

One. Autumnal Catalyst

Being surrounded by gentle breezes of an autumnal evening calmed Lukan Benka. It comforted him. Made him feel safe. The cool air chilled his senses. Refreshed him. Made him feel at peace. Gave him tranquility. Could even say it made him happy. The cool evenings and nights were the raccoon's home. His happy place. His safe space. Therapeutic on levels unmatched by even the best psychologists who could ever be conceived. Listening to the breeze knocking multicolored, crisp, and dry leaves off their trees was music to his ears. The raccoon enjoyed his time outside where the weather would stay cool, calm, and collected. The raccoon hated when it was too hot or when there was too much snow. Somewhere in the middle of such extremes was where he thrived. The cool, breezy autumns and the rainy and sometimes stormy springs were the only things he'd allow, or he'd magically warp into an eternal indoor hermit refusing to go outside.

The ring tailed creature was used to being alone as well. Solitude always had added to silent peace that he enjoyed. It pleased his pensive and often wandering mind, to let it flow undisturbed by the turmoils of the world and the creatures who squabbled over it. His inspiration and ideas were fueled by that feeling of composure, as it would for most. Lukan most certainly did not look forward to the blizzard infested winters that were soon to come for numerous reasons. Among which would be the end of the autumnal serenity.

The breeze in his fur, the crisp air entering his lungs, the soft, cooling dirt under his paws... Yes. This was the perfect blend of nature that he enjoyed the most. But only for a moment, for a noise was coming down from somewhat further down the path. Ugh. Figures. Nothing worse than a creature or two disturbing the peace with their incessant noises. Lukan was a misanthropist alright. He hated being in the company of anyone who wasn't a friend or family. Even then... Nothing could compare to solitude. He felt he never needed anybody.

Lukan rolled his eyes as he padded along, intending to completely ignore the creature that he would soon pass by. As the source of the annoyance drew closer, however, Lukan realized that it wasn't a normal sound, or at least not one you'd never hear every day. However, he still could not quite make it out. For a moment he thought about turning back, as he did not want to be involved in anything. He liked his rut of a life. He wanted to stay in his comfort zone. But there was curiosity for the unknown, and the desire to know what it is.

The sounds got louder. It was then, that Lukan began to recognize the voices of a few creatures. There was a subconscious curiosity about what they may be conversing about, but Lukan's misanthropy squandered that feeling. He would just grit

his teeth and just keep walking. They came into his eyesight. They met eyes for only just a moment. The fiery emerald eyes of a pale orange furred otter, and what was presumably his friend, a silvery wolf with eyes the color of striking blue corundum. They both looked around Lukan's age, maybe a little older. It did not take Lukan long to realize that they were arguing. So that was what was unusual about the voices... They weren't yelling after all. In fact, when Lukan caught sight of their eyes, Lukan immediately recognized the signs of pain, anxiety, and sadness in at least the otter. The wolf's eyes were unreadable.

They seemed to want to keep the conversation as private as possible. This thought was reinforced by the fact that they shut their muzzles when they walked swiftly past Lukan. The curiosity came back, and Lukan was tempted to ask what their spat was about, but he kept his own muzzle firmly shut as he walked past them in turn. They each only took a dozen steps when an explosion happened.

"Well then fuck you too! We're through!" Lukan flinched when the words were practically screamed out, shattering the already damaged silence and reverberating through the air. Lukan wasn't even sure which one of the two said that, but Lukan realized he just learned that they are, or now were, a gay couple. Lukan stopped in his tracks, wondering what in the hell he was to do in response to what he had just witnessed. At first he wanted to wait and see what happens, but the second creature did not respond. In fact, there was nothing but dead silence that followed that sudden outburst. This silence though... It's not the soothing and comforting silence that Lukan relished. No. This one was filled with tension and anxiety. At this point, Lukan's curiosity had been piqued. He took a step back in the other direction and started back the way he came.

Lukan expected there to be nobody there when he reached the spot where the alleged breakup happened, but to his surprise, he saw the same orange otter sitting on a boulder off the path with his head in his webbed hands. He was alone and looked noticeably depressed. Lukan stopped and hesitated. What could he do, let alone should? He had no idea how to handle a situation like this for a friend, let alone a stranger. But before he could decide, the otter had looked over to see Lukan's worried and uncertain face. But he turned to face forward again, disregarding him.

Now what? The otter knew he was there, but... Did he want Lukan to talk to him? Or would he feel even worse if the raccoon were to just ignore him? What decision could he make at this point? It feels like a no-brainer, but at the same time, it didn't. Yet, Lukan still felt obligated to at least try to talk to him. If the otter told him to leave him be, then so be it. The decision would only be clear once he at least tried. He took a step closer to the mustelid. The creature immediately noticed, but he made no movements in objection.

"H-hey..." Lukan started, but every word in the English language got caught in his throat. What should he say? What could he say that the otter would like to hear? "A-are you okay?" Immediately, Lukan wanted to slap himself. Are you okay? Really!? Of course he's not okay! That was one of the last things he wanted to say.

The otter sighed as he looked at Lukan with his brilliant green eyes. The fires inside them had been thoroughly extinguished by tears. "N-no," he shuddered sadly in response. He didn't say another word immediately after that.

"Did um..." Dictionaries from a billion languages were caught in Lukan's throat this time; he was even more uncertain of what to say even more than before. "Did you um..." But the otter interjected to seemingly finish his question.

"Love him?" The otter scoffed. "N-not anymore, that asshole," he said angrily, sniffing hard.

Lukan hesitated again. What now? Lukan, almost without any conscious awareness, sat down next to the otter and placed his hand on top of his own. "Tell me what happened, i-if you want," he journeyed.

"Well um..." he sniffed again. "It's complicated." He was equivocating. Not that Lukan misunderstood why. He would undoubtedly be the same way himself.

"It's okay... You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to. Hell, I'll leave you alone if you want me to," Lukan added, mostly to find out if the otter doesn't want him intruding in his private life.

The otter shook his head though. "No. I'm glad someone is here to be here for me. Even if it is a total stranger. I don't give a fuck anymore," he said in a much harder voice than before. There was something ominous about that voice though, as if it indicated that there was something dark in the otter's memories. But Lukan did not want to pry too much.

"What do you mean?" he asked, prying anyways, but not as deep as he was curiosity would want him to.

The otter took a deep, unsteady breath, tears staining his orangish tan fur. "Well... It's nothing that is uncommon to any relationship... We just been drifting apart for weeks. And now I just needed help from him for something, but he wouldn't. I knew he did not really care about me; he'd be there for me no matter what..." Each word seemed to have been shaken from the otter's throat, forced out against their volition.

"O-oh... I-I see," Lukan said, having every word in the universe lodged firmly in his vocal chords.

The otter went on. "So yeah... I guess I am single once more," he laughed ruefully. "I'm not sure what to do now about that.."

"Is uh... does uh..." Lukan searched the vast library of literature scattered in his disorderly mind. The otter did not help him this time. "Does uh... being gay make it

hard to find love..?" he finally asked. He was no longer certain if that was the question he intended to ask.

The otter scoffed. "It makes it impossible. Even online, there are no other queers like me in this hick-hole shit town besides me and Platt here. I have to get out of here." he said flatly.

Lukan never heard such harsh words for his hometown of Lilac Grove before... But they made sense. A small city in the middle of nowhere would have very little to offer to most creatures. Or... all creatures. "So.. what are you going to do now..?" he asked, holding onto his hand tighter.

The otter sighed and sniffled again. "I... I don't know. There is nothing left for me here, but I can never leave. I have nowhere else to go..!" the otter cried. The pain in his voice.. It hurt Lukan more than he thought it could.

"Have you tried online dating? Maybe you could find a guy and you can go to him or something?" Lukan was a million percent sure that was the exact wrong thing to say. Or at least, worded poorly.

The otter merely shook his head. "I met Platt online. And anywhere outside of here would be way too much of a gamble for me to take. No way... Plus... I heard about LDRs... They suck and never work. I-I can't," the otter was overcome with a harsh wave of sobs and was obviously unable to keep talking.

Lukan wanted to say his name to comfort him, but only just now realized that he and the otter never actually introduced themselves. But now was not the time to do so. The otter was even more distraught than Lukan thought. Not only dealing with a breakup, but he also believes that his own hometown was restricting his goals as well? At this point, Lukan no longer had any words in his throat at all. Nothing but emptiness. Nothing but sympathy for the weeping otter. He wished that there was something he could do, but wishing made him feel even more helpless. He only sat there, holding the otter in his arms as he cried into his shoulder. The breeze blew past, showing life's contempt to one's fragile feelings. The sun was starting to get lower in the sky, hiding behind the trees as if it were trying to hide.

The otter finally took a long and hard breath to force himself to regain composure and then sighed out heavily. "Okay.." he said in a voice so soft it was more like a whisper.

"B-better..?" Lukan choked out. He felt grossed out when he felt drool and snot soaked into his shirt and probably even into his shoulder fur. Priorities though...

The otter dipped his head. "A little bit. As good as I'll ever be for at least today.." he answered plainly. "Thanks for being here."

"O-of course," Lukan replied sincerely. "Sorry if I kept saying the wrong shit. I'm horrible at talking to others.." he confessed.

"I know what you mean, don't worry," the otter said. His voice was noticeably altered by a most definitely clogged nose. "By the way, my name is Klaus... Klaus Richtors.."

Lukan's ears perked when he heard the name. "Oh uh... m-my name is Lukas Benka. Although everybody just calls me Lukan. I dunno why really," he said sheepishly.

"Lukan... That's a nice name," Klaus noted.

"Huh? Why do you say that?" Lukan pondered. Why would he say that? His name might be a bit more unusual, but still.

Klaus shrugged. "I just like the sound of it I guess." The otter finally stood up. His long, slender body made him look absurdly tall for an otter, but his short legs made up for that easily, shortening his height drastically. His thick, rudder-like tail trailed down to the ground, looking smooth as the stone it was just sat on. He sighed. "Well... It was nice meeting you, Lukan. Maybe we could hang sometime?" he asked.

"U-uh..." At that moment, Lukan wasn't sure what to say. As much as he wanted more friends, his distrusting, misanthropist manner made him question the thought very heavily. Klaus noticed relatively quickly.

"It's okay if you don't, I uh--" But Lukan interrupted.

"Oh no it's not that I don't want to; I do, but..." he trailed off. It was his turn to evade the question.. "I'm terrible at creatures." Case in point. Those four words.

Klaus laughed. "It's okay, coonie! Just give me your contact info! I know you want to..." The otter seemed like he was feeling a lot better. Lukan's heart swelled at that proposition. Maybe he could help the otter by just being his friend after all. It seemed to already be working. Also... Coonie!?

"Okay, okay.." he conceded. He then proceeded to tell the otter his email address... Which was all he had since he had no cell phone or social medias... Yeah misanthropist coon is a misanthropist alright.

"Wow, really not a creature creature are you?" Klaus noted. Lukan shook his head. "I wish I was that way... That way I wouldn't need love, ergo, no heartbreaks, ever. But does it ever get lonely for you?"

Lukan shrugged. "Sometimes, but never anything bad for me at least.. I've been a loner my whole life, save for a few friends I used to have in high school."

"I see... Well I do suffer from loneliness a lot. Please forgive me if I ever seem like a clingy friend or..." Klaus stated.

Lukan chuckled nervously. "Uh... Yeah that would probably be really weird for me," he said. "I'm so used to being alone, that it'd be like culture shock!"

Klaus scowled. "Sorry," he said a potentially premature apology.

Lukan shook his head. "Save your apology for when it matters. I don't think it will.." he added. To be honest, Lukan was unsure of how much he actually meant that comment. His lone wolf attitude limited how much he knew about friendships that

weren't school based. How different could they be anyways? But being out of school now might change everything. Lukan hoped it would change nothing... He turned to look at the otter. "Do you still need me to be around to help you feel better?" he offered.

Klaus shook his head. "I feel a lot better now, thanks, coonie," he said brighter. "Well, I mean it still does hurt but, I really am glad you were here..." He back peddled. Why? "Um... You can stay if you want; I don't want to force you to if you have somewhere to go or anything."

Lukan wasn't sure. While Lukan liked being alone, and enjoyed every peaceful second of it, he couldn't help but feel a level of curiosity towards the otter character. There was something about him that intrigued Lukan, made him want to get to know him. Maybe even be his friend. This feeling was not a common one in the slightest. Anyone who did not immediately become judged by apathy or worse was someone Lukan always felt compelled to be with. His few friends all had that quality after all. But why? Why was Lukan's mind so selectively picky? It made no sense to him. In the end, Lukan nodded. "Well I have nowhere else to be right about now, so, why not? I don't feel right leaving you alone after what you just went through..."

"Okay, coonie, um... so what now..?" Klaus seemed just as uncertain as Lukan was.

"Well, I was just on a walk, enjoying the weather... Want to come with me?" Lukan offered. The otter seemed incredibly hesitant though.

"W-well... Platt and I were too, but uh... You know," he stammered.

Lukan nodded his head, understanding. "I-I see. Well then um... I dunno then," he laughed mostly to himself in embarrassment, hating himself for not knowing how interpersonal relationships work in instances such as these.

"Let's just... Sit and talk," Klaus offered, sitting down underneath a nearby tree. Lukan sat next to him wordlessly. Warm colored leaves gently rained from its branches over them, matching Klaus's fur, but clashing with Lukan's pretty heavily.

"So... What do we talk about...?" Lukan began awkwardly. Stupid coon. Go get some damn social skills...

"So... is autumn your favorite season too?" Klaus prompted immediately as if to answer his question indirectly.

Lukan was somewhat taken aback by that question. "Um... I dunno. It's really between autumn and spring for me.. They're both perfect to me. Not too hot or cold like the others."

Klaus nodded. "I love the cold. But winter likes to throw in wind to make it way worse than it needs to be ya know?"

"I know right?! And then the snow piling up making it damn near impossible to walk!" Lukan added.

"Well... For the most part I like snow. It's ice I have an issue with," Klaus said. "I dunno if you know this, but these short legs are awful on ice."

Lukan huffed. "I can imagine. Don't you get tired having to walk on those?"

Klaus shook his head. "It's the same for any mustelid really. We get used to it. And so does everybody else."

A breeze that was chillier than usual made Lukan's fur bristle out. "But I bet you got us all beat at swimming, eh?"

Klaus scowled. "That is a stereotype. But one that is mostly true to be fair," he added lightheartedly when he saw Lukan's face fall. "I was on the swim team in school. You still in school?"

Lukan gave a deep sigh. "I dropped out of college last year," he confessed. The reasons why constantly replayed in his mind. For a creature, failing grades, wanting to leave Lilac Grove, but failing. A complete and utter fiasco, that was.

"I did too," Klaus admitted as well. "Well, not really. I was about to go to college, but I backed out last minute. I didn't have enough confidence that I'd do well. Especially considering the money thing. I didn't want to bomb after investing a shitload of money you know?"

Lukan nodded in understanding. "I wish the reason I dropped out was as simple as that..." he said without really meaning to. Way to go dumb procyon...

"Oh?" Klaus took notice. The whiskers on his face twitched curiously. "Sounds like you got a story to tell as well," he said. There was no obvious curiosity in his voice though.

"Yeah well... It's a long one. And ironically enough, it involved trying to leave Lilac Grove too. I should have learned from last time though.. Every time I leave this place, something somehow pushes me back here," he said flatly, saying more than he wanted to yet again.

The air around them grew chillier and darker. The night was approaching fairly quickly. Lukan also loved the night. It was much quieter at that time than even the evenings. But alas, he knew he couldn't stay out so late alone in a dangerous world....

"Wow. Sounds like you got quite the story to tell actually," now there was curiosity in the mustelid's voice. "Do tell sometime?"

Lukan sighed. "I dunno.. They are long stories. It'd take time to tell them all," Lukan said, looking over them into the darkening sky.

The otter gave Lukan a small smirk. "Well, I got all the time in the world now."

Lukan narrowed his eyes and returned the smirk. "Y-you really want to know my stories, don't you, you... you rudderbutt," Lukan was surprised at himself. He didn't expect such a provocative name for otters to escape his muzzle. Such a thing was usually only used if one's partner was an otter. Uh oh. Lukan done fucked it up! The

otter's eyes widened and he did not say a word. "K-Klaus? I-I did not mean that in a--" Lukan started.

Klaus held up his paw and silenced the raccoon. "Just... please. Never use that word again..." his voice was so bone chillingly serious, it froze Lukan solid, instantly. Minutes of awkward silence followed. The sky continued darkening and the air grew colder, chilling Lukan more. A wind that was picking up most certainly failed to help matters. Lukan then wondered, what now? Then Klaus spoke up. "I guess I'll go now. Thanks again, Lukan," he said with much less sincerity or care this time. Lukan felt like he actually may have hurt the otter with what he had said. Was that something that wolf creature often called him affectionately? Oh no... Fuck you Lukan... just fuck you... "For the record, Lukan," Klaus said as he stood up. "I would love to hear your story. But maybe you should pay attention to mine before you tell me yours. We'll see if we meet again.."

Lukan suddenly broke free of his ice prison and jumped up. "Wait no! Klaus! Don't go! I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to. It just slipped out... I really am terrible at talking to others you know?"

Klaus looked at him, his eyes softening. "O-of course... But... Rudderbutt... is such a sensitive word for us otters. You may think that it's used for affection towards us. It really just calls us sluts," he said bluntly. Lukan gasped immediately.

"Oh no! I-I had no idea!" he exclaimed.

Klaus shrugged. "I don't blame you. At least I don't call you trash panda, considering what THAT invokes." That was true... The term "trash panda" fed on the notion that all raccoons were stereotypically considered to be homeless or poor creatures feeding on garbage and never doing anything with their lives.

"I-I'm sorry," Lukan repeated much more seriously.

"You never really talked to many otters before, have you?" Klaus inquired.

"Never really talked to any other creatures.. Except maybe wolves and other raccoons," Lukan answered. "I've been a lone coon for the most part."

"For the most part? What does that even mean?" Klaus seemed somewhat annoyed. At what though? Lukan failed to understand what that was...

"W-well... I say for the most part because what interactions I usually have are all online, and being online is obviously so much more different than being in person!" Lukan exclaimed.

"Oohh okay.. Makes sense now," Klaus replied. He looked around. "Hey. Where did the sun go?"

Lukan shrugged. "To the other side of the world?" Which was the actual truth after all.

Klaus instantly laughed. "You're such a jokester coon..." he sighed. "I am sorry I may have overreacted to the rudderbutt thing." Klaus was looking down the trail where

Lukan came from, and presumably, where his now ex boyfriend went. He stared down that path, without budging as the breezes rustled their tails.

"What do you think will happen to him?" Lukan pondered as he stood next to him, knowing exactly who Klaus was thinking about.

"Well, one thing i for sure, he's going to be just as alone as I am. So that literally sucks for him. At least I have a coon friend now, right? Sorry for being so... presumptuous," Klaus added.

Lukan boldly grasped the otter's hand in his own. "Of course. I don't see why not," he said with certainty.

"Maybe I can help you break out of your little coon shell," Klaus said with a deep breath. The breeze picked up and blew against them from behind. The sun had almost completely gone down by this point and the trail was bathed in twilight. Fairly soon, the lamps that lined it would light.

"Shell? Is that what you think I'm in?" Lukan prompted, looking up at the otter's face. "What if I like being alone all the time though?"

"Trust me when I say... someday that may change..." Klaus replied as the lamps flickered to life, swamping the area in artificial light.

"What do you mean by that?" Lukan pressed, curious.

Klaus shook his head and smiled, a tear dripping from his eye. "And someday... you will understand that."

Lukan wasn't sure what the otter was even talking about anymore. He stayed silent after that point as he watched the last of the day's dying light dissipate from the sky completely. He did not want to leave the otter's side until he said so. Out of compassion for the heartbroken creature? Or was it something beyond that? Lukan was confused at how quickly he and the otter forged a friendship out of a fire of sadness. How can this be? And what did the otter mean by what he was just saying?