

TWELVE-A: The Deal

Lukan cursed every moment of every day that his mother acted contrary to her own personality up to this moment. He cursed himself for falling for it and becoming convinced that she actually changed, when in reality she had not. He cursed Klaus for letting the situation get to this level. He cursed the timing of all of it. And most importantly, he cursed himself for making this decision in the first place. As soon as he heard that threat come from his mother's maw, he knew that the situation had just taken a drastic turn. He racked his mind for what to say to that, but no good. There was nothing he was able to come up with in order to rationalize with his mother. He was never able to, even if it should have been easy. This is the weakness she preyed on for his entire cubhood... and now...

"M-Mrs. B-Benka!?" Klaus exclaimed without any breath in his voice. There was no describing the width of his emerald eyes at that point. They were so big in distress, that Lukan noticed far more white than anything else in them.

"Nobody hurts my son and gets away with it..." she snarled.

"B-but--!" Klaus cried. But true to her nature, she refused to let him speak.

"You will not hurt my son ever again, you understand me, Klaus?" her voice grew ominously dark and quiet. She was much, much angrier than when she caught them in the act and accused Klaus of raping Lukan. So much angrier, that Lukan had trouble comparing it to when she was potentially this angry in the past. There WERE no comparisons.

"Mom..." Lukan breathed. He never knew why, be he never called her mom within the past decade or so. To do so now felt surreal... like whenever she called him Lukas. This was too serious a situation after all.

"Mrs. Benka... I never wanted anything to come to this," Klaus said sadly. "I hope you know that."

"BS," she spat. "If you didn't, you wouldn't be cheating on my son or treating him with as much contempt as you have lately."

Klaus backed up some more, shock crossing his face. "I-I! I just--!" Come on Klaus... He needed to tell her how he was feeling through all this. But Lukan knew that he couldn't. His mother as just that petrifying. Argh, that does it.

"That's enough, mother..." Lukan stated, still not feeling sure of himself. If Klaus wasn't going to stand up to her, than he should. It couldn't happen this way!

"Lukas?" she started. "What do you mean, that's enough?"

"Exactly as I said. Leave him alone," Lukan replied, trying to keep his voice as plain, even, and direct as possible. "I now know why Klaus treated me this way. And

because of that, it was a huge mistake telling you what he did. He has his reasons. And you refuse to understand them."

"There is no reason to be faithless to the one you love. NONE!" she said darkly. "Klaus has made it clear that he cares about no one but himself."

"Then why did he ever become friends with me in the first place!? Back then he didn't know for sure if I was gay or not, so why then!?" Lukan's attempts to keep his voice under control were failing miserably. It was rising, along with his mother's. Of all times he failed to conquer, this was not the time to have it happen ever again. This time, this argument must be victorious under him.

"It's always as you said before, right Lukas? That people only make friends with you only to manipulate you?" she prompted.

Lukan had no clear response to that right away. Oh so she HAD been paying attention to him his whole life! Seriously!? And yet what has she accomplished in helping him!? NOTHING!

It was right then, that Lukan knew one hundred percent that he made the wrong choice... but somehow, he knew that he had to at least try to make the best of what was happening. "Be that as it may... this time, there was something going on... Klaus he--"

"...Is not a member of this family any longer. I suggest you look for somewhere else to stay. Starting now, understand?"

Lukan clenched his fists. He wanted to make her see reason so badly, yet was woefully aware that he didn't have the ability to. Or at least, knew nothing of what he could do to do so. He wondered what would happen once the cat knew what was going on... what would he say if he knew the otter was in danger-- no. Wait. He looked at the otter. He could tell that he was thinking the same thing. The cat would take him in, wouldn't he? Klaus WAS happier with the cat, judging by their make out session the night before. Maybe, it WAS best for Klaus to go with the cat? Maybe that option was the right one then? Lukan had no idea. But it looks like his mother is steering them down another path again, and judging by her actions, there was no way this was the right one either. There was no getting around it. Lukan's days with Klaus were numbered, and he had no idea what to do about it!

It seemed that his mother's fury had hampered her ability to concentrate. The whole following day, she was spitting fire at everyone and everything. Even Lukan himself. She might be taking it out on him for standing up to her the previous night. But what else was Lukan going to do!? She was threatening the livelihood of his boyfriend because of a mistake he made! No... if only Lukan had figured this out sooner... none of this fiasco would have ever happened. But now it's too late to go back.

Unfortunately, due to his mother's foul mood, there were no answers given to

them regarding the living and job situation. Lukan could not tell if they were being turned down because of qualifications or his mother's poorly hidden spite for what was going on behind the scenes. She needed to get her act together lest she wanted all three of them to end up in a really bad spot.

Lukan also pondered her sudden uncharacteristic animosity towards Klaus. While it was true that she never listened to reason whenever she was angry for whatever reason, to this extreme was nothing like her at all. It was as if she wanted to punish Klaus at all costs and gain justice for her son, without listening to any reason to sway her mercilessness. Could that be it? And if so, why? Why does she feel Lukan needed to be avenged or something? Then Lukan remembered something he told his mother when he was 17 and had a nasty fight with a close friend of his. He had completely forgotten about it until just then.

*sure you that
happen*

Not to mention the numerous times he kept reminding her when she pressed him to make more friends as he graduated high school and started college. Klaus had pulled the ultimate betrayal. His mother must believe he was going to kill himself over it. And now she is doing whatever she could to make Lukan happier.

Oh shit... What has Lukan done...!?

His mother was threatening Klaus, too focused on it to focus on getting jobs and a place to live, and fears for Lukan's life. This was not a good situation in the slightest. He had to make his mother see reason for the first time, EVER, or Klaus was not going to be in a good spot.

Though if she were to kick him out, what about the cat he was courting with? Would he take him in? If they loved each other, truly, it would... As much as Lukan hated the idea of the two of them together and the circumstances that brought them together, if it's all true, surely the cat would figure something out? If all else fails, this is the hope that Lukan had left. After that, there was nothing else he could think of that could save the poor otter from disaster. Ironically, it's the thing that he dreaded was true that would be Klaus' last line of hope.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" asked a store clerk who was talking to the mother coon about all the concerns they were still plagued with.

"I'm ," she snapped at the panther, obviously displaying that she was irrefutably not fine at all.

Lukan stepped up quickly. "No she is not fine, sorry," he said. How typical. His mother was embarrassing him, but in a very unorthodox way. "She's just skipped her meds again is all," he added the lie to justify it a little more. As if some random store

employee would care about their actual problems. "That and she's stressed that she can't find a job or anywhere to live."

"Yeah, and that otter will soon be on that road permanently," she muttered through teeth so furiously gritted, that she was almost completely unintelligible.

"Uhh what'd she say?" the clerk asked Lukan.

"Empty threats, empty threats," he assured him awkwardly. "But do you have any idea what to do about uh... ya know?" Lukan did not know how to properly end that query.

The clerk shrugged. "Unless you worked for the military base or if you were in college, you'd be set with something for sure. I know there are some tricks that someone could use, but I can't say I know what they are."

"College huh...? Maybe I should have considered enrolling down here when we had the chance, huh...? Tried to transfer even," he said to Klaus, who dipped his head.

"Damn it. If only we'd known," he said.

"And if only you'd realize the pain you've caused--!" started Lukan's mom again, but he started shoving her out before she could cause a scene. She was good at that. Good at all the worst aspects of confronting her son, or in this case, Klaus Richtors. She was demanding that her son stop such rude things without realizing how rude she was herself. That was a raccoon thing. Or was that a mother thing? A mother raccoon thing? Or something else entirely?

The mother coon reluctantly drove them for food, made Klaus pay for his own, naturally, and was in a vile mood lasting for the rest of the day. Lukan wondered if there would be a moment when she'd snap. He wondered why her fury did not immediately peek when he first divulged Klaus' secret to her. She may not have remembered Lukan's promise at that point yet either. But she remembered first and now...

"I don't understand why you would go to such lengths to hurt my son the way you have, Klaus," she said a hundred times more calmly as they left the diner that afternoon. "What has my son done that was so wrong to warrant a broken heart?"

"Will you finally listen to our explanation?" Lukan looked at her coldly, not trusting her in the slightest anymore.

"What do you mean explanation? It's Klaus I want to hear from, not you," she replied just as coldly. Only one other creature was capable of creating that much ice in their voice. And for some reason, Lukan felt it was far more familiarly recent than it should be.

"That's because it's partly, mostly, my fault for what he had to do!" Lukan growled. He felt different as he confronted his mother this time. As if he finally knew how to break the barrier that always prevented him from doing so properly.

"The only fault that I see belongs to Klaus!" she stubbornly muttered.

"Remember why we were arguing before I found him kissing that cat? Remember how Klaus said he wanted to... well do it... with me more and more? To help him cope with his libido at least until we get proper treatment for it? And how I refused to?" Lukan prompted, almost confidently.

"What does that have to do with anything?" she demanded.

"Well I underestimated just how badly afflicted klaus is with it... I made a mistake depriving him of what he needed. I know how he feels, though in a different way. It's damn near impossible to control yourself and... well I think it boiled down to either cheating on me or... raping. Me," Lukan looked at the otter sadly. Klaus returned his gaze with a look of empathy. "If he were to choose neither... then... I don't want to think about what would have happened."

"I see," his mother said too flatly to believe.

"We're both to blame," Lukan continued. "Klaus did have a reason... and I deserved it for being such a god awful boyfriend to him. So please, stop treating him so harshly, okay?"

The mother coon sighed. "I understand. Everyone has their reasons, no matter how legitimate they are or not. But no, Lukan, you did not deserve that. No one does."

Klaus looked at her hopefully. "S-so we're cool? I can still stay with you guys?"

"Will you be okay, Lukan?" she asked her son in obvious reference to the promises he made in the past.

Lukan nodded firmly. "I will, as long as Klaus will be."

"Alright, he can stay..." she conceded.

It was instant, Klaus' hugging of Lukan and nearly breaking his spine. Lukan never recalled being hugged so tightly, but all he could feel then was the air being squeezed from him. "Thank you Mrs. Benka! Thank you so much!"

Lukan still felt that change of heart was too fast and nothing like her at all. "What's the catch?" he asked plainly.

"Catch?" she seemed to try to play dumb. Lukan wasn't going to be convinced.

"What does Klaus need to do if he's going to stay?" he demanded in a level voice.

"Nothing, Lukey. I just want him to not see whomever he cheated on you with anymore, which I would think you'd want from him as well, right?" she stated plainly and innocently. If that was the only stipulation, then Lukan could live with it. Still, Lukan felt there was something very badly amiss. And it wasn't even directly with his mother either...

"O-of course!" Klaus nodded, voice shaking. His demeanor had shifted. Something wasn't right with the way he promised Lukan's mother that he wouldn't see the cat anymore. Lukan felt a brief curiosity on who the cat was. He hoped it didn't matter much as he studied Klaus carefully. He looked thoroughly worried. As if he felt

that promise was going to be impossible to follow. Why? Why would he feel that way? No. He doesn't actually have feelings for that cat that were stronger than the ones for him, did he? It cannot be! Lukan was good at making assumptions, just like his mother. That was what had to be a raccoon thing, or just a coincidental family trait.

"Then that's settled then! I'm sorry for making those assumptions Klaus, but... to be honest, I was way more worried than angry at you. I still remember that promise Lukey made to me... And I thought your actions would cause him to follow it. I-I just couldn't let what you did take my son away."

Klaus's eyes widened. "I... I forgot to even think of that... b-but no matter what I was going to do... It was going to end horribly for him anyways, even if I self destructed myself by forcing myself to continue abstaining the way I was," he shook his head. "I really wish I had waited a little longer and held just a little more faith in him for him to come round. This never would have happened," there was a harsh regretful tone in his voice. Like he made a decision he couldn't turn away from again. It was reminiscent of the feeling Lukan got when he chose to move to Bright and chaos ensued. But why was this one so bad for the otter?

"Klaus, who was that cat I saw you kissing the other night anyways?" Lukan asked.

Klaus stiffened. "Why do you want to know that?" he asked. He shook his head. "N-never mind. He uh... his name is Nathias Love. I-I don't really have feelings for him, once I found just how... how cold he is..."

"Son of the Loveless..." Lukan whispered as the name was refreshed into his mind. Nathias was in fact the cat that destroyed his entire mentality in Bright all those years ago. "So he's found us... and he's using you to get to me, I bet," he said. Suddenly it made sense why Klaus was feeling the way he did. A deal with the loveless? It's not possible to break it. At all.

"Nathias Love? That name rings bells that I don't like hearing..." Lukan's mother replied forebodingly.

"Bright," Lukan uttered the single word.

"Remember when we stopped for lunch just south of there on the way here? That's when we met. He must have recognized you with me and... he... he talked to me and said he wanted to help a fellow vagabond out as he put it. But ever since we got here, he's been... as cold as ice."

Lukan nodded. "He'll do that to you. He was called Winter's Gallows for how chilling his voice is alone by some creatures."

"He's the cat who attacked you in Bright, if I remember right?" the mother coon tilted her head. Lukan nodded. "You definitely should not ever see him again, Klaus," she added in a hard, stern voice. "I do not want that cretin mixed up in our family affairs ever again."

"I-I understand, Mrs. Benka," Klaus nodded.

Lukan shook his head. "Klaus doesn't have a choice anymore, mom. If Klaus made a deal with Nathias, then... he has to follow it, or someone's going to get very hurt. Or worse. Like what happened to me."

"We'll make sure not one of us loses sight of the other then. What must happen is that Klaus mustn't be allowed to see him again." Lukan's mother replied strictly.

The next day was a long and tense one for the coons and otter. They had wandered the city for another day of job hunting and house hunting in paranoia. Suddenly with the realization that a Loveless was in town made them feel impossibly unsafe. In every cold, dark shadow he could be there, watching them, waiting for an opportunity to strike, like a predator hunting down prey.

In fact, it was a subconscious effort on Lukan's mother's part, that she drove them straight to the police station which, due to the fact it was a small town, was merged with the town hall. She had not even intended to, but she did. If Nathias was watching them like Lukan felt he was the whole time they were in Salamanda, he must be wondering what these three were up to.

"Uh, can I help you ma'am?" asked the receptionist in the building. He was a well built husky with an impossibly deep voice.

"Uh..." she stuttered. She forgot her mission due to the clouds of foreboding in her mind. Not that Lukan blamed her. They fogged up his thoughts as well and can only assume the same applied to Klaus. The receptionist raised an eyebrow.

"We're not here to play games, Miss. We're very busy. Do you need help of any kind?"

Lukan debated telling the creature that they were worried about being potentially stalked and hunted down by a member of the Loveless family. If he did and Nathias were truly following them though, and he told him those suspicions, what would the dastardly cat do in return? He was always so good at dodging authority that asking for professional help seemed unequivocally moot. What would even be the point then?! To speed up his attack instead?! It wasn't worth that risk! "We were wondering about what to do about being both without a job and a home. What can we do about it? We have money, but if we don't get out of the hotel soon, we'll run out and... you get the picture, right?"

"I'm not the right guy to ask about that mumbo jumbo," the husky's eyes hardened. "I must ask you not to waste my time with something I'm not meant to deal with. You'll want to ask a real estate agent or job corp about that, not the police."

Lukan nodded. "I understand. Sorry for taking your time."

As he and the others left, Klaus whispered to him. "Why didn't you tell him about Nathias?!" he hissed.

"The same reason you didn't want me to report the bullies back at the college. Only he's far worse," Lukan whispered back. "Don't worry Klaus, we'll figure something out. I dealt with him once. I have no choice but to do it again."

Klaus dipped his head as they left the building. "Lukan... I'm so sorry for bringing this mess down on you like that..."

Lukan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "As lonely as I always feel... I am never alone because I know... the Loveless will always be there..."

That night was definitely an uneasy one. Every time there was a small sound outside, Lukan immediately suspected Nathias there. He almost wished he was ignorant of his presence. Because he knew Nathias was in town, he felt that he was out there, watching his every step, stalking him and Klaus. He took Klaus from him to try to break his heart... but since that didn't work... what was going to be that black cat's new plan...? He was scared to find out. And Klaus must feel the same way.

He and the otter held each other as they tried to sleep. Not out of love, but for comfort and assurance that they would be alright. Lukan in particular felt like he were lost in a forest alone. While it was true that he had dealt with Loveless before, he wasn't clever enough to take one of them down. They always seemed one step ahead, reading his mind and acting before he could. How does anyone beat an enemy like that...? What would the protagonists of all his books do?

Suddenly Lukan felt more powerless than he's ever been up to this point in his life. Even more so than at any point in Bright. This time, he felt it mattered more than ever that Nathias' schemes would fail. Even though they never have... but what could he do!? He held onto the otter tighter, hoping it would work out. But he knew, from the moment he realized that it was Nathias. That it was hopeless. All he could do was wait for the cat to come and take all his hopes and dreams away forever.

Lukan had to think. Would his choices have changed anything? What if his mother never knew about Klaus's affair? What if she wasn't so blinded by rage? And what if Lukan realized it was Nathias sooner than he did? If he had confronted Klaus, maybe that would have encouraged him to break up with him... that could have good, but Nathias would not let that happen. If he had let him go with the cat and break up with him, then that would have been worse! There was no right answer! None! Winter was a phenomena that was stated to win all its wars in ! It seemed that this time it was no different. Winter was going to claim all that he loved dearly and there was nothing Lukan could see that he could do to fight against it. Now was a time where he had never felt so hopeless in his life. Throughout the years and the fiasco in Bright, he felt now more than ever that it was hopeless. Yet, as he gripped the otter in his arms, tears pooling in his eyes and threatening to fall, he felt one last ditch effort to refuse to give up. The otter was still with him. And as long as that

remained true, Lukan refused to throw in the towel despite knowing what was to come as the storm began to rage.