

# Winter's Gallows

## ONE: The Change

*"In the icy clutches of a cold winter, not a soul dares to wander outside into the violent atmosphere surrounding their safe havens. Even the most well prepared and skilled could never withstand the true fury of nature itself. Nature will always win in the end, as it has been said for generations. It does not matter how much we meddle, adapt, or fight it. Nature will take its course and reclaim what it loses. So why even try? The winter is nature's wrath manifested in an everlasting storm of bitterly cold infertile beauty and anger. They say nothing could beat its harshness. Nothing but nature itself. And it will always win."*

Lukan Benka put down the book that held this passage. It was titled "Reclamation of the Land" apparently about a natural apocalypse that renders technology useless and the planet reverts to its formerly purely natural state. Lukan enjoyed reading dystopian and apocalyptic novels about fur-kind's struggle against a doomed future. He held that fascination; often daydreaming to himself what would happen if "X" happened to his world and what kind of cataclysm would result. Lukan hastily stuffed the book into a backpack lying at his paws as he prepared to go to school for the day. He looked out the window and sighed. The ground was still covered in a blinding bright white layer of snow. Wind blew it around in many directions at once as if fighting itself over which direction it wanted to go. Looks like another fun walk to school.

Lukan is a raccoon and a college freshman trying to earn his way to a degree in literature, the only thing he believes he has talent in. He dreaded such a major because of the classes he was required to endure: a million and a half English classes with paper after paper after paper asking him to write about crap he doesn't give a crap about. Several times he debated to change his major just to avoid such copious amounts of paperwork. What he'd change to he did not know...

Lukan picked up his pack, sighed at the window, displaying to him a wintry wonderland of snow and wind that he would have to trek through, and swung the pack over his shoulders. His mother had already left for work. She works at the hospital. As a laundry aid. So early in the morning no less. Lukan hated the mornings. He did what he could to have his classes later in the day. Lukan looked over to his desk with a computer on it as he walked out of his room. It held the same old display of a character in his favorite novels about a strapping young fox who flees his home to find where he belongs whilst being haunted by a dark past.

In the living room was a short Christmas tree that was falling apart. Two chairs sat next to it facing a small TV that was slightly damaged from years of use. Lukan strode to the door and exited the apartment. He sighed to himself. Walking through the snowy wind outside was something he hated to do above a lot of others. But he had to do it. Puffing up his chest, Lukan strode down the stairs to the entrance of the complex. He barely touched that door before it swung open violently in the howling winds as if it were welcoming him to a blustery doom.

Lukan did not live near the college. He had to walk to the supermarket, that he happened to work at, where there is a bus stop, the bus of which stops there would take him there. Problem was that the supermarket was a mile and a half away, so Lukan dreaded the walk that much more. At least the snow did not pile up that high yet... he hoped.

By the time Lukan got to the highway ten minutes later, his fur was all over the place and messed up badly. He sighed to himself again upon realization. He did not want to imagine what he looked like at that point. He glared down both sides of the highway as he waited to cross. He wondered how many will try to run him down this time. For whatever reason, many of the drivers just love to home in on him to mow him down. Whether it was joking or not, Lukan could not help but feel contempt for these creatures. What is the big idea anyways!? Just because he looks like a homeless raccoon living on the streets doesn't make him a target for hit and run!

Lukan looked around as he crossed with an angry glow that covered the entire mask on his face. He felt himself breathing steam as he did. Lukan very strongly despised others much further than being a mere introvert. He did what he could to avoid people, barely talking to anybody. Most of the words he says are at himself. Some days he feels lonely. But he'd rather deal with that than the idiocy of others. He had no time or patience for all the selfish drama that would await him.

Upon reaching the supermarket, he was met by a group of smoking Dobermans that also waited for the bus. His anger grew even stronger. There was one thing he hated among others. Smoking. To him, he believed it was a crime to themselves as well as others for performing such a disgustingly abhorrent action. It did not help that his lungs were physically incapable of handling even a small whiff of the shit. He tossed the gang dirty looks as they waited. They took no notice however. How dare they befoul the air he needed to breathe, Lukan always thought to himself. Dare he voice that, he knew what would happen. He damned his powerlessness.

The bus pulled up into the parking lot next to an entrance to the market. Lukan instantly started towards it, getting his pass out from his pocket and flashing it at the aging lupine driver. Sitting down, he breathed a sigh of relief as he survived the harsh winds as he awaited the 45 minute bus ride to the college. As he did sit, he grabbed his MP3 player and plugged in heavy metal music that was just as angry at the world as he

was, how he had very little purpose in the world. He wanted to be an author but he constantly felt uninspired and unmotivated to do anything. It was mostly because of the anger and frustration he felt that was supposed fuel his inspiration. Oddly enough it has the opposite effect on him. Every day as he rode the bus, watching the small city of 60,000 fly past him, he thought these words every day. He knew he had to get his shit straight and do something about it.

Lukan shook his head as he got off the bus. But what would he do? What *could* a lowly, poor, ordinary, and powerless raccoon like him do to change his life at this point? He knew there was something. Anything. But he just could never discern any solid options. Lukan didn't even feel like going to class. He knew he was failing at least two of them. He felt it was pointless to even try to keep up. He felt like giving up on school for the time being to focus on working and saving money so he could start changing his life. He felt that was the only way; to raise money since it was the key issue in his way.

But after speculating all that, Lukan could not help but think there was something missing beyond that. Something money could do nothing to help him. What could possibly... when he finally achieves his dreams? Lukan strode to his math class before shaking the thoughts from his mind. Now was not the time to dwell on such topics.

Oh joy. His favorite. Trigonometry. Impossible it seemed for him. How it was so easy for everyone else he could not comprehend. After an hour of cosine this and tangent that, he set off for the following class. English!

Oh shit. A paper is due tomorrow! Lukan stopped dead in his tracks as he realized that he was only halfway done! ...with the rough draft! Lukan violently shook his head again. Now is not the time! He just hurried his way to his English class.

Oh thank God... it was something he could handle. Comma rules! When it came to commas and their laundry list of rules, Lukan only really struggled with comma splicing. And the only other thing was the instructor reminding the class about the paper that Lukan was anxious about.

Following that was his lunch hour. He just took his usual sub andwich from the shop, and ate at the circle table all by himself like he usually does.

Following that class was History. Ah how he was interested in the past, how success came to people and how the struggles they faced before reaching them. He always loved hypothesizing that he was going through a similar phase. The history class was more or less good in content, but hard with assignments. The teacher was interested in a project detailing the history of each classmate's families. Lukan had hardly a family to speak of. He only knew his mother and damned his father for being selfish, greedy, and a drunk smoker. Oh boy this project will hurt him, he assumed...

And finally, the only class he enjoyed. Japanese. Lukan held a strong fascination to the Japanese culture on top of its language. Of course he knew that despite the fascination, learning a new language would be the hardest thing ever. Just going to continue going over Hiragana and stuff before moving on to sentence structure as it is different than English.

Finally when the day ended Lukan instantly started off towards the bus stop to take him home. Another boring day has come and gone. Nothing new, nothing more than everything he's already seen before. Every day he swears that one day he was going to change his dreary life. But he's sworn that every day for the past decade it seemed! Nothing's changed. Every day the raccoon felt angry with himself for continually doing nothing. But he just did not know where to begin. How could anyone as powerless as he was change his life for the better? It was impossible! Such successes only exist in stories. Happy endings don't exist or everyone. It was that attitude that convinced Lukan that that was why nothing was going his way. He knew it was true, but is it true for him? Why is it true? Because not everyone has the willpower to change their lives. But where was Lukan's willpower? What could be missing so that he could finally obtain it?

Upon coming home, his mother was sitting at her own desk watching Korean dramas. Like Lukan was fascinated with Japan, his mother was more interested in Korea.

"Welcome home, Lukey, how was school?" she asked in a somewhat distracted voice.

Lukan hated when she called him Lukey, especially since he was 18. Why not call him what she called him when he was born?! "Same old, same old," he said with a sigh.

His mother looked over to him. "I can tell something is on your mind. Would you like the to talk about it?" she asked. Lukan was aware that she's said this numerous times, and he's responded numerous times that he would not. The few times he's had, she never gave him any answers.

"It's the same old thing," Lukan said. "Everything is," he added.

"Want to change your life to get out of the rut you're in?" she assumed. How does she know him so well...? Lukan only nodded before she continued, "Maybe when we move things will change," she said. That is another thing, Lukan was convinced that part of the reason he cannot add anything to his life was because where he lived then had little to nothing to offer him in terms of opportunities TO change his life. But even then, he still felt that something was... still missing. Without another word, Lukan strode back to his room to finish the day with lazily progressed homework followed by gaming. Solo of course.

That night he went to bed with the same old thoughts running in his mind. What could possibly be something he could do to tide him over until he is finally able to do something real for a change? It's not like answers will just tap on his shoulder...

Except. Something did.. The next day at the college's community sub shop, after English, and knowing neglecting his English paper, he was about to get his lunch for the day when he felt a finger tap him on the shoulder. He was convinced it was a ploy to get his attention and if he turned, there'd be no one there. That stupid prank gets old instantly. He also dismissed it due to the fact somebody may want to cut him or something absurd. But the tap came again. Lukan tried not to flatten his ears in irritation and continued to ignore whoever was doing that when he heard the voice, louder and closer than he expected, making him jump with a small yelp.

"Man you really aren't that big a talker are you?" It was a smooth voice, yet one that held a hint of attitude in it. The kind that Lukan was not fond of, yet at the same time, there was an intelligent sounding tinge to it. The kind that said to Lukan that the speaker was smarter than the average character. So he thought, what else did he have to lose? He turned around and responded.

"No, not really," he said simply. It was at that moment he was looking at the chest of a very tall, strapping yellowish orange otter with eyes gleaming the color of emerald. He looked up, shocked at the sheer size of him.

The otter must have noticed because he laughed. "Not used to otters being as tall as I am?" he asked with a bright smile on his face. Lukan only shook his head. "It's alright, I am quite used to such an assumption. Though I must admit, you're a short fellow for a coon..." he added with no hint of malice detected whatsoever in his voice. Still, Lukan felt wary of this character just randomly coming up to talk to him like that.

"And yet, I am taller than almost everyone in my... er... family," he said, hesitant on the whole family thing since it was pitifully small and almost extinct.

"Ah gene pools, dontcha just love them sometimes?" the otter said, still oddly cheerful.

Lukan proceeded with caution. "Y-yeah..."

The otter held out a webbed paw. "The name's Kaus. Ya know Clown without the "N" and with an "S" instead. Spelled with a "K"."

Lukan took it hesitantly and shook it. "Lukan Benka," he introduced himself.

The otter nodded. "I think I've seen you around a few times, here in particular," Klaus said. "The food here is surprisingly good considering."

Lukan bit his lip and nodded. "So... why have you decided to talk to me now after all that time you've seen me?" he blurted without meaning to.

"Well because you seem like a lonely guy who could use a friend to brighten their day," Klaus said plainly.

Lukan cursed in his mind. He was not inconspicuous enough. This otter does not know his past! He does not know why he did not want friends! Nor did he want to explain it when he says no to his offer! He sighed, a deep breath.

"It's very kind of you, but I don't really know you... I cannot be friends with a guy I don't know anything about," he said as kindly as he could.

"Oh that? That's what being friends is for right? Getting to know each other?" Klaus stated.

Lukan knew something was off about that logic, but he did not understand what it was. He was too distracted by the otter's height. He stood like a tower amongst all the others. His clothes even looked somewhat small on him. Green shirt barely covering his stomach down to his skinny jean resembling black pants looking tight around his... Lukan shook his head violently. What the hell is he thinking about; he's in a conversation right now!

"Well I guess that makes sense, but still..." he trailed off.

The otter gestured behind Lukan right when the sub shop worker called out "Next!" Lukan was next. He ordered his usual roasted chicken sub with spinach and tomato.

The otter nodded. "Ah so that is something I know about you now; your preferred sub sandwich right?" he grinned jokingly.

Lukan looked back at the otter. "Tah! I guess so," he says as his sandwich was prepared. The worker addressed Klaus.

"Tuna salad with extra pickles please," he said. He addressed Lukan. "Now you know mine! See? We're already learning stuff about each other!"

Lukan still felt the otter's over enthusiasm was somewhat awkward compared to the way he felt about others as a whole. And he had a feeling it'd get annoying soon...

"\$4.19 please," said the cashier, casing Lukan to snap back again. Jeez this otter is really distracting him. But he knew that some random guy talking to him would do just that so he just handed the cashier the money for his sandwich before hastily making his way out of it to the building his next class was. Wait no. That day was Wednesday. He had no history that day and had another hour and a half before Japanese. He paused halfway to the building, but he realized too late that it gave the otter an opportunity to catch up to him.

"Heeey! You're leaving without me!?" he called out from behind him. Lukan sighed. "Is he going to be stalked by this guy the whole time? When the otter caught up to him he spoke quickly, "Do you mind if I eat lunch with you?"

"Why?" Lukan blurted out, possibly sounding mean spirited, but he could not tell.

"Well you seem lonely... us otters are generally very social and happy, so if I seem obnoxious like that, I'm sorry. We just want to be friends with anyone!"

Lukan nodded. That made sense. He suddenly felt less annoyed. "Alright, I don't see why not..." he conceded.

"Cool, thanks bro," Klaus said. As Lukan started towards the next building the otter spoke again. "So what is your next class?"

Lukan did not answer right away. "Well usually it's history, but I don't have that on Wednesdays, so it's Japanese in an hour and a half," he answered.

"Ah that's cool! Most of my classes are online, so I have only one on campus. That would be programming. I always wanted to learn about computers. Complicated stuff, yet fascinating," he said.

Lukan nodded. "Too complicated. I could never be a technologist if I even tried!"

"Yeah it seems that some people have a knack for it while others don't," Klaus replied. "I probably don't, but I'm trying anyways."

As they sat down at a table inside the lounge of the building, Lukan asked, "So I am assuming computer technology is your major?"

"Yup," Klaus said with a maw full of sandwich.

"Good luck," Lukan said, "My major is writing, but I am almost thinking of changing it."

"Why?" The otter's mouth sprayed crumbs.

"Well these English classes are an absolute pain to deal with. And besides, being an author is not always successful and I feel like I could do something else..." Lukan explained.

"Ah I see... I hate English. I suck at it," Klaus replied.

Lukan felt his eyes widen. "Really? It's about the only thing I am good at. Writing stuff that is."

Klaus shook his head. "Nope. When it comes to that stuff, I'm dumb as tar. What kind of stuff you like writing?"

"Fictitious stories about fantastical fantasies I wish were real," Lukan replied as he worked on his sandwich some.

"I only understood half of what you just said. See how dumb I am?" the otter said with humor in his eyes.

Lukan laughed. "Yeah you're soooo dumb, Mr. Understands Computer Technology!"

"Hey I only sort of understand it..." Klaus said.

Lukan did not say anything else. He stopped and thought about what is happening. Suddenly he felt lighter in the chest, like a weight was starting to be lifted off his heart. He felt happier. Happier that he was conversing with this otter. But how? Why? Other creatures were nothing but trouble! He could not afford to let his guard down! Lukan scarfed down the rest of his sandwich. "Oh boy look at the time! I gotta go!"

"But I thought your class was not until an hour or something from now?" the otter said, confused.

"Yeah, but I got work I gotta do with another professor in the library. I'm sorry, but I'll see you later!" Lukan lied and hastily grabbed his pack.

"W-wait!" The otter was obviously flustered by Lukan's sudden evasion, but he got out a piece of paper and started writing on it. After a few seconds, he gave it to Lukan. On it was an email address and a phone number. "If I wasn't a total annoyance to you today and you'd like to hang out more, please, contact me," he said. "Goodbye." Was it just Lukan, or did the otter seem hurt? The otter took the rest of his sandwich and walked off, leaving Lukan alone in wonder.

"How was your day at college, Lukey?" Lukan's mother asked him as he got home. She was sitting at her desk, most likely watching her favorite Korean dramas.

"It was... something different," Lukan said with indifference.

"Different? Is that a good or bad thing?" she asked confused.

Lukan started towards his room, tail swaying under him. "Honestly I don't know," he said.

"Well I most certainly hope it was nothing bad," she said.

"Well I met this guy who seemed too eager to be my friend, like out of nowhere," Lukan confessed.

"That's great honey! Are you two friends?"

His mom clearly did not understand why he wanted no friends, no matter how often he'd explain it to her. And he had no intention on reiterating. "I dunno if I can trust someone as over enthusiastic as he was," he said slowly.

His mom's face fell. "Why? Does he seem shady? Is he a fox, God forbid?" Oh right. She's specist against foxes. Lovely trait, that.

"No he's an otter..." Lukan trailed off.

"An otter? Well you should know that otters are usually very energetic and social creatures. I don't see what the problem with that is," she said.

"I know! I'm just not used to dealing with someone like that, even after having an otter or two in my classes throughout the years..." Lukan explained.

"Honey, I want the best for you, and I really think you should try to put yourself out there," she started. And she continued when Lukan opened his maw. "I understand what happened to you in the past has made you distrusting. It's why I strongly disapprove of foxes you know. I'm not specist for no reason. But you and I got to break these trends--"

Lukan scoffed. "I know that! But neither of us are doing anything! What if my friend *was* a fox? How'd you react then, knowing what you literally just said?"



His mom sighed. "That's a flaw with our own species, Lukan. Otters are too happy, foxes are too shady, and we're too... I don't know the proper word..."

"Hypocritical? Double standardized? Not even trying? Over thinking? Self aware in all the wrong ways?" Lukan said bitterly.

"Sort of," his mom bit her lip.

"Okay, mom, I'll give it one last try... but if this time it is all for naught, you know what I promised?" he said in a monotone.

Her eyes widened. "L-Lukan Benka! Don't say such things! You know how much I love you after all and how much faith I have in you...?"

Lukan looked down and sighed. "I'm just sick of what I've been through in my cubhood. It's a miracle I made it this far! And I made it this far by denying all opportunities for this to happen again!" he returned on his walk to his room without another word. He heard his mother call his name but he pretended not to hear her. He sat down roughly and snatched the piece of paper the otter had given him from his pocket. Klaus Richtors? Lukan shook his head as he grabbed his laptop and opened the email. His fingertips paused over the keyboard. He must be nuts to do this shit again! He knew exactly what was going to happen in the end... but then again. He had nothing to lose except...

Within seconds, Lukan started typing on the keyboard. He started with an apology for abruptly ending their lunch that day and that he'd like to at least get to know the otter more before they became friends.

Lukan had no idea what he was going to do between each email. He pondered on playing a game, continuing reading his book, working on writings, or watching YouTube, but if he had to continuously interrupt either to talk to Klaus if he responded, it'd be an issue.

Within minutes he was responded to. He opened up the email and it said, *'That's quite alright I... I thought I had bothered you and you made that up to get away from me.'* Instantly Lukan felt bad because it was almost exactly true.

*'I'm so sorry, but... it is true, I made it up so I could get away, but... but I was not annoyed I was... scared.'* he confessed as his heart beat heavier. Why was he telling this stuff to a complete stranger? Surely he knew exactly what that could indicate if he was wrong in befriending the otter...

*'Scared? Why would you be scared in an overly friendly otter like me?'* Klaus wrote back. Because this conversation was being conveyed through email, Klaus could not tell if the otter was sad, confused, curious, or even angry at the moment. Yet he knew the otter knew exactly what he felt. 'Don't let him prey on that feeling,' he told himself

*'I'm afraid of... everyone really. It's why I have no friends,'* Lukan said. He stared at the conversation so far. Something was obviously compelling him to continue

writing to the otter with such confessions and he had no idea why! He wanted to stop, but he was curious as to what the mustelid would say next. What was wrong with him!?

*'Everyone? That's no way to live life! That's terrible?! Do you want to talk about it?'*

There is the question Lukan despised getting. No he did not want to talk about it; it changes nothing and makes him feel worse! *'I'm sorry, but I hate talking about why almost as much as the reason itself,'* he wrote. No matter how compelled he felt to converse with him, or anyone for that matter, he was never going to confide in anyone ever again.

*'Oh. I'm terribly sorry. I didn't know,'* this time Lukan could feel disappointment and sadness radiating in the email, even through the cold technological screen that separated them.

*'No don't worry about it. I just don't feel comfortable making any friends,'* Lukan replied.

A few minutes later. *'So that's a no with being my friend?'* and he even added a sad face emoticon to the message that touched Lukan's heart in the worst way. Now he felt like he was hurting the otter himself, even though he knew that was supposed to be the otter's job later on if they *were* to become friends.

*'I did not say no! I just... I need to think... I'm sorry, but what's happened to me before... it's too painful,'* Lukan responded with tears trying to well up in his eyes.

*'Will you meet me at school tomorrow?'* Klaus had asked him.

*'Sure. At the sub shop again. But since I will have history class tomorrow, I dunno how long I can be there for. I hope to have decided by then...'* After they had said good night, Lukan was in a whirlwind of confusion and tempest of every emotion imaginable. Should he or shouldn't he? That was the question...