

Winter's Gallows

THREE: The Crisis

When Klaus showed up at the apartment complex just as he promised he would, Lukan had to let his mom know he was out, so he left her a note telling her he'd plan to be home again same time he had gotten home last night. He strode down the stairs quickly, anticipating the benevolent air around the otter that was contrary that of his dreamland. When he exited the complex, it was snowing outside. That did not bode well for when he had to go to work the following day! But he did not care as he saw the door to Klaus' truck open up, and the orange-ish otter was inside beaming at him.

"Hiya!" The kind otter said as Lukan got into his truck. "How'd you sleep last night?" he asked curiously.

"Not well. I had another nightmare," Lukan said stiffly.

Klaus' face fell. "Aw man that sucks... was it the same one?"

Lukan shook his head. "No, this one was... different." He looked away, daring not to look into those emerald eyes or that slender build.

"If you want to talk about anything, I am right here," Klaus said kindly. "I *did* study psychology for a while after all."

Lukan shook his head. "It's... too complicated; it..." No way. He could never confess what he saw in that dream. It'd surely freak the otter the fuck out!

Klaus did not press. "Lukan, I really think you should see some help. Next time school rolls around, I want you to see that counselor, okay? They're free and they can help you. Maybe they're caused by subconscious stress over finals soon?" he suggested.

Lukan looked down. "I've had nightmares on and off since the day we left Bright," he said slowly. "I've grown immune to most of them it's just... lately they've been different."

"Because they involve me," Klaus said as the confirmation chilled Lukan to the bone, causing every strand of fur on his body stand. "Look Lukan, are you absolutely certain you are okay with being friends with me? Me being gay? Being around me at all..." Klaus looked uncharacteristically serious and crestfallen.

"I..." Lukan stuttered. "It's just, after everything, I can't help but think you'll... hurt me somehow. I want to be friends with you; it's just... there is this overpowering subconscious side of me who absolutely distrusts you. I just don't know anymore."

Klaus looked into Lukan's eyes and saw them blazing with emerald fire. 'Lukan, that does it; I'm getting you professional help right now. I can't stand to see anyone like this, let alone you.' Klaus then, without waiting for a response hit the gas.

"But, money!" Lukan protested.

"The school's open today," Klaus refuted. "We just never bothered to think about it because none of our classes have Fridays am I right?" Lukan only nodded. They did not speak a word to each other as Klaus drove them to the college. Lukan only glanced at the grim faced otter as he drove, eyes glittering in legitimate concern. Was Lukan really wrong to doubt this creature...? Could it be that this one could actually be trusted for a change.

'No! Do not show any further signs of weakness you twit! Stop it or he will take advantage of you eventually!' That voice in his head... oh how Lukan wished it would just SHUT UP!

Klaus parked the car right in front of the Health Center. "Now you go get a long, thorough session with that counselor and tell me it helped you, okay?" Klaus said kindly as Lukan opened the door.

"Okay, fine... but this better work," he said gruffly.

"Trust me, it will," Klaus said as Lukan closed the door behind him. He shivered from the sudden drop in temperature as he approached the Center. As the doors came into his reach, they flew open and an opossum began coughing and hacking very loudly. Flu season. How fun.

The people at the desk were very old lady dogs. Lukan almost thought they were as sick as the opossum was. But then he remembered that elderly dogs often looked... sick.

"Yes, can I help you?" one of them asked in a relatively raspy voice that sounded more irritable than it was intended.

"I-I was recommended to see a counselor about problems I have?" Lukan had no idea how to ask for help properly...

The elder shook her head. "That depends on what for? Personal issues? School issues? ...Relationship issues?" she asked.

Lukan was not sure. But at the same time, he was. 'Personal, please,' he said quieter than he wanted. The elderly canine looked into his eyes as if she did not understand. "P-personal!" he said a little loudly, but with even less confidence.

The elderly dog picked up a nearby phone, dialed a few numbers, then said, "Paging Miss Cesia Farison, Miss Farison you have a client up front." When she hung up. "She'll be here momentarily.

Lukan was uncomfortable in the little waiting area. Several of the other occupants were either really sick, or sick looking. Lukan could not imagine what he looked like after what he'd been through so far today. So much for spending the day

with Klaus! But he also knew the otter wanted what was best for him. Lukan knew that his feelings and emotions keep harassing their young friendship, and he hated every second of it, but at the same time, if they weren't to be friends anymore, would things get easier again?

"Who was the raccoon who requested Miss Farison?" asked a somewhat quiet voice. If not for the word, "raccoon", being said, Lukan would have continued daydreaming again as he jumped up and replied.

"I-I am," and he looked at a very thin orange cat with the deepest amber eyes he's ever seen in any creature holding a clipboard and looking right at him.

"Hello, I am Cesia Farison," they shook paws. "I hear that you wished to speak to me about problems you've been having, I presume?" she asked as she led them to her office. Upon entering the office, Lukan immediately noticed that on one wall, there was a mural depicting a Japanese garden on the end connected to plain ones that had motivational posters plastered all over them. They took their seats, Lukan sat in a far too soft plush chair that captured his hindquarters, and he was unsure if he'd ever escape it. "So... this is your first time in here?"

Lukan nodded. Then she asked for his name, which he gave her.

"Can you tell me what has been on your mind lately?" she asked.

Lukan hesitated. Where does he begin? "W-well, there's a lot of things, really but I uh... I..." he stammered. What does he say to her!? That he's had nightmares about his friend? About how he might hurt or even rape him!? Or how all of this is tying into his nightmares!?

The cat's tone remained cool and calm. "Don't worry about any sort of judgements around here. We just want to help you," she said.

"I've been... having nightmares," Lukan finally said.

"Nightmares? What about?"

Now what? Should he start from the beginning, and describe what the nightmares were about, or does he explain how they've affected him recently? "Well about me being... hunted down..." he said uncertainly. *'Yeah that is the way to say that. Ugh, way to go, idiot!'*

"By what? I'm sorry, Mr. Benka, but if you want to know anything, you need to be a lot more specific." And she was right, Lukan knew he kept beating around the bush.

He sighed. "Okay... I've actually had this problem for several years, but... they've changed. They used to be about a bad time I had years ago, something that made me lose faith in all friendships and... now I am beyond introverted, but now they're about... a new friend I made earlier this week," he said with as much confidence as he felt. Which was almost nonexistent.

Farison nodded. "Do you trust this friend?"

Lukan opened his maw and no words came out. Yes he did, but yet, no he did

not. "I do, but in some way, I don't. The distrust... it... feels more subconscious..." he said, trying not to sound confused.

"I see. That happens a lot to creatures with traumatic past experiences that involved close ones. Don't feel ashamed for those feelings, Lukan," she said as she scribbled on her clipboard. "Can you tell me what exactly the dreams are about, or why you may not feel so secure around your friend?"

Could Lukan really confess to her Klaus' secret that he was gay? Maybe, since he did not mention him by name, he's just gotta be careful not to say it. "I think he may rape me because he told me he was gay," he said quickly, certain he left something out. Farison dipped her head telling Lukan to go on. "He uh... just randomly started talking to me one day... no real reason. And yesterday when we went swimming I knew he was watching me undress and it was... so uncomfortable I--" he choked up, unsure how to go on. He knew he was about to confess that he had done the same thing, albeit he was in a rush, but he knew deep down he did it. Farison nodded, kept writing, but gave Lukan the look on her face that said she knew he had more on his mind and more to say and gestured him to continue. "And... I did the same thing to him when we were done... and last night when I was home, I could not stop thinking about it and I- I... I can't be... it can't..." Farison stopped him.'

"Do you think you're gay?" she asked, looking right into his eyes.

Lukan instantly shook his head. "N-no! I can't be! I never felt anything sexual about anyone before! Not even girls and especially not other guys!"

"Did you know that might be because you never really interacted with people in your life very much at all to develop those sexual feelings?" Farison prompted.

"I... guess so," Lukan admitted.

"Did you know that some gay people have this instinct in their minds that can identify other gay people on the spot?"

What...? Lukan thought the so-called "gay-dar" was a myth. Could it be real...? Or a coincidence? But wait! He was not gay! So what did it even matter!?

"I-impossible," he breathed.

"Maybe him talking to you was a way to unlock yourself after shackling yourself like that. Do you feel sexually repressed in any way? Teenagers like you often fall into that issue, and for gay teens it's even worse, generally," she continued.

I-is she just assuming Lukan was gay!? But he was not! "B-but I am not gay! A-and no, not really; I've had too many other things to ponder about other than being sexually attracted to anyone," Lukan replied.

"It's not healthy to repress yourself Lukan. Whether you're gay or not, just locking yourself up like that so no one can see you is very unhealthy and it could lead to feelings you've had in the past to grow even worse. Those dreams you say that

won't go away? They won't go away because you won't let them go away," Farison explained.

"My friend is the one who made me come here after I told him that I had another one last night. He did something to me that I know I don't like, yet it... it... felt good..."

"Something you hated that felt good?" Lukan nodded. "Adolescence is never an easy feat. We adults give you such hard times, when your mental and physical states make them so much harder."

"But... I am 18 years old! 19 next week actually!" Lukan said flustered.

"If you lock yourself up and repress yourself too long, they'll break out late, and be even worse than ever, because your mental development is happening all at once... or so a theory that my trainer gave to me spoke of," Farison said.

"You... really think it's because I have not let myself be... me...?" Lukan asked.

Farison nodded. "That is exactly what I think. You need to let yourself show. Don't be afraid of being vulnerable. Don't be afraid of any feelings you feel. They're all trying to help you find out who you really are. The attempts to repress and lock yourself are hurting you. The pleas of your true self wanting to break free manifest in these nightmares. Have you ever thought of that?" she asked.

"I... guess not," Lukan conceded. Was she right? Was everything that he's felt, seen, experience, heard... all of it! Was it all true? Was it all just an attempt for him to realize the truth!? It cannot be yet... it probably is... Is this the key to changing his life at last...?

"Keep everything in mind, Mr. Benka. I've seen others like you who point blank refused that advice. I've not heard from them since," she said ominously. "You know what to do now?"

Lukan nodded. "I do." he said, for the first time in years, he finally felt sure of himself. If these were the answers, so be it. Any qualms he has now, he has to force away.

"Feel free to visit again if you have any other concerns," Farison said as she let him out the door. Back in the Health Center lobby and Lukan's head was spinning. He felt sick. So much revelation for him for one day; he just felt like collapsing. Had he had his entire persona all wrong? Not only was he potentially sexually repressing himself by being introverted to such extremes, but such introversion was causing the nightmares, not the past itself? And Klaus... turning to him because Lukan might be gay? What in the world is going on around here...?

"Holy shit, Lukan! You're pale as a ghost!" Klaus said when Lukan reached his truck. "What happened in there?"

Lukan was only able to mumble at this point. "Several things. It's... all so hard to explain but..." dare he ask Klaus if he thought Lukan was gay?

"What...?" Klaus asked.

Lukan shook his head. "I don't know!" he half lied. "It's just so much to take in..."

Klaus patted Lukan on the back. "Hey it's okay, it'll work out. You wanna mull things over an ice cream or something? Ice cream makes everything better!"

Lukan glanced at the smiling otter. "But it's December!" he protested.

Klaus shrugged. "Who cares, it's ice cream!" When Lukan did not respond. "You know you want to... come on!" he begged.

Lukan laughed. "Oh come on, what is this a date?" he asked, half good naturedly, half not. Then he realized the implications of what he just said and tried to say something to correct it, but the otter interjected.

"What?! Oh come on, can't a friend treat a friend to a treat? Especially after everything you've been through lately? Come on Lukan, I'd never make advances on you, and you know it. The locker room was just a stupid folly. Let's forget it ever happened, okay?" he said.

Lukan could not think anymore; his brain was way too fried. Maybe a good brain freeze really would help... "Okay Klaus, I'm sorry... I never mean to be this way at all... I just have... so much on my mind that I just can't comprehend it all," he said sadly.

"Don't apologize! I understand! I just wish you'd try more is all," Klaus said.

"And that is what the counselor told to me," Lukan affirmed.

"See? Even she agrees with me, so come on, let's go," Klaus said.

"Alright alright, you win," Lukan gave in. No point in arguing anymore. Just do it. It's all apart of everything he wanted to do anyways, wasn't it?

Klaus instantly pulled out of the parking space. "Too late to change your mind!" he said as he drove hastily through the campus' complicated parking lot.

"H-hey! Slow down, you'll get a ticket or wrecked or something!" Lukan yelled, but couldn't keep a smile from forming on his face. But they were already on the street, on their way downtown.

"Relax," was the only Klaus said as he drove swiftly down the streets of Lilac Grove, going more than five miles and hour for sure. Then Klaus glanced and saw the concern starting to take over the smile on Lukan's face and he slowed down. "Oh alright you worrywort. I just can't wait to spend the day with you. I'm sorry for sending you to the counselor without warning like that but... I really thought you needed help right away," he added, sounding oddly guilty.

Lukan shook his head. "I understand why you did it, but it's confused me even more," he said with a sigh. "After what she told me, I'm not even sure who I am anymore."

Klaus nodded in understanding. "Yeah I had a hell of a time when my sexuality started showing when I was 12. It was an uphill battle for two years before I came out. And it was another battle from there because of my God loving, yet God forsaken mother..." he said.

Is Klaus really comparing Lukan's struggle to his own for his sexuality as if to indicate that Lukan was going through a very situation? Please stop it!

It was another moment when the two of them approached an ice cream shop christened "The Frozen Cow" and its logo was that of a frozen cow holding multiple scoops of ice cream. Interesting... The bells on the door jingled as Klaus opened it and held it for Lukan to go in first. It was a small establishment with tables on either side of it and it smelled heavily of cream. The shake machines were buzzing, and they made Lukan's ears twitch from how loud they were.

There was a bear waiting at the counter and his face lit up as he saw Klaus and Lukan walk in. "Hey! Welcome to the Frozen Cow!" he called out in a voice that was somehow louder than the shake machine.

"Hey EZ, is Dunnan in today?" Klaus said.

EZ shook his head. "Sick with pneumonia, poor guy. This weather has made so many sick lately I am surprised our economy is still standing," he said sadly.

Klaus' face fell. "Pneumonia? That's horrible! Is he okay?" he asked worriedly.

EZ shrugged. "The guy is 87 years old; it doesn't look good."

"Oh no," Klaus said. He turned to Lukan who was obviously confused. "Dunnan was the man I talked to a lot after I had the big fallout with my mom. It turned out he was a fur-kind's rights activist 60 years ago and ran a shelter for LGBTs, religious minorities, racial minorities, you name it, specifically for those forced homeless by bigots, for a few decades before it was shut down by... you guessed it, over zealous Christians who wanted nothing but control over the country. Then he started this place and has owned it ever since. It's the most gay friendly place in town, so I often come here to muddle things over and um... at one point to um... mingle..." he added with nervousness. It lasted but an instant. "He was my first true friend after coming out. It's hard hearing that his life is on the line... EZ, which is what we called him, his real name is Ezekiel, ran that same shelter alongside him."

Lukan nodded in understanding. "Wow, that really sucks to possibly lose such an awesome sounding guy like that."

"He was a great lion, heart of the purest gold, but eventually his time has to come," EZ said somberly. "As does anyone. But in his absence, I've been running this place to the best of my ability. What could I get for you two, back on topic?"

Klaus looked at the raccoon. "Anything in particular you're after?"

Lukan looked up at the extravagant menu and all the options up there. "Uhm..." Lukan viewed himself as the world's worst decision maker in the history of ever. And he believed every ounce of that proposition.

"We'll each have a banana split, EZ," Klaus interjected Lukan's thoughts. "If that is okay of course, Lukan?" he turned to him.

Lukan snapped his mind back to where it was supposed to be. "Oh uh, yeah that's fine," he said still absent mindedly.

The bear at the counter nodded. "Two banana splits coming right up my friends!"

Lukan and Klaus turned around to sit at a table next to the window. Klaus looked at him with an unreadable expression as Lukan looked out the window with a sigh. Who was he really? Why is everything the way they were right then and there? Why did this otter have to come up to him that day and made a mess of his life? And even bigger one than before? Why? Who the hell was he!?

"Are... you sure you're okay, Lukan?" Klaus asked in concern.

Lukan did not even completely break his trance. "Who the hell am I...?" he whispered, echoing the nasty voice in his head.

Klaus placed a handpaw on his that was on the table. "You're Lukan Benka," he answered calmly.

And it did not help that with each time Klaus held his paw, he felt progressively more comfortable with it. "No I mean... what makes me who I am... what are they really...?" Lukan pondered.

Klaus tilted his head in a confused curiosity. "I don't follow," he said.

Lukan shook his head. "It's... it. Klaus," he finally said. "You can't have talked to me just because I was lonely and seemed like I needed friends. I know better than to believe that, and you do too. Please. Tell me why..." he said, dreading the worst.

Klaus sighed. "That counselor, she told you about it didn't she?" he asked.

Lukan's heart was pounding. He was going to say it wasn't he? He even admitted to mingling on numerous occasions! Why wouldn't he!? "About the g--"

He was interrupted by EZ carrying two large banana splits. "Here's the splits, boys. Enjoy! Oh and Klaus, these ones are on me," he winked.

Klaus' eyes brightened. "Aw really? Thanks so much, EZ!" he exclaimed as he started digging in.

Lukan looked down at his and sighed. Well at least he did not pull a "let's share a milkshake together" thing he saw a lot in couple's stories. He thanked the kind bear for the generosity as he started to dig into his and was surprised that inside the vanilla ice cream was a sherbet of rainbow colors. He nearly dropped his spoon in shock. He knew that the shop was an LGBT friendly place, but this? Was this some sort of symbolism for who he was on the inside? Lukan was almost unable to continue eating; it shocked him so much. He was tempted to just bolt from the building; Lukan knew that his breaking point was fast approaching. Klaus took no notice as he dug into his. Lukan tried to look over his split and see if there was a rainbow inside his as well, but could not see one. No. It can't be? Could EZ detect homosexuality in him too? What is going on here!? The antagonizing clues and indications, make them stop! Lukan felt

like he was losing his mind as he became more and more desperate for answers. He slowly worked on his split as Klaus wolfed his down without even noticing Lukan. It was like he forgot what they were just talking about. Maybe it was for the best? Or maybe... not. Lukan really wanted these answers, but he did not want to hurt or offend the otter. What could he possibly do now?

Klaus exhaled a satisfied sigh as melted ice cream coated his face. "Ah... that hit the spot. Lukan? You've barely touched yours! What's the matter with you; it's ice cream!" he exclaimed.

Lukan looked up, "Huh? Oh yeah. Sorry..." he mumbled as he took another slow spoonful.

Klaus wiped his mouth on a napkin, but it did very little good at all. "There really is a lot on your mind isn't there, Lukan? About me... Lukan, I think the only way you're ever going to feel better is if you tell me," he said bluntly.

Lukan sighed and knew that Klaus was probably right. "You're right Klaus..."

Klaus placed a handpaw on Lukan's shoulder, which made Lukan's heart skip a beat and beat harder. "Whatever it is, I promise I won't be offended. That's what friends are for," he said.

Lukan hesitated. He was only able to ask one question. Just one. "Do you think... I'm gay...?" he asked.

Klaus looked at him sadly. "What do you mean...?" he asked in such a complicated tone, that Lukan could not discern what he was feeling right then and there after he broke the breaking question.

"It's like I said before we got our ice cream, Klaus. I don't believe for a second that you'd walk up to me, talk to me, and do *all* these things for me as much as you did, just for the sake of friendship. There has got to be more to that than I am not seeing. Then the counselor said that some gay people can detect other gay people and that made me think of... you!" he confessed. "I am so confused..."

Klaus sat there with his jaw ajar, as if he could not understand or comprehend what the raccoon had just said to him. He stuttered for a moment before he was able to form words. "Lukan I... I admit, when I first saw you weeks ago, I detected something in you. Something that made me to talk to you. But it was hidden in such a way, as if it were locked behind bars, wearing a gag, unable to scream for help so that I could hear it."

Lukan's ears perked briefly. That was surprisingly poetic; he thought the otter said he was no good in literature? But he knew now was not the time to worry about it.

"Then that day, earlier this week, I decided to get closer to you, and I heard it. Your true self, in your heart, unable to escape. I had to help. And that is what I intend to do," Klaus explained.

"My true self... is it... homosexuality...?" Lukan looked down at his paws and just thought. Is that all it was all along? Is his true self truly the reason he is shackled behind bars? And as a result, is resulting in these haunting dreams and thoughts he could never let go of? That cannot be! No matter what, he refused to believe it! But... but there was one thing that was overpowering evidence...

"Lukan, that look on your face when we were at the pool. We were redressing in such a hurry, yet I saw you pause briefly to watch me. I saw that glint in your eyes even if it was for a very brief instance. It was because of that I am sure you missed the bus. Did you miss it on purpose?" when Klaus said that, it sent a ton of shivers down Lukan's body. He knew he did not mean to miss the bus. He knew that was a complete accident. But Klaus did know everything else was true... so now it was futile to hide it. And it was futile not saying...

"And... that night, Klaus. That night when I got home to shower, all I could think about was you in those trunks. How good you looked, and that brief instant you were naked, I... I couldn't think about it. It got to me. It made me... want more. It made me want release, but I refused to. I refused because that'd make me gay on the spot. I don't want to be gay! To be hated by so many people, I can't bear such a burden! I'm already the most hated species on the planet! But throw gayness on it and... and... I can't bear being hated, Klaus. I can't..." he confessed with tears clearly flowing down his eyes.

"Oh Lukan... I'm sorry for doing that to you and causing you to feel that way, but whether you are gay too or not, what I want is for you to let yourself shine. That bitter, angry looking raccoon I saw in the past, even I know that that is not you. Do you think it's you, Lukan?" Klaus asked.

Lukan stared off. "I don't," he said plainly. "I know Klaus, I know you, the counselor, everyone else around me wants the best for me, but I guess I am just going through the adolescent revolution later than usual because... of holding it back because of my past, I don't know," he replied sadly.

"You'll figure it out eventually. I'm rooting for you Lukan!" Klaus said, fist in the air.

Lukan could not help but chuckle. "Thanks Klaus. Really. Thanks so much..."

Klaus just shrugged. "Someone had to come and rescue you, you know," he said. "So I decided that it'd be me."

Lukan did not know what part of his mind made him do what he did next. That part of his mind was the one part he was not paying any attention to, but the next thing he knew, he was hugging the otter tightly. Klaus, obviously surprised, hugged back and patted Lukan on the back. "I just dunno if I'll ever figure it out..." he said. He held the hug for several seconds, subconsciously aware that he did not want to let go

of a warm embrace such as that. When was the last time he had someone hold him in their arms...?

"You will, Lukan. Don't worry," Klaus whispered.

It was at that moment Lukan realized they were both still in the ice cream shop. Lukan abruptly stopped the hug and his face burned with embarrassment. He looked around wildly to see if anyone seen, and thankfully, besides EZ, there was only one other patron, a young looking female weasel with huge earrings who was talking to EZ at that moment. Lukan cleared his throat. "Sorry," he said.

Something in Klaus' tone changed, but Lukan did not recognize it. "Don't worry. Really, worrying is the last thing you want to do. And besides. I knew you needed it," Klaus said.

"Oh yeah and Klaus?" Lukan remembered.

"Yes?"

"Remember how you said how my true self was locked up and all? You said in such a way that sounded like you know more about literature than you say," Lukan said.

"I did? I guess I was taking quotes from a counselor I had when I was struggling with my sexuality," he said uncertainly, scratching his head.

What? Another connection about discovering that? At this point, Lukan was not even phased by it anymore...

After Lukan had finished his melted treat, the two of them decided to just take a drive through town and seeing if there was anything interesting they could do. But in a town of only 60,000 that was as isolated as it was from the rest of the world, there really was not much at all. And evening was on top of them before they even knew it.

Klaus was driving Lukan home when he asked, "So, you have work tomorrow?" he asked.

Lukan nodded. "Yeah, at that supermarket I mentioned before. I don't want to," he added humorously.

Klaus laughed. "Yeah I bet. Working sucks. But we gotta do it. Hey Lukan? What if I applied to work there with you?" he asked.

"What? You would?" Lukan widened his eyes.

"Of course! I need a job anyways so... why not?" Klaus asked. "There are positions open right?"

"Yeah in all the undesirable places. Janitorial, cart pushing, truck unloading..." Lukan said with a smile. "And it's just getting worse because Christmas is coming up."

"Bring them on," Klaus said confidently which caused Lukan to laugh aloud. "I can take any shitty job they throw at me as long as my best friend is there with me as well."

"Aww... that's so kind of you Klaus, thank you," Lukan said. "So I guess I'll be meeting you there tomorrow morning? My shift starts at 11."

Klaus nodded. "I'll be there."

That night, the thought of the naked otter crossed his mind again as he stepped into the shower. Lukan wanted to deny it, but he knew, for the sake of his own sanity, he had to let it go. The image continued traversing through his mind, down to his limbs and eventually, right where his legs met. He shuddered as it triggered the same response as it did the previous night. He knew he could deny it no longer. He had developed arousal to the thought and image of another naked boy. Did that necessarily mean he was gay though? It had to. There is no other way to deny it.

The way the otter swam in that dream, stark naked; that memory crossed his mind too. The more Lukan thought about it without denying it, the more Lukan liked it. Lukan shuddered again as his arousal grew stronger. He bit his lips and knew he couldn't deny it any longer and gave in to it. He pleased himself and gave himself the release that his body had been begging for since the first time it came around due to the thought of the otter. It was glued into his mind; Lukan could never forget it. And he wondered if the otter did the same thing with his own image in mind. The way he bashfully covered himself up with his tail... Lukan can imagine it only made it more arousing to that otter. Oops. Lukan just had to laugh to himself that he was trying to avoid arousing the otter, but may have done the opposite.

Lukan finished the shower moments after he himself had finished and dried himself off, fur becoming an absolute mess. Would it be so bad to be gay? He couldn't imagine what would happen if his mom found out. She seemed to want his happiness, so if being gay made him happy, would she in turn be so as well? Lukan could not imagine, nor was he still okay with the idea he was abnormal in such a way. He flat out wanted no sexual attraction. He knew it would bring nothing but even bigger troubles. Yet his mind. His body. The way it reacted to the otter's masculine grace. Can it be anymore denied? No way...

Lukan and Klaus were in the counselor's office together. No wait. Not in the office, but inside the mural that was inside the counselor's office. They were sitting together on the bridge, holding paws and admiring the scenery. Not only that, but they were both, contrary to Lukan's surprise, naked together. And happy. No worries. Lukan had none of that. The evil eyes, the windy voice, the tension. It was. All gone.... What could this possibly mean...?

"I'm so glad we became boyfriends," Klaus had said in an unusually muffled voice.

"Me too," Lukan said in an equally muffled voice.

And then they kissed. Lukan couldn't believe what he was doing, but at the same time, he did not feel anything other than... other than... what was that feeling? What was it!? Lukan did not recognize it. It made his pulse race, his heart beat. Yet he desired more. And kissing the otter was exactly what caused it. No. Was it?

IMPOSSIBLE!

Yet when Lukan awoke that morning, he was not out of breath, his heart was not racing, and his fur was not waterlogged with sweat. That was no nightmare. It can't have been when he enjoyed it right? Even if it was in dream? No way...

Lukan saw that there was still an hour before the alarm would go off. He rarely even needed that alarm, but he always set it just in case. It was 9 in the morning. He slowly got up and left the bedroom.

He performed his morning routine as normal. Got breakfast and watched the weather. Oh goody. Snow and wind. What else was new? He was anxious to meet the otter at the supermarket, so he prepared himself for work early and left the apartment an hour earlier than he usually does. He assumed the otter would be there earlier just in case, so Lukan thought it made sense.

The walk to his job was more pleasant than usual. He felt nowhere near as much anger or bitterness as he usually did. The highway? Oh yeah, there were assholes "jokingly" running him down, but that? That was no issue. He couldn't wait to see the otter again. At first he was sick of seeing him all the time, but now? Now he anticipated every second they'd spend together. This is friendship right? Please tell him it was still friendship?

As Lukan approached the market, he knew it had to be something more. He wanted to deny it. He did not want this. But he knew he could not deny it, for fear the dreams would return. He wanted to accept whatever came, but he... he did not want to be different in such a hated way!

"Lukan!" The familiar voice hit Lukan's ears, and his heart was instantly lifted. The yellow-orange otter was racing at him from his scarlet truck, arms outstretched as his short legs hindered his running speed.

Lukan instinctively opened his arms for the embrace the otter was going to give him and when it came, Lukan hugged him tightly, not wanting to let go, despite being more public than they were in the ice cream shop. But something was different about the otter. He was shaking violently. It took Lukan a minute to realize the otter was sobbing all over his shoulder.

"L-Lukan..." he cried. Instantly, Lukan felt horrible for not seeing it sooner and stopped the hug to look at his gleaming, leaking green eyes.

"Klaus! Wh-why are you crying?! What happened?" he asked incredulously.

"I- I-!" Klaus was bawling at this point. Lukan tried to console him, but he wouldn't stop. His eyes were fountains, and they were pouring salty tears all over the both of them.

"K-Klaus, please! Try to get a grip on yourself! Tell me what happened to make my best friend turn this way...?" Lukan said sadly, tears welling up in his own eyes now.

"Everything just... everything just!" Klaus was gasping for air. "Fell apart at once!" he sobbed. Lukan patted his back as he cried, tears leaking from his own eyes now. "Lukan. I've got nowhere to go..." he whispered when he calmed down enough.

"What do you mean...?" Lukan asked.

Klaus sniffled. "Mom kicked me out," he gasped. "She found out about you and thought you were my boyfriend... refused to hear me out... I've been in this parking lot since last night!" he wailed.

"O-oh my God!" Lukan exclaimed incredulously. "I-I cannot believe it! Oh Klaus... I am so sorry that happened!" Lukan hugged the distraught otter even tighter.

"And... that is not all," Klaus' nose was dripping. "I also found out Dunnan passed away last night..." he said.

"N-no way..." Lukan refused to let the otter go.

"Why?" Klaus croaked. "Why did this have to happen?"

"A-are you sure your mom kicked you out? You can't go back?" Lukan asked, too dumbfounded to believe it. He even knew it was a stupid question, because contrary to what he thought, it was entirely possible to be kicked out of home for being gay. No... that won't happen to him too will it!? If he *was* gay after all?

"A-again, it's either you, or my home," Klaus moaned. "And I promised I'd choose my friend over anything this time! I-if I want to go home, I have to promise never to see you again..."

Lukan grimaced at the grim realization. He knew what he had to say. "Klaus. Go home. And never talk to me again, okay? I can't stand to see you like this, nor could I fathom the thought that you have no home anymore! I want you to be okay more than I want to be okay, okay Klaus? Just forget about me," he said sternly, tears falling from his eyes as he said that. He never wanted to give up his only friend so quickly. But Klaus did not deserve to be kicked out way more than Lukan deserved a friend. They both knew that right?

Klaus shook his head violently. "N-no! Not this time! I'm not letting go of my friends this time!" he gasped as he hugged Lukan tighter.

"But Klaus!" Lukan exclaimed. "Th-this is more than just the sake of friendship versus education! You can't end up on the streets for me!"

Klaus sniveled loudly. "Y-you... you're probably right, but..."

Lukan patted the distraught otter on the back softly. "I know, I know. I don't want to lose you either, but... what can we do?"

Klaus looked into the raccoon's eyes with his gleaming emerald ones. "I can only think of one thing, Lukan. And that is to stay with you..."

Lukan shook his head. "No Klaus. You need somewhere to live more than you need me as a friend," he said sympathetically.

"No not that, Lukan. Well yeah that, but I also mean..." he took a deep shuddering breath. "I mean live with you, at least until I'm on my paws again," he said in a strangely defeated voice, as if he knew that was impossible. And it was! There was no way Lukan's mom would even consider having him over as a guest for a couple hours let alone reside with them for who knows how long?! The only creature Lukan knew that could match his hatred for others was his own mother. But he knew his mother wasn't flat out heartless. Could she turn away from someone in need like this? Lukan did not know...

"I-I dunno Klaus, I'd really love to, but my mom... she... she does not take kindly to company..." Lukan started.

"Please! Could we at least try?!" Klaus was begging. Lukan hated begging; it always made him feel bad when he knew he couldn't do anything because of his horrendous powerlessness.

Lukan sighed. "Okay Klaus, but... you should know that our apartment is tiny. You'd probably have to sleep on the floor because the air mattress won't fit anywhere..." he said as he continued listing off a number of things Klaus would have to deal with that involved the lack of anything to do, lack of food, lack of, well, living quality as a whole.

"It's better than sleeping under a dumpster downtown," Klaus said in a wheezy voice. Lukan could tell the sadness was overwhelming the poor otter's energy.

"That's true, but are you sure you want to try to...?" Lukan could feel his heart pounding lightly. Never had he considered for a moment he'd ever be caught in this situation last weekend before he even met the otter. Seriously though, they met what, four, five days ago? And they may end up living together already? As if they were coupled or something? Granted the situation was dire, but Lukan cannot help but think, even through what was going on, what this all could imply. Lukan also knew that this was no time to dwell on such things.

"Do I have much of a choice otherwise?" Klaus looked down miserably as his tears fell onto the frozen parking lot.

Lukan sighed sadly. "I suppose not. Klaus. I'm so sorry that this all happened. I promise I'll do whatever I can to help. Even if... I can't really do much..." he added with a painful tug in his heart.

"Your support is all I need to keep going, Lukan," Klaus whispered.

Lukan hugged the otter tighter. "But I got to go to work now... I'll be back out at 8..." he said as he reluctantly broke the hug with the otter, whose arms were outstretched in need of more comfort.

"E-eight... That's such a long time..." Klaus muttered as he sniffled again.

"I-I can come out to visit on my lunch break," Lukan offered.

Klaus sighed as he got back into the truck and sat back in the seat. "Th-that'd be nice," he whispered as he seemed to be falling asleep. Lukan can't imagine how exhausted he must be. If he had been there all night, trying to sleep must have been impossible...

"It's going to be okay, Klaus. I-I can't promise it, but I'll make sure to do the best I can to make it okay, okay? Just get some rest until I come back" he said as he prepared to close the door on the otter.

Klaus only dipped his head and closed his still teary eyes. "I'll rest easy, knowing my best friend wants to help me back..." he whispered.

"Sleep well, Klaus; I'll be back in about four and a half hours," Lukan slowly and carefully closed the truck door as he sighed. He really hoped he could help Klaus out, but it became apparent in his mind that that might be a distinct impossibility.

Lukan clocked in almost too early. The managers were pretty strict with how the clocking works. They want no one to clock in more than five minutes late and most certainly not a minute too early. Clocking out was the same way, but they also hated the idea of clocking out late just to squeeze in more time on the employee's check. It really put a lot of pressure on not just Lukan, but everyone else who had worked there.

It was just as Lukan put away his belongings in his locker that one of the employees got his attention. "Lukan." the voice said.

Lukan almost jumped from how surprised he was. He swung around to find that one of his work partners he called Cloud because of the cloud like feature on the end of his feline tail was trying to get his attention. "What is it Cloud?"

"Someone had a bit of a disaster in the women's restroom. The managers have had me busy shoveling the stupid parking lot so I can't fix or you know, clean, it," he said.

Lukan sighed. It was always the women's room! Why was it always the women's room! He always knew about the stereotype that males are messier than females, but given his experience working at a store for several months, he realized just how hypocritical that stereotype has become. In fact it was flat out contrary when it came to the bathrooms! ...And why does he always get stuck with this job!? "Alright fine, I'll take care of it," he said gruffly. And it was this sort of nasty behavior in public places like this that made Lukan hate people even more...

"Thank you, Lukan," Cloud said as he went and grabbed his coat and a shovel. "Welp, break time for me is over..." he said as he wandered off. Why did Lukan have a nagging suspicion that he was never doing his job in the first place? Lukan wandered into the maintenance room and sighed. None of the maintenance carts were properly stocked or organized. This convinced Lukan Cloud was just goofing off since he came in today. Why do so many creatures treat their jobs like jokes!? It's a wonder anything at all gets done around here.

As Lukan stocked the cart, the otter crossed his mind again. He wondered if the otter had fallen asleep yet and what he was dreaming about. Lukan really hoped he could help the otter out and he knew the otter would be on his mind all day as he worked. And not even because he was attractive, no this time it was serious. Very serious. If that otter became homeless because of him, he could never forgive himself!

"Excuse me, but are you closing the bathroom?" a deep voice caused Lukan to jump violently as a wide bodied doe moved the cart that Lukan worked hard to fit just right between the entrance of the bathroom to block it off.

"Yes," Lukan said through his wilting patience.

"I need to use it first," the doe said plainly with that particular tone that Lukan could not stand. The tone that spoke of complete smugness and entitlement. Lukan huffed as he narrowed his eyes as he moved the cart. "Make it quick..."

Instantly the doe tried to walk into the bathroom, and it forced Lukan to be pushed against the wall. He yelped out in surprise as the doe crushed him into the wall. When that was over the doe did not even apologize. Lukan was breathing steam at that point. Oh how he hated his job sometimes... and yet! It only just started.

It was fifteen minutes before the rude doe finally left the bathroom and when Lukan was finally cleared to go in, he almost gagged immediately from the smell. Oh good. This oughta be fun... He grabbed the gloves as he put them on with grim determination to get it over with.

40 filthy minutes later and Lukan was driving the cart back to the back as he sweated. It's been quite some time since he dealt with a bathroom that resembled of a disaster area. If there was one positive about the job, it's the fact that it's helped Lukan out with his past fear of public bathrooms considerably.

It was at that moment that Cloud wandered back into the back absolutely covered in snow and water. He was breathing heavily. "Fuckin' weather. It's snowing again and the wind is back," he muttered. Lukan could only imagine. Wait. It must be freezing out there and yet Klaus' truck wasn't on to warm it up! Lukan felt even worse for the otter's condition. He felt even more desperate for a solution to show itself. "Lukan?" Cloud snapped him back. "Is there something on your mind? You seem more distant than usual today."

"Huh what? Oh sorry about that, I've just had one helluvan eventful week is all," Lukan said, barely paying the white cat any attention.

"Well that's good right?" Cloud asked. "You're always complaining about same old, same old crap when you come into work."

Lukan looked at the cat he had just used. "Well yeah. And no. Things have gotten crazy complicated for... really personal reasons; I don't think I'm allowed to discuss them at work," Lukan found that excuse. Cloud was also somewhat nosy. Not extremely so; it was probably more of a manner of being overly curious. Lukan found it hard to talk to the cat because he never wanted to talk about such problems. This time he sort of did, but at the same time, if anyone else were to find out he might be gay for starters was a very daunting thought.

Cloud nodded. "Ah I see. Girl troubles?" That made Lukan jump. Oh boy there is that to worry about too! Other people assuming he's straight! ...Wait no he is straight right?! But what about last night!? He pawed off to the memory of a MALE naked otter for God's sake! No! Now is NOT the time to dwell on that! Stop it!

"Um... like I said, personal," Lukan said awkwardly.

"Makes sense. And besides, no offense, but you don't look like the type who'd date anyone anyways. Not because you can't get a girl, but because you don't seem to want one," Cloud said which made Lukan jump and instantly blurt out.

"N-not because I'm gay or anything!" he exclaimed.

"...because you aren't ever in the mood to date," Cloud finished with a stare. "I don't think it's gay for a guy to not date anyone. That's a fucking ridiculous argument. I'm not going to make it," he said. Probably because he is also single, but Lukan digresses. Nonetheless Lukan breathed a sigh of relief. "And I don't even have problems with gays as long as they keep their paws off of me, jeez," Cloud looked somewhat insulted. What for? For Lukan making assumptions? Lukan was very confused...

"It's not girl troubles; it's my best friend..." Lukan said.

Cloud's eyes widened and his sulky face disappeared instantly. "*You* have a best friend now?! Now I see why you've had an eventful week! But... what about them?"

Lukan sighed. "Well he's been kicked out of home, so I am really worried about him," he said reluctantly.

Cloud gasped. "That's awful! What did he do?"

Lukan sighed because this is where homosexuality comes into play. "Well he was kicked out for being gay," Cloud wouldn't know who Klaus was would he? If he did, then he just gave away Klaus' secret. Lukan felt a painful guilty sting stab him in the gut. How open was Klaus? The more open he was, the less Lukan had to worry, but he couldn't help but think he made a big mistake.

"That's just heinous!" Cloud breathed. "I know she doesn't agree with something like that, but to flat out kick their kid out with no consideration is just plain disgusting!"

Lukan only nodded in agreement. "I'm going to try to have him stay with me, but neither of us have any clue how we're going to do that. And we were going to see if he could get a job here. We were today until he got told to never come back home."

"Well it's nice of you to offer your place to him like that," Cloud said.

"What are you two just chit-chatting for?!" that was the voice of one of the managers. And to Lukan's dismay it was the meanest one in the store, Crystal the lioness. "We don't pay you to just stand around and gossip, so get your tails in gear and WORK!" she yelled, causing Cloud's fur to fluff out and Lukan's ears to flatten.

Cloud's voice was unsteady when he replied. "Y-yes Ms. Crystal! R-right away ma'am!" And he even gave her a salute, which Lukan was not sure how she'd react to such an unusual gesture, whether it was respect or not.

"Mr. Benka!" Crystal boomed, causing Lukan to flinch.

"Y-yes ma'am?" he tried not to look into her menacing eyes.

"Did you clean the women's room yet?" she demanded. When Lukan nodded... "Well, get back in there! You've missed several spots!" Even though Lukan knew as well as she did, that Lukan scrubbed the whole place down because he had to, due to the disaster Lukan will never discuss. And with a last disapproving stare, Crystal stalked off, tail raised high in irritation leaving Lukan with his heart pounding and Cloud's eyes full moon wide in fear.

When she was out of earshot Lukan began grumbling. "I fucking hate perfectionists like her... and they wonder why people under their watch have emotional problems all the time..."

Cloud was only capable of nodding. "I... I'll be collecting cardboard boxes from the produce department now..." he said nervously.

"I thought you were still working on shoveling snow outside?" Lukan pointed out.

Cloud shook his head. "I'm done until the snow piles up again, which means I'll probably be out there again within the next hour or so," he said with a disappointed sigh. "And are you going back into the bathrooms, Lukan?"

"She knows as well as I that there is no need. She just wants me to do the hardest crap in the store for no apparent reason!" Lukan replied almost too loudly.

"She's like that with everyone. I am so glad we don't have her as our direct supervisor," Cloud said.

"We should get to work before she comes back, or we'll never hear the end of it," Lukan said nervously as he heard pawsteps coming from around a corner.

Cloud only nodded as he wandered off, leaving Lukan alone in the maintenance corner of the back room. He sighed as he resumed his usual duties of making sure it

stays clear and organized. As he shifted the boxes around, Klaus crossed his mind again. He sighed heavily. He just couldn't stop thinking of that creature could he? Lukan knew there were reasons why the otter would not leave his mind alone, especially now, but Lukan really wished it would stop hindering everything else in his life.

It took time much too long for Lukan's comfort for his lunch break to finally come. He was supposed to take it at 3, but duty calls right before he punched out for lunch and he was delayed at least a half an hour. That's half an hour spent on the otter wondering where he was. And worrying was the last thing someone could afford to do in a situation like this, where that someone is forced to be dependant on another for God knows how long now?

When he approached the crimson scarlet truck that belonged to Klaus, he knocked on it. It swung open instantly, so fast and with so much force, it knocked Lukan flying several yards back before he landed flat on his hindquarters on the frozen parking lot. "Lukan!" Klaus yelled. "I'm sorry! I just really missed you!" he hopped out of the truck and ran toward Lukan and helped him to his paws. Klaus sniffed. "You smell like a used bathroom..." Klaus' nose wrinkled.

"All a part of the job, I'm afraid," Lukan's face burned. Why did that happen? Why would he be embarrassed in front of this otter?

Klaus took a deep breath. "Okay... I'm going in," he said suddenly.

"Wait what?" Lukan asked, shocked by the sudden change in the otter's attitude.

"Going to apply for a job, of course. You think that after being kicked out of home would make me forget that?" Klaus prompted.

"I suppose not, but we should focus on getting you somewhere to live first, don't you think?" Lukan countered skeptically.

Klaus shrugged. "Maybe, but the sooner I get a job, the sooner I'll be back on my paws, right?" he said.

"I guess so, but when they ask for your address, what will you say? Especially if my mom does not allow you to stay with us?" Lukan asked.

"I'll tell them the truth then. Will it really hurt my chances of being employed?" Klaus responded.

"It might! If you say you were kicked out of home, they might think you did something awful to deserve it!" Lukan exclaimed.

"I did nothing wrong," Klaus spat instantly.

Lukan backed up at Klaus' sudden ferocity. "I know, I know, but do they know you're gay? Of course not!" Lukan replied trying to stay calm.

"They can't refuse to hire me because I'm gay; you know the anti discrimination laws affect this market's corporation right?" Klaus said with a smirk. "And if they try to, I can sue them, and that will instantly fix my problem when I do for lots of money."

A smart idea, Lukan had to admit, but pretty sneaky and dirty. And yet as indicated by laws and such, it was legal. "Maybe, but I guess we'll see," Lukan conceded. "I really do want to work with you, but until we know where you will end up, applying right now is not that good an idea!"

Klaus only shrugged as they reentered the store. "Maybe, but I have faith that things will work out," he said.

"Blind faith like that could get you in serious trouble you know!" Lukan said as she held on the otter's arm. He was blind to the stares of some shoppers nearby; all he could care about was the success of the otter's life after a sudden major collapse such as this.

"I don't care. It's better than assuming everything won't work. Something you yourself, need to stop doing all the time," Klaus said calmly.

Something about what the otter just said sparked anger in Lukan's chest and before he knew it he was half shouting and half snarling at him. "I don't just *assume* things will go badly, I *speculate* what would happen if they do, for your information!" he spat.

Klaus remained calm though. "Calm down, Lukan, I'm just trying to give you advice," he said.

Lukan was only able to sigh. "If things don't work out, you'll know where to find me..." he said as he broke off Klaus as he strode confidently towards one of the backroom entrances. Klaus did not even look at Lukan when he broke off. He kept a strange look of determination on his face. A look that made Lukan convinced that it wasn't the same Klaus he saw this morning. This one looked like it was ready to embrace the world, no matter what it threw at him.

And for some reason, Lukan knew that from that demeanor the otter had now, everything would work out somehow. At least. He liked to hope so.