

Five. The Story of the Symbol

As the days went by, Lukan still could not shake the shock, nor the surprise from the facts that not only was he gay, or at least, potentially attracted to just other males, but that the otter had officially graduated from close friend, to boyfriend in a matter of days. How could this be? And how could a misanthropist like Lukan have let this otter into his heart so easily? Whatever the answers were, Lukan was glad that he had done so. The otter had simply put, changed his life. Showed him what love and compassion was like. What Lukan had been missing out on all these years. Given Lukan a genuine reason to attempt to break out of his monotonous life of solitude and social evasion. The feelings he had experienced now... They were so new and exciting. They washed away all his qualms. Cleansed the unsavory stains of life that Lukan did not know he even had. All gone.

Two weeks had gone by, and the weather was surely slowly degrading further and further. Sure, every now and then, the familiar and serene Autumn Phase One's conditions were met, but as November progressed, they became sparse, replaced by icy cold winds that frequently attempted and yet failed to penetrate Lukan's home. Well, at least Lukan seldom to never had to walk to work in such inclement weather courtesy of Klaus and his truck. ...Of course he would have to chip in for gas. The otter even said that he couldn't afford that much gas, even if Lukan's work was a few blocks away. Lukan had suggested the otter get a job himself. Maybe work with him if possible. With the looming holiday season dead ahead, many places would need a lot of helping paws. Klaus seemed uncertain about the idea though. It was as if he knew he should, but there was something holding him back.

Neither of their parents knew about the newly blossomed relationship. Klaus swears that his parents wouldn't be the most okay in the world with his orientation. Klaus emphasized how difficult it was to convince them to move to Lilac Grove for Platt those years ago. According to him, by all accounts, it should not have been possible. Curiosity permeated in Lukan's mind as he wanted to know more about why that was. Klaus, though, stayed silent. As for Sarah Benka, Lukan already knew she would be more than okay with it. In fact she'd be happy for him. Too happy. And that is precisely why Lukan wanted to keep it from her. She was... always rather invasive whenever Lukan broke out of the norm and crept out of his coon shell. Even more so than his vulpine coworkers. Or at least, more impulsive. This reinforced his desire to remain in his coon shell. Klaus was still as persistent as ever in attempting to shatter it into a billion pieces. But with him by his side, Lukan was tempted to let him succeed.

Another workday was on the temporal horizon as the clock ticked closer to its start, and Klaus was over at Lukan's yet again, trying and failing quite spectacularly at

beating Lukan at those same games that they played the day they professed their feelings for one another.

Klaus looked at him and scowled when he lost for the forty-third time. "Man... I am never gonna beat you am I?" They both sat next to each other in their underwear. Klaus had insisted they do so in case the raccoon would get distracted as Lukan did before. To no avail. Lukan was still shy around Klaus, however. If anything, his own self conscious distracted him. And yet he still won. Did the otter's plan backfire or was it just insufficient? Or... did the otter have ulterior motives for such a suggestion? Lukan had not even thought of that...

Lukan poked the otter's nose. "Well. Every time you get better at it, so do I."

"Cheeky coon." Klaus said, smiling. "Damn... Is it really almost that time again? For you to go to work I mean? You know, I miss you when you're at work."

Lukan blushed. "You're silly. I'm only gone for a few hours!"

"I know, but it's a few hours too many! I want to be with my coon forever!" Klaus huffed.

"Stalker much?" Lukan laughed.

Klaus shook his head. "Not if we're boyfriends, it's not."

"Hm... That still doesn't sound right," Lukan scowled thoughtfully.

Klaus planted a kiss right on the raccoon's lips, completely incapacitating him. "Well if you like when I do that, then you'd miss me too if I were gone for just "a few hours", he said teasingly.

Lukan desperately tried not to look down for fear his weakened state of mind would overtake him as he blushed furiously. "O-okay. Point taken. You evil creature."

"Muahaha! Then I will have you join the dark side!" the otter lowered his voice to sound pseudo threatening.

"My mom was right; you are such a dork. Although if you were to join the dark side, I would not hesitate to join you," Lukan said, laughing.

"She said that about both of us, so you are too!" the otter pointed out.

"I still deny that claim!" Lukan exclaimed.

"You are overruled, simply because you are my boyfriend, and that is what I, as your partner, think of you," Klaus then imitated how a judge would say that to a defendant. Yep. The mustelid was a dork indeed.

"If you say so," Lukan usually shot down anyone with that phrase. Usually in a less than happy way, but not so this time. It felt... odd due to that.

Klaus licked his cheek. "Well, I guess we should get dressed and get you to work. Ya know, I was thinking though, it would be awesome to work with you. So maaaaybe I will try to get hired there."

Lukan's ears perked up. "Oh you will? That would be so great! Although the store does have a no "dating employees in the same shift" sort of rule though."

Klaus dismissed what Lukan said with a wave of his hand. "Ahh I'm not worried about that. I'm more worried about getting the job, really."

"Why would you be worried?"

Klaus did not answer right away. "I uh... dunno really." Something told Lukan that Klaus did know, or at least had an idea why, but wouldn't say. Klaus must have noticed, for he continued. "Okay, I do. But... it ties a bit into my story." He then grabbed his tail, and laid it on his lap. "You've seen the holes in my tail right?" he pointed to them.

Lukan nodded. "A couple times. I have been curious about them, but I didn't want to seem pushy, asking about them."

"Well, it's from a piercing that I have. I haven't been wearing it because I did not really want to wear it around you. That and well, I've become a terrible klutz because it's messed with my sense of balance. I'd be a terrible worker!" Klaus stated humorously.

Lukan tried to hold back a laugh. "Then why would you get a piercing there if that was going to happen, silly creature?" That's when the otter's face became negative again.

"Like I said it ties into my story a little bit. I-I guess since we're lovers now, you have more than enough right to know what that is..."

Lukan shook his head and placed a hand on his chest. "No. I told you, Klaus. Only tell me when you are ready and only then."

Klaus breathed a deep sigh. "Alright. I-if you insist."

"Hey, can I see that piercing though?" Lukan asked.

Klaus kissed him softly. "Of course. But for now, let's get you to work on time."

Lukan then noticed how much time they wasted talking and his heart nearly dropped into his tail. "Oh fuck!" He wasted no more of said time sprinting from the living room, into his room, to get properly dressed.

"Lukas Benka!"

It seemed that the second Lukan had walked into the door to his place of work, the annoying fox had spotted him. As if she were trying her damndest to keep an eye out for the ring tailed creature. Lukan let out an audible sigh. "Oh. It's you again," he said monotonously to control his emotions.

"You seem much happier than... well I had ever seen ya! Didja get laid for the first time or something?" the fox smiled slyly. Lukan jumped backward in surprise so forcefully he almost bowled over nearby customers.

"Wh-wha...!?" Of all the things she could ask!? "Are you fucking insane!?" he exclaimed. "I thought I said I was anti-sexual, pretty much?!" Although now that he thinks about his current relationship status, he had to question how true that was. Wait.

Doing stuff of that nature with the otter? It had never really crossed his mind before now. Just thinking about the prospect sent shivers of embarrassment into his entire bloodstream. ...Right in front of Eira. So incredibly perfect.

"Ahhh I am beginning to think that that is the case indeed!" Eira cheered teasingly. "So tell me about her! Who is the lucky lady?"

Lukan was so flustered at this moment, that there was only one thing he could say. "Sh-shut up...!" Yeah... real smooth.

Before Eira could reply, Lukan saw the tan fur walking toward him. "Lukan, I think you should report her to management for harassment if she keeps bothering you like that," Klaus said, scowling.

"Uh, I am right here!" Eira growled, losing her positivity instantaneously.

Lukan completely ignored her though. "Klaus! What are you doing here?" he thought the otter would be on his way home once he had dropped him off at work.

"I did say I wanted to apply for work here, possibly?" Klaus replied. "That's what I am here for."

Eira immediately had a reaction to learning this information for herself. "Wait, what!?" Then she looked between the two of them, and continued. "I-I had no idea that you two were that close of friends! Kudos Lukan! It looks like your coon shell has been cracked open!"

Lukan flinched at the phrase. It felt weird for creatures other than Klaus to use it now for some reason. Although it was amusing to see that Eira did not know that he and the otter were more than just friends. Part of him wanted to see her reaction to that information. But the other part of him doesn't want to gratify her nosy personality, or potentially give her even more questions to shove in their faces.

"Ah, finally something we can agree on!" Klaus said in relief.

"What's that supposed to mean!?" Both Lukan and Eira exclaimed in almost impeccable unison.

"It means you will both be late for work if we keep talking!" Klaus stuck out his tongue. "I'll see you later Lukan!" he then dashed off into the store, leaving behind a wink of his emerald eyes at Lukan.

Before Eira could even say a word to Lukan, Lukan exclaimed, "See ya!" before dashing off towards the back of the store so he could endure his next work day. Of course he knew that he couldn't avoid Eira through the entire day when they worked through practically the same shift as each other. ...And it doesn't help that Lukan frequently had to sweep in Eira's department a lot. Lukan often felt that she did that purposely just to bother him. Seriously. Just what was her deal anyways?

Klaus was waiting for him as he usually did once Lukan's workday had come to an end. It was such an odd day; Eira had not bothered him nearly as much as she

usually did. Lukan had to wonder why that was the case. Immediately, Lukan noticed that there was something attached to the otter's tail. It was undoubtedly the piercing he mentioned he had before. The small metal ring went right through his tail, in the holes that Lukan had wondered what purpose they served. Attached to the ring was a small metal symbol. The best way Lukan could describe it was a warped letter "M" with three diamonds underneath it. The middle one being just as vibrant an emerald color as the otter's eyes were. "Klaus!" Lukan greeted his boyfriend.

"How was work, hun?" Klaus asked softly, love burning inside his eyes.

"Surprisingly well, actually. Eira left me alone through most of the day, which is just... really odd, but refreshing. How did your job hunt go?" Lukan asked.

"Well, they said they'll call me for an interview sometime in the near future, but that's it, really," Klaus shrugged. "I asked if this piercing was going to be an issue, and they said it won't as long as it doesn't actually hinder me at all."

"You said it does," Lukan pointed out.

"I know, but I swear I am getting better at dealing with it!" Klaus defended himself. "I only tripped or fell a couple times today!"

"And that's something to be proud of?" Lukan raised an eyebrow.

"P-probably not," Klaus confessed.

"That is a nice symbol though," Lukan pointed out. "What is it of?"

"Oh nothing in particular. Just a little something that's run in my family for a long time. But I've given it my own meaning," Klaus added slowly.

"Your story?" Lukan guessed.

"Yeah." A good guess at that. Klaus looked away. "Let's go back. When we do, I'll tell you everything, alright? And don't you dare try to stop me this time, because... I do feel ready now. I feel a lot more confident now that I got my piercing back on and that you're my boyfriend."

"You are sure, my love?" Lukan asked, wide eyed.

Klaus nodded firmly. "Absolutely."

Neither of them spoke a word to each other as Klaus drove them both back to Lukan's apartment as he usually did. Lukan had greeted his mother as he usually did, but they did not say too much more. Lukan wondered what his mother thought of Klaus coming over as often as he was. In the past he knew she hated company a lot more than he probably would have, but she seemed way more supportive of the idea now more than ever before. Like Eira's sudden shift in behavior, this was just baffling to him. Now he began to understand why Eira and Klaus were so worried when his mind had changed after meeting Klaus...

"So..." Klaus started, bringing Lukan's attention to him. "Um..."

"Klaus? You are absolutely sure?" Lukan repeated, recognizing the otter's hesitation.

Klaus nodded again. "I just don't know where to begin. You are my boyfriend. I want you to know this. Although the only other person I told this story, in full anyways, was well... Platt," he added sadly.

"O-oh," Lukan replied.

Klaus sighed, presumably to calm his nerves down. "Well, there really is not too much to say honestly. I did mention that I met Platt online right? When I was 14 years old." Lukan nodded, remembering that completely. "Well truth be told, the site we met online was for um... gay teens in need of others to talk to about their... troubling lives, be it stuff with their parents, school, or anything really because you know, the world is still a homophobic place despite all the good things that have been happening." Klaus seemed to struggle with every word leaving his muzzle, as if he were not sure they were the right ones he wanted to say. Lukan felt immense familiarity in that emotion. Klaus went on. "Well... I was on there because my family does not at all support me being gay. Well, my mom and dad can tolerate it, but.. The rest of them, my grandmother especially, kept yelling at me to get myself fixed before I drown in hellfire. Um... And..." his face fell dark. Darker than at any point Lukan had seen it.

"Klaus?"

"My... uncle... threatened me that if I don't go back to be straight, quote unquote, he would... Show me a reason to be so. D-do you know what that means?"

The implications of what Lukan was just told could have led to a number of things. But not a single one of them were good thoughts. A few were simply, horrifying. Lukan swallowed, nodding.

"Being so hated by my family had really dragged me down. And it was there on that site, that I met Platt. And we just sort of hit it off. A few months after we met, I decided to start dating him. And. Well. I guess I will tell you the truth right now."

Lukan cocked his head sideways as he listened intently to Klaus. "Truth?"

"My mom, dad, sister, and I did not move here because I wanted to be with Platt like I said. Yeah in the end we chose here so that could happen, but... it wasn't because we wanted to. Not then," the otter's voice grew more and more unsteady as he seemed to be trying hard to fight back tears. Lukan wrapped his arms around the otter and held his body in a soft hug to comfort him. Klaus composed enough strength to move on. "We moved because my uncle actually... tried to sexually assault me." And at that moment he burst into heavy shuddering sobs that took complete control of his voice. Lukan instinctively held the otter closer to him.

Lukan once again found himself completely speechless, but under a different circumstance than before. "O-oh my God, Klaus. I-I am so sorry."

Klaus sniffled heavily. Lukan did not even care that the otter was leaking mucus into his shoulder. "W-we had to go. T-to keep me safe from him. Even if he was taken to prison, we did not want to be in the same town as him. E-even my grandmother disinherited him."

Lukan couldn't imagine just exactly what that creature tried to do to his boyfriend. But it filled him with rage and anger that anyone would try to harm a teenager in their own family!

"Worst part is... it wasn't even the first time he did that. He's done it a lot and always threatened me to keep my fat maw shut. It was his way of "therapeutically" recapturing my proper sexual orientation as he put it. He violated me, Lukan. A lot. And... if it weren't for my parents coming home early one day and catching him in the act, it would still be happening now. I-I just know it!" The otter's voice was almost totally incoherent at this point due to his racking sobs and clogged nose. But still Lukan listened and held him close, not wanting, even for a moment to let him go.

"H-how long?" Lukan choked out.

"A year and a half. S-started only a couple weeks after I said I thought I was gay. I was 12 then. I wasn't sure yet! H-he wouldn't allow such a possibility. He said he couldn't..."

"And you couldn't just pretend that his... his shit... fixed... you?" Lukan breathed. It was hard to even say those horrible concepts!

This only made Klaus sob harder. Lukan did not think he was going to get a coherent answer out of this. He only recognized a few words through the otter's wailing. "Couldn't...! Lie...! Watched...! Knew...!"

"Shh... It's okay Klaus. It's all over now. You have me now, and you know I would never do anything to hurt you," Lukan rubbed the otter's back as he spoke to him calmly. He could feel just how badly soaked his shoulder had become now.

"Y-you promise?" the otter shivered weakly.

"I'll place my life on that promise!" Lukan exclaimed and clutched the mustelid's warm and soft body against his own even tighter. "I dunno who that Platt guy even is, but I promise to never be anything like him!"

Klaus sniveled softly. "I really h-hope so... I mean, you know what happened to my family once we moved here to Lilac Grove. Financial struggles left and right. Bankruptcy and barely getting by at all. Maybe if I get a job at your store place, I can turn that around. Especially now that I dropped out of school."

"You can do it, Klaus," Lukan was not entirely sure what else to say to give the otter further encouragement. But somehow he knew that his presence was all the otter actually needed right now.

"So this symbol on my tail. It's meant to represent all the negativity in my life. All my bad thoughts, emotions, memories, and beliefs. I don't wear it all the time

because I want to hide all of that. But when I do... it's on my tail because I want to put it all behind me. But something keeps me from doing so. It's all attached to me. Following me wherever I go. I hope someday I will have the will to just throw everything away. D-do you think that I finally will with you by my side?" Klaus explained all that in the most unsteady and almost indistinct voice possible. Yet Lukan understood every word perfectly.

"I will do anything I can to help you Klaus, okay?" was Lukan's simple reply.

Klaus sighed heavily as he began twiddling with the trinket attached to his tail. "Well. There you go. That's my story in a nutshell. I'm sorry. I don't like recalling it at all. I'd rather just hide it and be that happy go lucky otter you fell in love with," he said blankly.

"But bottling up how you feel never gets you anywhere, Klaus! I don't want you to hurt yourself by holding it all in like that!" Lukan exclaimed.

"Says the coon who kept telling me to only tell you when I am ready," Klaus retorted good naturedly. "But... No matter what I choose to do, it will hurt me. So why bother hurting someone else with that sap story?"

Lukan had no response to that at all even though he knew that that way of thinking was going to be more detrimental to the otter's health in the long run. He wished he had a way to prove it. Wait... "Klaus...? Would you like to hear my story, then?"

The otter's small ears twitched. "O-oh?" the otter looked out the window and into the darkening gray skies. "I would love to, but... I think we've had enough sadness for one night."

Lukan gave the otter's cheek a lick. "I understand. Another day then. So..." Lukan tried to think of something more positive to talk about, but was worried would be too awkward given the information he was given about the otter's past.

"What now?" Klaus finished the question for him. "Well, that's up to us, isn't it? I suppose I should ask. Do you really and truly want to stay in Lilac Grove? Because this town... it has done so many bad things to me. Sure, I had great memories with Platt, but. They're all worthless now..."

Lukan was somewhat taken aback by the otter's bluntness. "I dunno if I could leave Lilac Grove to be honest. At least not any time soon. But, I would gladly go anywhere as long as I am with you."

Klaus dipped his head and nodded. "And you may be the only thing that would keep me here in this trash heap of a town. Can't believe I let myself graduate high school here. Hey, did you go to Lilac Grove High?"

Lukan was relieved that the otter had changed subjects. He thanked an invisible force for that! "No... I went to Fox Mountain."

Klaus sneered. "Oh so you were one of THEM?" he said teasingly.

Lukan let out a small haughty laugh. "You only have us beat at football, but we cream your tails at just about everything else!" Oh Lukan missed high school. And how his and the other school in town always had a rivalry going on between each other. LGHS always boasted their prowess on the football field as if it was the only thing that mattered even though FMHS had them beat in literally every other sport and pretty much all of academics. Lukan often wished he participated in more stuff like that. He felt he was probably TOO quiet in high school.

Klaus huffed. "Man though. Would have been something else if we went to the same school at the same time. You're only a year-ish younger than me!"

"I know right? I might have seen you from the school bus on the way to or from school, because it stopped there!"

"Oh what if we rode the same bus then!? 25!" Klaus suddenly exclaimed.

By instinct, Lukan cried out. "99!"

"Oh shoot. Guess not! I remember seeing 99 though. Don't ever remember seeing a younger version of this adorable raccoon though."

Lukan flushed immensely. "Y-you are the more adorable one in this relationship!" he rebuked defiantly.

Klaus planted a kiss on Lukan's lips, causing Lukan to go even redder. "Not when you blush so adorably deep like that!" Klaus laughed as he tackled Lukan into the bed to cuddle him zealously.

It was as if Klaus had completely forgotten the melancholy that permeated the room's atmosphere only moments ago. Lukan could not discern if that was a good or bad thing. But the lingering sadness did tug at his heart slightly. He hoped the otter wouldn't notice that. But... He hoped that the future ahead with him and Klaus would be as bright as the otter wished it would be. And that he would be able to uphold his promise to help Klaus break free of his past life influences.