

TWELVE-D: The Winter

"The hell?!" Lukan's mother couldn't help but exclaim. "Who could that be at this hour?!" she went to open the door, but both Lukan and Klaus blocked her when Lukan fought his previous urge to hide.

"I know who that is," they both said in unison.

Klaus turned to Lukan with surprise. "Wait, you know Nathias?!" he exclaimed incredulously. "How?"

"So many terrible reasons, Klaus," Lukan wheezed, too much stress on his chest to speak properly. "Too many."

"Lukan, what do you mean?" Klaus grabbed Lukan's shoulders as the raccoon felt tears welling in his eyes, both from memories and from fear.

Before Lukan could answer, the door was knocked on again, this time, much louder. So much louder that Lukan thought the door was going to break and that the dastardly cat had left dents in the door. Even then that was still a distinct possibility.

Klaus growled as he went to open the door. It was as he was doing so that Lukan wanted to hide immediately. He continued fighting the urge, but every millisecond he did, he felt his paws start moving in the direction of the bathroom. The door opened to reveal the black, yellow eyed creature glaring in front of him. "Nathias, why are you knocking on the door so damn hard!? Think we're deaf or something?"

The cat's voice was as wintry and intimidating as ever, only slightly deeper than when they were eleven. He scoffed. "You told me you were going to meet me tonight and you did not show up!"

Klaus was taken aback. "Yeah, but you did not wait at all; it's still early! I was going to be on my way there, but--"

The cat cut him off. "Alright then. If it is as you claim, then I'll visit you directly." It was then he noticed that the raccoons were still inside with Klaus. "Who're the coons?"

"I did say I wasn't travelling alone, Nathias," Klaus stated. "This is my boyfriend, w-well I suppose ex... boyfriend now... Lukan Benka and his mother."

Lukan jumped a little when Klaus brought Nathias' attention to him. He saw the cat aim his icy beams of eyesight right at him and freeze him solid. He saw a flicker of recognition in the cat's eyes as they narrowed.

"I see... Lukan Benka..." the cat whispered.

Lukan's mother stepped forward angrily. "Excuse me, but are you going to tell us what's going on here? You nearly busted the door down!"

It was then that the cat looked uncertain of what to say. The clever bastard had messed something up? That was promising. But Lukan knew he'd weasel his way out of it somehow. He always has and always will. "I wanted to see Klaus, ya know? He

promised he'd see me tonight," he said in a straightforward manner. Wait. No tricks or lies with that? What's he up to?

"You wanted to see Klaus..." she echoed. "For what reason? To sell him drugs? You don't look like very nice folk to be around you know," she was as accusatory as ever. Always flinging around accusations and assumptions that were never true.

"Well he met me last night and he said he didn't want to go back here. I let him stay the night at my place. If you were wondering where he went, there you go. After that, we became friends," Nathias explained.

Lukan looked over to Klaus, who was then shifting uncomfortably on his paws, ears flat on his head. That was true, wasn't it? While it made sense, Lukan knew the two of them were doing more than just sleeping in the same house, or even bed for that matter. Lukan shook his head as he felt more tears in his eyes. He refused to even let one fall. No weaknesses. Never show them around the Love family.

"He promised to meet up with me again tonight, but when he didn't show up... yeah. You can see that I don't take broken promises lightly, nor do I have any patience. I apologize," the cat explained. Lukan knew it. He found a way alright. As much as he loathed the creature, he wished he had his speaking skills. Would have saved him immense amounts of grief as a cub...

Lukan's mother looked skeptical. "I see... Although there is something oddly familiar about you. Have we met before?"

Lukan nodded, but she did not notice. While she and Nathias never directly met, Lukan told her so much about him and what he did, she knew him as much as he did, except what he directly looked like.

Nathias shook his head. "No. We have never met before," there was something about either his voice or his face that made it apparent to Lukan that he was obviously lying. Either Nathias was in fact losing his touch, or Lukan was getting better at detecting these fibs. He really hoped it was both actually.

"Well it's good to know that Klaus has a friend down here in Salamanda already. Do you know anything about how to break the cycle between getting a job to get a home and getting a home to get a job?" she asked. Lukan was taken aback. This was NOT a good creature to get ANY advice from. Do not--

"Oh that? That's a piece of cake," Nathias replied. "You can get a job easily if you use the hotel's address. You technically are living here as of now, right? Most hotels will let you do that for the sake of breaking that fucked up cycle," he explained.

"Really?" Lukan's mother's eyes widened. "Why haven't I thought of that? Yeah, that should work perfectly! Then we can use that job's income numbers to get a place to live and we're golden! Thanks for the info... uh...? What was your name again?"

"Nathias. Nathias Love," the cat replied.

"Nathias Love..." there was a brief flicker of thought in the mother coon's eyes as she processed the name. But it went away quickly. Come on... how could she forget how badly this cat had hurt her son less than a decade ago? "Thanks a lot for the help. We'll start throwing applications everywhere tomorrow. Klaus?" she addressed the otter. "You wanted to hang out with Nathias tonight too? Now that I know where you were, I think it's okay now."

"U-uh..." Klaus stuttered. He glanced at Lukan apprehensively and then to Nathias. He knew what was in store for him when he'd go over to Nathias. So much lewd garbage that Lukan felt sick thinking about it. That and Klaus knew very well how much he'd hurt Lukan by going over there since Klaus knew that Lukan was aware of their courting. Klaus wanted Lukan, but also wanted the thrill from sex that Lukan could never give him. Could he? No. No he couldn't!

"Do as you want Klaus. I cannot afford to care any longer," was all Lukan could say to the otter before walking away into the bathroom. He closed the door, and was wondering if he should listen and figure out if Klaus went or not. If Klaus really did want him... he'd stay, but... Lukan also knew what Klaus needed. What the otter needed was what had to usurp what he wanted. And what he needed was... that libido to be satisfied or cured. And until they settled down in Salamanda, it could only be satisfied, which Lukan couldn't deliver. The cat? As homophobic as the cat was to him in the past, if he could do it, then so be it. Nathias was a dangerous criminal and he wanted no part in him. But at the same time, Lukan felt worried for Klaus since he was courting with a member of the Love family. That slippery feline was going to do something really nasty, and Lukan instantly felt bad for letting Klaus make his own choice. This wasn't about hurting him anymore. That cat was liable to really hurt Klaus at any time!

When Lukan left the bathroom, he saw that the otter was gone and his mother was looking at him worriedly. "Lukas...? As helpful as that cat was... I can't help but have a bad feeling about him."

Lukan sighed as he regretfully sat on his bed. There was no way he'd ever catch up to the two of them now. Not when Klaus had his truck and Lukan only had his paws. "I don't either mom... I don't either." All Lukan could hope for was that Klaus would be safe come tomorrow.

Lukan did not sleep a wink that night. Not even one. He fretted over Klaus and how he had not come home when the clock struck past midnight. Past one in the morning. Past two. Where was he? Surely he did not intend on staying the night at Nathias' place again. Wait a minute... That cannot be possible! Like them, Nathias was a migrant to Salamanda as well. He wouldn't have a home here yet either, would he? Not this soon! That scared Lukan even more. Where was the cat taking him? To his own

hotel room maybe? That would make a lot of sense, but somehow Lukan felt it was more sinister than that. He was assuring himself through the night that he was just assuming the worst without knowing what was going on. But with Nathias LOVE in the picture, assuming the worst was not necessarily acting on the highest levels of pessimism. The worst case scenario was what always ruled under the Love family after all. Always has been. Always will be. It will never change.

How long did it take for someone to have a night of debauchery anyways? Lukan thought sex usually lasted ten minutes, maybe a little more. But as eager as Klaus was it could last even less than that. Unless they went over and over again that is. ...Wh-why is Lukan even thinking of that?! That almost hurt as much as the idea of Klaus being manipulated and harmed by Nathias! No! Stop thinking of these things! Klaus will be fine, so go to sleep stupid coon!

But alas, Lukan failed to get any sleep at all. When morning came, it was like clockwork. First rays of the sun shining through the window, Klaus comes in, smelling like otter and cat much stronger than the previous morning. Lukan breathed a sigh of relief. The otter was okay. But for how much longer though was the question.

"Lukan... I'm so sorry... I-I just... had to again..." Klaus said as he sat down on Lukan's bed this time. "I-I don't want to hurt you, but... I-I..." he seemed close to tears. "I thought of you every time I went down on him and..."

Lukan sat up. "Klaus stop. This is what you wanted. This is what you needed that I can't give you. You keep going until we can get you therapy or something. Although... Nathias is not a good guy to do it with..." he said.

"Why not?" Klaus tilted his head as he sniffled.

"Because that is Nathias Love. The one and only guy that almost killed me in Bright eight years ago..." Lukan said darkly.

Klaus's reaction to the revelation was not instant. But he looked thoughtful for a moment before going wide eyed. "No... Then that explains how I met him just south of Bright when we stopped for lunch..."

"You what!? You never told me you met someone then!" Lukan exclaimed incredulously.

"W-well it's because he said he wanted to help me and... y-you probably didn't want to know... he so happened to be a wanderer like us and... w-well..." Klaus trailed off. "Say it ain't so... it's not him. It can't be," Klaus replied.

Lukan sighed as he looked out the window. "He recognized me with you... Nathias has no quarrel with you, but he wants to do what he can to hurt me. He wants to take you from me so I can... wither away because of heartbreak," the words caught in Lukan's throat.

"No..." Klaus breathed.

Instinct told Lukan to hug the otter tightly and to never let him go. He held on tightly to the otter and refused to stop. "Klaus... why...? Why him? Of all creatures in the world. Of all seven billion. It just had to land on him. Why!?"

Lukan felt Klaus pat him on the back. "I'm so sorry... I couldn't take the anxiety any longer..."

"It's all my fault," Lukan whispered.

"No Lukan-I-"

"It's all my fault!" Lukan echoed louder.

"Lukan--"

"If I hadn't been such a fucking piece of shit boyfriend to you, this never would have happened! I deserve this... I brought this on myself!" Lukan felt like he was starting to lose his mind, if he had any of it left. Suddenly it felt like no matter what choice he made, they were all going to be the wrong ones given the creature that Klaus was going out with. With the Love family, there was no right choice. There was no choice at all! Only misery and death. There was simply no hope at all.

"No Lukan. Shut up," Klaus slapped Lukan a bit. No malice... just trying to get him to snap out of it, Lukan assumed. Nevertheless, Lukan was surprised the otter did that to him. "It's my fault and mine alone. I'm going to have to fix this myself," he declared.

"Klaus?" Lukan sniffed worriedly. "I hope you mean 'we' right? Confronting a Loveless alone is unequivocal suicide!"

"Still... I'm the one who accepted him into my life and having him re-enter yours," Klaus replied. "I feel like this is my responsibility."

Lukan knew there was no question though. Whether it was his fault, Klaus's, both, or neither, there was no disputing the fact that Klaus should not be allowed to confront Nathias on his own. Lukan vaguely wondered if any of the paths he could have taken before would have changed anything... Since it was Nathias all along, maybe not. He could only hope that even the slightest change from the start would determine victory from defeat. "Even so... I will never let you do this by yourself, Klaus," Lukan said in a hard, unwavering voice.

"Lukan... after what I did to you, honestly... I deserve to die. So perhaps, maybe, I should," Klaus sighed in defeat.

"K-Klaus!" Lukan exclaimed. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Lukan had once thought that all cheaters deserved eternal torment or death, but after Klaus's case... And besides, if Klaus was killed... Nathias would still win! Lukan needed Klaus more than anybody else. If he were to go, Lukan would never let it go. "D-don't-!" he couldn't say anymore words. There was nothing that Lukan could say to help convince Klaus not to.

But it seemed his desperation at least got to Klaus, as his eyes softened. "But I also don't want to leave you all alone, especially with Nathias still in town like this," he said. "I made a promise to you Lukan. I will keep it, I swear," he added.

"That Nathias cat, a shady as he is, really helped us out of that bind," Lukan's mother observed as she checked email on her phone. "I've got three interview offers already!"

"That's good news," Lukan replied, distracted.

His mother noticed instantly. "What's wrong, Lukey? You bored or something?"

Lukan flinched. Whatever happened to him being able to hide his feelings? He wanted that ability back. Gah... why did he let Klaus change him so much like that!? "N-no, just worried is all."

Lukan's mother assumed the wrong thing. "About being able to find a place to live and such? It's looking a hundred times better now so... Oh! I just remembered! We're going to need to take a look at the college in town! You're going to want to go back to school in the future right?" she said that in such a way that made Lukan think he had no choice but to go to school again. Lukan wasn't sure, but at the same time, he definitely did not want to focus on that right now.

"Mom, can we not right now...? Klaus and I were--" he briefly stopped himself from continuing. He could not tell her what was going on! ...Could he? With a situation like this, Lukan wasn't sure what was the right move anymore.

Again his mom assumed the wrong thing. "You were going to get intimate again? Can't that wait at least? Besides, we have nothing better to do until the days of these interviews," she said.

"Mom I-" Lukan started.

"Come on, let's go. And tell Klaus he's coming too."

Lukan sometimes really didn't like how his mother would just out of nowhere spring things onto him the way she does. Lukan subconsciously felt it was a raccoon thing, but at the same time, it was in Klaus's nature as well. He remembered the day they first met like it was yesterday. The way Klaus just hastily suggested they become friends... and acting as if they'd been friends for years. It seemed like it was in everybody he knew!

He did not want to go to the college, nor did he want to focus on anything else other than taking Nathias down. Why any of this matters, Lukan did not understand. If he did decide to go back to school, he certainly was not planning to do so for a couple years at least, especially with how expensive school was. And he was certain Klaus felt the same way. Klaus sat next to him, staring out the window. He was still regretting everything, Lukan assumed.

The college that Lukan's mother had referred to was the one that was several blocks down the street of the hotel, across town. Apparently she applied for a custodial job here, but this was one application that did not answer. Lukan wondered if she was going to ask them directly as that may have been her real reason to come here and not for his sake. Whatever it was, Lukan was extremely reluctant to even consider tagging along today. Nevertheless, he and Klaus knew they had no choice.

Upon arriving at the college, Lukan noticed that it was immediately similar yet dissimilar to his back in Lilac Grove. Several differing buildings to indicate different subjects? Check. Landscaping? Not check. It was obviously desert themed. Terrible parking? Oh God yeah check. Familiar? Oh God no check. Lukan was not sure how to feel about the place... in a smaller town than even Lilac Grove, he knew that the college had far less to offer him or Klaus in any subject majors.

Lukan's mother, adding to Lukan's annoyance and impatience, spent a good forty minutes looking for the admission building. Every time she looped around the lots that intertwined throughout the campus, she kept muttering to herself in her own increasing annoyance and impatience about wondering where the building was. Lukan had a feeling that the college structured itself differently. The college in Lilac Grove did not really have a specific admission building. Anything like that was more than likely the Gateway building.... It was probably a different building around here.

After several moments, she got annoyed and pulled over to a couple of students that were walking past. A goat. And... a snow leopard? In the desert? That was odd... And he was wearing a dark gray hoodie too. How did that make any sense? As the goat answered the mother coon's question, the feline seemed completely disinterested in what was going on. However, LUKan could not help take a deep interest in the leopard. The spotted furred character was slightly tinged a light blue. Most of his spots were either round or crescent shaped. There was a crescent one that went through his bright and piercing cyan eyes. And just between them, on the forehead, was a heart shaped one. Something about the crescent eye and the forehead heart put Lukan off. For some reason, Lukan suspected that he was not born with those ones in particular.

His mother gave thanks to the goat and began driving away before Lukan's eyes can thoroughly meet with the leopard's. What a strange creature... and yet. There was something intensely familiar about him. Lukan knew for a fact that he never met him, but... somehow he knows him. Lukan couldn't imagine why he did...

Lukan's mother parked the car close to a large building that had a strange arch in front of it. So the college was christened to be called the Desert Sky College? Alright, that makes sense... The mother coon led them into the building and the air conditioning hit Lukan hard. Even in February, the outside was hot as any summer would be in Lilac Grove. That momentarily made Lukan quite wary of the summer's imminent in the future.

The mother coon started talking to one of the people who had greeted her, but Lukan zoned off before he could listen in. Klaus was looking at him curiously.

"Lukan, what's up?" he asked.

Lukan did not reply right away. "Did you see that snow leopard guy that was with the goat my mom was asking directions from?"

"Kinda, why?" Klaus tilted his head.

"Did he seem familiar to you or is it just me?" Lukan stated, feeling like something was caught in his throat.

Klaus shook his head. "No, I did not get a good look at him. Wait... is he another Loveless or whatever you called them?" he added apprehensively.

Lukan shook his head. "No. There is no way I know him, yet... I feel like I do... why would I get that feeling?" he pressed.

Klaus shook his head again. "I don't know, my love, but it can't mean anything important could it?"

"I don't know Klaus... but for some reason, I feel like I should find him."

Klaus's eyes widened. "What? Why?" he said.

But before Lukan could even start to think of a reply, his mother addressed the both of them. "Okay, they said they'll look at the application I sent. And if you two are interested in enrolling, you're going to want to talk to the enrollment services upstairs," she said.

"Mrs. Benka, I thought we made it clear that we aren't ready to go back to school yet!" Klaus stated.

She nodded. "I know that. I meant for fall and stuff," she clarified.

"Right..." Klaus replied skeptically.

It was really strange though... Lukan had the sudden urge to go upstairs where the enrollment services apparently were. But he did not want to apply, but he had a feeling that there was something he needed to know about up there. He couldn't pinpoint what it was though. Without even thinking let alone looking back at his mother and boyfriend, he started towards the stairs just outside the room they were in.

"See, Lukan is already getting a head start," she assumed things wrongly, yet again, but this time, Lukan understood why. Although he only vaguely paid any attention at all. The second floor could also have been the ground floor, for when Lukan emerged onto it, the other face of the building led outside. Was the place built into a hill or something? But what he noticed just next to that exit... it was a small cafe. It looked eerily like the sub shop that he met Klaus in back in Lilac Grove. There. He saw him. Inside the shop, in the line that was there, was the snow leopard. The expression on his face was completely unreadable from where Lukan stood, but from his posture it looked like he was not in a happy mood and likely hasn't been for some time. He pointed as Klaus came up after him. He was not sure where his mom was...

"They just pulled your mom to talk about the application," he huffed. "Man... I've been falling out of shape lately," he added.

"There he is," Lukan replied.

"Oh yeah, him?" Klaus stated. "Oh... I see," he added with a whisper.

"You feel something too?" Lukan's eyes widened, with engorged the mask on his face.

"Lukan... this is the same feeling I got when I first saw you in that sub shop in Lilac Grove," Klaus replied breathlessly.

"It is...?" Lukan said. When Klaus nodded, Lukan instantly knew why he recognized the snow leopard. He was vaguely aware of his paws moving as he went into the shop ahead. The smell of freshly baked bread and freshly brewed coffee hit him hard, but he did not waver. The snow leopard was in the back of the line. The raccoon was vaguely aware of stretching out his arm.

"Who's that?" the leopard noticed before Lukan even got close. He turned around and Lukan met with those fierce cyan eyes that mirrored something familiar from his past. The eyes softened slightly as they flashed with something. Was it... recognition on his part. "I know that look. That expression. You are the ones that must understand everything that I have endured. The ones I've waited for my entire life. Who are you?"

"L-Lukan Benka," Lukan replied.

"Klaus Richtors," the otter replied quietly.

"No... I mean your pasts. Who are your past selves..." The leopard seemed to be studying them. "Ah. One of you is a victim of the Loveless lot. I do presume? Hello. My name is William Perow."