

Winter's Gallows

SIX: The Preparation

In the few days that followed Lukan revealing his true feelings for Klaus, the two new lovers continued to do as they did the night they found out about each other's feelings: indulged in them. Every time they had, Lukan felt happier and happier knowing that his life had changed for the better. Every time they committed to sensual deeds, Lukan welcomed it with a smile. He still had not felt ready to take it any farther than a mutual paw-shaking, but he was confident that someday, he and Klaus would.

It was now December 13, the day of Klaus' orientation at the supermarket, and Lukan also had to work that day. It was Sunday, so Lukan knew it was going to be a busy day. Why they decided to hold Klaus' orientation on the weekend like this he'll never understand. Since Klaus had his orientation start at 9 in the morning, and Lukan worked another half day, meaning he had not needed to go in until 2 that afternoon, Lukan had to walk to work for the first time in a couple weeks. He was not exactly happy about that, since that Friday, the 11th, there was a nasty snowstorm that covered the city around them in ten inches of snow. And since the city knew snowstorms like it did itself, nothing closed down that day despite many people getting stuck in their driveways since some places never got plowed and the snowdrifts thanks to Lilac Grove being among the windiest cities ever, being unbearably ridiculous. Nevertheless, creatures who walked to work were shit out of luck having to walk in it day after day, dealing with the frozen water infiltrating their boots and soaking their paws uncomfortably. Lukan found it miraculous that such things happening every time he left the apartment did not make him sick at all. Just irritable.

Upon reaching work and clocking in for the day, Lukan overheard the HR giving the new recruits the rundown about safety and other generic rules about the store. Lukan tried to peek in to see Klaus in there, but did not get a chance to due to his fellow maintenance coworker greeting him.

"Oh look at what the cat dragged in; it's Lukan!" Cloud said as he drove one of the maintenance carts into his direction. It was as if he were joking because he *is* a cat.

"Afternoon, Cloud. Has it been busy today?" Lukan prompted as he grabbed his work supplies from his locker.

Cloud sighed, letting Lukan know he was exhausted. "Definitely. I mean in the morning it wasn't so bad; everyone was at church, but when that got out, holy shit dude. I don't understand how even we are getting swamped, even though we're not a retail store like Wal-Mart or something!"

Lukan shook his head. "People want their Christmas dinner ya know?" He said.

"That may be, but holy shit!" Cloud echoed himself. "Anyways, how are you doing...?"

"My paws are frozen again, naturally, but I'm here to help for a while at least," Lukan answered.

"Pfft. And yet they know you're able to work all day today as well as Saturday, so why aren't they scheduling you the whole day knowing how much we need your help!?" Cloud exclaimed.

Lukan could only shrug. "Only management knows the answer to that question, but we should be glad Klaus is joining our crew, right?"

Cloud nodded. "Oh God yes. Sooner he joins, the more we can relax at how terrible this season is!"

"I think he's working only part time like I am though, that's the thing," Lukan said

"What!? But we need all the paws we can get for as long as we can get them! Why is management hiring part time constantly like this!? We need full time commitment or things will go to shit!" Cloud raged unexpectedly.

"I know I know! But some time is better than no time, right?" Lukan explained.

Cloud sighed again. "Yeah. That's true, but it is not enough, and it may hurt the company more than it helps," he said in a much calmer voice.

"If it were any other time than Christmas, then maybe, but right now, the business is most certainly keeping that from happening," Lukan rebutted. "Once the season is over, I'll see what I can do to increase our hours so that won't actually happen," he added in an offer to appease the angry cat.

Cloud nodded. "That would help, but we need your hours now..." he said with a tilt of his head.

"I'm sorry Cloud, but since Klaus and I both have school, we can't exactly do that. We both plan to drop out after this semester, but for right now, we can't do much..." Lukan responded apologetically.

"Understandable, but it does not change the fact that--"

Just as Cloud was speaking the PA activated and called out. "Attention, we need a member of maintenance to aisle five for a glass cleanup. Maintenance is need to aisle five for a glass cleanup please."

"We are busy as hell..." Cloud finished with a grumble.

Lukan held out his paw to take the cart from Cloud. "Here, I'll take care of this one. I assume you have not take a break yet?"

Cloud sighed again, this time of relief. "Thank you Lukan. And no I have not gotten to take a break yet; I haven't even made it to lunch either! It's a madhouse I tell you! Mad!"

Lukan nodded. "Okay then. Go to lunch you blasted feline; I'll take care of the store while you're gone."

"You sure you can handle it?" Cloud asked with his eyes widened.

Lukan nodded as he began directing the cart in the direction of the spill the PA had announced. "Definitely. Now hurry up and get yourself clocked out for lunch. I got some glass to attend to..." He did not look back as the cat gave his thanks before moving towards the time clock.

At 5 'o clock, Klaus' orientation was finished and Lukan made sure that he was there to witness the otter leaving the HR room with his schedule in paw. Of course that was difficult to do thanks to the busy day and Cloud getting off at that exact same time. Nevertheless, Lukan did what he could to make it happen. And as the clock struck 5, the HR room opened up and a slew of creatures filed out wearing the employee attire. Lukan smiled and greeted the otter. Instinct almost made him kiss him. Realizing where he was, Lukan stopped himself, almost too late.

"So... how was it?" Lukan began awkwardly, trying his hardest not to blush.

Klaus held up his schedule. He worked five days a week, but part time across the board. "I start the CBLs on Tuesday!" He announced.

Lukan was crestfallen. "Tuesday?" He echoed disappointedly.

Klaus cocked his head to the side. "Yeah. Why? Is that a problem?"

Lukan realized he never told the otter his birthday. He felt very stupid for not doing as such. "Well, my birthday is actually on Tuesday so um... that sucks you'll be there all day."

Klaus hugged the raccoon briefly. "Oh no, I'm so sorry; I did not mean to do that!" He said sadly.

Lukan shook his head. "It's my fault for never telling you. You did not know... and this is what happened," he said plainly.

"I can always reschedule it if that is okay..." Klaus offered.

Lukan shook his head again. "No do not do that; you'll look badly to these guys and you'll be indirectly penalized by them as you begin actually working," Lukan explained.

Klaus nodded, looking hurt. Lukan felt sorry for the otter and regretful for not telling him sooner. If only he had not kept forgetting to let the information reach his knowledge!

"I'll see you when I get home, Klaus," Lukan said. "Oh and. One more thing," he said as Klaus started walking slowly away. He looked back, a somewhat hopeful look portrayed on his face. "You're working five days a week? Does that mean...?"

Klaus nodded, hope disappearing from his face. "Yeah. I'm giving up on school for now," he said.

Lukan nodded. "Then I will too. There is no point for me to continue either. I'm failing almost all my classes, I don't know entirely what to do with my life yet, and trying to go back next semester would be a waste of time and money. And... now that we are no longer in school, the sooner we can move," he said.

Klaus sighed. "That's great. I hope we could get out of here as soon as possible," he said.

"Me too. So that one day, we could live together happily, away from this dreary town..."

"Happy birthday Lukey!" Lukan's mother brought out a cheesecake with the candles on it matching his new age: 19. AND it was a cheesecake because Lukan always hated the taste of traditional cakes that were used on birthdays. Ironically, cheesecakes are his favorite food ever. Well maybe not that ironic; cake and cheesecake are very different.

Lukan could not help but smile when his mom brought out the cherry smothered dessert item, candles atop set aflame. He wished Klaus could be there to see this. Come to think of it, Lukan did not even see or ask when he actually got off today. It was only now that he thought about the possibility of the otter getting off early and coming home... ..it was his home now right? Lukan had to wonder that too...

"Is something wrong with the cake, Lukey?" Lukan's mother snapped him back to reality. "You should blow out the candles quickly; the wax will drip into the cake and that wouldn't be good at all wouldn't it?"

Lukan bit his lip as he watched the door. He wanted Klaus to be there to witness this, but he nodded his head when he thought that his mother was right. Cheesecakes were expensive. It would be a massive waste to ruin it like this. Lukan took a deep breath and made his birthday wish: that he and Klaus would one day be together, living happily, with success and prosperity, and blew out the candles. The smoke instantly billowed to the ceiling as if it were carrying his wish to an invisible being above them.

It was at that instant the door's lock clicked and the otter had come in, looking exhausted as if he ran a mile. "Happy birthday Lukan!" He gasped as he shut the door behind him. "I-I'm not late am I?" He asked in dismay when he saw the smoking candles. He cursed. "Damn it! I'm sorry Lukan..." he said.

"Klaus! No it's fine- I-I'm glad you made it here so soon!" Lukan was surprised to find the clock saying that it was 6:15. So did he get off at 6? Lukan had trouble remembering exactly what time the otter went in to work... "Why are you so tired...?" He added.

"I ran up the stairs as fast as I could," Klaus said. The two raccoons looked at him suspiciously. An athletic creature like him could not dash up one flight of stairs and not feel winded? That made no sense... Klaus noticed this and flushed. "Aw come on!

Otters have shorter legs than you guys! Or have you forgotten...?" Even still. Klaus had longer legs than the average otter. Nevertheless Lukan's mother took his word for it and began cutting the cheesecake.

"So how was CBLs?" Lukan had to start a conversation as his mother struggled cutting it evenly.

Klaus shook his head and yawned. "Long, dull, and boring. At least they were easy, but ugh. Hate doing that crap all day," he said.

Lukan giggled. "So true; I hated them too. But at least it's over right?"

Klaus shook his head. "Got a little more than half of them done. I have to finish the rest tomorrow. I was only there for six hours I believe today?" He said affirming Lukan's thoughts.

"Huh. That's weird though. I thought they'd have you all day because they're CBLs. They did that to me," Lukan stated. "Then again they've made a lot of weird choices lately. They held your orientation on SUNDAY for God's sake! That never happens!" Lukan exclaimed.

Klaus could only shrug. He obviously had even less of an idea of what was going on than Lukan did.

Lukan was offered a large slice of his cheesecake. He took it as he looked into the otter's eyes again. God he loved doing that. And he was even more glad that he had made it there. He hoped more than anything they'd be together forever. Cliched hopes indeed. But never changing.

"So I heard both of you were going to drop out of college?" Lukan's mom suddenly prompted. "So we could all move sooner?" She added when Lukan jumped. Lukan was about ready to defend himself because his mother was quite the perfectionist when it came to school.

"Y-yeah," he answered cautiously, taking a bite out of the delicious dessert item.

Lukan's mom only nods. "When I get my tax refund, we will," she said. "End of January," she added.

Lukan almost choked on his piece from surprise. "J-January!?" He exclaimed. "That's so soon!"

Lukan's mom nods again. "Yeah. But I want out of this miserable place as soon as possible," she said.

This time Lukan nods and looks down at his birthday treat. January... that is about five months sooner than what they had all initially planned. He wondered if they were going to be ready for that day to come or not. As fast as time goes, he would not be surprised if he woke up the following day only to find that they were about to hit the road. They weren't even sure where they were going yet! How could they talk about moving so soon right then when not much has been planned out just yet!?

"You're worrying again aren't you? I hate it when you worry; it makes me worry," Klaus said suddenly in almost a monotone. "Lukan, why do you always worry so much?" He asked.

"Klaus," Lukan started, almost ready to spill more secrets in front of his mother. "It's... complicated. And it all has to do with Bright," he said.

"Oh. That's right I forgot," Klaus stated. "But seriously, Lukan, you can't worry about everything all the time, or you won't get anywhere far in life."

"Klaus is right, Lukey," his mother chimed in. "It's never bad to be cautious, but being nothing but is no better than being reckless. We'll be okay."

"Th-that's what you said about when we were forced out of home back in Kadan! And remember where we ended up as a result!?" Lukan exclaimed without even meaning to. "We ended up in Bright! No! We ended up in *hell*!"

"Don't use such language around me, Luke," His mother growled. Luke. Yeah she was angry now... "We ended up in Bright because we had no choice and no time. This time we do. Now stop your worrying. I believe we both learned from our mistakes there!" She stated flatly.

"Raccoons never learn from their mistakes..." Lukan grumbled. "Or at least, neither of us do..."

"What did you say?" His mother demanded. Lukan said nothing. He knew he was going too far over a subject that still has a month and a half's time written on it. Maybe this time it would be so bad?

After another paw shaking with Klaus, and a special one since it was his birthday, Lukan found himself thinking about what had happened in Bright as Klaus snuggled up to him closely. Moving was something Lukan used to be used to. As a cub, he moved around a lot. It seemed that at the end of the school year he'd move somewhere else, causing him to have to say goodbye to all the friends he did manage to make. Of course, after Bright, he stopped bothering. Just his luck he managed to stay in the same place in Lilac Grove for five years. Now it did not even matter anymore. Lukan felt the otter's arm shift as the held each other. Lukan was extremely glad that the otter was going to be able to go with them. He could not imagine what life would have been like for either of them if they couldn't. Could it have been worse than Bright? No. No. No matter how much Lukan adored the otter, he knew nothing could be worse than what happened there. Nothing.

"Lukan...?" Klaus said in a very hoarse and tired voice.

Lukan felt the otter's paw on his stomach and shivered with happiness when it moved. "Yes Klaus?" He asked.

"What exactly happened in Bright...?"

Lukan shuddered from the memories. They were all so vivid and so painful..."It's a long story Klaus," he answered.

"Tell me," Klaus whispered. Before Lukan could object, Klaus continued, "I told you mine. What's yours, my love...?"

Lukan sighed. "Alright I'll tell you it. But not too many details-- I... it still really hurts me even to this day..."

"I could still remember what had caused this to happen. Unlike your story Klaus, mine began when I was 11. So during your time in the foster home, this was all happening to me. It began simply. Me and my mom lived in a city called Kadan in the next state. It's three times the size of Lilac Grove. And it was March when this started. It started from something so simple, yet so common at the time. As you and I know, the economy was absolutely thrashed at the time. So what else could start the adventure than my mom losing her job? Yeah something like that. What could we do? We may have had a lot in savings, but due to the economy, costs for everything skyrocketed too high for us to cope for very long. It took only two months for all our money to disappear. We had to sell a fuck ton of crap we had our entire lives. Childhood memories, valuables, you name it. All gone forever. It helped us stay for maybe a little longer. On June 1, we were forced out of home. We had two options. Either move with a couple of my mom's friends to the town of Bright, or find a homeless shelter. My mom asked me what I wanted to do. Why she asked an 11 year old idiotic cub was beyond me. Just because I was smarter than most cubs my age doesn't mean I am always right. In fact it was opposite. When it came to decisions like that, I was always wrong. Nevertheless. I chose to move to Bright.

At first moving to Bright was not so bad. Sure it was a lot hotter and uncomfortable and me and my mom had to live in their basement. The worst part about the basement was all the spiders and bugs. And they did not really bother me that much. N-no... what bothered me was something that happened a month and a half in."

Lukan hesitated as he looked into the otter's eyes, realizing that his were filled with tears of sadness and anger from his memories.

Klaus whispered in his ears. "It's okay Lukan... I'm here to comfort you..." he said as he softly ran his fingers through Lukan's tail.

Lukan hesitated before continuing.

"Midway through July. We were having dinner. And I asked what it was. When I got the answer, I almost panicked. Sure what may have been a simple food a lot of

people had. But one of the ingredients I KNEW existed in them was something I was very, very allergic to. I told them this.

...They did not care. I was forced to eat dinner, because they claimed that they were working hard to help us. Sheltering us and feeding us. They saw my denial of it as a sign of ungratefulness. I tried to tell them that it wasn't. But they told me and my mom we had to get out in three days if I did not show my gratitude. So I had no choice...

It was instant. I was very sick with something that I dare not speak. I was sick for three days straight, unable to eat anything, unable to sleep, unable to concentrate. It did not help that the heat only made it a million times worse. I was in a constant state of discomfort, pain, and nausea. I felt like I was close to death. I remembered. That enough of the stuff could actually kill me. It wrecked me. Dare I say. The initial illness ended after three days. But the effects never went away. Though I was not sick anymore, the discomfort in my system continued to persist... for months.

It was a dark time after that. If adults could not be trusted either, than I would never talk to anyone ever again. I would find no guidance, no consolation, and no friends. No anything for the rest of my days. And most of all, I would never trust myself ever again for making such a horrible, HORRIBLE mistake in choosing to go to Bright. I may not have had a choice in the end, but the fact that I made it still gives me chills.

School began criminally early in August. Instantly I was outcasted. By myself. As in I outcasted myself from the crowd to make sure that I would never trust anyone. No one could ever be trusted. The sixth grade was different too. Now we had separate classes in separate classrooms. Needless to say, it was not easy adapting to it all at first. But if I thought that I was going to get out of this school in one piece, I was wrong.

On my second day there was this bully. He would always call me the nastiest of names. Some of which I actually never heard of before. And one of them... was actually the word "faggot"... it scares me that he was right in that regard. He would physically abuse me, verbally berate me. The teachers who knew what was happening only bat their eyes. And I did not report him. The abuse continued as long as I remained there all the way to November. But...

There was something that happened just a week into the school year. I had an attack. From being poisoned, the effects never truly went away, and sometimes I would find myself flinging myself to a trash can or toilet. Most of the time, nothing would happen, thank God. But one teacher in particular, did not understand how sick I still was at that point. And she told me to get back to my position. It was PE class by the way, the easiest class to set it off. And if I did not. Office for me. I had no ability to argue with her. I had to get to the nearest trash can and... eventually it DID happen this time. Guess who did not fucking care! Sent to the office with suspension threatened on me...

I was lucky that this time, my mom cared about me and did something about it. We were going to sue the school over this. But we found that it was not enough of an offense to do so. But she made sure the staff of the school would understand that I was a very sick cub. And that I needed special help for it. Insultingly though, I was sent to a class for disabled cubs to replace my PE class. I was sick; I was not disabled. But something in my psyche had apparently changed enough, for them to consider me disabled. And it scared me.

And now... in that class... I made a single friend. One that understood everything that I was going through. One that agreed with me on everything. One who clearly was not disabled like me. They knew more than any of those teachers combined. Why he was in the class. I would never know.

Soon I did. He was the son of a major mass murderer in the area. And apparently he had extremely violent tendencies that put him in serious trouble. Guess when I found that out? Shortly after he lured me to the train tracks that ran between my house and the school, and nearly killed me there. Y-you can't imagine how scared I was! I was having another attack and everything when this happened! I also found out another one of his friends happened to be that bully I mentioned earlier! I-I was so hurt, so forlorn, that I made sure that ever since then, no one would ever pay attention to Lukan Benka ever again. I made sure I never stood out. I made sure no one noticed me. And more importantly. I made sure I would make no more friends, ever again.

In November, we were able to leave Bright after a close call of being kicked out. Not by the owners, but by the landlord. And things somehow improved from there. Another five months, and the illness I had faded away for good. Hopefully. Sometimes I feel its effects to this day, but I am sure I will be okay... And now I am more than okay now that I have an otter who loves me."

He was well aware that he was crying, tears streaming down his face as he recalled the most painful and bitter memories of his life. Klaus was there drying them up and hugging him tightly, comforting the trembling raccoon as he cried.

"O-oh Lukan I... I am so sorry," Klaus whispered. "I never knew it was that bad; I should never have convinced you to tell me," he said as he patted Lukan on the back.

Lukan sniffled. "No. It's okay Klaus. You told me what happened to you. It was only right that I did the same for you. I just did not think my problems were so bad. In fact they seemed pathetic. I mean. On the surface, I was depressed because I had to eat something with green chilli peppers in it. Th-that's what I am allergic to by the way..."

"Oh Lukan... being essentially poisoned is not something to take lightly. Whether it was an allergy or not, you said it could have been fatal right?" Klaus asked. When Lukan nodded he gasped. "Y-you should have called the police!" He exclaimed.

Lukan shook his head. "Then what? What would have happened if they went to jail or something? We would definitely be on the streets then. In one of the most hostile places I have ever seen anywhere. We could not take that risk, and besides. My mom? She does not care or understand what I was going through. Probably because I was only a cub. Like my thoughts and feelings did not matter."

"That's bullshit!" Klaus yelled. "Everyone's opinions and thoughts should count! Shame on her for not seeing it before!"

"She knows that now, Klaus," Lukan started, but Klaus' rant was not done yet.

"I mean if she wanted your input on moving to Bright, then she should have understood what you were thinking and feeling at the time, right!?"

Lukan kissed the otter's lips to shut him up before explaining. "She gets it now Klaus." He echoed himself. "She's learned from that mistake and so have I. Despite what I said about raccoons not learning from their mistakes, we know what to expect if this happens again and we won't be so... quick to decide like that anymore. I was just... so worried that something like Bright will happen again if we do move again. I'm afraid Klaus. As much as I want out of Lilac Grove forever, I am too scared to move after what happened before."

Klaus kissed Lukan again. "Don't worry Lukan. No matter what happens, I'm sticking by your side this time. And you can definitely trust me," he said.

Lukan hugged tighter. "Thank you Klaus... thank you for finally giving me hope..." he cried as he held the otter's body firmly against his body.

"It's the least I can do... after all. I did promise to help you," Klaus said quietly as he embraced the emotional raccoon.

Christmas passed. The new year had come and gone. And with it did Lukan and Klaus' college careers. At least temporarily they had hoped. They spent their newfound time working more at the market, whose business had drastically died down as the days had passed. Christmas was uneventful for both of them. Essentially all that was different about it was more Christmas music and a much larger dinner. That was it. Lukan and Klaus were not religious so they held Christmas only lightly in their minds. On that evening however, Lukan finally let Klaus try oral on him when they got intimate again. Lukan could not describe it. It felt more wet than usual, that's all he could say for sure! He was not quite so keen on doing it to the otter yet. Imagining doing so was scary to him. Klaus understood of course and let him paw him off instead, which Lukan still loved doing.

There was something though that was bothering Lukan. Something small and he wondered about it a lot now that it was halfway through January. He and Klaus had their intimacy literally every night and every morning that they could. Every opportunity they took. As much as Lukan loved it, he had to wonder if that was all

Klaus was willing to do. If they ended up together like this, would they end up having sex every single day? As magical as that was, the magic would be ruined if done every day! For the time being, yeah Lukan loved it, but every day? Surely the otter must understand that breaks were needed. However due to many instances such as work, other creatures, his mother, and getting lost in his forest colored eyes, that never came to be.

He and Klaus could only focus on their future as well. Neither of them had time to worry about anything, and if they did, a good intimate session would cure them right up! The two of them worked 25 hours a week. At their rate, they'd both have \$1,000 each by the end of the month. Plus Lukan's mom's tax return and an additional grand in savings guaranteed them a total of \$7,500 by moving time. That would definitely get them somewhere. However that somewhere still evaded their plans. Where exactly were they going to go? Lukan's mom already called ahead to a few places looking for jobs and/or housing. But of course there were no responses. Can't have one without the other. The only way to know for sure if one each replied at the same time.

Lukan and Klaus were also trying to transfer their work to a similar market owned by the same corporation wherever Lukan's mom looked, but nobody was looking for extra paws anywhere! All Lukan was told was that they had to keep looking.

The places that seemed to interest Lukan's mom the most was down south and west towards the desert. The desert!? Lukan was surprised. The place that got very little rain most of the year and was hotter than the sun. Why? No snow. That was always her answer. Fair enough Lukan supposed, but he still held skepticism over the situation. He barely held the capacity to care anymore where he ended up, as long as he was out of lilac grove and in the otter's arms as well.

Working with the otter in the store was also different. As much as they loved being in each other's company at work, they could not show it. That rule about employees dating each other in the same department was a real pain in the tail for Lukan because just being near the otter made him want to hug and kiss him all day. Maybe having him work at the market with him was not the best idea, but at least it made his days at work much more bearable. And it was made even more bearable when Lukan heard that the nasty manager, Crystal had quit for unknown reasons. Hah. Figures that would happen just days before their departure. They both put in their notices for their last day being January 24. January 24. Lukan made sure to take an infinite amount of mental notes since that was the day! The one that guarantees his final departure from the prison Lilac Grove enclosed him in. He had two things to thank the city for though. It rescued him from Bright when things were far from bright. And it gave him the kindest otter to confide in and love for hopefully the rest of his days.

"Maintenance, you're needed up to register 5 for a glass clean up. And the front women's restroom. Maintenance--"

The PA was interrupted by a loud groan from Klaus as he pushed one of the carts back to the back where Lukan was, making sure the other cart's mop water was replaced. It wasn't. Figures.

Since there were three of them now, they had to make sure they had two carts instead of one for multiple needs like... right that instant.

"God damn it, why are women so messy!?" Klaus exclaimed. "Glad I'm gay," he added with a frustrated mutter.

"Hey don't be sexist," Lukan said plainly as he prepared new mop water.

"I'm not! It's just... it's always the women's room! Why is it always the women's room!?" He responded.

Lukan shrugged. "It's harder for them I guess. I dunno; I'm not a girl!"

Klaus almost licked his cheek. Lukan was half glad half upset he did not. "And I love you for that. That handsome manly body of yours," he was flirting again. Lukan always got nervous when he started to do that at work.

"Heeey stop it," Lukan said almost more plainly as he started pushing his cart. "We need to decide who's going to take what," he said.

"How bad is the bathroom...?" Klaus asked apprehensively as he followed Lukan out of the maintenance room.

Lukan shrugged. "You know how it is. Could just be out of paper towels... could be shit all over the walls... ya never know at a job like this. And yeah," he added with a sigh, "it can be frustrating not knowing."

Klaus only sighed as well. "Well only one way to know for sure." Lukan nodded.

Upon reaching the front of the store where the spill was, Lukan found it to be... oh shit. Lukan stopped dead in his tracks and stared.

"What? What is it?" Both Klaus and the cashier, a coyote, asked.

Lukan looked down and stuttered. "I cannot clean that." He said plainly then he glanced at Klaus. "Green chilli salsa," he stated.

"Oh fuck," Klaus said in a low voice. "I-it's okay Lukan, I got it," he said as he ripped a wad of paper towels to get to the glass. He addressed the cashier as he did so. "Lukan is very allergic to green chilli, so he can't come near the stuff."

"Really?" The cashier asked in surprise. "God that must suck! I love green chillis!"

Lukan could only stare at her with a look on his face. Then he shook his head. "Guess I am going to check that bathroom..." he muttered as he directed his cart in front of it. Blocking off the bathrooms was always the hardest part of doing them. The women's one in particular was always so hard. Always going in and out, in and out. There was never enough of a grace period for Lukan to get in and work. In fact it took so long that Klaus had finished with the spill and joined Lukan.

"So what's up with this?" He asked as he was wiping his paws off from the salsa. The smell of it almost made Lukan gag.

Lukan shrugged. "No idea. I can't even get in there!"

"I know that feeling," Klaus replied.

It took them ten minutes to finally be able to check the bathroom. Lukan went inside cautiously to make sure there were no women left inside that he lost track of. Considering the traffic, doing so was not uncommon. A few moments passed. Complete silence. Lukan knew he was supposed to knock and call out his department to let them know he was there, but he always hated doing that. So he stopped. He actually found that he was never in any problems for not doing so. But the bathroom this time was indeed empty. And Lukan had to smile when he saw it.

The mess was the foam hand soap all over the sink counter and floor in front of it.

"Well that's the cleanest mess I have ever seen!" Klaus said brightly.

Lukan laughed aloud. "Hah! I know right?!"

"Must have been some little girl who went crazy," Klaus assumed.

Lukan shrugged. "Who knows? Even adults act crazy sometimes. And... good thing too. Life would be so boring..." he added.

"Exactly," Klaus nodded. "Now let's get this cleaned up, shall we?"

"Where did you just say we'd move to?" Lukan asked.

It was after work, and Lukan's mom surprised him with a map of a location she had apparently been looking at all day. It was very close to the Mexican border. It was all he could tell for sure.

"Salamanda," his mother said. "Yes it is close to the border, but since it's a military town... we'd be fine! For the most part..." she added. "It's smaller than Lilac Grove, but it looks like there is a lot more there than here."

"How's that possible?" Lukan continued.

"Because Lilac Grove sucks," his mother answered simply. Fair enough. Can't argue with that logic! "There is a lot of housing down there that we can look for. All sorts of apartments. Nearly all the shopping and restaurants are in one place. Anywhere we'd pick to live and it is not far from much of anything!"

"Isn't it like ten-bajillion degrees or something out there though?" Klaus cocked his head in concern.

Lukan's mom shook her head. "Well of course it gets hot down there; it IS the desert, but!" She added loudly when Klaus opened his maw. "It's actually 15-20 degrees cooler than the rest of the area because of a few mountains around it."

"Sounds great, but Klaus and I probably can't transfer work down there," Lukan noted. "We kept asking around, but it seems nowhere around there has one of our

markets," he said. He and Klaus had been pestering HR on and off over the possibility of transfer over the previous days. Now that there was essentially only a week until they had to quit, they were running out of time to actually find a way to do so. But no matter the amount of times they went to check, there were no answers for them that they liked to hear. The only thing was. Nothing.

The mother coon's face went grim for an instant. "Yeah, I wouldn't be able to transfer either. That's going to be the hardest part right there, is finding a job to work when we get down there. As you already know, can't get a job without a home. Can't get a home without a job."

"That's the stupidest cycle I've ever heard! How many homeless creatures exist because of that crap!?" Lukan exclaimed.

"I do not know," Lukan's mother said. "But I'm doing the best I can to prevent that from happening to us as well."

Lukan and Klaus nodded as they both went into Lukan's room. They spent the rest of the evening playing games on the Wii U together and talking about the future that is to come.

"Only four days left. We still haven't packed that much stuff, you know?" Lukan stated as he looked to both Klaus and his mother.

"Unfortunately, because I've been trying to find things in Salamanda, I haven't got the time to do much," was her excuse. Lukan shook his head as he and Klaus returned to his room, which was getting progressively messier. But even Lukan knew that even though time was getting tighter, the whole searching process was necessary. He and Klaus had to take the liberty and chip away at the things they needed to bring and could just throw out. This was why Lukan's room was getting messier and messier after all. They had no plans on taking a truck. While they had the money, Lukan's mom believed that they needed all of it for a potentially long hotel life until something is resolved. That, and considering how expensive a truck is, she thought it'd be best to start over with brand new furniture and all that when they went. Very few would go with them. Important documents from the past, the computers, clothes, and entertainment stuff, other necessities. Absolutely no furniture though. It was all surreal to Lukan. A lot of the things they had at that point, they had for as long as he could remember. Since the first time he could count the rings on his tail! To get rid of such things... it felt somewhat unreal. It felt even less real when considering the otter was coming with them. Lukan had to wonder, how long was his mom actually going to let him stay? Once they move and they all get settled in, will she kick him out once she thinks he could hold his own alone? Lukan hoped not. He had to stay with him!

"You're lost in your thoughts again. Please tell me it's nothing bad this time too!" Klaus teased him, knocking him from his thoughts.

"Well, nothing really bad, per se. But it's something that worries me," Lukan stated.

"Always worried about something, huh? Alright, lay it on me you silly coon," Klaus said with a smile. It was as if what worried or bothered Lukan was no problem to this otter. He admired his state of mind. And he wished he had it as well.

"Well I was just wondering how long my mom is going to let you live with us," he said. "I don't think she'll let you stay with us for good, you know."

"I know. But I'm hoping she'll let me stay at least until you're ready to come with me," Klaus said, still smiling.

Live alone? With Klaus? Lukan felt his fur beginning to warm up at such a thought. As much as he'd love that idea, could he and Klaus live alone together? Completely independently? It was an answer that he was unsure of. It was why he was trying to raise money after all. So he would have some sort of safety net if he couldn't. With Klaus' help, maybe it would be possible to do as such, maybe? Right? Needless to say, Lukan would love that. "I would love that," he voiced that thought aloud so the mustelid would hear it.

Lukan blushed deeper when he felt the otter's tongue pass across his head. "I know you would. And you know I would too," he whispered as he wrapped his arms around the raccoon. Lukan held his paws over the otter's and closed his eyes.

"I wish it could stay like this all the time," he whispered back. It was at that exact moment he realized. He broke the hold the otter had on him and sat up.

The otter panicked. "What? What is it!?" He gasped. Lukan was looking at his doorway when Klaus jumped. There was no one there.

"Oh thank fuck. I thought my mom was watching us!" He said, gasping, heart racing. "You never know with her. She's almost sneakier than a fox sometimes!"

Klaus flushed red. "Shit, I forgot she was still up!" He whispered back. "I'm sorry Lukan, I just got lost in the softness of your fur and feeling of your breathing on my paws..." he drifted off, obviously thinking of how much he loved the raccoon. This caused Lukan to blush even harder. Now he really hoped his mother would not come in and see these two red faced lovers. Still, it was better this than if she walked in on them snuggling or God forbid pawing. Klaus sighed. "I still hate hiding it. I kinda want her to know about us, so we won't have to hide it."

Lukan sighed. "I do too, Klaus, but if she takes it badly then... wh-who knows what would happen!? She might kick you out definitely at that point!" He said. "I-I don't want to take that big a risk..." he said sadly. "I'm afraid I might lose you if I do."

"Me too Lukan, but it hurts. Being together and yet, unable to actually show it to others we live with. I hate hiding. It feels so wrong!" Klaus said.

Lukan gripped the otter's paw in his and squeezed it gently. "Maybe someday soon we won't have to! Look, Klaus, maybe I can try to get her opinion on gay guys and

we can go on from there. If she seems okay with it, I'll tell her, alright?" He suggested. Klaus only nodded while Lukan thought to himself that his mom better approve, otherwise he was not sure how long Klaus could keep it just between them.

"When?" Klaus asked softly.

"Tomorrow, I can try," Lukan said. "How I am going to do so without giving either of us away, I dunno," he added. "But I'll do my best."

"I have faith in you, love," Klaus said as he licked him again. Lukan tried his best to suppress a blush if his mom walked by. Lukan had to wonder though. Why does the otter have so much faith in him? Lukan barely had any confidence in himself after all. What was in that otter's mind to give him such an impression?