen from two tables over upon hearing those words, clearing his throat loudly and catching Simon's attention.

He looks at him in a way he hopes is chastising, shaking his head which only causes Simon to roll his eyes; he doesn't know how he resists flipping him off before looking back at the young boy.

"Look, kid, neither of us wanna be here so we just gotta get this over with," Simon says, eyes boring into him, coldness sharp in his tone. "Don't waste my time and I won't waste yours. Open the book."

Wilhelm doesn't feel angry much, he actually considers himself a relatively calm person, but his heart grows heavy watching the student's face fall at Simon's words.

He wants to take him aside and yell at him, actually *yell* at scary Simon Eriksson, because he can't do that. That's the *last* way to approach a child already struggling and most likely getting in trouble by his parents and teachers.

They need to be shown the problem in different ways, until they find out that works for them.

Be shown that there's someone who exhibits patience, kindness and a genuine desire to help them - which is exactly what Wilhelm tells Simon when he catches him at the end of the study group, Simon sneering at him the moment he appeared.

“Thanks for the advice unwarranted advice, Wilhelm, but I'll be getting this shit over with my own way," he says, brushing past him roughly and knocking into him; even though Wilhelm has a few inches on the boy, he still makes him feel small.

That's fine, he can make him feel small, he doesn't care, but he can't do it to the kids here. Wilhelm refuses to let that happen.

"Wait," he says, not surprised when Simon doesn't turn around and he has to walk over to him. That's fine. He'll do that too to make a point.

“Look, I know you don't wanna be here,” he says softly, fully understanding the stuffy library after a day of school isn't everyone's cup of tea, “but you can't take it out on them. You need to at least be nice and *try* to help him not only pass but also understand it. That's the whole-”

"I could give a shit if the kid passes or not," Simon snaps, not needing to hear this shit right now, especially from him. "We're not all perfect little fucking saints like you, Wilhelm."

Because for as long as he's known that new little boy in 6th grade, he's known Wilhelm irritated him.

Maybe he was jealous like trained professionals would suggest, he saw Wilhelm with his loving father and careless but kind attitude and wished he had some of that.

He watched him parade around with ugly sweaters and books and entertain the kids that everyone avoided.

Some people might find that commendable, that he gives everyone a chance and seems to be completely pure and good, but he finds it incredibly irritating - he always had, watching him grow up through the years and feeling some oddly placed resentment and pity.

No one could genuinely be that kind.

No one could be that unbothered by the fact they had no friends.

No one could actually smile in the face of their bullies or enjoy tutoring bratty kids in their free time.

"That's not why I'm saying it, Simon," Wilhelm says, like the way he talks to the kids struggling, the kids who think no one believes in them. "I just want you to take this seriously. These kids need help."

"They need help when *you're* the one tutoring kids for fun," Simons scoffs, feeling himself grow more agitated and bitter as Wilhelm talks down to him.

Because that's exactly what he's doing, he's like everyone else and that's why he doesn't care about his mean, immature comments. "I don't know if you realize how sad that is."

If the words twist Wilhelm's gut and hurt a part of his heart, he'll never say.

He doesn't care, he's learned not to care, but it's that type of mindset that Wilhelm just can't for the life of him understand.

"More sad than you needing to be *forced* to help anyone but yourself?"

Whether Simon wants to admit it or not, the comment rings in his head for the rest of the day.

He knows he's selfish, he knows he's a bit of a dick, but hearing it so bluntly in his face by Wilhelm Bernadotte of all people makes his chest churn uncomfortably.

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"So, what do you know about acute triangles?"

A week later and Simon's back to studying with his student.

He's clenching his fists under the table because, really, how fucking hard is it to remember this?

They've made some progress day by day with just talking, which could be considered improvement in and of itself, but Simon knows if he had someone more cut out for this, someone more like *Wilhelm*, he would've learned it by now.

He wouldn't be back to staring down at the blank paper with a questioning gaze on his face, wouldn't be spending the first 30 minutes in a tense silence again.

"There are... three angles," the boy says, uncertainty laced in his tone; Simon can only nod his head because *wow, yeah, good job*.

"Okay..." he says, "and what about them?"

The boy swallows nervously, eyes boring into Simon's like he's gonna take pity on him and help him out - he only stares back blankly, raising his eyebrow challengingly.

Like there's no way in hell Simon's gonna help him, even a little.

"I- I don't know!" the boy yells through the quiet library, the other students and teachers and stupid fucking Wilhelm turning at the outburst. "Fuck this! This is so stupid!"

Wilhelm watches as Simon just stares at the child having a break down, arms crossed over his chest and jaw ticking, like he's trying not to scream back at the kid.

His stomach fills with dread when he sees the boy's eyes water, stomping away from the table and ripping open the library door. It echoes throughout the room when it slams shut, knocking a few books in the entry way onto the carpet.

Several other kids softly murmur to each other before they get back to work, Wilhelm's eyes almost uncontrollably moving to Simon who hasn't uncrossed his arms, whose unfocused gaze is just staring ahead of him.

"Try the next one by yourself," he mumbles to his student, "I'll be right back."

It's stupid and bold but he can't stop himself from walking over to Simon's table, taking the previously occupied seat across from the curly-haired boy. His hair looks soft to the touch and smells like coconut.

"He's just frustrated," he says softly, hoping to ease the obvious tension coming off Simon's body in waves.

It's easy to feel dejected and upset when these kids get mad at you, Wilhelm remembers feeling bad when he first started thinking he was failing them.

Simon's eyes flicker to meet his and they're such a deep, dark brown, Wilhelm's shocked to find that they're almost black. He wonders what they'd look like in the sun.

If they were twinged with happiness or wonder instead of constant dread and despair.

"What do you want from me, Wilhelm?"

He shouldn't be surprised by the boy's annoyed, harsh tone but it still makes his face fall slightly, a sigh leaving his mouth as he shrugs.

Why does he have such a hard time accepting kindness? Isn't it exhausting?

"I just wanna help Simon," he tells him, sharing that he knows it can feel upsetting at first not being able to help. "I... It was hard for me at first, too. But if you can try maybe explaining it in a different way. Maybe something he can relate to more."

The dark brown storms meet his and if suppressed rage had a permanent home, it'd be in Simon's eyes.

The darkness scares the shit out of Wille for a second, ever so slightly leaning away from him. He can't look away, though, can't bring himself to back down, so the two just stare at each other.

It should feel intimate and uncomfortable and scary but it doesn't. It's scarier when Simon pushes at the desk and it clatters underneath them, mumbling something under his breath as he saunters toward the exit.

The same teacher from the first day is there and Wilhelm catches his gaze before he can say something, shaking his head gently; to his surprise, he lets Simon go with a simple roll of his eyes.

Like he expects nothing less than failure from Simon Eriksson. For some reason, that pulls at a part of Wilhelm's chest.

He works with the student until 4:30 rolls around, eyes moving to the empty table and library door as his student works.

Neither Simon nor his student ever came back and it causes his stomach to sink. If he takes an extra five minutes to clean up and put his books away, the two other teachers and librarian don't say anything.

As he exits the library, looking around for his keys in his bag, the familiar sound of a ball bouncing off the gym floor catches his attention.

He peeks through the opening and can't stop the quirk of his lips at the sight of Simon and the boy from the library. The two of them are standing a few feet away from the basketball hoop, that rare hint of a smile on Simon's face as both of them move around the floor.

"So this would be a....?" he hears him ask, the younger boy immediately responding with "acute angle! And it's *less* than 90 degrees," before taking the ball from the older and shooting - in a tragic turn of events, he misses.

In an even more tragic turn of events, Simon's smile widens across his face and his laugh echoes through the gym. It makes Wilhelm's heart jump frantically in his chest, stomach swooping strangely.

"Used all your brain power for that you can't even get it in, huh?" he teases, throwing the ball with one hand and watching with a cocky smirk as it shoots through.

"You're a showoff," the boy mumbles, Wilhelm biting back a laugh as he watches Simon dribble the ball away from the boy who starts chasing after him.

Wilhelm leaves school that day feeling lighter, stomach no longer riddled with sadness, and the sickening realization that he was right all along: Simon Eriksson, as scary and jaded as he is, is beautiful.

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The next day, Wilhelm is surprised but overjoyed to see Simon and his student working together.

He catches their focused expressions more than once, hears Simon explaining in a not-so-soft but not-so-harsh tone about the problems and how he can remember the equations.

He tries not to smile at the end of the day when the boy shyly thanks Simon for his help, the older boy not able to respond before the kid rushes off and out of the library.

Wilhelm can't stop the encouraging words that blurt out of his mouth.

"Good job."

Simon's head snaps up at the voice, at the words, looking over Wilhelm with distrust. The dark storms are back, it had seemed like they calmed slightly today, but it's back with a vengeance. All biting tones and snarky looks.

"What?"

"You're working well with him," he says, everything about his tone so genuine and *soft* and kind, it makes Simon want to scoff. "He really seems to be getting better."

A few moments of tense silence falls between them, Wilhelm positive it's gonna stay like that until the boy grunts out a "yeah."

It seems promising, his cooperation today and responding to Wilhelm, although he thinks it's in his best interest not to mention seeing them in the gym yesterday.

"It's hard at first for everyone," he continues encouragingly because Simon really did do a great job and he wants him to know that, "but then I think once you break that barrier, it's gonna get--"

"Why are you talking to me, Wilhelm?"

His short, harsh tone causes Wilhelm's face to fall and for a split second, he feels bad.

He knows the boy is just doing what he *always* does, showing people unwavering decency and kindness and all that shit, but those are things that he, both, can't relate to and finds makes him uncomfortable.

He doesn't want him to think that just because he helped one kid out that means he's some reformed fucking pupil who would do this if not forced.

After all, he can only help people when he's forced.

“I just wanted to-”

“Well, don’t,” Simon bites back, picking up his bag and icily cutting Wilhelm off. “It’s bad enough I have to do this shit. I don’t need you talking down to me every fucking day, too.”

“I’m not talking down to you, Simon, I was trying to be encouraging. You did really good with him today and I thought it was-”

“Then don’t *encourage* me if this is what this is,” he says, gesturing between their two bodies. “It’s weird. And fucking annoying. Just ignore me the way I intend to ignore you.”

They ignore each other for two weeks in the same manner they have for the past six years of their lives: Simon acts like he doesn’t exist and Wilhelm watches from afar.

If by some rare chance their eyes meet, Simon rolls his away and quickly averts his gaze. He keeps his conversations with the students hushed and quiet, hunched over the desk as he looks over their papers.

Right when the clock strikes 4:30, he runs out like the building’s on fire. It happens today like clockwork and Wilhelm is finally starting let it go. Kind of. Sort of. Not really.

He just can’t help but wonder what he could have possibly done, both, since Simon started tutoring and their school years together to make him so wary and untrusting of him.

He knows people think he’s a freak, he knows they think he’s a loner, but he’s also always nothing but nice. Kindness and respect were two main things he was also taught, that if people were mean, they were unhappy about something within themselves and they just need a little extra help and support.

Maybe that’s why Simon has always intrigued him.

Apart from his obvious good looks, he’s always had this strange, innate feeling that there’s more to why he acts the way he does.

That the darkness he carries could be washed away if someone just listened to him and gave him a chance; that could be Wilhelm’s naivety talking, though, he knows that.

His dad and brother always said that his heart, the way he thinks like that, is his biggest strength but could also be his greatest weakness.

His music plays quietly in the car as he drives through the rain, thoughts about Simon wandering, when his gaze catches someone walking in the rain. Their hood is up, head is down but, somehow, Wilhelm knows it’s him.

He doesn’t even think twice about pulling up next to the boy, rolling down his window as Simon side-eyes the car.

“Do you want a ride?” Wilhelm asks quietly, met with a silent shake of the head.

His feet continue at the same pace, like Wilhelm's not even here offering him. The rain is pounding down, thunder crackling through the sky and the street's threatening to flood any moment now.

The late fall sun will be gone quicker and soon swallow him in cold, wet darkness.

"You're gonna get sick," he points out, causing the boy to stop in his tracks and stare at him; even through the fall of the rain and his hood and his wet sopping curls peaking out, he can tell the boy is annoyed with him.

He probably could've guessed that without seeing him, though.

"And what does that matter to you?"

Wilhelm's lip quirk as he raises an eyebrow, leaning over the middle console to open the door invitingly.

Simon stares at the car in annoyance, holding back his shivers and the way he can't feel his sopping wet toes. He can also feel the heat blaring from the car, warming Wilhelm's stupid fucking pale face to give him rosy cheeks.

Some part deep within him, so so deep below and repressed, feels ashamed to accept his kindness after the way he's treated him. After the mean shit he said weeks ago.

That being said, because Simon is who he is, he gets in the car soaking wet and slams the door shut.

"Happy?" he grumbles.

Wilhelm smirks because, okay, this is something, muttering the word "seatbelt," before going back down the road.

Rain pelts down on the window and it seems like in the past ten seconds, it's gotten severely worse. Thunder and lightening cracks through the sky quicker, only three Mississippis, and if he didn't know any better, he'd think Simon was looking at him because he was grateful.

After he stops at the third stop sign and Simon lets out an annoyed huff, he knows he should've known better.

"What?" Wilhelm asks, looking over at the boy only after he's come to a full stop.

"How the hell do you get anywhere? You drive like a grandfather," Simon grumbles.

He feels around in his pockets for a cigarette, agitated when he finds he doesn't have a pack on him. He could totally fucking use one right now, in this car with Wilhelm that reeks of his natural, distinct scent and old man driving skills.

"I dress like one too. Ironical, isn't it?"

Simon laughs through his nose, if you can call a short chortle a laugh, as they fall into silence again.

Wilhelm's beat up, rattling car, the soft radio, and rain pelting down surrounds them. Simon doesn't know which one is driving him insane or if it's really when Wilhelm starts softly humming under his breath.

"I don't get you, Wilhelm," he finally blurts out at a red light.

Because ever since they were 12, he's never fucking understood him. The boy looks over with brown eyes so hauntingly similar to when they were young, that same soft shade of brown and pure innocence.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you really just... you don't care about what other people think about you?"

Because obviously he knows people shit on his stupid fucking sweater vests. How could they not, though, to be fair?

Wilhelm smiles at the puzzled expression on Simon's face, thinking that, even looking so confused and disturbed about the person he is, he still looks pretty.

"No."

Something about the unabashed confidence in his tone and the soft smile causes Simon to squirm in his seat. Where the fuck did his last cigarette go? He swears he had one left.

"Why not?"

"Because why do they matter?" he asks quietly, "While I can, I'm gonna live the way I want."

Simon didn't realize at the time how strange that sentence was coming from a 17-year-old boy. While he can, like he knew it was going to expire. Like he was thinking at any moment, he wouldn't be able to live the way he wanted.

But how could he *want* to live such a sad, quiet life? Between the covers of books and walls of a church of all places? How someone could go on smiling and being happy when they had no friends to make memories with?

"Seems like a sad way to live," is all he finds himself saying, a smirk playing on Wilhelm's lips as his brain quips back with a sassy comment - but because he is who he is, and lives the way he wants, he just shrugs.

The rest of the ride is quiet as they drive to Simon's, only speaking a few times for directions until the car is parked in front of his house.

"Thanks, Wilhelm," he says, the words foreign and awkward on his tongue. "I didn't need the ride... but thanks."

“You’re welcome, Simon. See you tomorrow?”

Simon answers by slamming the car door in his face. Wille bites back an amused smile despite himself, waiting until Simon's in his house to slowly drive away.

Chapter 2

With the end of the first marking period coming to a close, Wilhelm stays behind at 4:30 to make a study guide for one of his students.

Everyone had filed out 30 minutes ago, the last page nearly completed when he hears footsteps approaching.

He looks up in surprise, brown familiar eyes meeting his; they haven't been too stormy today.

"What're you still doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Simon says, peeking at the paper before taking the seat across from him.

That's when Wilhelm knows he's about to ask for something.

Maybe try to get a pardon from this 'stupid volunteer work' (as if Wilhelm has the authority do to that) or another ride home due to the rain - because in all the years he's known Simon Eriksson, he's never initiated a conversation.

Never went out of his way to talk to him, and he's certainly never sat with him.

"I'm making a study guide for my student," he explains, "she's still having a bit of trouble so I'm hoping this will help her."

He nods, resting his elbows on the table and silently watches as the boy across from him writes in concentration. When he's done, he shakes out his hand, closes his pen, and looks up at Simon curiously.

"But I know you don't care about that," Wilhelm says, two vastly different shades of brown meeting. "So why are you here?"

Simon lets out a sigh, running his hand through his curls and the smell of coconut wafts between them.

"I need your help with something."

Wilhelm can't help but smirk, raising an eyebrow as he drops his pen on the table and it echoes through the quiet, empty library.

"Is Simon Eriksson asking for *my* help?"

The boy just stares blankly, no storm in his eye and a barely there twitch on his lips makes Wilhelm feel okay about his teasing.

"What do you need help with?"

Something about his tone seems to relax Simon ever so slightly, popping his neck to the side. Wilhelm wonders if this is the first time he's ever asked someone for help.

"I'm- uh, I'm supposed to write a play. For my class," Simon says, uncharacteristically fumbling over his words. "It's another thing I have to do on top of this tutoring shit so I don't get..."

His words trail off and Wilhelm just stares at him, not because he's even more beautiful when he's flustered but because he's trying to listen to him.

The taller boy's brows pull together in confusion, waiting for Simon to finish his sentence but he never does.

"O-okay..." Wilhelm says, nodding his head in slight understanding. "And you need help... writing the play? Editing it? Coming up with ideas?"

Simon's mind starts to swarm with slight panic and uncertainty, completely out of his element and comfort zone - he doesn't know the first thing about writing fucking plays, you couldn't pay him enough money to even sit through one.

"Uh... all of it, I guess," he says with a wince. "But I had a feeling you're probably like, a theater geek, or whatever, so you'd know."

Wilhelm can't stop the laugh that bubbles out of him, shaking his head at the boy in front of him.

"A theater geek?"

"Not- not like that," he says, tone desperate and unsure and it's so clear how *uncomfortable* he is asking for help. "I just mean like you're probably... good at that stuff."

"Ahh, because I'm, like, a nerdy old grandpa, right?"

Simon would laugh if he wasn't so horrified.

If he didn't realize he couldn't even ask for Wilhelm's help without insulting him and if maybe, for a split second, he didn't just think about how nice his laugh sounded.

"I didn't mean it like that, Wilhelm."

He can't help but watch Simon for a few seconds, hand twiddling his curls, jean-covered leg starting to bounce before he puts him out of his misery.

"I'm just kidding, Simon," the boy says, a soft, teasing smile on his face. "Of course I'll help you."

His head of now ruffled curls snaps up, face once ridden by anxiety and panic full of surprise and relief.

"Really?"

“Really,” he confirms with a smile, “but I’m only gonna assist you. *You* have to do most of it, okay?”

“Yeah, right, of course,” he says, over and done with this conversation; now, he has to get the fuck out of this library.

“And you have to take it seriously,” Wille continues, “on the days we do it, you’re gonna have to be focused, Simon.”

“I wouldn’t have put myself through this and asked you if I wasn’t gonna take it seriously,” he grumbles, watching the boy’s eyebrows furrow and quickly realizing he’s falling back into his dick-ish ways; he mumbles out a half-assed apology. “I mean, of course, yeah, thank you, Wilhelm.”

Wille smiles and that should’ve been Simon’s hint to go, so he really doesn’t know why he stays.

Why he lingers and silently watches as Wilhelm carefully puts his books away, body stuck in the seat like he’s transfixed by the kind boy he could never understand.

He’s not even surprised when Wilhelm looks back up and his soft smile is still there.

He doesn’t look at him strangely for staying, lingering, really, or make fun of him for asking for help, he just regards him with a thoughtful expression.

But Simon can’t deal with it any longer, doesn’t know why he’s even here analyzing his kindness, and the soft shade of brown in his eyes, and the way Wilhelm’s always just been so fucking good, so he finally jumps up.

Takes his bag and plans on silently leaving before he takes two steps and the boy is speaking again.

“By the way,” he says, Simon craning his neck over his shoulder. “You can call me Wille, if you want.”

Simon’s brows pull together in confusion, because not sure he’s ever heard anyone call him that before.

He’s also struggling to remember if *Wille* has always looked like this: if his cheeks were tinged with pink this whole time because the library heat is blazing right now - he knows this because Simon’s starting to feel warm too and that’s the only explanation.

“Uh, okay,” Simon says, staring at the boy for a second longer before turning away.

He has to turn away, for the life of him he has to turn away. Even though for the rest of the day and into the next, he can’t seem to shake the boy out of his head.

His smile, his soft words and immediate acceptance to help, his stupid pink cheeks, the way he said *you can call me Wille if you want* just playing over and over in his head.

The boy's kindness and carefree attitude haunts him, eats at him, because he just doesn't fucking get how someone can be like that.

Especially toward him.

Wille's been in his head all day so maybe that's why it's so jarring to see him in the cafeteria, like he's not just a figment of his imagination.

Or maybe it's because, even though Simon's sitting with Henry, Vincent, and August, the boy in a light purple sweater vest walks up to the table like he's not a skittish little deer walking into a lion's den.

"Hi, Simon," Wille smiles, knowing it's bold and knowing he could be stupid for this but thinking there seemed to be a change in Simon.

A change to work, to help, if even unenthusiastically. There was some sort of change for the better and that's all Wille cared to see.

"Do you wanna start working on your project after tutoring today?"

He thought the worst that could happen was Simon and his friends ignoring him, used to awkward silences and weirded out, shifting gazes, but he knows that when all he hears is mocking laughter, Simon's about to disappoint him.

"I think you're a little lost, Wilhelm," he says, spitting his name out like a bad piece of food, his eyes some of the stormiest he's seen yet.

They would've taken down buildings and flooded cities, left people devastated because they underestimated just how tragic the storm would be. How defensive the raging winds and rains would be.

"What do you think you're doing over here, huh?"

A lump forms in Wilhelm's throat and he can't understand why - *he doesn't care* - eyes wide as they look over Simon.

Why are you doing this? he wants to ask, hoping the look in his eye is properly portraying that thought; even if it is, Simon wouldn't know. After he spits out venom to Wilhelm, his eyes wander and look at everything but him.

Maybe it's because of guilt and that should make him feel better but it doesn't.

Not even a little bit.

"Aww, do you wanna be friends with our little Simon here?" Vincent mocks, reaching out to tug at his collar. "He's not into boys like you, Wilhelm, I'm sorry to say."

"Vincent, leave him alone, he's like, socially awkward for real," Henry says, knocking into the boy's arm before he whispers not so quietly, "I think he has problems."

Wilhelm's cheeks flame and he can't tear his eyes off Simon who suddenly finds his ring very interesting. His jaw is tense, his body even tenser, and Wilhelm feels that unfamiliar feeling of anger brewing in him because he won't even look at him.

His friends go back and forth insulting the boy like he's not even there all while Simon just stays silent.

Wille's eyes are threatening to burn with tears before he shakes his head. He doesn't need to take this - he knows why they're doing it but that doesn't make it any easier.

"Sorry, nevermind then," he mumbles, unsure if anyone even hears him before he leaves the lunchroom; Simon, not only feeling shitty that Wille just apologized, realizes he didn't have any food with him either.

He grabs some extra bags of chips and granola bars after the period ends (only once his friends are gone, of course). When he gets to the library later that afternoon, a few minutes before 3:15, he's not surprised to see Wilhelm there early as well.

He doesn't say anything as he walks up to the boy, gently grabbing him by the elbow and leading him to the back of the room.

It hits him harder than he cares to admit when Wilhelm flinches in surprise, a quiet, confused "what are you doing?" leaving his mouth.

He pulls them into the empty computer lab, glass windows doing little to hide the obvious tension in the room.

Simon closes the door behind them, turning to see the boy staring at him, his lips pulled into a slight frown. If he had looked at him in the cafeteria, he'd know that his face looked exactly the same.

Wide eyes full of disappointment, shame, embarrassment, a mix of emotions that would make him feel so fucking guilty, he doesn't even wanna try and understand them.

"Just hear me out."

"I don't think there's anything to hear out," Wilhelm says softly, not knowing what Simon's doing but not caring. He can't deal with anymore embarrassment today. "You made it obvious you don't need my help anymore."

He turns to head out the door because he said his piece, avoiding eye contact with the storm, when a hand touches him again.

He can feel the warmth through his sweater, can feel the indent of Simon's rings in his arm and his body stiffens at the feeling it shoots through him.

Simon immediately lets him go and despite everything, he feels cold.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't..." the boy sighs, moving away and running a hand through his curls. Wilhelm wishes just one time they didn't smell like coconut. "I shouldn't have done that. At

lunch today."

It sounds like accountability but to Wilhelm, it's like the fact that he knew it was wrong is making it worse. He knew it would hurt him and make him look stupid but he did it anyway to prove a point to his friends.

Or to himself.

Or even to Wilhelm, that he didn't wanna do whatever they were doing.

"But you did," he says quietly, shaking his head as he looks at beautiful messy curls and haunting eyes. "And I know you don't care, Simon, but I really thought you were trying to be better."

I thought we were becoming something like friends.

Simon sighs again, meeting Wilhelm's gaze and hoping, praying, he doesn't look as fucked up as he feels.

"I was. I am. That's why I need your help, Wilhelm, please."

His gaze catches a group of kids that come barreling through the front door, one of them being the girl he's been working with. She takes a seat at their normal table, taking out her supplies and nervously moving them around.

He has to get back out there. He knows that.

He can't be fooled by Simon's eyes right now, the storm clouds gone and replaced with something regretful. And sad.

Something that Wilhelm knows is only present because he's not getting something out of him anymore, not because he's genuinely upset that he hurt Wilhelm.

Why would he care about him and his feelings anyway?

"The drama teacher is really nice," he says, a small smile on his face as he looks at Simon.

The polite, kind smile he always wears because he knows the boy needs some kindness.

He knows the boy is hurting but that doesn't mean Wilhelm has to be hurt by him either. But he will be kind to him, he will always be kind.

"You could probably sit in with her and get some pointers."

"But I wanted you to-"

Simon can't even finish his sentence before Wilhelm is brushing past him and out the door, making his way toward his student and never again looking his way that day.

The chips and granola lay crushed, forgotten, at the bottom of his bag.

~

Simon was shocked by how much it annoyed him that Wilhelm was ignoring him.

That anytime he now tried to get his attention, he'd smile dismissively and busy himself.

That he no longer lingered at the end of the day or gave him words of praise and *encouragement* - because he'd been working really well with the students, had even started helping two different ones - even though it used to piss him off so much.

It made the cold weeks drag on even longer, his afternoons now a more dull and dreary experience. He couldn't take it anymore on one snowy afternoon, ending his session five minutes early and waiting outside the library like a complete creep; if this was his only chance to talk to Wille, he'd take it.

Wille was digging through his bag trying to find his keys, wondering how each and every time they end up buried at the bottom, when he almost took out a smaller body in front of his.

An apology was on the tip of his tongue when he looked up and saw curls.

“Hi.”

Wilhelm raises a brow, Simon's face lacking its usual smugness and disdain.

“Hey.”

The two boys just stare at each other, soft brown full of confusion while the darker held insecurity and nervousness. Wilhelm forgot how much concerning emotion could swarm in someone's eyes all while being so beautiful.

“Are you gonna make me beg, Wille?”

His eyebrows shoot up for more than one reason, the deep, lowly spoken words and nickname throwing him completely off guard.

He shouldn't like how Simon says his name as much as he does.

“What?”

“I miss... I miss your stupid fucking encouragement, okay,” he blurts out suddenly, small, stiff body coming to life, moving just a little bit closer to Wille. “And I miss talking to you. I want... I want you to help me with my play.”

Wilhelm crosses his arms over his chest, like that's gonna stop the boy's words from affecting his lonely little heart.

To Simon, it'll probably look like he's trying to gauge his mood, maybe even intimidate him, like that'd even be possible, but Wille's heart is crying out for something right now and it's not fair; because a part of Wille also knows he could just be saying all of this to get what he wants, make his life easier.

“What’s wrong with the drama teacher?” he asks, "She’s nice. I’ll even ask her if you can-”

"She’s not you.”

Fuck.

Wilhelm swallows the lump in his throat, his heart seemingly the thing to jump up and get viciously caught in it. He knows Simon doesn't mean the words like that, he knows he doesn't mean it like that at all, but, fuck, if for a moment, it's nice to pretend he does.

“That’s kind of the point,” he says, voice strong despite the way he's absolutely shaking inside, quivering, really, but he must remain resilient. “That's what you wanted.”

"Well, I don't want that anymore," Simon says, his eyes never leaving Wille's.

He doesn't know if he's ever seen the type of indistinguishable emotion he's seeing in Simon's gaze right now and he doesn't know what to make of it.

He just knows that his heart, his stomach, every fiber of his shaking being likes it and is taking it in.

“I was wrong and I’m sorry, Wille, I am,” he says, not even realizing he used the nickname again. It just flows off his tongue too nicely, feels too right, especially after not talking to him for so long.

"I'm- I'm trying here, okay?" he sighs, his voice low and gaze wandering, searching, *begging*, Wille to please listen to him. Please look at him and give him another chance because he didn't expect this change and he's trying. "Fuck, I'm really trying here and I need your help."

Wilhelm so wants to give in immediately. He can hear him, see him, crying out for help and the look in his eye is making his chest push and pull.

He swears this time he's being genuine, he swears there's something different right now, another shift in the air between them that's palpable.

But that's what Simon's able to do.

He can look at someone like Wilhelm and fool him. He can use his pretty face (Wilhelm really hopes that Simon doesn't know just how pretty Wilhelm thinks he is) to be persuasive and trick and connive.

Wille has those thoughts for all of three seconds before he feels awful - he’s thinking about Simon the way everyone else does. The way people think about the kids who struggle.

He can't ignore the fact that, no matter how he’s treated him or anyone else, he’s here and asking for help now.

He wonders how many times Simon's been able to ask for help, if he ever has before. If the one time he did, he was ignored so harshly, it ruined him for every other opportunity.

Until now, maybe.

Until Wilhelm was searching his gaze and Simon was searching right back, hearts pounding for two completely different reasons.

"Fine. Okay," Wilhelm finally breathes out, missing just how comical Simon's surprised face is because he's trying to remain strong. Trying to protect himself. "But all the same conditions still apply, Simon. Even if you're... embarrassed to be seen with me, we still have to do the work and--"

"I'm not embarrassed," he's quick to clarify, Wilhelm's eyebrow shooting up at the blatant lie. "I'm not," he repeats.

Wilhelm shakes his head because it doesn't matter, not really, he understands after all these years even if it hurts.

"Well, whatever, that doesn't even matter," he says, "we just need to do the work. Next week we start, okay? No... No more bullshit, Simon."

The boy nods as a smirk pulls at his lips, watching as Wille's gaze quickly falls to them before back up to his eyes. There's a few moments of silence before-

"Did you just curse?" Simon asks, a shit eating smirk covering his smug, beautiful face.

Wilhelm only rolls his eyes and shoves the boy out of his way, forever grateful his back is to Simon as he smiles. Feels that familiar pink twinge on his cheeks and feels a stupid, stupid, *stupid* warm feeling blooming in his chest.

Simon feels it too, not sure if he wants to smile or grimace because what the fuck is Wille doing to him?

~

Ayub and Simon are walking home, intensely debriefing the interactions between them, Rosh and her new girlfriend-

"Yasmine!"

"Yasmina!" Simon shouts through the empty streets, laughter booming. "Bro, did you really go through the whole fucking night calling her the wrong name?"

"Her name is fucking Yasmine, *bro*!"

"No it's fucking not!"

Simon, Ayub and Rosh only lived a few blocks from one another but the school zones tragically left Simon in a different district, which left him living what felt like a double life.

He was still troubled the same way people at school knew him to be - the only difference was that Ayub and Rosh knew why. Ayub and Rosh knew the shit Simon's been through and how

long and debilitating his bouts of depression were.

They knew that Simon tried hard, he really did, but sometimes the effects of trauma won and trauma sometimes makes you do shitty things - they always check him on that, though.

"I think Rosh really likes her," Ayub says, their old, dirty sneakers smacking on the street gravel.

It was cold tonight but not as cold as it should be, given that it was snowing a few weeks ago. It was only unbearable when the wind picked up.

"Did you notice she did that thing where..."

Simon can't help but notice when they come up on the eerie little cemetery they pass every time on their way to home. Any time he's making this walk alone, he tends to go around and make the trip 15 minutes longer, actively avoiding it.

There's something very unsettling to him about death and mourning.

Maybe because he's seen his father on the brink of death more than once.

Maybe because he always thought, if he found his dad dead once, a small part of him would feel relieved, dare he say happy, that he was gone.

It hurt to be hurt so much.

It hurt to be disappointed and that's all Micke was able to do.

It hurt that even the act of grieving, which Simon knows isn't linear and knows is different for everyone, his fuck up of a father had to make even more complicated for him.

He can hear Ayub going on and on about Rosh and all of her non-discrete tells when she likes a girl but catches the sight of a person under the streetlamp right outside the cemetery.

Something inside him tells him to stop, his feet slowing, when he sees Wilhelm open the old, iron gate and walk in alone. It's dark out, late, probably close to midnight, and Simon's intrigued.

He shouldn't be, he knows he shouldn't, but he is.

He also knows Ayub is the last person who should know this about Simon; his friend notices him stopped behind him, of course, words dying in his throat as he looks back at Simon.

He's staring into the cemetery, eyes wandering like he's following something (or someone) with his gaze.

"Yo, Simme," Ayub says, the boy looking to him quickly. "You good? See a ghost or something?"

"Yeah, no, I'm good," Simon says, knowing he should drop it and continue the walk. He's telling his feet to move, telling his brain to drop it, when his mouth just starts going. "Uh, you mind walking the rest on our own? I gotta go do something."

Ayub knows immediately that something's up, though, to be fair, how couldn't he when his friend wants to go into a cemetery at midnight?

There's a mix of amusement and intrigue in his gaze, looking back into the dark cemetery, seeing only headstones, trees and the faintest outline of a person.

He can barely see them but he's able to tell they're tall.

"I'm telling you right now, if you planned a booty call in the fucking cemetery, you're more fucked in the head than I thought, Simon."

"*You're* fucked in the head, it's not like that," Simon says, smirking despite himself as he pushes his friend away. "Go home, you sicko."

"You're the one meeting mystery boys in graveyards," he says, demanding to know more about this tomorrow before he goes off.

Simon shakes his head at Ayub, watching his friend disappear down the street before focusing on the slightly opened gate.

It only takes him a moment to make a final decision - a stupid, intrusive, slightly stalker-ish decision but a decision no less; he finds Wille with shocking ease, walking up and down the grassy, overgrown paths.

He's placed a blanket in front of one particular headstone, his backpack off to the side and his head bowed in prayer.

If there's one thing that makes Simon more uncomfortable than the dead (or following sweater-vest wearing boys into dark areas), it's religion.

Not only because some people use it as a tool to hate, a tool to tell him he's wrong for loving who he loves, but because the concept of believing wholeheartedly in something that bears no proof is fascinating to him.

He doesn't think he believes in anything that much, except his philosophy that, in the end, when it really comes down to it, no one gives a fuck about you; he's found that one to be proven time and time again.

He waits until Wilhelm is done praying and placing books around him to speak.

"So, this is how you live on the edge, huh?" he asks, smirking when Wilhelm jumps, a surprised yelp leaving him. "Sneaking around a cemetery at night? Strange choice."

Wilhelm's surprised to see Simon standing a few feet away from him, his teasing, quiet voice pulling his lips into a smile.

He always looks good but he looks especially good tonight, blending into the night with black clothes and a beanie covering his coconut curls.

Tragic.

"No sneaking, I just walked right in," he says, gesturing to the world of the dead around him. "If anything, you snuck in. I didn't even hear you."

Simon smirks, making a habit of searching for a cigarette when he feels that particular feeling in his chest.

When Wille smiles or smirks or looks at him in a way that makes him feel something; he's cigarette-less again so he chooses to look around.

A large oak tree in the corner catches his attention, because he's trying not to notice just how many fucking headstones are around them right now.

"So, were you actually following me?" Wilhelm asks, causing him to rip his gaze away and look down at him. "Or are you here to see someone?"

A few beats of silence pass before he answers.

"Would it be weird to admit that I followed you?"

His quiet chuckle echoes through the night, through this place of mourning and sadness, and Simon can't help the quirk of his lips.

"Not much weirder than me spending my Saturday night in a cemetery, I suppose."

That gets a laugh out of Simon, nodding his head in agreement because "yeah, I guess that is weirder."

Wilhelm rolls his eyes, looking back down at the blanket in front of him.

He nervously toys with the books, with the ends of the soft fabric, and Simon just watches him as he stands there. A cold gust of wind howls around them and it kind of sounds like ghosts laughing at them.

A chill runs through Simon at the thought when Wille speaks again.

"You can sit, if you want."

"You can call me Wille, if you want."

For the same reason he followed him in here, for the same reason he's started calling him Wille and for the same reason he was about to lose his fucking mind when he stopped talking to him, Simon accepts the invitation and sits down.

He keeps a good distance between them, his butt just hanging off the edge in the grass and he can't help but stare at the headstone in front of him.

Erik Bernadotte. Beloved son and brother.

What the hell? Is that his-

"My brother," he says quietly, because it's hard not to know what he's thinking or what conclusions the boy next to him is coming to. "He died right before we moved here."

Simon feels a pang in his heart at the confession, mind flashing back to the nice new boy with messy blonde hair and no friends.

"Shit."

Wille nods, smiling only a little because he doesn't say he's sorry and a part of him appreciates that.

He knows people never know what to say, that that's a normal, good thing to say, but sometimes saying the unexpected is good too.

He sits criss-crossed, placing his chin on his cold, curled fist as he looks at the headstone.

"It feels weird. That he's buried here and not where we grew up." *Not with our mom*, he thinks but he can't bear to get into that right now either.

Simon nods because that actually makes sense. That does seem weird.

He peeks over and is surprised not to see sadness or sorrow but, instead, that same look of compassion and warmth Wilhelm seems to permanently wear on his face.

He's not sure if he's known it all along or is only noticing right now, with the moonlight shining on him, that Wilhelm's beautiful. He might be the most beautiful person he's ever seen and it seems to be a reflection of who he is inside too.

"Why do you come here then? If it feels weird?"

The question holds no malice or judgement, just kind of slipped out out of genuine curiosity.

Or maybe so he doesn't blurt out his *other* realization.

"To talk to him, I guess," he says, the loss five years ago but sometimes feeling like it was, both, yesterday and ages ago. Like it didn't really happen to him or he dreamt of Erik's existence. "He was my best friend, my only friend, and I think he'd wanna know what's going on in my life. Even though he always called me boring."

Simon doesn't smile even though Wilhelm does, because he thinks that might be the saddest thing he's ever heard.

"What do you talk to him about?"

For the fucking life of him, he can't understand why he's so interested in this. In Wille, all of the sudden.

He can't understand anything about what's been going on with him these past few weeks, maybe even months; if Wilhelm's surprised he doesn't show it.

Wilhelm's surprised but in a good way. He's just surprised that he's taking the lead in conversation, showing an interest.

He begs his heart to not take it the wrong way, that he's just setting himself up to be hurt, but it feels nice to have someone listen. Have someone be interested in him.

"Anything really. I tell him about school or my dad's sermons or what I did during the weekend. Sometimes, I'll just read. There's so many books that have come out that he's missed."

Simon nods because that's true.

The world keeps going on after someone dies and they miss so many things that you wouldn't even think about. His eyes shift over to the grave and he can't help but wonder how much this piece of stone has heard about his life.

Does he tell it how people treat him at school? How much he volunteers his time to help others and make them better? Maybe even how he's been trying to help him but might see him as a lost cause.

The sound of paper rustling snaps him out of his thoughts, noticing Wille with a pen in hand, scribbling down something in his note book. It's nosy and intrusive (he already followed him in here so that checks out) but he peaks over out of curiosity and reads:

"Bucket list?"

A smirk pulls at Wilhelm's lips, nodding his head as he scribbles down a number 4.

"Do you have one?" he asks quietly, meeting his eyes that are boring into his face.

His cold body warms at the idea of Simon watching him, a sick, secret sort of pleasure that the tables have turned if only just for the night.

"Can't say I do," Simon hums, eyes trailing over the boy next to him.

He's sure the pink twinge is from the cold but it makes him look pretty. So does the nervous look Wille gives him, gaze searching his face, his body, the same way.

Like they're tentatively, curiously observing the other, the blonde swallowing just as Simon licks at his cold, chapped lips.

"I have some stuff I wanna do, though."

Wilhelm will die here. He thought he had more time left but he's positive he's gonna die right here.

"L-like what?"

He blushes when he stutters and then blushes more when Simon smiles, looking down at the blanket and running his fingers over it.

It's the best kind of soft material, the type you touch in the store and know you need to buy because it'll soon be the only thing that keeps you warm at night. The only thing you'll be able to have beside you to feel safe.

Simon's playing with fire right now and he knows it. Things with Wilhelm are... unknown.

He doesn't quite know if they're friends, although they definitely don't feel like strangers or acquaintances anymore.

He doesn't know if that's a can of worms he even wants to open, knowing a part of him is slowly softening for the boy, has been softening and was probably already soft under all the jealousy and teenage angst.

He doesn't know if he could sink that low and take this boy he knows is too good for him. This boy he's hurt more than once and will probably disappointment again.

Because if there's one thing Simon Eriksson is good at, if there's one thing he was taught, it's disappointment.

"I don't know," is all he mumbles and he thinks about saying fuck it when Wille giggles beside him.

He rips out a piece of paper and doesn't shy away even the slightest bit when their cold fingertips brush.

"Writing it down might help," he says, placing the empty piece of paper and a pen between them.

His book is open in his lap and he smiles when, to no one's surprise, because Simon is way more nosy than he thought, his list is read aloud.

"Fall in love, see the ocean, get a tattoo..." number 4 is blank and Simon hums, curious as to what he was gonna put there before, apparently, losing bravery. "Get a tattoo?" he asks with a smirk, looking over at Wilhelm in amusement.

"What? Is that so hard to believe?" he asks, a mock expression of hurt on his face; he knows nothing would look more bizarre than him covered in tattoos.

Simon smiles at that very thought, a sleeve of colorful artwork on his arm, pastel sweater rolled up neatly.

"Kind of, yeah," he chuckles, Wille smiling sweetly beside him.

The air between them is different, charged with something new, and Simon can't lie and say he doesn't like it.

That it's not something causing him to smile more, hold back laughs more, that it's not something he ever expected to feel but especially with Wilhelm. Wille.

He needs Wille to stop laughing so his chest stops feeling weird.

"Why do you even have one, though?" Simon asks, because he's heard of bucket lists before but only in tragic cases. "Don't only people who are like..." he cringes once he remembers where they are, surrounding by corpses who probably have no fucking idea what bucket lists are.

Or what books have come out since their untimely deaths but hear a sweet, soft voice reading to them every so often.

"Don't you only make bucket lists when you're gonna die? Get news that you have, like, a year left to live or some shit?"

Just like in the car that day, when he asked the boy why he doesn't care about what other people think about him, he doesn't think about how sadly cryptic the answer is.

How odd the dreary words sound coming from the mouth of a high school boy whose only cares should be about prom and college acceptance letters.

"I could only have a year left to live," he says softly, eyes moving to Erik's headstone. "I could even only have a month left. You never really know, do you?"

Simon can only nod after the words sink in, and he really digests them, because while they're true it's also-

"Damn, pretty fucking morbid, Wille."

A small chuckles leaves his mouth as he shrugs, gesturing to the hundreds of graves around them.

"I don't know, I think everyone here would agree with me."

He's never heard Simon laugh the way he does, loud and booming and so pretty, it sounds like a song.

The prettiest song that Wilhelm gets the knowledge of hearing, unreleased to the public but something he'll cherish. Something he'll remember the next time he comes to the cemetery to tell Erik all about.

He knows if Erik's ghost could talk, he'd be making fun of his pink cheeks right now.

"Good point," Simon says, once his laughter dies down and he's only smiling into the darkness.

He didn't know much about Wilhelm, he never cared to, but he's positive he's never met anyone like him in his life.

It's an odd place and time to learn about someone, to spend the rest of the night sharing shy smiles, stolen glances, and inappropriate laughter, but it happens nonetheless.

Simon makes sure the boy next to him isn't looking when he takes his pen, grazing his fingers as he does but Wilhelm too distracted by his book to notice, as he starts his list.

Simon's Bucket List:

1. kiss a boy in a sweater vest

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

made the executive decision to put all the fluff in this chapter bc the next two are... :/

The more Wilhelm and Simon talked, the more they liked each other.

Wille figured that night at the cemetery was a fluke. That if he ever dared mentioning it to Simon, he'd laugh in his face or feign confusion - he didn't ever in his life expect that, the following Monday, he'd plop down in the seat across from him at lunch like it was nothing.

Like it was their normal.

He looked, comically, really, from side to side in confusion, convinced that their budding friendship was just one big practical joke.

August, Henry and Vincent looked just as confused as him, faces pinched in disgust as they whispered and hit one another.

"Your friend's look confused," he mumbled to the boy quietly, because his heart is fragile and he can't handle this if it's not what he thinks. "You should probably go back."

Without missing a beat, Simon just shrugs and takes out a tattered black notebook.

"Fuck them."

Wilhelm's eyes widened at first, shock coursing through his body before he caught the look on Simon's face.

In his eyes.

They were once like dangerous, dark, hazardous storms that Wille never thought would be tamed.

They were calm now, though, the calmest he'd ever seen them. So deep and full of something more vulnerable that made Wille smile and Simon smile back.

They were like that then and they're still like that now, weeks later.

Wille can't even get out a "hi," when Simon sits down today, a look on his face he can't quite make out but the boy suddenly shyly holding out his notebook.

"I ... wrote some of the beginning last night. Of my assignment," he begins, before a look of contemplation crosses his face.

He takes a deep breath and looks unsure, eyes searching Wilhelm's face like he's looking for something specific there. Or something *not* there.

But Wille regards him as he always does - with kindness and patience and a genuine desire to help - and Simon finds himself able to share something he hasn't told anyone.

"I asked the teacher if I could write a song instead," he confesses quietly, like the loud cafeteria is gonna hear him. "I like music so I thought that'd be better."

Wilhelm smiles and it's full of pride and admiration. Simon didn't realize how much he needed someone to look at him like that.

"That's great, Simon," Wilhelm smiles and everything about it is so sickeningly genuine, Simon knows he can't share this with him here, in the crowded cafeteria where his *friends* are watching with confused, mocking expressions.

"Can I show you later?" He asks, licking over his lips before adding, "maybe... we can hang out for a little after tutoring?"

He catches the look in Wilhelm's eyes, something strange like hope, but it doesn't scare him.

Only makes him smile a little, knock their feet together teasingly under the table and smirk when Wilhelm blushes.

"I... yeah, sure, we can hang out, if you want."

Simon wants, so they do.

His mom isn't home so they go up to his room and Simon, at first, shows him the song on paper. Wille sits cross-legged on his bed while Simon sits in his gaming chair.

It feels weird but right for the boy to be here, to see a part of Simon that only Rosh and Ayub have seen.

To see parts that Rosh and Ayub haven't seen, because he's never shared his secret love of song writing or music with anyone.

"Simon, this is amazing," Wille says, looking up once he's reread it three times. "Really, this is so so good."

The boy looks down because something about receiving compliments is so fucking awkward to him. Maybe because, coming from Wille, it's so honest and true.

"It's alright," he says nonchalantly, "it could use some work and the teacher will probably find something wrong with it but it's just a stupid-"

The last thing he expects is for a pillow to be thrown in his face.

For *Wilhelm* to be sitting on his bed like he owns it with a shit eating grin and for the boy to throw his own pillow at his face.

There's a soft, teasing but ever so confident look in his eye and it makes Simon bite back a smile despite getting whipped in the face.

"Don't say that about your work, downplay it," Wilhelm says and if a person didn't know any better, they'd think Wilhelm was *tough*. "That's the best thing I've ever read and if the teacher can't see that, then she's-"

The pillow he just threw at Simon comes flying back at him, smacking him in the face and cutting off his compliments.

This sets off a war of pillows flyings and boyish shouting, Wille giggling and Simon cursing and one thing just leads to another before their clumsy, silly feet tangle and they land on Simon's bed with a plop.

The springs of his small twin bed frame squeak, curly haired atop the blonde and it's the closest they've ever been.

All Wille can smell is coconut, wafting in his nose and causing his heart to flutter.

Simon can make out every light speck of brown in Wille's eyes, thinking that's what makes him look so soft all the time - because that's the only word he can think to describe him.

Their eyes dance across the others face, falling to parted lips and peeking out tongues and when Wille reaches up, almost thoughtlessly, to fix one of Simon's curls, the boy who once thought of himself as the baddest bitch around almost whimpers.

Whimpering because a sweater vest wearing boy touches his hair, pushes it behind his ear in the gentlest of touches, the softest of movements, and he doesn't even care.

Because Wille slowly and then all at once weaseled his way into Simon's sad, jaded life, his black ink heart that, really, was just bruised and beaten so many times, it hurt to consider he could feel this. Feel this for someone and accept that someone could feel it for him.

"Can I tell you something?" Wille whispers, breath wafting over Simon's face.

He can only nod because his voice will quiver if he speaks, the whimper will break free and Simon will have no choice but to kiss Wille senseless.

"I always thought you were beautiful," he confesses, the boy unmoving from on top of him. "You scared me, because I thought you'd, like, beat me up if you knew that I thought so," Wille mutters, a laugh bursting out of Simon. "But yeah," Wille says, a smile pulling at his lips at Simon's laugh. At the way his curls are just as soft to the touch as he suspected. "You're beautiful. I like you."

He whispers the last three words and it feels like every crack in Simon's heart is momentarily filled.

He bites down on his lip, never thinking he'd have a moment like this. A moment of whispered confessions and giggles and pink cheeks. He never thought Wille would be the first to say it.

"Do you like me because I'm beautiful or do you like me because I'm nice?" Simon quips, "and thoughtful? And considerate? And-"

"Remember when you literally called me a theater nerd?"

Simon smiles despite himself, shaking his head as he looks over Wille. It should feel weird or awkward or uncomfortable to be on top of him like this but it feels too right. Too perfect. Too much like they'd waited way too long to do this.

"Can I tell you something?" Simon mimics because it seems unfair if he doesn't expose himself a little right now too.

Wille silently nods and Simon wonders, for a moment, if it's for the same reason as him.

"I think a part of me envies you. Has always envied you."

It's heavier than Wille's confession but that's okay. It should be. Simon's the one who's fucked up several times with him.

Simon's the one who hurt him more than once and was lucky to be given several chances. His fingers come up to stroke Wille's cheek, warm and pink and a few stray acne scars that do absolutely nothing to take away from his beauty.

"You're... so good, Wille. Sometimes, I'm not sure you're real," he says quietly, tone as gentle as his touch.

The pads of his fingertips are rough and his rings are cold when they hit Wille's face but it feels perfect all the same.

"I wish I could think like you, that people are good and there's... there's a reason to have hope."

That maybe, sometimes, people do give a shit about you. People won't disappoint you. That if you give someone a chance, they might surprise you and change life as you know it.

"Well, I'm definitely real," Wille smiles, his heart soaring at Simon's words and touch and the soft hue of brown. "It's easier to live that way, I think. A little bit of kindness and patience can go a long way. Makes life worth living."

Wilhelm sounds like he's lived multiple lives.

Sounds like he lives everyday like he could be dying the next and Simon will look back a few months from now and wonder how the fuck he didn't see it.

Hear it in the odd things Wille would say and just chalked it up to him being who he is.

To being so distracted because they're just teenagers falling in love, he simply missed it. Or wanted to miss it; if he had known, he would've tried to stop himself from loving him.

Actually, no. That's a lie, the biggest lie he's ever told.

Because when he mutters, "I like you too, Wille," his smile is worth it. His smile is worth the pain to come; the only pain right now was Ayub finding out and that's pain he could handle.

His sneaky, annoying, loud mouth fuck of a friend just happened to pull up when Wille was going home later that night.

He saw Simon walk the boy out to his car, the two walking closely, arms and hands brushing softly, playfully, and he can confidently say he'd never seen his friend smile like that.

Right when Wilhelm pulls away, he fucking starts. This is the problem he has with Ayub showing up unannounced all the time.

"Is that your cemetery boy? It is, isn't it? Holy fuck! Was he wearing a sweater vest? I didn't think your type was a motherfucker in a sweater-"

"Shut up," Simon growls, pushing his best friend and hoping he falls in the dirt. "They're cute."

Ayub looks at his friend like he's grown seven heads, eyes searching over him frantically; he's only met with a familiar scowl and if it weren't for that, he would've thought his friend was killed that night in the cemetery and replaced with a sappy, sweater vest loving imposter.

"I... did you just say they're cute? They're *cute*?" Ayub asks, head thrown back in laughter as his friend pushes him one final time and stomps into the house.

He can't not follow him, though, not even if he used all the restraint in his body.

"Simon, yo, get back here! Tell your best friend who the fuck stole your heart and why is it a guy in a sweater vest?"

~

After all the final tweaks, long nights in Simon's room and extra time in the library after study group, the song was due.

He and Wille had worked on it one last time in the library yesterday, Wille's hushed words of encouragement and assurance that he would absolutely get an A filling the boy with an unfamiliar feeling of pride and excitement.

He had worked hard, though, they both had, and he couldn't believe he was actually excited to hand in an assignment.

He was even more excited to show Wille the A+ on top of the paper the following week, walking into the library a few minutes before 3:15 and right up to Wille's table.

"Simon!" Wille squealed, not even thinking as he excitedly jumped up and wrapped his arms around the boy. He forgets how much shorter he is, his head hitting the top of his chest as his familiar scent fills his nose. "I *told* you it had to be an A!"

Simon can't even think with Wille's arms around him like this.

They'd been touchy ever since the soft confessions in his room, wandering hands and bumping arms and even a few stolen kisses on the cheek, but he couldn't explain how it felt to be wrapped up in Wille's arms.

To feel safe and cared for and protected, just because the boy was a little taller and full of such warmth inside and out.

He didn't stiffen, not even a little, if anything, he melted into Wille, but the boy still pulls back.

Still looks at Simon as his eyes flash with sorrow and he quietly apologizes. Everything about it makes Simon feel ashamed of himself, the center of his chest hit with a pang of guilt. He never wants to make Wille feel like that again.

Now, he only ever wants to be the reason Wille is happy and laughing and blushing and feeling like he's not so alone anymore.

Not one for PDA, especially with the students filing in, all of them already gossiping about the two boys, but needing to prove himself to Wille, he pulls him back in for a hug.

Wraps his arms around his waist and breathes him in, melting and humming into him further when, after a few seconds of shock, he hugs back.

It's so strangely intimate for what it seemed like - thanking someone for a good grade on an assignment - but they know it's so much more than that.

They know it's changing everything they worked to build since the beginning of this school year, the air buzzing and crackling between them as Simon mumbles lowly in his ear.

"Do one more thing for me?"

Wille pulls back to meet his gaze, so much emotion in them, and Simon finds it incredibly fucking difficult, way more difficult than writing a song and tutoring some kids, to not kiss him right now.

"Go out with me on Friday."

~

Wille knew his father was gonna give him a hard time.

In any other circumstance, in any other universe, the reason would seem to be incredibly obvious - the pastors son was going out with another boy, was very clearly falling in love with another boy.

The boy wasn't the problem, it never was for Wille's father, never would be, it was the other part.

The falling in love part.

The part where he knew how this was going to end and it'd be just another heartbreaking event for him to watch.

He saw with Erik and his girlfriend. He experienced it with him and his wife. He didn't know how he was going to watch it from the very promising, very sweet beginning with Wilhelm and this boy named Simon he couldn't stop talking about.

"Dad," Wilhelm whines, looking over his father who was hunched over in his chair.

"Wille," he sighs back, a lump already building in his throat. He thinks, after the past ten years of his life, it's permanently there. "I'm not comfortable with this."

"You're not even giving him a chance, dad," he says softly, eyes trained on the clock that reads 6:50. "He's gonna be here in ten minutes. He's gonna think it's because he's a boy."

Ludvig knew, just somehow knew, his youngest son wasn't straight.

He made it clear in their household that the religion he followed, the religion he preached and the religion he gave his son's the choice to believe in, held no room for hate.

Held no room to hold the bible, something sacred and meant to bring comfort and believers together, as a tool to spew hatred for people only trying to love who they love.

He knew the day would come and he didn't care. Not even a little bit. He wanted so badly for his son to experience love with the right person for him.

Until now.

Until this.

Until circumstance changes and now, Ludvig selfishly prayed that no one else would have to go through this.

"If you just told him, Wille, he'd understand why I'm-"

"Why? Why are you doing this right now?" Wille snaps. He usually doesn't do this, snap at his father (or anyone for that matter) but why?

Why does he have to bring this up now?

Why does he have to bring it up on the one night he's being a normal teenager?

Why can't he love and be loved back?

Ludvig wills the tears to wait just ten more minutes, ten more minutes until he can pray with tears in his eyes, and places his hand over his last remaining son's.

"I'm not trying to upset you, Wilhelm," he says, the gentle tone just an older, deeper version of Wille's. "I just don't know if you should start something with this boy when..."

"I'm fine. I feel fine."

He sighs as he looks at his young son, a mature boy growing into a man and that's when he sees that, yeah.

Maybe he is.

Maybe he looks fine and healthy for now.

Maybe he looks the happiest he has in weeks, months, years. Maybe all his praying and past tragedy will do something, spark a miracle.

I know you do," he says, pulling his hand back and running it through his thinning hair. "You didn't tell him, I'm assuming?"

"Of course not," he says quickly, shaking his head. "There's no need to tell him."

"No need to-" the words and exasperated tone dies in his throat, so he doesn't start a fight or upset his son before his first date.

Before he sees him interact with the boy who managed to take his shy, sweet, wallflower son out of his comfort zone.

"Wilhelm," he begins, his voice soft and gentle and Wille knows it all too well. Knows he used it when he told them his mom was sick, when Erik crashed his car, when the doctors wanted them to come in for an immediate follow up. "What if this gets more serious? What then?" He dares to ask this because he knows Wilhelm and he knows the way he loves.

A knock at the door causes them both to jump, Wilhelm's head snapping to the screen door and seeing Simon standing there with his hands in his pockets.

"Then we'll deal with that when it comes," he tells him, voice serious and hushed. "Just... please be nice, okay? He's important."

He can see that he is.

Can see the way the two smile at each other, can see how the boy looks at his son as he lets him in and how Wille chuckles lowly at something he says in passing.

He sees how easily he takes his wrist in his hand, dragging him over to Ludvig with a pleading, warning look in his eye.

"Hi, sir," Simon says, his voice deep, wary, but also somewhat friendly as he outreaches his hand. "It's nice to meet you, I'm-"

"Simon Eriksson," the older man finishes, taking the boy's hand in his and smiling as genuinely as Wille. "Wille's told me about you."

"Good things I hope."

"You wouldn't be here if they weren't."

"Dad," Wille flushes, Simon suppressing a smirk, both, because of Wille's reaction and his father's comment.

He was scared to meet a pastor, to date a pastors son, but now he's just scared because he sees this for what it is - a father and son who grieved together, a father and son who now only have each other left.

Wille told him his dad was protective, which is why he demanded to meet him face to face, and warned him this would happen.

"It's okay, Wille," Simon says, bumping his arm gently.

He meets the man's gaze and sees, underneath the friendliness and intrigue, he's concerned.

He wouldn't have seen that months ago. He would've seen that as him judging Simon, him thinking Simon wasn't good enough.

But he knows Wille, knows the effect he has on people. Knows how fiercely you wanna protect Wille once you really know him.

"Where are you guys going tonight? And how are you getting there?"

"Dad, I'm 17, this is getting a little-" one look from Ludvig and Wille's mumbling under his breath. "Just dinner. Like I told you five times."

"I borrowed my mom's car," Simon adds, "I've had my license for almost six months now."

Ludvig looks between them, notices the closeness and how comfortable they seem to be, and knows he has to get a fucking grip.

"Have a good night, boys. Be careful."

Wille couldn't have pulled Simon out of there faster if they were strapped to an airplane.

~

It was five minutes into dinner before Wilhelm asked for Simon to confirm that this was a date.

"You didn't think to ask this, oh, I don't know, before I met your pastor father?" Simon asks, eyes full of mirth as he looks at the boy across from him; he seemed to be more nervous than usual and now Simon was quickly understanding why.

"I don't know!" Wille squeaks, a complete and utter mess the longer he sat here in the restaurant.

Because he started to think back to when Simon asked him in the library, he only said "go out with me," that didn't necessarily translate directly to "go on a date with me," although maybe it did?

Wille didn't know. Wille never thought he'd like someone (and vice versa), let alone go on a date.

"I just... I've never been on a date before... if this is a date, which I'm still not sure by the way," Wille says, cheeks flaming before word vomit just- "if it's a date, I don't know what to talk about. Date conversation seems to be different than normal conversation and I, obviously, don't have any sort of practice because up until a few months ago, I didn't have any..." Simon gently kicks Wille's foot under the table and his lips press together so he doesn't outright laugh at his *date*.

Wille notices and takes footsy (because, yes, that's what they're doing, Simon's playing footsy with him) to an aggressive level.

"Stop laughing," Wille whines, a pout on his lips and holy fuck, Simon can't believe he hasn't properly kissed this boy yet.

"But you're cute, Wille," he says, brows wiggling playfully as he hooks an ankle around his.

As teasing and playful as he is, though, he can tell Wille may actually be uneasy. May actually be freaking out and really wondering whether Simon intended for this to be a date or not.

"Baby," he says, trying out a pet name because what else solidifies date status like cheesy pet names? Wille's red face immediately darkens.

"I need you to breathe for me, because there's nothing to worry about. This is a date, I intended it to be a date, and date conversation is very much like normal conversation."

It took Wille about five more minutes into the date to see that Simon was right.

Conversation was natural and so was their innocent touches. They laughed and teased and talked about their childhoods.

They got to know the stupid facts you learn about a person randomly, like their favorite color or what they'd take on a private island or why they hated their 2nd grade teacher.

They fought over the bill that Simon paid for because he asked, because he "didn't even ask properly enough for Wille to know this was a date."

They walked out of the restaurant toying with each others hands, Wille shyly looking down and watching as their fingers intertwined.

He was so distracted by how perfectly they fit, how right their hands looked together and how much bigger his were than Simon's, that he didn't realize they walked passed his car.

"Where are we going now?"

Simon's only watching him with a small smirk, probably from the permanent blush on his face and relishing in the fact that he's the one that put it there.

"You'll see."

The two of them walk hand-in-hand, dangerously running across the street per Simon abandoning the crosswalk signs for general safety and Wille still not knowing which direction they were going in.

"Do you have to *always* prove you're just such a cool rule-breaker?" Wille asks sarcastically, teasingly, shocking Simon who smirks at him.

"Rule-breaker, huh?" he hums lowly, making Wille's stomach swoop. "Is that what you *really* think of me? I got an A+ on my assignment, you know, and tutor kids in my spare time."

A deep, genuine laugh bubbles out of Wille's chest, his heart soaring because they may be joking and laughing but he knows how proud Simon really is of that (as he should).

How he now knows he's capable of succeeding and doing well and that people really do believe in him.

"Oh right, I'm sorry, my mistake," Wille teases, looking up at him to admire his smiling face in the setting sun.

It's sick how beautiful he is. How he knew this whole time how beautiful he was and is still struck by the realization every time he sees him.

He can see the exact moment something in his eyes change, his gaze focusing on something and looking at Wille curiously.

To all the places this boy could've taken him, like some sort of underground ring or a crazy house party, they're both standing in front of-

"A playground?" Wille asks, trying to contain the childlike excitement building in him.

He thinks he only mentioned it once in passing to Simon how much he missed going to playgrounds. How life just feels different, especially during sunset.

"Yeah, is that stupid?" he asks, an unsure smile on his face as he looks down to gauge the boy's reaction; Wille's pulling him into the park before he can prematurely proclaim his love for him, ignoring the 'no entry after dark' sign for peace of mind.

The two of them run around the playground like rowdy, unhinged children, racing down the slide and then chasing after the loser.

Playing on the seesaw and fearing for Simon's safety when he nearly flies up into the sky. He shouts again when they race, Wille catching him around the waist.

His hands dig into the boy's hips as he spins him around, pulling him close and burying his face in his neck from behind.

He breathes in his skin, a mixture of coconut and sweat, that's intoxicating.

That's why he begins to feel lightheaded, he convinces himself. No other reason.

Simon and his touch and his smell and his face and his laugh make him so deliriously happy, he becomes lightheaded. And out of breath. And starts to feel shaky and weak.

"What happened?" Simon asks, after Wille plops down on the swing and Simon kneels between his legs.

He helps steady the boy, holding the contraption until it's just barely moving. His hands are warm against the cool night air, against the fabric of Wille's pants as he rests them on his knees.

"Are you okay?" he asks, looking up at the boy with obvious concern.

He was fine one minute, chasing Simon and holding him, and then he looked like he was about to pass out.

"Yeah, of course, I'm fine," he says, leaning his head against the cold chain. "Just out of shape."

A scoff leaves Simon because he begs to differ - nothing about Wille looks out of shape and he tells him so.

"I'm serious, Simon, I'm fine," he whines because he is.

He's fine.

He feels perfectly fine now.

He feels more than fine, with Simon's thumbs gently rubbing over his knees and looking up at him with the softest brown eyes he's ever seen.

He's shocked that, at one point, he used to compare them to an unruly storm.

Simon sits on the swing next to him and they sway in a comfortable silence.

They admire the night sky and singing cicadas, how calm and content they both feel right now, just the two of them and no one else.

Wille looks over with his clammy head still against the cool chain and admires Simon, before the boy feels his gaze and looks over at him too.

There's still concern in his eyes because Simon can't shake how quickly lethargic he's become.

"Thank you for asking me on this date... that I now know was a date," Wille says, fully distracting Simon as a laugh bubbles out of him. "I had a lot of fun."

Simon smiles and reaches out to touch the boy's cheek, brows pulling together at how clammy he is to the touch. How, once the pinkness fades, he realizes just how pale Wille is.

He pushes the thoughts away, though, because he's smiling and happy and realizing this is the end of his first date that was definitely a date.

"Yeah?" Simon hums, gaze trapped on the beautiful, tired boy in front of him.

"Yeah," Wille says softly, snaking his hand over and grabbing Simon's with ease.

Intertwining their fingers like their hands were created to be held together and closing his eyes because it's like now he can properly rest since he's holding him.

Simon's not sure how long they sit there holding hands but he knows it's long enough for his mind to wander.

It only hit him a few minutes ago, because this place seemed so much bigger and scarier when he was a little kid, that he used to come with his dad.

He remembers it all so vividly now, his dad playing here with him for hours, running around like no other parent would and giving him so much attention, he felt like the luckiest little boy in the world.

Felt like his dad loved him so much, would do anything and everything for him no matter what.

"I used to come here a lot, you know."

He's not even sure he means to say it aloud. It just kind of slips out, in the calmness of the moment and with the comfort of Wille's body beside him.

"Oh yeah?" Wille mumbles, voice subdued as he pictures a young, exuberant Simon.

He remembers him when he was the new boy at 12-years-old, noticing a head full of messy curls and the brooding expression on his face.

He distinctly remembers smiling at him one day, because he didn't like how sad he appeared to be, and Simon scowling at him. The first of many scowls.

"Mhm," he hums back, and a very foreign, very untimely lump forms in his throat because he doesn't wanna say his next words.

Some part of him wants to share this with Wille, break down some unfamiliar, vulnerable side of him in an effort to show the boy he really is trying.

Really wants whatever this is to work.

But he's also scared, terrified, really, because it's also embarrassing. It's opening up feelings and thoughts he'd been running from since Micke's drug addiction and abuse started.

But because Wille seems to make him do things he never would be, since he brings out new parts of him more and more everyday, he continues. Slowly, but he continues.

"I used to come here with my dad," he says. Wille opens his eyes but doesn't look at the boy beside him yet. This is the first time he's ever mentioned a father, his family, really.

"That's sweet," Wille says softly, remembering how often his own dad would bring him and Erik to the park. Erik was older and starting to outgrow it but he still did it for his little brother. "He sounds like a good dad."

Simon laughs and Wille can tell it's not a real one, not a good one. It's a bitter scoff full of years of hurt.

He tightens his hold on Simon's hand, because he knows this can't be easy. This can't be something he's used to. But it's something he wants to share with Wille and he's incredibly grateful for that.

"He was, at some points, so I think that's what makes it so hard," Simon whispers, just the empty playground and spring air listening to them.

"If he was a piece of shit the whole time, it'd be easier to hate him. Because I want to Wille, fuck, I wanna hate him so fucking bad but I don't. Not completely, anyway."

Wille stays quiet because he knows he's not done but he squeezes Simon's hand again.

Keeps squeezing it gently, encouragingly, before rubbing over the tanned skin with his thumb, admiring the contrast of rough warmth.

"He's a junkie now, haven't seen him in years," Simon says, not sure if he's ever said it aloud to someone who wasn't his family or Ayub and Rosh.

"The last time I saw him, I begged him to stop and he said he would. He fucking said he would because he overdosed in front of me three times and knew I was fucked for life," Simon continues and Wille feels tears prick his eyes.

He thinks of a child finding their parent, crying to their parent, begging their parent to stop doing bad things because they don't understand what or how bad addiction is.

But it's not a child's place to help their parent. It's not a child's place to understand that.

"He could be dead for all I know," Simon says, although he has a feeling, somehow, somehow, Micke would fuck them over one last time and make sure they were made aware of his death.

One last bout of guilt that they could've done more for him.

Could've supported him more, could've helped him find a rehab for the 50th time and spared him the tears and disappointment when he relapsed again.

Could've taken the fights and yelling and not cry as a little boy gets thrown up against the wall by his drunk, drugged up father.

"Simon," Wille says softly, pulling their swings together so he can gently wrap his arm around him. His breathing seems to have steadied, warmth wafting over Simon's neck. "You know that wouldn't be your fault, right?"

Simon laughs because he thinks this boy might be a fucking mind reader.

"It wouldn't be your fault now and it wasn't your fault then. You're just a kid. He's the parent. Nothing about this situation is your fault."

Simon doesn't remember the last time he's felt this: tears building behind his eyes, throat clogging with the need to sob.

He leans against the boy and is transported right back to his car all those months ago, when his smell was overwhelming and he needed a cigarette to mask how much he liked it.

He can't speak yet so he breathes him once and then once more, letting his eyes fall shut for just a few moments.

Wille makes him vulnerable, makes him wanna be vulnerable, and it's like something he's never experienced before.

He can melt into the perfect boy beside him and not feel weird about it.

Can accept his comfort and how it makes him feel safe. Wille makes him feel safe and Simon doesn't know if he's ever truly felt that before.

"Where were you years ago, huh?" he mumbles against him, a humorless, scornful chuckle that makes Wille frown.

Because Simon knows exactly where he was. He was actively ignoring him, this angel of a boy, because he was too miserable and pissed off and envious of the kindness he possessed.

Too concerned that everyone, including him, found him to be weird.

Wille wants to secretly confess that he was there, right in front of him.

He was young and mourning and so alone but he would've done anything to help the curly-haired boy not look so mad at the world - he's doing that now, though.

Slowly, but surely, he wants to show Simon that the world and the people in it aren't so bad.

"I'm here now, if you'll have me," Wille mumbles, teasing but also not.

He squeezes Simon closer to him, smiles into his curls because they consistently smell so good and he's grown to be so fond of it.

The words nearly bring Simon to tears, focusing on the boy's thumb softly brushing over his hand.

It's what he needs to stay here in this moment, not get trapped in his head the way he does when he thinks about his life.

Because he can't get lost down that darkness, lost in the shit he's been thinking about and destroying his life over for years, when the light is here beside him, holding him gently and breathing him in.

He's never wanted to kiss someone just to kiss someone as bad as he does right now.

When Simon moves beside him, Wille thinks he's fucked up and stiffens, looking over to see Simon standing up to move in between his legs.

The swing sways ever so slightly under him, the shorter boy's hands wrapping around the chain links; it's the only time ever Wille has to look up at him but that's not what's making his heart quicken.

The way he's looking at him, sun setting low in the sky and Simon's skin shimmering like gold, is intense.

No one's ever looked at Wille this way. He never thought in his short life that anyone would look at him like this.

It makes his heart soar but also causes his cheeks to warm, the shy expression crossing his face causing Simon to smile and that does his heart in even more.

Wille thinks he's read about this before, the moment before a kiss.

It's happened between them before, their eyes dropping down to the others mouth, lustful tongues peeking out, but it's never been like this.

Never felt like this.

He's never been so close to something he's wanted so bad.

"I wanna kiss you," Simon says, because he sees Wille's nervous but curious. A pretty wide-eyed stare full of desire and longing as he swallows, licking over his cold pink lips.

"I... I might be bad at it," he whispers, voice caught in his throat.

And if that statement didn't make his heart soar in the best possible way, his eyes still proved to be the biggest weakness.

Proved to make a smile spread across Simon's face, a short chuckle leaving his mouth as he shakes his head bemused.

There's nothing bad about Wille, there couldn't be.

"That's not possible," he hums lowly, removing a hand from the chain to brush through his soft blonde hair.

He's waiting for permission, needs permission, needs Wille to make the first move in pulling him down and then Simon will do the rest.

A few moments full of sharp inhales and shaky exhales, wandering eyes and cold skin meeting, and then it happens.

A soft, slow, gentle press of their lips against the other, Wille leaning up while Simon leans down.

It's tentative and sweet and just a little bit awkward but it's everything a first kiss should be.

Everything their next kisses will be and more because, after this, after these moments, they both know there's no going back to how they used to be.

~

Date number two turned into date number six and then over the next few months, they both had started to lose count.

Just to fuck with Wille (and see the pretty blush creep up on his face) Simon made it obvious each and every time he was asking Wille out that he did, in fact, mean it as a date; Wille did the same, although shyer, with nowhere near as much mirth in his eyes.

If the boys weren't together at their respective homes doing homework and final projects in the living room, they were at the cemetery or playground.

Simon leant back against Wille's chest, laying comfortably between his legs. A blanket was usually spread under them as the blonde read quietly, or looked around and just soaked in the moment, until Simon would open his mouth and start exposing all of Wille's embarrassing moments to Erik.

Simon never thought he'd be the type of talk to someone at a cemetery, he found it weird and scary and all a little unreal, to be honest, but he knew Erik was important to Wille.

He knew that Wille spoke to him and he wanted to do it in return. Maybe wanted to show Erik, if he knew, if he really heard them out here somehow, that his brother had a friend now. Somewhere more than a friend.

Tonight's date was a surprise. A new location, too, because Simon warned Wille to clear his schedule for Saturday and that he'd asked his mom to take her car; Wille offered to drive but Simon said no, because he actually wants them to get there before they turn 40.

"Where are we going?" Wille had asked, sweet, amused smile directed right at him for all the cafeteria to see (and oh, did they see. Simon's old friends couldn't seem to look away and it was actually really fucking strange).

"You'll just have to show up Saturday and see," Simon said, ignoring the looks from his 'friends' and putting all his focus on Wille, Wille, Wille; that's all his fucking head sounded like these days and he didn't know how it was possible for him to become this type of person.

Wille showed up, of course, warmth and excitement buzzing through him, but didn't see much of anything.

Not when, fifteen minutes into the drive, Simon turns to him with a blindfold in his hand - he even had the audacity to laugh in Wille's face when he looked horrified.

"Oh, c'mon, you big baby," he says with a roll of his pretty brown eyes that just get lighter and happier each day. "Don't you trust me?"

He does, of course he does, so he takes the stupid blindfold with a pout and Simon pecks him on the cheek.

It feels like they're driving for over an hour when the car suddenly stops, a strange scent hitting his nose through the open window. It smells a little like salt, his eyebrows furrowing together.

"Simon, where the heck did you-"

"Just shut up and let me open the door for you, shit," Simon groans, cutting Wille's words off who bites back a smile.

He feels a familiar rough, smaller hand in his a few seconds later, a foreign softness squishing under his sneakers almost immediately.

Despite his protests and Simon feigning annoyance (because he keeps rubbing his thumb over his hand on the off chance he's getting anxious), the boy guides him for a few more minutes.

It's a quick walk to the sounds of crashing water and the chirping of a few angry seagulls, Wille's free hand quickly moving up to his face because no way did Simon Eriksson take him to see-

"Number three," he says, "see the-"

"Ocean," Wille gasps in amazement, taking in the vast body of water, blue skies and boats on the horizon he's only ever seen on tv.

He takes it all in, inhales the salty air and listens intently to the crashing of waves and stares so wide-eyed at the ocean, and it's just as amazing as he imagined.

It might not seem like a lot, like a big thing, to see the ocean, but Wille can't help but be fascinated by it.

By how much unexplored life is in this giant body of water and the way it just seems so unreal.

"I didn't just do this for you, by the way," he hears, that sarcastic, teasing tone he can positively say he's fallen in love with behind him. "I haven't seen it before either and I just thought-"

Wille can't control himself as he turns around and pulls Simon into him, hands covering his cheeks and his mouth devouring his; it's safe to say, with a lot of practice, Wille had gotten a lot better at kissing.

Simon smiles into it, wrapping his arms around Wille's waist as meets his boyfriend's lips with the same amount of passion.

Same amount of fervor and longing and the two of them just feel so right, Simon doesn't know for the life of him how he resisted him so long.

"I'm kidding," Simon says, pulling back once their lungs are screaming for air and their lips are red. "I did it for you. Completely for you. Feel free to thank me like that for the rest of the-"

Wille pushes the boy and he pushes him back, the look in his eye one Simon knows all too well so he drops the bag he packed, toes off his shoes, and runs off into the ocean.

Wille follows after doing the same, his chuckles and screeching of Simon's name quickly turning into yelps when his bare feet hit the cold water.

Simon pulls at his sweater just before he can run away, stretching out the material.

"This is my favorite sweater, Simon!" Wille whines even though "you say that about all of them, Wille! They can't all be your favorite."

He begs to differ, if the way he grabs Simon and dunks him in the water doesn't make that clear; Wille discovers that day that the only better thing than seeing the ocean for the first time is playing in it.

The waves pick up and it causes the boys to splash and chase and hold each other in the cold, stolen kisses and giggles in the others mouth as the salty air howls around them.

Simon's laugh echos on the beach when Wille screams at a fish swimming over his toe and Wille laughs back in karma when a piece of seaweed almost scares the life out of him.

But then, like usual, after they run around or play or spend a few moments frolicking around, Simon notices extreme fatigue come over Wille.

His hold on him will loosen, he'll start to sway, and he puts a heavy arm around Simon like he needs to be held up.

Wille always tells him that he's okay, that he just got tired, that he's out of shape and needs to start going to the gym, but it scares Simon.

Terrifies him.

He has to always carefully, obsessively, help Wille find a seat or set him down somewhere gently like a porcelain doll.

He guides him up the lumpy sand and puts out a blanket before helping him down, the blonde huffing over and over that he's okay.

"You're not okay, Wille, this happens a lot," Simon says with a frown, grabbing some towels he packed and wrapping them around their shoulders. "Have you seen a doctor?"

Guilt sits heavy, disgustingly, in Wille's stomach - but he's finally normal.

He just wants to be normal and going out with your boyfriend and doing things is so normal. It's what a 17-year-old boy should be doing.

"I'm okay, Simon," Wille whines with a pout, putting his arm around him and pulling him close.

Burying his face in his hair because the smell calms him and being close to him makes him feel better; it doesn't make him feel any less guilty but it makes him feel better.

Simon whines back because he has a feeling he's not but he also knows all of his emotions are skewed now because of Wille.

He didn't think he'd be the type to get like this when he's in love, he'd never been in love before, not even close, but he had no idea that it would feel so-

He's in love, he suddenly thinks, catching where his mind was just going.

He feels Wille press a kiss to his head and just looks over at him, eyes wandering over his devastatingly attractive side profile and grown out hair.

He loves him. He loves Wille.

He's fallen so tragically and devastatingly in love with Wille, it feels like he can't breathe. He had closed himself off for so long and, yet, letting Wille in seemed to just happen.

It couldn't not.

Because Wille is everything good in the world and Simon hated it. Couldn't see the good in anything until good looked him in the face and so sweetly called him out for only helping people when he was forced.

"What?" Wille asked, oblivious to Simon's thoughts and just how beautiful he is. To just how much he changed Simon's life and how he just realized in this moment he loves him.

"Nothing," Simon says, elbowing Wille softly and pecking him with pouted lips. "Just think about making an appointment, Wille. Please," he whines.

If Wille says anything else on the topic, he'll start to cry so he doesn't say anything. Just rests his head on Simon's shoulder with a quiet hum and looks out on the horizon.

The two are able to sit in silence so often and it feels like the most normal, peaceful thing in the world. Just having the other beside them, basking in their silent comfort and physical touch, is enough.

It's always enough.

Wille still can't quite believe it sometimes.

"I can't believe you took me to see the ocean," he mumbles, slight humor in his tone as he shakes his head.

He can't believe this is the same Simon Eriksson he was scared of most of his life.

"I don't know if you've noticed," Simon says, his head atop Wille's and his voice low, serious, despite his teasing, "but I like seeing you happy."

Love seeing him happy, actually, and completing his (albeit small) bucket list are one of the many things that make him happy.

"I like seeing you happy, t-"

"Which is why I have *another* surprise."

Wille's head nearly flies off his shoulder, his tall, lanky body seemingly getting a burst of energy as he shimmies in front of him, cross-legged and wide-eyed.

"Another surprise?" he squeaks excitedly, like a child on Christmas day.

"Yup, another surprise," he says teasingly, leaning over to grab his cold hand. "How would you feel about crossing another thing off that list?"

Wille looks at him skeptically, knowing the available things are fleeting (one left because he saw the ocean and fell in love) before his eyes widen.

"No."

Yes," Simon says, a shit-eating grin on his face. "I was thinking my name, right here," he says, trailing his finger up Wille's arm slowly, before swirling it around his sweater-covered bicep; it's June but this boy is always freezing and insists on wearing them. "What do you think? There's a few shops around here."

"I think you've lost your mind, Simon!" Wille yelps, because if he seriously thinks he's mentally prepared to get a tattoo, he's very wrong. "I- I, you can't just spring a tattoo on me like that."

"It's *your* list Wille," Simon shrugs, the pack of temporary tattoos feeling heavy in his back pocket. "A bucket list is a bucket list."

"Okay, yeah, but they're, like, merely *suggestions*," Wille whines, "dreams, aspirations, if you will, and I don't know how you think I'm in any way prepared to see the needle that's gonna

penetrate my arm with something for the rest of my life!"

Simon loves when he rambles so he lets the tattoos sit in his pocket, leaning back on his hand with a quirked eyebrow and growing smirk.

"Also, Simon, no offense, but I'm the one who taught *you* what a bucket list is! How are you gonna sit here and-"

A mix of paper and plastic hitting him in the face cuts off his words, looking at his boyfriend in mock outrage.

"What did you just throw at-"

"Maybe stop your fucking rambling and look, pretty boy," Simon says, only using that term because he wants to see Wille blush and for no other reasons like merit or affection.

Wille grabs the first sheet of paper resting by his foot, eyebrows pulled together curiously as he looks over the sheet.

A wide, gigantic, most probably crazy smile covers his face and Simon's heart feels like it's about to explode; maybe Ayub was right, maybe he died that night in the cemetery and was replaced by a romantic, sweater vest loving doppelgänger.

"These are perfect!" Wille says, always seeing these in the store but never thinking about getting them.

His head snaps up to Simon and he's overwhelmed by the feeling in chest, overcome with so much love and affection and warmth as he leans over and kisses him again.

He just wants to kiss him forever, kiss him always - if he had one wish, he wouldn't wish to live longer to live but to live longer just so he could kiss Simon.

Wille pulls back and Simon's light brown eyes are shining, the sun casting down on him and making him glow.

His lips are pulled into the softest, faintest smile he's ever seen the boy wear, the look in his eye so tender and sweet, Wille wants to kiss him again.

"Thank you," Wille mumbles, when their lips finally part and he manages to stop breathing Simon in.

"You're welcome, pretty boy," Simon teases, because he wants to see him blush again and that's the quickest, sure-fire way. "Which one do you want?"

Wille picked a purple butterfly while Simon picked an orange one, the both of them taking turns carefully placing it on the other's skin.

They touched each other with such delicacy, with such care, like the other would break if they weren't careful.

The most pleasant type of electric sparks shoot across their wrists as their fingers smoothed over the paper, Wille's cold hands making Simon wince and Simon's rough fingertips making Wille smile at the care behind them.

Time seems to stop for a little while after that.

Wille lays on the blanket, creating a makeshift pillow in the sand, and Simon rests on his chest.

He listens to steady sound of his strong, heartbeat and almost memorizes it. He swears he can hear a difference when his hand finds Wille's, playing with his long fingers before intertwining them.

He knows his own heart speeds up when Wille's thumb absentmindedly caresses over his hand, because he always does it and it never fails to make Simon smile.

Everything he's feeling is pouring out from the cracks in his heart.

Wille's been repairing it day by day, with his words and his smiles and the way he touches Simon with such care, and that's why it doesn't feel so scary.

Doesn't feel so grand and uncomfortably vulnerable.

Doesn't make Simon feel like he can't tell Wille right now that he loves him, because he thinks Wille might love him too and that's the most comforting thing of all.

To be loved by the person you love. To feel that they love you back without them even telling you.

"Wille?" Simon mumbles into his chest. The boy's eyes are closed as he hums a response, tightening his arm ever so slightly with a small, content smile.

"Mhm baby?"

"I love you."

~

The second Ludvig sees his son's tear-stained face, he knows.

"Did he tell you?"

Because he saw this one coming.

Knew it from the day Simon was in his living room picking Wille up and every day since that those boys were gonna fall in love.

The way they looked at each other was the picture of young love and Ludvig couldn't help but feel like he was helping contribute to this disaster.

Wilhelm can't even speak, can't even look at him, only nods before collapsing on the couch and burying his head in his hands.

"You knew this could happen, Wille," he says, not wanting to say he told him so but knowing from the start how reckless and tragic this was gonna be. "You have to tell him now. Be fair to him, son, please."

But nothing's fair.

Nothing about any of this is fair and Wille should've known his life was getting too good, feeling too happy and perfect like the book's he read.

He knew tragedy was coming but he didn't expect another person's heartbreak, the person he loves so much and doesn't wanna hurt, to be a part of it.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

additional TW: mentions of death, dying & cancer

Things probably should've felt more awkward than they did.

The day at the beach was bad, the car ride home was even worse, but the days after that felt shockingly... normal.

Because after a confession of love (Simon had never done one before, never fucking imagined that he would), tears seemed like they could be a normal thing: happy tears, emotional tears, tears of relief that the person you love actually loves you back.

That seems normal.

Nothing out of the ordinary - what did seem out of the ordinary, however, was Wille's reaction.

The tears that quickly surfaced in his eyes that Simon almost smiled at - almost made a teasing little remark about before he kissed them away and then kissed him on the mouth - until, all the sudden, they were streaming down his pale face.

Tears pouring out of him until he was drenched and his eyes were bloodshot.

Until he was sobbing so hard that he couldn't breathe and burying his face in the smaller boy's chest, sobbing "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," over and over again.

"Wille? Wille, please, what happened? It's okay," Simon said, pressing his lips against the top of the boy's head. "It's okay, Wille, it's okay if you don't-"

"It's not fucking okay," his voice broke and Simon's heart squeezed. "Because I do, too, Simon, of course I do, but it's not- it's... this is all my fault, I should've... I didn't think... I never expected to..."

Wille cursing was out of the ordinary, Wille cursing at him was even more bizarre.

Wille not being completely open and honest about what he was feeling, unable to because he couldn't stop crying, was definitely out of ordinary.

Simon held him and let him cry.

Simon kissed the top of his head and looked out at the ocean Wille seemed to be trying to fill with his tears.

Simon laid on that beach with him for God knows how long, until he was shivering and Wille was sleeping with a tear-stained face.

He looked so small and weak in Simon's arms, looked so defeated and sad but also so fucking beautiful it made his heart hurt.

He didn't know what caused him to cry, what caused him to apologize profusely and take fault, but he knew whatever pain he was experiencing in that moment was raw.

And true.

It hurt Wille to hear that Simon loved him - even though he wanted him to, even though he loved him back - and he can't imagine why.

Wille woke to burning eyes and soft kisses on his face.

He didn't forget about the confession, is sure he'll be haunted by it for the rest of his life which is numbered and fleeting, but it's nice to pretend for a moment.

Pretend he just fell asleep in Simon's arms because of the exciting, amazing day they had and not because he cried himself into a slumber.

They walked to the car wrapped around one another, nothing but silence and soft kisses and unanswered but pressing questions.

Simon needed to know why Wille was scared.

Wille needed to know, after this, after he breaks the news to him and the truth is out, if Simon will still love him - because it's asking a lot, he knows that.

It's a lot to ask a person if they'll continue to fall in love with someone who's dying. To put themselves - their heart, their soul, their most pure, vulnerable self - into someone who won't be here much longer to nurture that love.

To love them back the way they so desperately want to and the way Simon deserves.

Wille would if he could, he'd give anything in the world to stay now.

~

"Let's take our bets now," Vincent says, the boys crowding around their designated table. "Is he gonna sit with the freak today?"

"No shit, when was the last time he sat with us?" August sneers, bitterness and disgust in his tone. "He's definitely not."

The boys couldn't remember the last time Simon had hung out with them.

Usually, they'd skip class together to smoke or hang out at lunch but it's like he was just indifferent to them.

Not necessarily avoiding them, because he didn't care if they saw him at lunch with Jesus freak Wilhelm, but not making an effort to be with them either.

Henry didn't care, Vincent cared a little more, and August was the most perturbed.

He didn't know what he didn't like about Wilhelm, if it was how he carried himself in general or the way it seemed like he thought he was better than everyone because he was nice.

"He follows that kid around like a dog on a fucking leash," he continues, "it's fucking weird."

Henry and Vincent share a look because while they miss hanging out with Simon, and think it's incredibly odd he's with Wilhelm all the time, they also know he's always been a bit of a wanderer.

Simon was always quiet, almost standoffish with them, and only seemed to hang around because he wanted to smoke and destroy shit with them. They didn't know much about each other, only surface-level stuff, but they knew that Simon seemed a lot happier now.

They'd never seen him smile let alone the type of beaming, teasing, genuinely happy one he wears at that table with Wilhelm every day.

"I mean, they seemed to be good friends, probably more, I'm assuming," Vincent says, earning a scoff and side eye from Henry.

"Just because Simon's gay doesn't mean he can't have platonic male friends, Vincent."

The blonde can only shoot his friend a dirty, unimpressed look.

The three of them look over to see Simon and Wilhelm smiling at one another, hands toying with the others as their feet touch under the table.

"Oh really? Tell me, Henry," the boy says dryly, "does anything about *that* look platonic? I mean, for fucks sake, they look like they've been in love for years."

"Maybe they have," Henry says, "maybe Simon's been secretly pining but sweater-vest has been pining even more, because, hello, look at that nerd, and then maybe Simon threw him a bone and-"

"Can you two shut the fuck up for once?"

They don't know why August is so annoyed by this. They don't know why for half the period, he sits and stares with curled fists and a sneer on his face.

Why he mutters curses under his breath and pure disdain for Wilhelm - "he makes Simon get him his food now? Simon leaves us to be a food runner? You can just tell that fucking kid thinks he's so cool now."

What August doesn't know, what no one except Simon and Wille know, is that Simon only gets his boyfriend's food now because of how fatigued he's getting.

It'd gotten worse within the past week and a half and Simon is leaving Wille with absolutely no choice but to go to the doctor - "I don't care if I have to fucking drag you there by your beautiful long hair, Wille, you're going."

Simon tucks his hair behind his ear and something about the way Wille laughs sends August over the edge - in any other case, it would sound like jealousy.

It would seem like August had a secret little crush on Simon that went unrequited and now he's acting out in a jealous rage.

But everyone who knows August knows he doesn't like to be humiliated and what he considers humiliation vastly differs from what the average person finds humiliating.

A friend who was publicly in his friend group, who was known for hanging out with them and was held to a certain standard of degenerate behavior, not only leaving the group but leaving the group for a known goody-two-shoes church boy is unacceptable.

It's ridiculous high school politics but it's very real, if the way August gets up and makes his way over to Simon and Wilhelm's table means anything.

"Yo, what're you doing?" Henry calls out, concerned when August just waves him off and heads straight to the table a few feet away; he side-eyes Vincent because he knows nothing about this is gonna end well.

Simon and Wille are in the middle of debating which one of them would survive longer in a zombie apocalypse when Simon hears a familiar voice, his aura shifting, body stiffening, and Wilhelm swallows nervously.

If Wille thought he was scared of Simon before he fell in love with him, he was wrong, very wrong, because the feeling coursing through him when August towers over their table is nothing like the fear he got thinking about-

"Simon," the tall boy says, his voice seemingly nonchalant meaning even friendly, but his eyes dangerous.

Way more dangerous than stormy, beautiful brown eyes that were just misunderstood and needed to be loved.

"Hey, August," Simon says, his voice tight and cautious and one Wille hasn't heard from him in what feels like forever.

It makes his stomach churn uncomfortably; it churns even worse when August speaks again.

"So, are you done with this shit or what?"

After years of dealing with this, after years of being belittled and bullied, both, implicitly and explicitly, Wilhelm has a few courses of action.

Usually, he likes to just remove himself from the situation, smile politely before getting out and away before it becomes too much. But, now, this time, he has Simon beside him. He has his support and his words and his 'take no bullshit' attitude that will hopefully rub off on him.

It appears, not, though, since he drops his head and suddenly becomes very interested in his lap.

"What are you talking about?"

Simon's voice is shockingly neutral and calm, which scares Wille a bit more.

"You're kidding, right?" August scoffs, "you haven't sat with us in months. We haven't even hung out. You completely fucking ditched us and for what? For *who*?"

Wille's grateful he misses the sneer August throws his way, Simon standing to his feet and pushing the boy back. Just barely, it was more of a warning touch, but it still sends a very clear message.

"I didn't realize I had to hang out with you guys all the time," Simon says, sarcasm dripping.

"Nah, if you don't wanna chill that's cool, it's whatever, but like... the company you're keeping? You gotta be careful how that's gonna make you perceived."

"And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

Gone is cool, calm and collected and back is what Wilhelm knew was there. What he heard around school about Simon's fights and temper but never actually saw with his own eyes.

"Simon," he says warningly, voice barely above a whisper.

"It means what the *fuck* are you doing, man? Some kind of midlife crisis at 17 or something?" August asks, humor laced in his tone, like he's so fucking funny for being a bully. "Or charity work? What the hell are you hanging around this fucking weirdo for and-"

"Shut the fuck up."

"You shut the fuck up, it's weird, okay! Everyone thinks it's weird and people are talking."

No one's talking.

No one gives a shit about either of them.

No one's looking twice at them except for the asshole in front of them and Simon knows that for a fact.

"More weird than you getting pissed at me for hanging out with my boyfriend?" Simon spits, the topic of him and Wille not a secret, not even close. They're both proud to be boyfriends, proud to be where they are and proud to be with each other.

"Because that's actually the only weird fucking thing happening right now, August."

August and Simon have a stare down that can only be described as intense.

It's a standoff between two storms, two fiery tempers and two people who will refuse to back down and Wille just wants it to end before someone gets hurt.

Before Simon gets hurt and it'll be all his fault, because August wouldn't care if he left them for anyone but Wilhelm. Wilhelm's the problem.

He looks up in an attempt to catch his boyfriend's gaze, beg him to drop it so they can just leave, but freezes when August is the one to look at him.

Snap his oh so intimidating, not-so-friendly charismatic gaze over to him and work his much taller body around Simon so he can plop down next to Wille.

The blonde winces when he throws a heavy arm around him, pulls him close like they've been long time friends.

"So, you scored yourself a boyfriend, huh, you little freak?" August hums, Simon seething as he curses lowly at him again.

"Leave him alone, August."

The boy peeks up with a smirk, eyes widening as he looks between them.

"Damn. You two are a real thing, then, it seems. Little Simon here is about to bite my fucking head off for you, Wilhelm," he says, pulling him closer and winking. "What'd you do to climb the social ladder, huh? Is that what this is about?"

Of course he would think this is about popularity. Or gaining power.

Of course he doesn't think they could just like (love) each other as people.

"Uh, n-no, not at all," Wille stutters, blushing as he does so because it's so humiliating.

"Oh no? You *sure* you didn't do something to convince Simon, Wilhelm?" August hums, now just staying here saying shit to be a dick.

To see Wilhelm squirm and become uncomfortable.

To piss off Simon because who the fuck would ditch him for this bumbling mess of a boy?

"Because, if my memory serves me right, Simon didn't even wanna be seen with you all those months ago. He was sick by the idea, laughed in your face."

That wasn't true, though, Wille thinks. Simon didn't even look at him, couldn't even look at him. He didn't defend him, to be fair, but he also already forgave him for that.

That didn't matter anymore, in the grand scheme of who they were.

"August, I swear to fucking God if you don't stop talking to him, I'm gonna-"

"It's pretty fucking pathetic, Wilhelm, you look fucking sad," August continues, blocking out Simon's threats. "He's being your friend, maybe even your *boyfriend*, out of pity and you don't even see it. You actually think that someone would-"

He can't finish his sentence because he's thrown on the cafeteria floor with Simon standing over him.

August's head smacks off the tile and his loud "fuck!" echoes through the cafeteria that bursts into the typical chaos and excitement at first sight of a fight.

Chairs scrape against the floor as students scramble to get a better look, Vincent and Henry jump up because they knew this would happen and the lunch monitors run out to get security.

Simon curses lowly as he holds August down, channeling all his raw anger and rage at the boy.

"Get the fuck off me, you psycho!" August yelps, but Simon just hovers above him.

Somehow resists punching him over and over and just gives a warning shot to the face because way before Wille did Simon wanted to punch this kid in the fucking face - violence is never the answer, Simon believes that now, but, fuck, do some people just deserve a punch in the face.

Wille can only stare blankly, never seeing this side of Simon and almost not believing it's him for a moment. That this is the boy who kisses him sweetly and giggles into his neck.

Who loves when Wille falls asleep holding him in his arms, trapping him between his long, lanky limbs and breathing in his coconut curls.

Who would never do anything to hurt Wille but, apparently, wouldn't hesitate to-

"Yo, get your boy, what the fuck," Henry says, Wille not realizing he's talking to him because he's finding it hard to breathe and he feels so weak all the sudden.

He jumps up once he realizes, because Simon needs him, *Simon needs him*, and he can't have Simon get in trouble because of him.

"Simon, hey, Simon, stop," Wille says, standing up from his seat as he makes his way over.

There's a small crowd around watching, displeased because there's not nearly enough fists being thrown. Not nearly enough blood and gore and bruises being made, like it's a boxing ring and not a high school cafeteria.

"Simon, please," Wille begs and his voice is quiet just because he knows only Simon will hear him. Simon always hears him.

Everything seems so loud right now though. Loud and hot with the stuffy June weather and Wille's body feels so weak, he can barely keep his eyes open.

Can barely look at his boyfriend who he knows, once he sees his eyes, will stop. But he needs to keep them open.

Just a little longer.

Just needs to stay upright and keep his eyes from shutting so Simon can see him and he won't get in-

"Simon," is the last thing he utters before darkness takes him and he feels himself falling.

~

"Wille, Wille, please, baby, do you hear me?"

Simon's voice is frantic, even to his own ears. Simon's heart feels like it's about to beat out of his fucking chest because when Vincent of all fucking people caught Wille's teetering body, the world stopped and he heard or saw nothing else.

Didn't hear the gasping students or August yelling or the teacher's trying to separate them.

He only saw a limp Wille in Vincent's arms, Henry running over wide-eyed to help without even thinking.

They helped Simon drag him out to the car, the curly-haired boy swearing he never stopped saying "Wille," and "baby" and "open your eyes," the whole time.

He was trying to hold his shit together, trying to so fucking badly, but he was terrified. Shaking even with Wille safe in his lap, Vincent driving his car while Henry sat in the passenger seat.

He ran his hands over Wille's clammy face and blonde hair and, oh god, his face is so fucking clammy, Simon thinks he might start crying.

"What the fuck happened to him? Did you guys see anything at all?"

He already asked them this, he knows he did, because Henry had said at least three times he called out to Wille to get Simon and he stood up, then paled, wobbled like he tried to fight it but then passed out anyway.

"Fuck," Simon says, squeezing his eyes shut before looking back down at Wille and pushing his hands through his hair. Removing the locks from his sweaty, pale forehead.

"Wille, baby, what the fuck," he whispers, his throat clogging when his boyfriend's head silently lolls to the side in response.

The second the car pulls up and the boys are all helping to carry Wille out, Ludvig catches sight of them through the open window.

He nearly collapses alongside his son, barely able to register the fear and panic on Simon's face.

"What the hell happened?" he asks as he rushes out, not recognizing the two other boys carrying his son - his pale, sweaty, completely boneless son.

"I don't know, he- he passed out at school," Simon rushes out, feeling like he's about to vomit. Ludvig takes Henry's place as they drag Wille up the stairs and into the house, setting him down on the the couch.

"He- he's been so tired lately and gets winded out of fucking nowhere but he said it was nothing. He said he was fine and that he'd-"

"You have to go."

Simon assumes he's talking to Vincent and Henry, because they don't know Wille and he may be cautious, until he sees his eyes on him.

His wide, terrified, guilt-stricken eyes that he can't even comprehend right now because he's so panicked.

"With all due respect, sir, there's no fucking way that I'm-"

"You are," Ludvig responds, his voice harsh and firm in a way Simon's never heard; not that it scares him, not that he gives a fuck, when his boyfriend is passed out on the couch looking like death. "You shouldn't even be with him Simon, you two should've never-"

"What are you talking about?" Simon spits, his anger resurfacing tenfold.

Vincent and Henry can tell, side eyeing each other because nothing about this could get any more awkward.

"This is not the time or place for me to get into this Simon, I need to make sure Wilhelm is-"

"I'm staying with Wille."

"No, you're not."

Simon's jaw clenches and he's really, *really* trying to keep calm right now. Remember this is the man whose only son just passed out and is all he has left, but it's hard when Wille is all Simon has too.

Simon loves Wille, too, more than his father could ever understand. More than his father could-

"Is it because I'm gay?"

Because how could it not be?

How could that not be the reason him and Wille shouldn't be together?

He bought Wille here, is on the verge of tears because he's fucking terrified and loves him more than he ever thought possible so why the fuck else would a pastor not want his son's

boyfriend to be with him?

He didn't get those vibes from Ludvig, he really didn't, but people can hide a lot of shit about them.

Vincent and Henry cough awkwardly, muttering Simon's name.

"Maybe it's time to go, man, you can-"

"No, fuck that," Simon says, ignoring the two boys trying to de-escalate the situation and keeping his eyes on Ludvig, trying to figure out how he got this man so wrong. "Why shouldn't I be with him? Give me one fucking reason other than the most obvious one, *pastor Bernadotte*."

He sees the anger surface in Ludvig's eyes and, for a second, he thinks he's taken it too far until he hears Wille groan in his sleep. Still rolled on his side with his eyes closed but almost sensing the tension and fighting.

Then he doesn't care one bit, doesn't care if he gets punched in the face by his boyfriend's dad, because nothing about being with Wille is wrong. Nothing could ever make it wrong.

"Simon, I wish, I *wish*, the biggest problem in my son's life is that he's in love with a boy," Ludvig says, throat tight, angry eyes sparkling like he's about to cry.

Simon can't fully understand why, doesn't understand his words enough to know why they're so heartbreaking.

Because then that would mean Wille had no problems in life. There would be nothing wrong with Wille.

He'd be in love and he'd still be breathing and Ludvig would be able to either watch their love grow and flourish as they aged or fondly remember his son's first boyfriend and how sweet their relationship was.

But instead, Ludvig knows this is it.

Simon will know what it was like to love Wille and be loved by him for a short time, only to never see or hold or touch him again.

It's a pain no one should go through, certainly not a parent who's already lost a son, but especially a 17-year-old boy navigating love for the first time.

Ludvig is only seconds away from crying staring at Simon whose eyes are flooded with every emotion but heartbreak and, for now, Ludvig will take it.

He'll take the rage and disgust and confusion and betrayal but he won't be able to take right now the devastation when this boy finds out his boyfriend is dying.

This isn't the time, isn't the place and Wilhelm needs to be the one to tell him.

The thoughts are only seconds away from making him cry, shaking his head because Simon can't find out this way. Wilhelm needs to tell him.

"What does that even mean?" Simon asks, because he's oblivious, the older man isn't making sense, and his beautiful boyfriend is still passed out on the couch. "What are you-"

"Go. *Now*, Simon," Ludvig demands, tone throaty and loud in a way he wasn't sure this man of God possessed. "If you ever wanna see Wille again, you will leave now. I have to bring him to the doctor."

It's an empty threat, he knows it, but he needs the boy to go, too.

"You can't fucking keep me from him, I-"

"Simon, man, let's go," Henry says, taking Simon by the arm and wincing when he immediately pushes him off; he may be small but he's stronger than he looks.

"No, I'm not going any-"

"Enough of this shit, Simon, your boy's not gonna get better if you're being fucking impossible."

Vincent's smarter than he looks, smarter than he lets on, and the word's get Simon to stop for a moment. With his guard down, body less tense and stubborn, the two boys seize the moment and drag Simon out of the house.

They don't let go despite his thrashing and cursing, despite the way he keeps looking back at the house like it's about to erupt, until he's in the backseat of his own car.

"What the fuck you two," Simon snaps, "how could you-"

"It's not your place, bro," Henry says quietly, lowly, but with a surprising amount of sympathy. "Wilhelm's his son and he looked to be in pretty bad-"

"I'm supposed to be there with him," Simon says and the pain in his voice is so palpable, like his heart is bleeding and he's coughing it up. "How am I not supposed to be there with him when he wakes up? Who the fuck does his dad think he-"

"That's exactly who the fuck he is, Simon, his dad," Vincent says, the harsher of the two always - because even as heartwarming and romantic as Simon's words are, Wilhelm's dad is still his dad and his son passed out.

Simon knows he's right, knows there's nothing insanely wrong about what Vincent's saying, but he's still pissed.

Still upset.

Still feeling like he's gonna break down into tears because he doesn't hear from Wille for hours - not until almost midnight and ten texts later.

Wille <3:

Hi. I'm okay. Sorry if I scared you :(

Can we talk about it in school on Monday? <3 My dad wants me to rest this weekend, not letting me go out :(

Love u <3

Simon smiles despite the way he felt ready to throw up all night - because the relief of knowing Wille's okay is like nothing he's ever felt before.

As long as he's okay, that's all that matters.

As long as Wille's okay.

~

Wille was putting it off and he knew it. He's not sure if Simon knew, because they really had no good place to seriously talk, but he was scared. Terrified, really.

Shaking and ready to cry at the thought of having this conversation.

Telling someone you're dying is scary, knowing you're dying is even scarier, but telling the person you love, the person that fell in love with you all the while your body was slowly deteriorating, is the scariest thing Wille will have to do in his 18 years.

"You scared the shit out of me, Wille," Simon mumbled against his chest at the beginning of the day, when they met before class and the halls were too crowded for Wilhelm to drop that bomb on him.

"I'm sorry," Wille whispered into his curls, inhaling the smell that's just now deemed Simon.

Not coconut but Simon.

He's sorry, he's sorry, he's so fucking sorry and he doesn't know how he's gonna do this. He doesn't know how any time is gonna be the right time.

Because lunch was as normal as it could be, with nosy gazes getting thrown their way and two surprise appearances that Wille would've laughed about if it were any other day.

"Hey, Wilhelm, we just wanted to say that we're, uh, we're glad you're okay," Henry says, Vincent standing beside him and nodding dumbly, like the other boy forced him to be there.

He must've caught the blonde's wary gaze though, looking around for August and not knowing just how scared he was of him until last week.

"He's not here," Vincent says, "don't worry, man."

A small smile pulls at his lips as he nods, his foot touching Simon's under the table. His boyfriend smiles back and nods his head, supposing that Vincent and Henry are actually okay.

"They helped me with you on Friday," Simon later explained before their tutoring sessions started, when Wille was still baffled by the olive branch and couldn't wrap his brain around why.

"Jumped in like it was nothing, actually pretty cool of them. I was a fucking mess, of course, so Vincent drove and holy shit you would've died seeing what a lunatic he was. A grandpa like you couldn't handle it."

Wille winces, biting back a sob as he begs, prays, for the tears not to come. Not yet. They've been lurking deep behind his sockets all day, all weekend.

The lump in his throat is just getting bigger and bigger and bigger, like his body knows how exhausting this is gonna be. Knows it's gonna be-

"Hey, you okay?"

Wille looks to Simon and smiles at the concern in his eyes, soft brown and full of such love, he can't help but grab his hand and squeeze.

Hold on for dear life and remember just how perfectly their hands fit, in case this is the last time he ever does.

"Yeah," Wille smiles, squeezing again and Simon would be concerned if he wasn't already.
"Yeah, I'm okay. We'll talk after, yeah?"

His voice breaks, just barely, but they both hear it, both know it, both squeeze the others hand at the same time and Wille can't believe he doesn't break down crying right there.

~

It felt like a sick twist of fate to tell Simon here, in the library where their relationship started and blossomed.

Where Simon saw just how kind and helpful and sweet Wille was.

Where Wille watched Simon improve himself week by week.

Where it really hit Simon, after Wille started to ignore him, just how much he'd grown to like the boy's presence.

They worked on his song together here after they grew closer, with blushes and coy smiles and banter like they'd been best friends for years.

Best friends turned lovers who fell hard and fast.

"So," Simon finally says, the library now empty except for them. He leans back on the table while Wille sits in front of him; he can't help but wonder if it's because he's feeling tired and fatigued. "What'd the doctor say? You went, right?"

Wille can only nod because if he speaks, he's gonna cry.

He's gonna break down worse than he did when Simon told him he loves him and he'll confess just how often he's been to the doctor within the past year.

Simon doesn't know any of this, though, doesn't know why his boyfriend isn't speaking yet but he's being patient.

Being gentle.

Being kind.

Being all the things Wille is with him and has taught him to be.

Wille tries several times to get *anything* out, any words at all, but he can't. He doesn't know what to say.

None of his books have ever shown this because Wille only exclusively reads stories with happy endings.

Stories where miracles happen and, if they were between the pages of fiction, Wille would miraculously be cured and he and Simon would live happily ever after.

But that's not what's gonna happen. Not even close.

"Wille?" Simon probes gently, the nerves in his stomach and panic he's been trying to push down all day resurfacing at the silence. At Wille's dejected, pale form.

At the way his boyfriend can't even look at him and just keeps his eyes trained on the floor.

He really starts to feel it, panic and dread in the center of his chest, when he lifts Wille by the chin and sees tears in his eyes.

"Wille, baby, you're freaking me out," he says softly, rubbing his thumb gently over his chin.

The lump in his throat is so big and tight, surprised he's still able to breathe with something that feels like such a big intrusion.

Surprised he can even see Simon when he looks up and blinks back tears, breathing out the words he's been dreading to say aloud.

"I'm... I'm sick," he begins, but it's not good enough. It's not the full truth.

He knows Simon is genuinely confused when his brows pull together and crease his beautiful, tan forehead.

Wille slowly, gently, like he's touching the most precious of glass, smooths out the crease on his boyfriend's face and then, he starts to cry.

Tears quickly escaping, running down his face, and sobs bursting out of him as he lets his head fall into Simon's stomach.

Breathes him in and keeps breathing him in to remind himself it's not over yet.

He's still breathing and it's not over yet.

The sobs sound so much like the ones from the beach but worse and now Simon knows something is wrong.

Terribly, horribly, disgustingly wrong and feels it in the pit of his aching stomach. Feels his own eyes burn with tears.

"Wille, what happened? What is happening?" he asks gently, wobbly, his hands falling into the boy's hair. "Please tell me."

Please tell me, Wille hears him beg, *please tell me*, he hears, his boyfriend's voice so earnest and soft and scared, he thinks he might be just as terrified as him.

But Simon's here, strong and comforting and holding him. Simon's here waiting for Wille to tell him.

Wille pulls back and wipes at his face, letting out one, shaky exhale before-

"I have leukemia."

Silence.

Complete and utter silence, apart from the lights buzzing above their head and the janitors outside the library whirling around a dirty mop bucket.

The words don't sink in at first for Simon, his racing, pounding heart the only reason he's convinced he just heard those words - his brain is not so convinced.

His brain, although supposed to be the logical part of him, is telling him there's no way his boyfriend just said that.

No way this is happening.

No way Wille, the only goodness he's found on this god forsaken Earth, has cancer.

"No," he says, shaking his head as a humorless laugh leaves his mouth. A scoff, really because, "n-no," he stutters, "you're- you're perfect, you can't-"

"I was diagnosed a year and half ago and I've stopped responding to treatments," Wille says, "I... I'm... I'm dying, Simon."

The doctors didn't seem hopeful when he began treatment in the first place.

That, even though he was young, it was unusually aggressive and a whirlpool of unfortunate circumstance, as if a teenager getting diagnosed with cancer isn't unfortunate enough.

Wille watches through teary eyes and a breaking heart Simon come to terms with it. Slowly digest his words and what they mean before his body goes slack, head falling into his hands.

Wille's face crumbles and he wants to hug him, kiss him, cry into him.

Never let him go because he can't ever imagine not being with him even though he's the one who's leaving.

He doesn't want to, he was indifferent before, he grew to be indifferent to death, but, fuck, now he doesn't want to.

He doesn't want to die.

Simon's head suddenly snaps up, tears in his eyes but the storms are also back. Wille hasn't seen them in forever, forgot how different he could look with them.

"And you... you're just deciding to tell me this?" he asks, his voice wet but harsh. Harsher than he wants and means to. "Why the fuck..." he takes a deep, calming breath, eyes briefly closing before snapping open again. Still stormy but maybe slightly less.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I didn't want you to feel weird or be- be different around me," Wille whispers, because nothing makes people more uncomfortable than looking at a person and knowing they're dying.

He saw it with the doctors, the nurses, even his own father; he couldn't bear to see it anymore.

"And I- I had accepted it. I said I was just gonna try to go on with my life and live it normally. The way I wanted. The best I could until I died quietly and no one-"

Simon springs up like the table got set on fire, the metal clattering beneath him and Wille jumping slightly in his seat.

It feels like his heart is slowly, painfully breaking as he watches Simon begin to pace around the room.

He kicks a chair that's half tucked in to the table and then kicks it again for good measure. To feel the pain in his toes, ricocheting through his foot.

He runs a hand through his curls before pulling slightly, letting out a mocking laugh of disdain.

His eyes move to Wille's, stare right into him, and the storms would've scared him if the tears weren't swarming in them.

If his eyes weren't so glassy and wet and full of pain, it makes a fresh set of tears build up.

"Die quietly," he snarls, his jaw ticking and tight and he wants so badly to punch something.

Wants to punch something until the word cancer doesn't exist and he didn't just hear it coming from his boyfriend's mouth.

"Die quietly. What the *fuck* does that even mean, Wilhelm?"

The use of his full name hurts more than anything.

Hurts more than telling him this, hurts more than what the situation is.

Because it brings him right back to a time where he didn't have Simon.

Where they didn't have this and things were so unsteady. Where he was just an unloved boy pining and Simon wasn't his.

Simon wasn't his and he was just Wilhelm.

"Why are you calling me that?" he asks, his teary voice so low, so muffled by that lump in his throat, Simon doesn't hear him.

He doesn't want to because he can't.

He can't.

He can't have cancer and he can't be dying.

He can't-

"You want to die quietly, whatever the fuck that means, and you accepted it. *You* accepted it," Simon says, rehashing the boy's words. "But do you expect *me* to accept that? Honestly, Wilhelm, do you fucking expect me to be okay with... with hearing this? With you knowing you're- that you're gonna-"

He can't say it. Not aloud.

He can't say the words 'you're' and 'dying' to Wille aloud in the same sentence.

He can't, he can't, he can't, he thinks, shaking his head as he rushes back over to Wille, kneeling down and placing his hands on his knees.

It's the same way they sat at the park, the same night as their first kiss.

The same night Simon knew without a doubt he was falling in love with Wille and nothing could stop it.

"Please, please, tell me you're not serious," he begs, his voice wavering and wet and broken.

He knows he is, knows no one would joke about this and that the signs were there.

The signs were there and he fucking saw it. Heard it in Wille's weird fucking words and just ignored it.

"Please tell me you're not... please, for the love of fucking god, tell me you didn't keep this from me."

He can't tell him that, so he doesn't say a word.

"For fucks sake, Wilhelm, why the fuck would you-"

"Stop calling me that."

"Why the *fuck* wouldn't you tell me?" he cries, shaking his head as the tears come.

The sobs come. The crushing feeling in his chest that is so fucking painful, he thinks he might die first.

"God damn it, Wilhelm, why the fuck are you-"

"Stop calling me that!"

It's like all the pain of this moment - of him finally telling the biggest, most heartbreaking secret to ever be told - is shouted through those words.

It's a raw, wet, heartbroken shout of pain and both boys just seem to stop for a moment.

Stop and stare through their tears together, see that they're here and see that they're breathing and see that, even though they're both so fucking hurt right now, they're holding each other so they don't completely fall apart.

It feels like they already have, though, feels like their hearts are broken and they'll never stop crying.

Feels like they'll never stop mumbling broken "I'm sorry"'s through the empty, eerily silent library until they can't speak anymore.

Until they just hold each other and cry, hold each other and sob, hold each other and shake their heads because, please, how is Simon supposed to go on after knowing what it's like to be loved by Wille?

How is Wille supposed to leave this world knowing what it's like to be loved by Simon?

This is the first time since he found out, the first time since accepting his inevitable fate, that Wille's scared to die.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

additional TW: major character death and a truly distressing letter that would've, personally, left me in shambles

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wille's condition worsens over the next few days, landing him in the hospital and Simon in a depression.

He didn't leave his room or eat for days, nobody able to get anything out of him and Linda getting increasingly concerned - as far as raising her children goes, she's done her best.

Done as well as all single mothers can do who work three jobs just to put food on the table.

Who feel endless mom guilt and worry about not being there enough, wondering if they've given them enough love and support but also strapped by the heavy responsibility of bills and basic needs and providing for someone other than herself.

"Simon," she said, popping her head in to see the usual sight - him in bed, seemingly lifeless, with eyes void of anything but a deep, haunting sadness.

She's seen her son sad before, is heartbroken to say she's seen him more sad and angry than happy throughout his life, but nothing like this. This is a type of sadness a person feels deep within their bones, that leaves them unable to do anything else but merely exist.

Linda knows that feeling all too well. Linda knows it takes a lot to get out of it, so she's patient.

She's patient and gentle and kind until she's so fear-stricken, she calls in reinforcements; Ayub and Rosh knew something was wrong, coming around (usually uninvited but welcomed with open arms nonetheless) to find Simon curled up in bed.

He barely looked at them, barely spoke, barely did anything to even acknowledge he knew that they were there.

"What happened?" Ayub asked Linda, who just looked at him with defeat and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, he hasn't said anything."

Ayub gave his friend a few days to go through whatever he was going through before busting down his door. He didn't say much, didn't go in with loud demands and theatrics the way he wanted to.

He just really looked at Simon who was curled up under the blanket, a stuffed bear he always slept with shoved in the corner. He sat down with a sigh, not sure how long they sat there in silence, his hand every so often rubbing his back or arm, before Simon moved.

He moved and that was good. A step in the right direction.

He flipped around and Ayub frowned because never in his life had he seen his best friend look anything less than attractive - it was irritating as fuck, how much attention he got and how much everyone knew, even Simon, that he was beautiful.

Now, his curls were matted and frizzy, his eyes were puffy and red like he'd never seen before, and the usual tan glow he had was dimmed.

Severely.

Like, somehow, his momentary lack of sunlight had already affected his vitamin d levels.

"Simme," Ayub says, when he flips around and looks up at his friend. "What happened? You look like shit. We're all worried about you, man."

No laugh, no smile, not even a quirk of his lips.

Simon just silently nods because, yeah, he knows. He knows he must look terrible because he feels it.

Fucking horrible, like he's not even real.

Like he's not even human. Feels the worst he's ever felt in his life and has no fucking idea what to do. He has no idea what the fuck to do because-

"Wille's dying," Simon blurts out, his voice scratchy from lack of use. "He- he has fucking leukemia, Ayub. Just told me a few days ago and I'm so-" he doesn't know what to say, he doesn't know what the fuck he is.

What the fuck he's feeling.

Doesn't know how to deal with this news and can't for the life of him understand how his boyfriend could've accepted it.

"I don't know what to do, Ayub. I don't know what the fuck to do. Or how to feel."

Ayub didn't know what he was expecting but in no way shape or form was it that - his best friend's first real boyfriend dying before they've even lived.

His best friend immediately crumbles into him and starts sobbing, tears soaking Ayub's shirt and the boy, at first, doesn't know what to do either.

He can't remember if he's ever seen Simon cry like this, not once in his whole fucked up life; even when Ayub came over just minutes after Micke overdosed the second time.

Simon looked empty, Simon looked dead inside, Simon looked defeated and disappointed but he never cried.

Not once. Never let a single tear fall but his tears won't stop now.

His sobs are so deep and guttural that Ayub wants to cry just hearing them. Hear how someone can be carrying so much pain inside them.

He hugs his best friend because it feels like the only thing he can do.

He can't say anything or offer advice or tell him it's gonna be okay but he can hug him. He can be silent strength and comfort for Simon until he's okay to talk more.

Or not talk at all.

Just crying is okay, too.

"He said he accepted it, that he was just trying to live out the rest of his life as normal as he could until he..." *died quietly*, the words echo in his head, "*and no one...*" and no one what?

No one know?

No one grieve him?

No one tell him over and over and over again how much they love him, how they'd do anything to take his place?

Because how the *fuck* is he supposed to be okay after this? How is he supposed to accept this? How is he supposed to go on with his life after knowing he could've been spending it with Wille?

"I love him, Ayub, fuck, I love him," Simon cries, shaking his head because it's so fucked up. It's all so fucked up. "I don't know how I'm supposed to- to be okay with this like he is. I don't know how I'm supposed to, just, go on with fucking life after he..."

He can't even say it. Can't even say the fucking words. Can't even think about it without his chest feeling like it's gonna cave in.

"I can't do this," Simon says, "I can't even say it, how do I-"

"He's still here."

Simon's sobs seem to just stop for a moment, hearing his friend beside him and looking up at him. At his words.

His eyebrows pull together, twinged with confusion, and Ayub would laugh at the look on his face in any other circumstance.

"What?"

Ayub's mouth betrays him in the form of a sad smile, realizing, in this moment, his friend was so caught up in the news, he didn't think about anything else but the inevitable loss.

He didn't think about how he was grieving Wille while he was still here; he throws a gentle arm around Simon and rubs his arms, letting out a sigh.

"He's still here, dude," his best friend says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "He's still here right now while you're in bed, mourning him already when he's alive and breathing. Don't you wanna, like, enjoy as much time with him while you still can? Make the most of what he's got left?"

It's like Simon was just slapped in the face by his best friend's uncharacteristically wise words.

It seems like it should be a fairly obvious sentiment, seems like the way you would wanna spend your time with the person you love if you knew their days were numbered.

Many people don't get that, the knowledge of knowing. Many people don't say everything they wanted to to their loved ones and they're left with regrets.

Simon has the chance to make sure he has none but instead he's here, rotting away in his dark room when he could be with Wille right now.

"When did you get so wise?" Simon asks, a hint of sarcasm in his still so broken tone and it makes Ayub laugh; his laugh has always been contagious and Simon's lips, for the first time in days, pulls into a smile.

"When did you get so ugly?" Ayub teases, ignoring the pain as his best friend elbows him in the side. "Get your ass in the shower so we can visit your boy."

~

Shockingly, Simon doesn't burst into tears when he sees Wille in his hospital bed.

His boyfriend looks pale and small under the white sheets, sunken brown eyes that light up the second he walks in and immediately, Simon feels like a piece of shit for throwing the fit he did.

"Simon," Wille smiles, his heart racing at the sight of him - for everyone to hear.

His heart monitor speeds up and despite everything, despite their fight and the days of silence and the fact that going through this will be the hardest thing both of them will do, Simon laughs.

A teasing, melodic, beautiful laugh that immediately causes Wille to blush and mumble, "shut up."

"Excited to see me?" Simon asks, smile fading ever so slightly because he should've been here days ago. Should've been supporting Wille the second he told him and kept his pity party until... later.

Until later.

He sits on the side of his bed and Wille smiles, immediately reaching for Simon's warm hand because he missed him.

He understood his boyfriend's reaction, almost expected it, so he wasn't mad. Could never be mad - but he also doesn't regret his choice in withholding the information either.

"I wasn't gonna say it but that stupid thing gave me away."

"It did," Simon laughs, a more breathy, small one that doesn't meet his eyes and makes Wille wanna frown.

His boyfriend squeezes his hand and then squeezes it again, similar to that day in the library. Similar to all the times they wanna comfort each other, or say something without actually saying it.

Building up the courage because a lot of their relationship has been heavy and the physical comfort is easy.

They hold hands in silence.

Wille pulls Simon close to him until he's almost on his chest, inhaling curls that smell like Simon, Simon, Simon and he can tell he just washed his hair.

Simon looks up when it feels like he might start crying, because his heart that was empty and bleeding and bruised feels so content now.

He traces over Wille's face with his thumb gently, his skin cold and clammy under his touch.

"I'm sorry."

It's not enough and apologies are shit, Simon knows that all too well, but it'd feel too wrong if he didn't say it.

If he didn't slightly acknowledge what a selfish, inconsiderate asshole he's been.

"It's okay," Wille says gently, shaking his head as he leans into his touch. Closes his eyes briefly like it's the most comfort and affection he's felt in days.

"It's not, Wille," Simon says, eyes blurring with tears, voice shaky, because of course he's saying it's okay.

Of course he's the one making Simon feel better even though he's the one in the hospital. Even though he's the one who's... dying. He's dying; and to really spend the remainder of the time Wille has, Simon knows he has to acknowledge this gut-wrenching fact.

"I was an asshole."

The last thing he expects is for Wille to *giggle*, fucking giggle like he always so cutely does, sunken eyes shining as Simon can only stare back at him with a baffled look.

"What could you possibly be giggling about right now?" Simon asks, exasperated, gesturing to him in the bed, around the hospital room, in such a similar fashion to Wille at the cemetery.

"Just that it takes me dying for you to admit that you're an asshole."

It's too soon for jokes if the way Simon's face falls is any indication of that.

If the way Wille feels his heart break at the sight of it and the fear of death, fear of leaving Simon on Earth without him, threatens to creep up on him. Wille smiles sadly, more of a pout, really, and Simon knows even through his tears that he looks cute.

"That was a joke," Wille mumbles, knocking his arm lightly in hopes to lighten the mood just a little; he could only imagine what his boyfriend was going through over these past few days, probably the same type of bed-ridden depression he experienced after first getting the diagnosis.

Simon's red-rimmed eyes leak tears and he shakes his head, finding it hard to respond with the massive lump in his throat.

"It's not funny."

Wille's heart breaks not only from the look on his boyfriend's face but the way he croaks the words out, reaching out to pull the boy back into him.

"C'mere," he mumbles, before he immediately falls into him.

Buries his head in his neck and inhales the smell of Wille.

There's an unfamiliar, sterile scent that sticks to him and it feels like it's trying to taunt Simon. Remind him of where they are right now, like he could ever fucking forget. Like he's ever gonna forget this type of tragic heartbreak, even though he's only 17.

Even though they're both so young but genuinely, whole-heartedly, all-consumingly in love.

Wille feels small drops of wetness fall on his skin and his heart just continues to break.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, mumbles, kisses the words into curls.

He's sorry for trying to joke because that's how he copes but obviously for Simon, it's harder. More raw and new.

He's sorry that he had to keep it from him, that he could've prevented this if he just told Simon from the start. He's sorry that the universe just worked out for them like this, that, for whatever reason, it was Wille's time to go soon.

"Don't," Simon says, pulling back with a wet, tear-stained face. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Wille."

He knows by the look his boyfriend gives him that he's not completely convinced; his reaction in the library and days after probably didn't help either.

"I was out of fucking line, Wille, even though I... I'm... I really still don't know how the fuck to accept this news. How I'm gonna be okay with it like you are," Simon says, his gaze roaming over Wille's face.

Wille sees the love, the agony, the fear, the overwhelming amount of emotion in his boyfriend's eyes and he feels like he's in the most tragic love story he would've never ever considered reading.

"But, if you'll have me, I'm gonna stay to the end. I want to be there for you," he continues, the words he thought over in the car after Ayub's extremely needed (and appreciated) wake up call. "I love you so fucking much, Wille, it's actually disgusting and debilitating and I never thought I would love anyone like this so please let me-"

As much as Wille is truly, honestly, enjoying this uncharacteristic burst of feelings (biting back a comment about how he would've told him about his eventual demise weeks ago to hear him talk like this), he needs to kiss him.

Wraps his hand gently around the boys neck, caressing his thumb over a vein, before pulling him down.

Their lips meet and all is right with the world again: Simon isn't heartbroken, Wille isn't dying, and the nurses trying so badly not to eavesdrop in the hallway aren't shedding tears.

Wille pulls back because he feels slightly breathless, both from the illness and Simon's general presence.

Their foreheads rest on the other, two sets of teary brown eyes meeting and they know they're gonna be okay.

It's gonna hurt, it's gonna fucking suck, it's gonna be the worst thing they've gone through - but they're gonna be okay. They have to be.

Of course, Wille's the first to break the silence only full of heavy breathing and giggles.

Simon rolls his eyes and pinches his arm oh so lightly, couldn't even be called a pinch, making it a point to look at the heart monitor that started speeding up right before their lips meet.

"This thing has it out for you," Simon says, his lips pulling into a wide smile as his boyfriend blushes. "You're lucky I just confessed my love for you or this would be, like, super fucking awkward for you."

"More awkward than you calling said love for me *disgusting*?" Wille asks, pulling Simon back down on his chest despite his teasing words. "This is like when you called me a nerd

when asking for my help. Or pretended you didn't like me in front of a reformed Henry and Vincent. Or when you-"

"Are you about to list every fucking thing I've ever done wrong?" Simon half snaps, half whines, a pout on his lips Wille has zero choice but to look down at.

"I don't know," Wille shrugs, humming contently against his boyfriend. "Might not have enough time for that."

The words slip out and he can tell Simon doesn't like it. Sees the way his lips quiver and his eyes dim but Simon just tightens his hold on him, muttering something under his breath before squeezing him closer again.

And again.

Because if that's the way Wille copes, then fine. Simon can deal with it. Will have to deal with it.

He just won't give Wille a moment to himself, bask in his comfort and presence and make sure he spends every waking moment with him, because that's how he'll cope.

They'll get through it together, no matter what.

~

Wille worked together with the nurses to ban Simon from the hospital in order for him to go to graduation.

His boyfriend wasn't happy, vehemently *insisting* that he would just sit outside the hospital until he was allowed back in - but it took one little pathetic pout from Wille saying he wanted to see Simon in his cap and gown that got him to go.

Linda thanked him when they visited later that day, Simon walking in with a frown on his face and plopping back down in his designated seat.

When Simon wasn't in school (he shortened his already shortened day to get to the hospital by 12), he'd been at the hospital; every nurse and doctor on the floor became incredibly familiar with the boys - they watched them with heavy hearts and soft smiles each and every day.

On the days Wille had energy, they walked hand-in-hand down the floor and in the garden and sometimes to the pediatric unit.

Seeing the kids was devastating, it was a similar pain to watching Wille get weaker and paler as each day passed, but it was also some of their happiest times in the hospital - because even though the children were sick, and knew they were sick, there was still fun to be had.

Wille and Simon read to them, painted, sat in the sun and talked (debated) for hours about their favorite movies and shows and school subjects.

Wille exposed Simon for not liking school that much and he felt the reign of little hands swatting at him, giggles ringing through the usual melancholy air.

On the days Wille was feeling tired, Simon could be found in bed beside him.

He didn't leave him for a single second, everyone questioning if Simon even possessed a bladder, until he was kicked out at 10 at the end of visiting hours; their two favorite night nurses, however, always made exceptions for them on weekends, warning Simon that he had five more minutes left and then never returning.

It was on one Saturday night, Wille fast asleep against Simon's shoulder, when he and Ludvig finally talked.

The older man came in with soup and bread his son had asked for less than twenty minutes ago, Ludvig's tired smile softening when he saw Wille sleeping soundly against his boyfriend.

Simon felt his heart ache at the sight of the man, red-rimmed eyes and dark bags that haven't seemed to leave since the start of his son's hospital visit.

He can't imagine what he must be feeling right now, can't imagine how he's getting through it with such grace, after having already lost one son.

"Did he just fall asleep?" Ludvig asks quietly, placing the bags down on the table. He hands Simon a cup of soup and he takes it with a quiet, "thanks," waiting until the older man is sat to continue speaking.

"Yeah, just passed out probably, like, 10 minutes ago. We were outside today for a while."

Ludvig nods and he wants to cry.

He always wants to cry now, could just spend his days crying and crying for obvious reasons, but something about Simon and Wille especially breaks him.

Simon's unwavering dedication, love, loyalty.

Simon never ever refusing to back down or run away, even though he knows how this is gonna end.

Simon coming each and every day and never leaving Wille's side, always making sure his son has a smile on his face when he's up and conscious.

He watched it with Erik and his girlfriend, who stayed at the hospital for those two days before he passed away from complications.

He lived it with him and Kristina, knowing how truly draining coming here day after day, night after night, is - but something about them is different.

Something about Wille and Simon is so different, so heartbreaking to watch but also incredibly heartwarming and sweet.

Ludvig comes here despite everything and smiles each time he sees them. Smiles because you can see, feel, how much love there is between them.

How even though it's so fucking gut-wrenching, it's also tragically beautiful.

"I haven't properly thanked you for everything, Simon," Ludvig says suddenly, Simon mid slurp as he looks at his boyfriend's father; he's about to say the man has absolutely nothing to thank him for until he speaks again. "And I also never apologized either."

Simon quirks a brow at the man, head cocked to the side as he observes him.

It feels wrong to have this grieving man apologize to him for anything, although he has a feeling it has to do with the day Wille passed out.

"Look, I get it," Simon says, because if Ludvig can handle himself with grace, Simon can too. He's trying. He's really trying, all for the boy snoring on him right now. "You don't have to-"

"I was trying to spare you from this, I... I didn't want anyone else involved in this heartbreak. It's..." the man sighs like he has the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Like his nearly three losses are catching up to him and he's not sure how he's gonna survive the last one.

His gaze moves to Wille and Simon feels tears burn the back of his eyes, lump building harshly in his throat - he went his whole fucking life not crying, his whole life that gave him nothing but reasons to cry, and now it's like he can't stop.

"I told him to tell you because I knew this would happen," Ludvig says with a soft, sad smile, gesturing to the two boys in bed. "I knew from the second you picked him up in our living room that night."

Simon thinks back to the day with a smile, the nervous energy buzzing between them. The sweet smiles and quiet chuckles as Wille comforted him about meeting his dad.

"I was scared to meet you."

"I know you were," Ludvig smirks, shaking his head fondly. "And yet, you still met me anyway."

Simon nods, looking next to him when Wille makes a small groan in his sleep. He smiles, a smile that proves to Ludvig just how much love is really there, just how much his inkling that first day was right, before pressing a kiss to the side of his boyfriend's head.

It should feel awkward, given that Wille's dad is watching but it's not. Not under these circumstances, when they both know what they're losing.

Who they're losing and how soon it's coming.

"He said you *insisted* on meeting me if we wanted to go out, so I had no choice," Simon laughs, shaking his head as he remembers the true horror of meeting another boy's parent, for

one, but meeting another boy's parent who's a pastor.

Remembers Wille five minutes into the date asking him if it was, in fact, a date; he feels his smile widen, another chuckle bubbling out of him. "I might've loved him then, now that I think about it."

Simon depraved himself of so much good, of all his potential, because he was hurting, but loving Wille, falling in love with him, didn't seem like a choice.

He couldn't have stopped even if he wanted to. Would have no desire to go back in time and change it if he could, even knowing they'd end up here.

"He loves you too," Ludvig says, softness in his tired eyes.

He won't expose his son, not yet anyway, but the name Simon Eriksson wasn't an unfamiliar one to him. He remembers Wille telling him about the boy when they first moved here, how he seemed so sad and angry even though they were just kids.

"I think he just might need a friend," Wille had said, and it broke Ludvig's heart then because he knew from the teachers and the counselor that Wille needed a friend, too.

"Wille's heart has always been pure. He's always had love to give but I think a part of him was scared, like we all are," Ludvig continues, although he's sure Simon already knows that.

Is sure that's one of the things that got the sad, angry, simply misunderstood boy to open up in the first place.

"But you helped him so much, Simon, during a time where he needed it more than ever and you didn't even know. Had no idea the impact you were making on him, what you were giving him before he passed on, and I can't thank you enough for that."

Both men are teary-eyed now, the lump in Simon's throat about to make him cry and Ludvig speaking through his.

"I'm just sorry that you have to go through this now," he says, paying no mind to the stray tear that rolls down his cheek. "I'm sorry that, sometimes, these things just happen and we have to accept them for what they are."

It's hard hearing that, hard making sense of why the fuck these terrible things happen, but Simon thinks hearing it from someone like Ludvig, someone who has experienced such profound losses, is reassuring.

It gives him hope for himself after.

Gives him hope that he'll be able to live a somewhat fulfilling life, instead of the bottomless pit of despair he first went through.

He doesn't tell Ludvig how much Wille has changed his life, too.

Doesn't tell him how his son completely, single-handedly changed the course of his life and made him a better person.

Because he knows he can see it. He knows everyone in his life is incredibly aware of the impact Wille made on Simon, including Wille himself.

"I'm sorry, too," Simon says, "I'm sorry for how much shit you've gone through. I-I can't even imagine..."

The words don't have to be said. Ludvig's heartbreak lingers in the air like the smell of antiseptic and Simon's is right there beside him.

Wille lets out another groan, as if to distract them from the sadness, burrowing himself into Simon's shoulder and throwing his arm around him for good measure.

To make sure he can't get away (like he ever would). Ludvig watches them with a soft look in his eye, looking from his son to Simon and the curly-haired boy feels a smirk tug at his lips.

"By the way, I owe you an apology too," Simon says, Ludvig's eyebrows furrowing together. "Didn't mean to imply you were, like, homophobic or anything that day. Bad move on my part."

Ludvig doesn't mean to wake Wille, he really doesn't, but a loud laugh just bubbles out of him. Echoes through the quiet hospital room and Simon can't help but chuckle back, even as Wille moans tiredly against him.

"Can you guys bond more quietly?" Wille grumbles lowly, speaking the words into Simon's skin. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Sorry, Wille, I was apologizing to your dad for implying he was homophobic."

Wille sleepily looks up at his boyfriend and blinks once, then twice, too out of it to catch the mirth in his eyes.

His head snaps over to his dad who's watching them just as fondly, biting back another loud bout of laughter.

"Dad, what did you say?" Wille whines, falling right back into Simon as the two ignore him completely, instead choosing to harass him to eat; to no one's surprise, Simon's the one who eventually convinces him, with the promise (demand) of feeding him every bite.

~

Wille's able to go home a few weeks after graduation.

Simon took up a permanent residence in the Bernadotte household in a way he never imagined - falling asleep and waking up beside Wille, cooking with Ludvig and learning all of his messy kitchen habits, talking and laughing and crying with his boyfriend as they either lounged around the house or worked up the energy to go to the cemetery to visit Erik.

They talked there about everything and nothing.

Tried to focus on all the good, on all the love, on all the memories they made together instead of focusing on the sadness that lingers like a raincloud above their heads.

Simon didn't confess how scared he was to live life after Wille.

Wille didn't confess how much he was starting to welcome the idea of death, because he's getting weaker and weaker and if he had to hear the hospital tell his boyfriend and dad to "make him comfortable" one more time, he would scream if his lungs were strong enough.

They both just made their love known.

Told the other how much they genuinely loved each other, how much they changed each others lives, how they'd do this all over again if given the choice.

Simon told him all of this and more, because he didn't want there to be any regrets or things he'd have to speak into the cold, lonely cemetery air whenever that time comes.

He tells Wille he loves him every day, every hour, what feels like every minute, and Wille's positive, even in his short 18 years of life (because he had made it to his 18th birthday) that he's heard those words more than most people hear them in a lifetime.

~

Wille takes his last breath on a late summer evening in August.

It was a peaceful, quiet death where he was surrounded by love and comfort and Simon and Ludvig couldn't have asked for anything better.

The days that followed were hard, some of the hardest Simon knows he will ever endure, but having Ludvig helped; Ludvig's previous losses didn't make this one any easier, he and Simon both still cried and sobbed like they were trying to fill an ocean, but it assured them they'd get through it.

Rosh and Ayub helped too, crying with him because it's all just so fucking sad and made sure to never leave him alone.

The boy picked up quite quickly on the 'Simon shifts' they alternated (going as far as to adjust their work schedules so one was free while the other wasn't) but he didn't say anything.

Didn't call them out because having them with him was one of the only things keeping him from that bottomless pit.

Day by day, week by week, month by month, until living with the pain became easier. It feels lighter but it's never completely gone.

He feels the loss of Wille everyday in the way his heart feels empty, in the way it feels like he doesn't laugh or smile as much as he did when he was here, but it's manageable.

He's able to live, somehow.

The days pass and he sees and feels Wille in little things every day - the sun shining just a little brighter, a gust of wind that just feels different, his face in a dream - and it's comforting.

Simon thought it would make things worse, make things harder, but some of his favorite moments are the ones where he feels Wille's soul with him.

~

Ludvig found the envelope addressed to Simon exactly two months after his son's death.

Simon just happened to be at the front door when he picked it up from under Wille's pillow, Ludvig greeting his son's boyfriend with a smile, envelope in hand.

"Are you about to pay me off to leave you alone?" Simon asks, quirkling a brow at the older man. "Because the answer is no."

Ludvig laughs because nothing has been helping him through this loss more than Simon's snarky attitude.

"I wouldn't even try," Ludvig says, turning the envelope to show Simon's name in Wille's chicken scratch. "He left one last thing for you. I just found it under his pillow."

It takes Simon almost a week to open the letter.

It never feels like the right time or place but, finally, after visiting Wille's grave with Ayub and Linda, he reads it alone in his room. He opens the purple letter with shaky hands and already tearing eyes, his heart stuttering at the weirdest of things like his boyfriend's handwriting.

Dear Simon,

The fullest, most honest warning that this will be just as sappy and dramatic as you'd expect any letter from a dead person to be, but especially a dead 18-year-old who was in love for the first time, so hold your scoffs and eye rolls please and thank you.

Simon already doesn't listen to Wille and rolls his eyes, although they're full of tears and he's smiling so he thinks it's excusable.

I decided to keep this under my pillow for you because I knew that, if my dad had finally started to touch my things, maybe enough time had passed and this letter wouldn't feel so sad. That being said, I hope you're not seeing this when you're 45 because that will be weird and probably untimely for the things I wanna say to you. You also might not even remember me if you're 45, so, hi old Simon, I'm Wilhelm but you can call me Wille, if you want.

A wet chuckle bubbles out of Simon as he shakes his head, wiping at the few stray tears that have escaped his eyes. This is gonna be so fucking hard.

If my thought process is right, though, I feel like I probably died a few months ago and that will be a fair amount of time for you to read this. For me to tell you all the things I want you to know - some of which we've definitely already talked about and some things I wanted to wait until I was gone to say. I don't even know where to begin, or how to really start this, because you're sleeping right next to me and I keep getting distracted by you.

Starting with I love you seems right but we say it 17,000 times a day so that seems pointless (but I do love you. I love you a lot and I hope that's portrayed be the end of this essay letter.

A loud laugh erupts out of Simon, a laugh he hasn't heard from himself since Wille died and it feels nice to laugh. Feels nice but strange for the noise to echo through his usually melancholy room.

There's a few endearing scribbles that follow down the page, like Wille didn't know what to say or really how to start.

But then once he found the words, his writing became more scribbled, more frantic, and Simon knows that can only mean the words are gonna be heartbreaking.

You can't imagine how comforting it was to die knowing I got to experience this type of love. That I loved stronger and harder and purer than most people get to in their lifetime, and was then lucky enough to be loved back by you, so I wanna say thank you.

Thank you for letting me experience that during my final moments of life. Thank you for helping me make the best moments I ever experienced here during my last year on Earth.

Thank you for giving me a chance even though I was the weird boy who liked books and sweater vests and you were the ~~cool, scary, troubled, terrifying~~ cute boy I noticed on the first day of middle school and silently pined for from afar.

You are the love of my life and will be that forever. Even though I'm gone, because if you're reading this that means I am, you're still the love of my life. Will always be, unless someone else stumbles upon my grave at some point and starts reading all the newest books to me and Erik - then your spot might be taken and I can only hope that they're as beautiful as you.

That being said, I ask something of you. Just one thing.

I know you're gonna get mad.

You'll probably get really angry and curse me out at my grave (because you now believe in talking to the dead, which is convenient) and you'll look for your pack of cigarettes in anger but that's fine (not the cigarettes, that's not fine) but I need to say this to you, Simon.

Grieve as long as you need to. Remember me however you can, however you want to and however feels right for you during the grieving process. However makes you get through the days and makes you feel as happy as you can be.

But when the time feels right, when your heart feels less broken and you find yourself ready to love again, do it.

Find someone who makes you happy and you can give all your love to. Who loves you the way you deserve.

Because being loved by you, Simon, might just be the best thing this shitty world that you hate has to offer and I want you, need you, to make it less shitty. It'll be easy for you to brood, because I know you're a secret musician and brooding is kind of your thing, but my dying wish is that you don't.

Grieve me, remember me, think fondly of me as your high school boyfriend and someone from your past but then live.

Do your best to love someone else and accept love in return because I know if our places were swapped, that would feel nearly impossible for me.

Would feel like the hardest thing in the world, almost harder than going on without you, but I would try to do it for you, if you asked.

So I'm asking.

Give this horrible, fucked up world you hate a chance and love, be vulnerable, don't close back up into that scared, jaded boy you once were because I promise people give a fuck about you. It'd be hard not to, almost impossible.

I'm sorry I wasn't able to love you longer. I would've loved you as long as you would've let me, I still will love you the same way a part of you might always love me if I'm lucky (although, my luck seems to be pretty shit, given the circumstances of this letter).

It's a strange thing, to be crying so hard you can barely breathe, can barely read the words ripping at Simon's heart but also laughing at the same time.

Because from the moment in that cemetery, probably even before, Simon knew he had never met anyone like Wille before.

He knows now, knew the moment he then allowed himself to love him, that he'll never meet anyone like Wille.

He may not ever love anyone the way he loved Wille or, at least, it feels like that right now - but Wille made him better. Wille showed him it's okay to love and be vulnerable.

Wille asked, even though he loved him, even in his last moments of life, to still try and accept love, accept being vulnerable, accept all the things that Simon was terrified of and only grew to be okay with because of Wille.

I hope you live a happy, fun, amazing life full of love, Simon, because no one deserves it more than you. Thank you for loving me until the end. Now, I'm gonna wake you up and tell you I love you for the 900th time today.

Love always, Wille <3

Simon's pulled from his slumber in his favorite type of way - wet, loud, borderline annoying if he wasn't so in love, kisses on his face.

He pops open one eye and sees his boyfriend staring at him, brown eyes full of love and affection. Simon bites back a laugh as he stares back at Wille, knocking his arm lightly when he presses a final kiss to the tip of his nose.

"What are you doing?" he whines, both of their warm bodies sweaty under the covers, the humid July air sticking to their skin. "Why aren't you sleeping, Wille?"

"Because I love you," Wille whispers, like it's a secret just supposed to stay between them. Like everyone who knows them doesn't know it, see it, feel it. "I just wanted to tell you that I love you."

Simon can't not smile at that response, even though it makes no sense. Even though he just fully woke him from a slumber to randomly tell him what they say to each other every second of the day .

He could never be annoyed, not even a little. He'll never get tired of hearing him say that, of feeling his stare, of his body threatening to overheat because they refuse to not touch.

Simon burrows himself closer to his boyfriend, wrapping his arms around his waist and closing his eyes contently when he feels Wille's head atop his.

"I love you, Wille."

Chapter End Notes

anyway, this was a terrible au idea and now i'm traumatized <3

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

additional TW: suicidal thoughts, survivors guilt, anxiety/panic attacks

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

There were two things an 18-year-old Simon Eriksson had gotten right: grief is not linear and the loss of Wille would, undoubtedly, be one of the hardest things he ever had to go through.

There were some days it scared Simon how sad he felt.

How surely the human body and mind couldn't actually handle this deep, aching, physically heart-wrenching pain he felt day in and day out.

He thought it would kill him; some days, he wished it did.

Simon never prayed - didn't even pray when Wille first told him the news to beg God for a miracle - but on the darkest of days, he prayed for the pain to kill him.

To finally just put him out of his misery because he couldn't go on without Wille. Had absolutely no desire to, despite the boy's dying wish to him.

He couldn't get out of bed some days, some weeks, basic needs like eating and brushing his teeth completely unattainable - but then, sometimes, grief was the ultimate gas lighter because the next week, or for even a few weeks, he'd feel slightly hopeful.

After plans with Rosh & Ayub (who dragged him out) or lunch with Ludvig (his conscience dragged him out for that one, because that man lost everyone he ever loved and managed to live) and it felt like he kind of had something to live for too.

Felt slightly less depressed and able to consider doing something with his life - college, music, a full time job - anything other than wasting away in grief and sorrow.

He'd only think about Wille on those good days a few times and it was always the happy memories - not the what ifs that taunted him, not the milestones he remembered Wille wouldn't experience with him, not the way Simon can't even think, can't even stomach, the idea of being with anyone else the same way.

"It's barely been a year, Simon," Ayub said one night on a video call because Simon couldn't drag himself out of bed. "No one is expecting you to move on yet."

That's what a 60-something-year-old widow had said in his group therapy on Thursday nights, a recommendation from Ludvig that, at first, Simon admits he didn't fully consider; he

resented the idea of therapy because he knew how severely he needed it.

Knew how severely the average person should seek out a therapist but especially a 19-year-old kid who grew up in a tumultuous household with an addict father, presents little to no coping skills, and is still intensely grieving the loss of his boyfriend - but going once with Ludvig (whose opinions and bits of advice he considers greatly) had shown him how important it is to be supported like that.

By people who know how it is, how devastating this type of loss really is, how empty you feel.

His pain feels like the heaviest in the world, maybe it is, because he just loves Wille that much, but it helps to know there are people like him.

It didn't cure him, not even close.

It didn't make the pain go away either, didn't 'fix' Simon and get him back to who he was before Wille, during Wille - there are still many days the grief is as heavy as it was when he watched the boy he loved take his last breath.

And it scares him too, that sentence - "no one is expecting you to move on yet" - because *yet* implies that one year is gonna be the year where his grief becomes too much: too ridiculous, too full of self-pity, too pathetic and stuck in the past.

People will look at Simon and secretly wonder what the fuck he's doing waiting for a ghost.

Grieving the memory of young love and a boy who died years ago and being somewhat detached from the reality that he has many, many years left of his life - more years than he was even with Wille, more years than he even knew Wille - and he can't spend them alone, unwilling to move on; everyone seemed to decide after three years without Wille, enough was enough.

The first year he barely remembers, the second was okay, he had finally started college and practicing self-care so people felt hopeful for him, but the third.

The third was his first downward spiral; the third year was a funny one too, because it felt like enough time had passed and with time, Simon could only get better, right?

~

"You couldn't have told me to, like, never cut my hair? Or not change my coconut shampoo?" Simon grumbles to his boyfriend's headstone one night, right beside Erik's where the memories of them laid out on a blanket continue to be a source of comfort.

"Why, Wille, why the fuck did you ask of me the one thing that's impossible without you? How could you even ask me to do that, I mean, seriously what the fuck is wrong with you? What the fuck is-"

"Stop yelling at him! Jesus, Simon," Ayub sighs, exasperated, flicking his best friend's head; he then pats the hard, cold stone of Wilhelm "Wille" Bernadotte. "Sorry, Wille. He doesn't

mean it.

"Yes I do."

They both knew he didn't. Both knew he wasn't mad at Wille. Not really, anyway.

He was more mad at the fact that, just last night, Rosh dropped the bomb on him that her girlfriend Yasmina (yes, Yasmina's back, seemingly for good this time) has a friend who's recently single and looking for a rebound.

Looking to be set up with him, specifically.

"He saw your picture on Rosh's Instagram and was immediately interested," she tells him, voice full of excitement, like she was setting up what was bound to be a successful blind date.

"He's cute, nice, has a good job already, tall," she continued, knocking her elbow playfully into him. "I think you two would get along, he was really happy to hear that you're single."

He knows it shouldn't have felt like a punch to the gut to hear that.

He knew it was a fact - that him being single held the same amount of truth as his name being Simon, age 21, currently studying music in Stockholm - but it still fucking killed him hearing it, hurt so bad; he still refers to Ludvig as his boyfriend's father for fucks sake, is he seriously ready to date someone?

"It'd just be one date, Simme, it's nothing that serious," Ayub said gently, reassuringly, wrapping his arm around his small, broken friend.

Ayub didn't know how long people usually mourned, has been lucky enough to not experience much loss in his life, but he sometimes fears Simon will never be the same; admittedly, he thought by now his best friend would feel better.

He's seen glimpses of the old Simon some nights, but, more often than not, it's like no time has passed since they were 18 and crying over Wille's casket. Ayub wasn't sure if that was normal or not but he was doing the best he could to understand his best friend through this... process.

"It- it feels wrong, Ayub," Simon whispers into the night, to the dead, to his boyfriend who wanted him to move on but didn't realize just how fucking hard that request would be; sometimes, on the darkest nights, in the darkest of moods, Simon found himself *mad* at Wille.

Because it was such a selfless, kind, *Wille* thing to do and it made him miss him more than his broken heart could handle.

It made him mad that he got to stay - the dark, the brooding, the bad, - and Wille - the light, pure selflessness, everything good that could be in this world - is gone.

"I know that sounds... fucking crazy, because it's been three years," Simon continues, knowing that grief is different for everyone, no one person grieves the same, all that shit he's been reminding himself but also keenly aware of what other people might think; even his best

friends, even his family, everyone but the people from group who know what its like. Who people think are wallowing when, really, they're all just as exhausted.

"But, fuck, it feels so wrong. I- it makes me sick, just thinking about. But I also don't know if that's just because I was like that before Wille. Since I never gave a fuck about dating."

Which is true. Probably the only slightly reassuring thing about all of this that doesn't have to do with Simon unhealthily coping, holding onto his loss; before Wille, he never dated.

Never thought he'd love and never felt the need to seek anyone out emotionally.

So does that mean I'm back to normal then? It must.

Simon scoffs at the voice in his head, looking over at Ayub who's watching him with a wary expression. It makes him more mad than selfless Wille telling him to move on.

"Stop looking at me like that."

"I'm scared, man. I'm worried about you," Ayub says honestly, so similar to that day in his room when Wille was first in the hospital and Simon was a permanent fixture in his bed. "We're all worried about you."

Simon scoffs before he can stop himself.

"You're all trying to pawn me off on some guy, how fucking worried could you really be?"

"We're not trying to pawn you off, Simme, we're trying to *help*," his friend responds, not blinking an eye at his tone, at the bite and anger in it. "Going on one little date and meeting someone new just to see what it's like might help. You'll really see where your head's at, see how you feel once you're there in the moment. It wouldn't be anything serious."

Simon knows there's some merit to his words, knows his brain (most certainly altered by grief and stress) could think of a million excuses for him to feel guilt and not be ready.

His heart feels like Simon's completely betraying who he'll know will always be there forever, no matter what. No matter how much time passes, teenage love or not.

Would it even be fair to someone else though? Is putting himself out there too early, when he knows he's not over his ex, selfish to do? After all, Yasmina says her friend Marcus is a genuinely nice, sweet guy.

Simon looks at Wille's headstone, still so clean and new-looking from him and Ludvig's care, and feels like he could cry.

"I don't like it."

Ayub wants to laugh at the almost whiney tone of his friend's voice, throwing an arm around the man beside him; Simon rarely allowed physical touch to comfort him until three years ago.

"You don't have to like it," Ayub says, trying to be wise and gentle for his friend who he knows has gone through so much. Who he knows is doing the best he can and was jaded even before this loss. "But it's good to try. It could go well."

They sit in silence for a few moments, or it could've been hours, he's not really sure. Simon's trying to block out the voice in his head that knows, just knows, it's not gonna go well.

"Fine," he finally chokes out, throat tight and eyes burning. "Fucking fine. I'll try. I'll go on a fucking date."

~

Trying to go on a date was a bad choice. Going to dinner was an even worse choice. Allowing himself, for a single second, to think about his and Wille's vaguely similar first date was what made the night go as terrible as it did.

"I've never been here before," Marcus says from across the table, his oh so attentive eyes roaming over Simon in a way he should've liked.

Marcus wasn't bad looking, quite the opposite. He was tall and imposing, which Simon usually enjoyed. He seemed kind and carried himself well and checked boxes Simon would assume were boxes that should've been checked; but something didn't feel right, something was off.

He didn't have eyes that were so kind, so good, his angelic soul shined through them.

He seemed to have first date etiquette down to a science, easily opening the conversation up in an attempt to get to know Simon. To tell Simon about himself. To show him just how interested he really was, like Rosh and Yasmina had suggested.

He wasn't blonde or blushing or fumbling cutely over his words.

"I just... I've never been on a date before... if this is a date, which I'm still not sure by the way," Wille says, cheeks flaming before word vomit just- "if it's a date, I don't know what to talk about. Date conversation seems to be different than normal conversation and I, obviously, don't have any sort of practice because up until a few months ago, I didn't have any..." Simon gently kicks Wille's foot under the table and his lips press together so he doesn't outright laugh at his date.

"So, you study music," Marcus says, ripping Simon from the memory.

It takes him a few seconds to register the man's words, obviously learning that from someone else because he sure as fuck didn't hear it from him.

"Do you like it?"

"Yeah, it's cool," Simon hums, hoping his attempt at a smile is convincing enough; maybe he'll just think Simon is shy. That he hasn't been on a date before and doesn't know about date conversation. "What do you do?"

He finds that if he keeps asking Marcus about himself, the man doesn't stop talking. He welcomes that type of one-sided conversation because then he doesn't have to speak, to try. He doesn't have to pretend that he's not sitting here waiting for this to be over because it all just confirms he's not ready for this shit; it could just be that Marcus isn't the one, although he should be.

Simon knows he should like Marcus.

Simon should be able to see that, maybe, this could be the man that helps put his heart back together; helps him understand that, while his heart may not ever be the same, it'll be less broken. He'll be able to laugh and love and feel happy again and he can move on to a different chapter of his life.

Simon should feel ready for all of that and more but he doesn't. Not even a little. He just wants to throw up and cry.

This date is different, too, because when it's over, Marcus pays; Simon paid last time because *"Wille! You didn't even know I asked you on a date, obviously I have to pay now."*

It's different because Simon in no way wants this date to be extended, arms bumping accidentally as they walk to their separate cars and not to a playground where he'll know he's fallen into a deep, fairytale-like love.

It's different because when Marcus leans against his car and looks down at Simon's lips, a smile pulling on his own, Simon knows he's gonna completely freak out.

"I had a good time tonight, Simon, I like you," he says, "and you look beautiful, by the way. Think I forgot to mention it because of the nerves."

Simon's stomach turns because this is wrong. It's all wrong.

"I always thought you were beautiful," Wille confesses, the boy unmoving from on top of him. "You scared me, because I thought you'd, like, beat me up if you knew that I thought so," he mutters, a laugh bursting out of Simon. "But yeah," Wille says, a smile pulling at his lips at Simon's laugh. At the way his curls are just as soft to the touch as he suspected. "You're beautiful. I like you."

Simon can't say anything because of the lump rapidly forming in his throat. It's a lump he's all too familiar with, and yet, it's about to choke him. Crush him. Finally put him out of his misery and hopefully-

He knows he didn't give a single signal that would've made Marcus think he wanted to kiss him - maybe all the questions about himself at dinner, just so he wouldn't have to talk to him - and yet, he sees the man's eyes drop back down to his lips, to his eyes, before he slowly starts to lean in for what he's assuming would be a short, chaste, first-date kiss.

Simon's heart twists and turns and squeezes so violently in his chest, tears start to burn the back of his eyes. He doesn't know if it's because of the palpable pain it's been in or the situation in general.

He moves when he can feel Marcus's breath waft over his skin, turning his head and stepping back with a quiet "I can't." Marcus backs up but regards him with a curious expression, like Simon had just begged him to plant one on him and is changing his mind.

"I'm sorry," Marcus says, still managing to be so composed and charismatic in the most awkward of situations. "I'm sorry if I... misread anything, I thought the date went-"

"It's fine," Simon blurts out, shaking his head because he just wants this to be over. He just wants to go home. He just wants to be with Wille, his boyfriend; he feels the tears break and holy shit, this couldn't be going worse right now. "It's okay, really, I just... I can't do this. I... I didn't know if I was ready and obviously I'm..."

He knows Marcus doesn't know what he's talking about. That he has no idea about Wille or why he's single and not ready or why this simple first date is so difficult for him. He couldn't tell him, couldn't put it out there, because it's hard and he just met him two hours ago - he just can't do it and that's the only explanation he has.

The only explanation he needs because *"you don't have to ever justify where you are in the grieving process. That's a process for you and you alone."* And if Simon's process seems to be a sickening, concerning trend of denial, anger and depression (with tiny glimpses of acceptance and hope that, sometimes, help his loved ones) for the past three years, then so be it.

He's fucking trying.

He came on this date tonight.

He's still here, living and breathing.

He has Wille's letter tucked away and reads it with the hopes that, one day, he can give his boyfriend what he asked of him. That he can, maybe-

"I know loss is hard. I'm sorry to hear about your ex," Marcus says, and it makes every fiber of Simon's being grow stiff. Cold, like his organs and blood have frozen over. How the fuck did he know? Rosh and Yasmina must've told him. Must've warned him in advance what a basketcase he's been.

"But I think he'd want you to be happy," Marcus continues, somehow unable to sense how utterly uncomfortable Simon is. How he's one step away from breaking out into a sprint so he doesn't drop to his knees and sob. "I think he'd want you to be able to live, after all these years. He'd want you to-"

Leave.

Simon turns around and leaves without saying a word, although his lungs are begging to *scream* at him. His hands are curled into fists begging his past violent self to just hit Marcus, once - it won't bring Wille back but fuck, would it feel good.

He doesn't know how he makes it to Rosh's with the tears streaming down his face. With the way he's crying the hardest he thinks he's cried since Wille's death and feels like he's about to have a panic attack.

He flies into Rosh's apartment like a storm, her and Yasmina on the couch and Ayub third wheeling on the floor in a pile of blankets.

"Ayo, is that you Simme? How was the-"

When he looks up at his best friend, he sees a wet, tear-stained face, heaving chest, and a red-eyed gaze he hasn't seen look that fucked up and dark since they were teenagers. Since the last time Micke threw him against a wall and almost strangled him lifeless.

"Fuck you," Simon spits, his voice croaking and broken and so fucking devastating, everyone can feel his pain; red, stormy eyes move from Ayub to the couple on the couch. "Fuck you, fuck you, and *fuck you!* Fuck all of you. How could you-"

"Whoa, whoa, what the fuck Simon?" Rosh spits, looking at Simon like he's grown seven heads bursting into her house like this. "What happened? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Between Rosh and Ayub, Rosh is always the one to humble Simon. To do tough love when needed. To coddle him when it's time to be coddled but then also tell him when he's gone too far - flying into her house and cursing them out is pretty high on that list.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" Simon laughs, a manic, breathy type of laugh he knows sounds unhinged. "*With me?* Really?" He scoffs, looking over Rosh and Yasmina and feeling a pang of jealousy. Of pure contempt because they're both happy together, alive, and getting a second chance so how can he not feel bitter over that right now?

"Yes, Simon, you!" Rosh yells, having no problem getting up and walking over to meet her best friend. "You just bulldozed in here cursing us out, do you think I'm not gonna-"

"I'm not ready! You both knew I wasn't fucking ready!"

It's a loud type of cry deep from his gut. A type of cry where you can hear pure pain and sorrow come out from deep within a person who's suffering, as if the look on Simon's distraught face isn't enough.

"You guys keep trying to push me. Keep looking at me like I'm fucking *crazy*, like I don't realize my boyfriend is fucking dead. Has been fucking dead for years," Simon says, like it's taking everything in him not to scream. Not to cry. Not to break down to the point of no turning back. "You forced me to go on that terrible fucking date with Marcus and I didn't even-"

"We didn't *force* you to do anything!" Rosh exclaims, eyes narrowing as she throws up her hands in innocence. She feels for her friend, she really does, she knows first hand how hard Wille's death has been on him. Wishes she could make the pain go away somehow and bring Wille back herself - but his therapy clearly isn't working.

"We thought it would help, Simon, we only ever want to help you. We love you and we're concerned about how you've been coping recently. We thought a non-serious date would-"

"Why did you tell him about Wille then?" Simon asks, his voice loud and booming but still shaking his tears, still with such a palpable tightness, he knows an anxiety attack will come on at any moment. "If it was so not serious, why would you tell him that? He- it was none of his fucking business and you both told him that."

Wille being dead is just as real a fact as Simon being single, age 21, studying music in Stockholm so he shouldn't be this upset about it. Not really. Sure, maybe he could be a little annoyed because they were obviously talking behind his back - but not to be malicious. Never to be malicious.

He knows his friends love him and have been patient with him. Know they're trying to be there for him in every way they can.

But it's all just so painful. And fucked up; the more Simon thinks about how his life has been these past few years, the more he sees how unfair it is.

How traumatized he is.

How he's so hopelessly lost in his grief, in his memories with Wille, he doesn't know how to actually move on from it even with all of the support he has.

"We didn't mean anything bad by it, Simon, we just-" Yasmina begins but Rosh cuts her off, shaking her head and placing a comforting hand on her best friend's shoulder; she's helped her best friend through so much shit and she's not about to stop now, even though she wants to rip him a new one.

Simon's also in a foul enough mood at yell at Yasmina and Rosh knows, if that happens, a fight she doesn't want to have will ensue.

"Yasmina's right, Simon, we didn't mean anything bad by it. It just... it happened to come up," Rosh says softly, which is the honest truth. "We just want you to be happy, we all want what's best for you and for you to feel okay again."

Because last year he had seemed good: he started school, he laughed, he smiled, he didn't seem to carry that heavy raincloud above his head as much.

There were still times of sorrow but it was nothing like the first year. Nothing like these past few months. Nothing at all like how he is right now.

"We want to help you and we're trying. We're trying so hard to help you and we thought getting you back out there, maybe going on a date, would help you-"

"Well, it didn't. It didn't fucking help. Nothing seems to be fucking helping," Simon cries, shaking his head because it's not fair. It's not fair and he wants Wille. Needs Wille. Misses him so fucking much that, even three years later, the realization still hits him this hard.

He misses his smell and his voice and fears that, day by day, he's forgetting what both are like. Misses his touch and longs for the dreams where he swears his boyfriend visits him, swears he feels his arms trailing up his neck and soft kisses on his eyelids. He misses being able to go on dates with him and feeling genuinely happy. Feeling so loved and getting to experience being in love and-

"I miss him."

Uttering those words seems to break Simon, breaks everyone in the room. Rosh catches Simon as he collapses into tears, into sobs, his head shaking back and forth, back and forth, because he can't deal with this pain.

He always said if he could go back in time and never fall in love with Wille, he wouldn't - because experiencing that love was like nothing he'd ever felt before; but right now, for the first time in his life, he almost wishes he could.

Because the pain is almost unbearable, living like this. Living everyday, grieving so unhealthily and in a way that's slowly destroying Simon as a person.

"I don't wanna feel like this anymore," he croaks between the sobs, Rosh cooing and shushing him as she gently ruffles his curls. "It hurts so fucking much, feeling like this everyday. But I- I can't not. I don't know how. I miss him, Rosh, I miss Wille. I miss him so fucking-"

"I know, Simme," she says, a tear escaping her eye as she catches Ayub on the other side of Simon. "I know," she coos again quietly, continuing the slow, caress of her hand against his hair.

"We're sorry," Ayub mutters quietly, in the room full of tears and hiccups and sniffles. "We're so, so sorry, Simme."

They all cry hunched over in a circle, Rosh and Ayub clutching each side of Simon and Yasmina offering a comforting (although slightly awkward) hand on his back when she joins them - it's the first and last time they try to get him to go on a date.

~

Between group bereavement therapy and individual weekly sessions followed by dinner with Ludvig, Simon felt himself improving. He knew it wasn't necessarily improving, because he's finding you just learn to live with the grief and pain, but thinking about Wille and the idea of moving on wasn't so debilitating. Didn't make him feel like he wanted to die or cry or scream or throw up.

Talking about Wille has become easier too. Actually helps a lot, sharing memories and keeping him alive in the form of stories that end with laughs and smiles and, of course, sometimes tears.

"He told me about you when we first moved here, you know," Ludvig said to him one night, Simon looking over at him across the dinner table.

"Oh?" Simon hummed, a smile pulling on his lips. He remembers Wille all too well as the new boy, remembers how cruel his 12-year-old mind was about the nerdy little boy with no friends.

"Yeah, he told me he thought you just needed a friend," Ludvig says, remembering his youngest son with a pure heart fondly. Remembers how he was always so good at reading people, feeling empathy, taking on someone's emotions on his own and helping them no matter what.

"You scared him a little, so he was hesitant to approach you," he continues, Simon snorting into his cup and the older man smiling softly. "But yeah... he noticed you then. I think he always liked you a little, but I didn't have the heart to confront him."

"I think I might've liked him too, but I just didn't let myself," Simon confessed, these conversations never feeling weird with Ludvig anymore. "He was just... so fucking good, and nice, I didn't believe someone could actually be that nice. It pissed me off."

Ludvig laughed because it was a very Simon thing to say.

He watched the young man get through his son's death in the best way he could, in the way that was right for him. Loss wasn't unfamiliar to Ludvig but it always hit just as hard so he understood. Understood the sorrow and guilt and feeling that, maybe, he just shouldn't go on. He has nothing to live for anymore.

Why should he get to live when his family, his sons, his pure, kind-hearted youngest Wille, is gone?

There was no reason, there couldn't be for something so cruel and unusual, but it's just what happened. How life is. And people can either choose to get through it or let it destroy them.

Ludvig always chose to get through it, somehow, if by the grace of God - but Simon got through it and then some. Simon got through it and learned to thrive, learned to laugh, learned to talk about Wille so openly and fondly, you can tell it's his pure love for him that got him through it.

That love is what made the loss so hard but it's also what helped him through it, in the end. What made Simon see he was meant to live a long, happy life full of love - accepting new love, remembering old love, falling in and out of love so many times because that's what people are meant to do.

Simon knows, just like Wille said in his letter, that he'll think back on them fondly and be grateful he got to experience that. Will always, always, always and forever hold Wille in a place in his heart and feel a type of first love, young love nostalgia that, even years later, might make him feel sad.

But that's okay. That's grief. That's experiencing something as pure and amazing like he and Wille had and then needing to move on from it, eventually.

He can miss him, he can love him, he can think fondly of him, but then he also has to live in the present.

~

Simon visited the cemetery the night before he left for New York. He had just graduated from college that spring at age 24 and had a plethora of opportunities ahead of him: a new city, a new life, a new place where he intended on making a name for himself.

He put down a blanket in front of the familiar graves he knew so well, just his backpack and Wille's letter beside him. The edges of the paper were slightly frayed, a few water spots from, both, tears and drinks, but it was still very much readable; even if it wasn't, Simon memorized every word. Can recite it word for word because it's the only thing he read for months.

He sits in the humid, late summer air, the sounds of crickets singing around him bringing an odd sense of comfort. He sits there with his thoughts, dusting off the dirt on the two Bernadotte headstones, before he finally searches his bag for a pen.

The same black tattered notebook from high school is in his lap, flipping to an empty page.

Dear Wille,

It's 45-year-old Simon and you were right. I have no idea who you are so this is kind of awkward but your letter made me cry anyway.

Simon can't help but cackle to himself in the empty cemetery, twiddling his pen like a middle schooler with a crush and not a grown man writing to a dead person.

Kidding. Of course I remember you. And I'm older, but not too old. I'm 24 and just graduated college. Took me a hot minute because I was traumatized by your death and all of that. There are still days I feel traumatized by it but I've gotten better. A lot better. I no longer sit here and curse you out at your grave, which I hope hasn't gone unnoticed.

Obviously I believe in talking to the dead now but your letter brings me such comfort that I wanted to write one for you too. Even though I'm gonna have to read it aloud to you anyway, I still wanted to write it down. I heard that sometimes might make it easier.

A smile tugs at his lips at the memory, the two of them sitting side by side, Wille's bucket list beside him as Simon worked on his.

I don't really know how to start this either, to be honest. I've read yours so many fucking times that I thought maybe I should just copy the format because yours is good. Really good. Never fails to make me fucking cry so thanks for that.

I could say I love you, I guess. I loved you then, more than I thought would be possible, and a part of me still loves you now. I guess you're lucky, even though you're dead, because I still do very much love you. If you have to know anything from this wack

fucking letter, just know that I still love you. Will always love you because loving you was the most unexpected thing in my shitty life that made it not so shitty anymore.

I still think this world is bullshit. There are some good parts I guess, like Ayub and Rosh and my family and your dad (who is one of my besties now). Music is good too. Really good. Was one of the things that helped get me through losing you. Because you were right, I'm an artist and I brooded but it worked out in my favor because I wrote so many sad fucking songs that are 100x better than the one I wrote in high school.

I wish I could sing them to you and see you react to them. Watch you react the same way you did that day in my room when I first showed you that song. I don't think I ever told you this but that was the first time I ever showed anyone a song I had written. Nobody even knew I liked music like that but, of course, I told you, Wille.

It's hard to write with tears in his eyes but he still does. Still tells Wille mostly everything about the past six years of his life - even the disastrous date with Marcus, that he wishes to never relive or retell again.

If all this shit is real, Wille, I know you must have heard me curse you out 10,000 times about asking me to move on. Like it'd just be that fucking easy. I was so mad, genuinely mad, got into my all time brooding musician moods about it.

But now, I understand. I understood then, too, but was so lost in my grief that it made me mad. It didn't seem fair that I got to stay while you were gone. You were everything that was good in the world, Wille, and I don't know if I can stress that enough to you. I don't know if wherever you are you're able to look back and reflect on just how true that is.

Your letter is way better than mine, by the way, because I think mine's a little more therapeutic than, you know, a dying declaration, but it feels good to do this anyway. It feels good to write this and act like, one day, you're gonna find this under my pillow too because I'm a sneaky little fuck.

Simon laughs through the tears and sighs, surprised to see just how much he's scribbled down the page.

Anyway, all of this aside, Wille, I wanted to thank you back too. Thank you for loving me even though I was a piece of shit to you so many times. Thank you for letting me experience what I was gonna deprive myself of because I felt like I didn't deserve it, didn't know how to love when loving you was actually the easiest thing I'd ever done.

Thank you for giving me permission to, eventually, find it in myself to move on and love again. Sometimes, I'm still not sure I'll be able to do that (because yeah, you were great but the options are also slim pickings) but hearing it from you was something I didn't know I'd need to hear one day.

The world is still fucked up, still horrible because it took you away from me and I'll never forgive it for that but I am also able to see the good in it now. To see how important it is to be vulnerable and love and give people a chance. You taught me that

but I'm gonna continue learning by myself, even though it's super fucking hard and not as natural as it was for you.

The sun is low in the sky, darkness about to fall, and Simon knows he has to leave soon. His flight leaves early tomorrow and he's meeting his friends for a farewell dinner. He ignores the pit in his stomach, the lump attempting to grow in his throat, and just continues to write. He writes his farewell to Wille that he'll read into the cemetery and then leave taped to the back in the same purple envelope he got Wille's letter in.

I'm not sure how long I'll be in New York for but I know, eventually, I'll find my way back one day. Thank you for loving me, Wille. Thank you for letting me love you until the end (and even after) and thank you for helping me see that, in my own time, in my own way, I'll be able to live that happy, amazing life you claim I deserve (which I do, I'm coming to see that now as well).

I can't rudely wake you up the way you did to me so I'll just tell you again, for the 10000th time, that I love you.

Love always, Simon <3

PS: I'm sorry I kind of fell off on reading books to you and Erik, I was doing it for a while (when I wasn't yelling at you, sorry about that again) but then life got busy which is kind of what you wanted anyways. I promise the next time I'm here, I'll bring a book with me.

Chapter End Notes

i've been lucky enough like ayub to never experience such profound loss in my life so i hope this seems like a realistic portrayal of the process <3 it was so sad to write and made me feel even more certain that this au idea was ridiculously sick, i will try 2 promise i won't write anything like this again

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