

Thirteen. Winter's Gallows

Klaus sighed as he sat with Lukan, outside the store, on a cold, wet bench facing the mountain to the south. He looked like he didn't want to speak. Like he didn't want to be there at all and be anywhere else other than the situation he was in at that moment. He made no eye contact with Lukan. His eyes were pointed down at their paws. His hands fidgeted with each other. His voice hesitated. All the while, Lukan sat there, letting Klaus build up the courage he needed. "S-so..." he started. Lukan placed a hand on his shoulder and sighed, now realizing with a war in his head, just what he was asking of the otter. "I-it's just that... I tried. I tried so hard to have Platt in my life that... y-you know. I-I wrecked my own life, leaving my family, moving to this hick town, and being poor for years... I endured all of that for him a-and... to see just how ungrateful he is about that, i-it just... Hurts. Y-you know?" Klaus seemed almost as unsteady as Lukan was when he talked.

Lukan nodded. "I-I get that, but... But think of what those sacrifices also led to. They, albeit more indirectly, led to me, Klaus..." he said softly.

Klaus only nodded slowly, swaying his tail along the ice on the ground, piercing making a low, mournful grinding sound. "Yeah. Y-you're right, it's just... Seeing Platt with someone else, after everything we've been through..." he clenched a fist, tears forming in his eyes. "I can't describe the pain..." he choked, gritting his teeth as he fought back the saline water in his eyes.

"Klaus... Is this why you can't let go? Focus on us now? And our future together?"

"It is Lukan. I just want my efforts to mean something. Something that says I made... I made the right decision. Because it feels like, no matter what decision you make, in the end someone is going to get hurt. It won't be the right choice for everyone. I chose to move to Lilac Grove. I could have stayed in Rosethorn, where my life became okay again once they locked up my uncle. B-but I didn't."

Lukan stroked the otter's tail softly. "It led to me," he echoed himself. "Even the worst of decisions can have some sort of silver lining," he said, half believing his own statement. He always thought about his decision to move to Bright when he was eleven. Just how good or bad was that decision in comparison to the alternatives? Lukan knew that there was no way he'd ever know for sure.

"I'm sorry, Lukan. I know I am a mess. Platt's right. I'm not right for anyone," Klaus failed to keep the tears from falling anymore as he shuddered out his apology.

Lukan felt a sting in his chest deflating the air from his lungs. "What do you mean, Klaus?"

"I'm sorry for everything. For all the negativity I've been spouting for the past month, or however long it's been. I'm sorry for failing you as a boyfriend. And most of all, I'm sorry for..." He stopped himself. He seemed completely reluctant to go on.

Lukan, concerned for the otter, tried to get him to finish. "For?"

Klaus shook his head. "It's too horrible for words," he said in a soft, low voice. "I know exactly what I did to you, and it's unforgivable. You don't know it yet. And I hope you never find out, but... I fear that someday, you will figure it out."

Lukan scratched his head, completely and utterly lost. "What the heck do you mean by that, Klaus?"

Klaus continued his arcane speaking. "I can't apologize to you enough, especially if you do find out."

Lukan shook his head. "All I want, is for the otter I fell in love with to come back," he echoed himself from earlier, yet again, hoping that Klaus would eventually understand what Lukan means.

Klaus sighed, still keeping his eyes on his paws. "I dunno if that otter CAN come back, Lukan, now that I know exactly how Platt feels. It's like, I never existed or had any impact on his life at all! That really hurts me, Lukan!"

Lukan closed his eyes. "W-well... I don't think it's because he truly feels that way, Klaus. I think it's because he moved on. Something you should do too."

Klaus shook his head. "It just feels wrong! Just ignoring and forgetting about a huge chunk of your life and the creatures involved like that!"

Lukan scowled. "I think moving on is not letting it affect your future like this, not outright forgetting about it."

"How? How can you do this? How could anyone? When I am reminded of what happened... I can't help but feel... affected," Klaus was trying and failing to not cry even harder than he already was.

"It takes... Time," Lukan replied softly. "It took me forever to come to terms with what happened in Bright. It doesn't affect me anymore, even if I haven't fully recovered physically or mentally."

"How long? How much time?" Klaus demanded. "I don't like feeling like this all the time either, y-you know that right? That's why I try to hide it. It brings me nothing but even more pain for every second I let it show!"

Lukan shrugged. "It depends on the creature, and how strong their will to change is. I dunno. I'm no psychologist, but this is something a couple of my past therapists told me so..."

Klaus' eyes widened as he took in a shuddering breath. "I-I see..." He looked away from Lukan altogether and towards the horizon where the sun sets.

"Klaus?" But the otter did not speak much else for the rest of his lunch break. Lukan had a feeling that if he pressed the otter to talk more, he would stay silent.

It seemed that in the few days that passed, Klaus seemed to at least be attempting to try and let go of Platt and the bad memories associated with him. Whenever they did see either him or Will, Klaus seemed to go into a zen mode, meditating out what his feelings were. They never saw the pair of them together within that time, which Lukan was grateful for. Despite Klaus' efforts, Lukan was sure that the two of them together would barrage the otter's mental defense until it would inevitably collapse again. Klaus seemed happier, more upbeat and optimistic. He was obviously trying to revive the Klaus Lukan adored. But... Something felt horribly wrong at the same time. Like he was forcing himself to be happy. Or that there was something that was still holding him back. Klaus was trying, but something was trying just as hard as he was in the opposite direction. Either way, something wasn't genuine, and Lukan did not like it.

"No fair!" whined a little otter girl. Lukan rolled his eyes slightly. She was blissfully unaware of just how unfair things in life truly were. Part of him couldn't wait until she grew up and realized that, but another part felt sorry for her, for someday she WOULD find out the hard way.

"Your birthday isn't until August, Kandice! Today is your brother's birthday!" Kristina addressed the little otter girl as she brought out small looking gifts from her and her husband's room to present to Klaus.

Klaus looked over, seeming to try too hard to seem excited. "Ooh my God! I cannot wait!" he said, rubbing his paws together.

"Well you have to at least until we've had cake!" Kristina replied teasingly. "You sure you don't want some, Lukan?" she addressed the raccoon with a small scowl, remembering how Lukan had said that he held disdain for cake..

Lukan thought for a moment. "W-well, I mean I don't really like cake, but... It is Klaus' birthday, so I won't say no!"

Kristina nodded. "Only if you are sure.. Oh... I am just disappointed I couldn't afford to get a beautifully done cake at the bakery. I'm definitely no baker..." she suddenly said, disappointed at her handiwork. Lukan would feel even worse for declining something the mother otter baked out of love, even if it did just look like bread more than anything else on the surface.

"It looks fine, honey," Kuaren defended her.

"Oh man. I could have bought one for you guys!" Lukan realized far too late and instantly felt immensely guilty.

"Um... Not if they're fifty dollars for a decent one," Kristina replied apologetically. "I couldn't let you do that!"

Lukan felt his ears twitch in disdain for such a large number. "Say what now? This isn't a wedding cake!" At the mention, Klaus seemed to fidget in his seat. Lukan

wanted to pretend that he didn't notice, for he had an idea of what the implications of Klaus' actions meant for his feelings. And he despised it, more than just hoping he was wrong.

"Cakes made by anyone other than yourself tend to be really expensive I'm afraid," Kristina scowled, not noticing her son at all.

"Dumb," was all Lukan could bring himself to say as a response.

A flickering flame made Lukan jump lightly in his seat, merely because he wasn't expecting it. Kuaren had entered the raccoon's field of view holding a lighter, which he took to light the twenty-one individual candles on Kristina's meager cake. "It's time for Klaus to make a wish!" he said brightly.

"He better not wish for it to never be my birthday, 'cause that is what it feels like," Kandice pouted, looking like she didn't want to be there.

"I won't," Klaus replied simply. "There's already something I would like to wish for..." Lukan found it scary that he thought he knew exactly what Klaus was thinking. And even more so than before, he hoped he was wrong.

"Would you like us to sing 'Happy Birthday' to you?" the otter mom asked. Lukan was instantly jealous. He wish he had the option! And now he was hoping that he wouldn't have to sing. Even if it was for his boyfriend, he wished nothing more than to not sing at that instantaneous moment! He hated his voice as is; if he were to sing--!?

Klaus shook his head. "Nah. It's alright." And Lukan felt his panic attack immediately begin to ebb away, and his heart slowly returning to normal as he watched Klaus extinguish the flames. The otter's family looked noticeably disappointed, but didn't object.

Lukan looked over to Klaus when they had finished eating and opening the otter's less than stellar presents. They sat in the otter's room. "You never did tell me what you wanted for your birthday," he said. "I wanted to get you something this time."

Klaus sighed. "I would think you know what I want by now," he said disappointedly. "I just want to be happy, with you!"

Lukan dipped his head sadly. "But despite being with me, you're still not happy." The way Lukan phrased that made Lukan feel that there was something very, very wrong. Something about what Klaus had confided in him in the past. What was it though? Lukan hated not knowing anything!

"I'm sorry. I am so sorry, Lukan," Klaus echoed himself from approximately a week prior. "I beyond hate feeling this way. I just wish I could stop! Which pisses me off all the more because that fucking snep seems to think I can!" Klaus growled in anger.

"Has he told you that?" Lukan asked softly.

Klaus shook his head as angry tears welled in his eyes. "No. But just thinking of the way he first talked to me, I knew, even through how cryptic his speech was, that

that was what he meant by all of it. Emotions being nothing more than fabrications of the mind, give me a fucking break!" the otter was so angry that his voice cracked.

Lukan could only give the otter soft comforting rubs to try and calm him down. Lukan knew that asking him to do so was completely fruitless. "W-well maybe what he meant by that was directed more about controlling how you react to how you feel, not the feelings themselves?"

"I can only wish that were true. But I just... Don't. Feel that it is!" Klaus' speech became fragmented. Lukan knew it was getting harder for the otter to keep talking like this. "Lukan."

"Yes Klaus?"

"I suppose I cannot hide this about myself any longer."

"What is it, my love?" Lukan's voice was barely even a whisper anymore.

"That otter you fell in love with. That happy, seemingly always positive, never in a bad mood, joyful and excited otter. That is not the real me. I've been pretending this whole time. And this symbol on my tail, isn't really a family crest or anything like that at all. Let me show you something." And without even letting Lukan speak, Klaus turned his focus onto a table in his room, absolutely in shambles in terms of both structural quality, as well as its contents strewn across it. The otter shakily grabbed a pen and started drawing on the paper. Lukan realized quickly that the otter was drawing the symbol on his the piercing, as well as the necklace. "Look." He stopped before even finishing it. Then Lukan realized that it looked like a boxy heart, sort of like in retro video game health systems. "And now..." The otter extended the lines that made up the bottom of the heart symbol, brought them parallel to the shape itself, before crossing them, and thus, creating the finished symbol. "You see? This symbol is basically a heart, crossing itself with its own shape."

"Klaus? A-are you okay?" Lukan's voice cracked. This was the only thing Lukan could bring himself to say at all. Literally the first thing he had ever said to this otter when they first met, and it was all he could muster.

"No Lukan. Like I said before, I fucked up my own life so bad! And for no fucking reason at this point! I created this symbol to represent that! I knew I screwed up the second I moved to this shithole town and I just wanted nothing more than for Platt to justify such an awful decision. But even that did not work. A few years ago, I had this turned into my piercing, and yeah, what I said about that still stands. I can't let go, Lukan. I don't know what to do! All I am good at is fucking over my decisions!" The otter was, quite simply, hysterical. Beyond upset. Beyond what would be beyond even that. Lukan felt helpless, absolutely powerless to help. There was no need to ask such a useless question about his well being; the answer was too obvious. Too plain on the otter's face that it cannot be ignored, let alone be confused!

"Then, can I ask why you gave me this symbol for my birthday, if it means something so awful to you?" Lukan pondered.

Klaus closed his eyes, blocking out tears. "To reinforce that lie. I had said that it was a family symbol. And therefore, I wanted you to feel like you were a part of it, despite the negativity I said already surrounded it." His voice was barely under control.

Lukan knew what the otter needed to do. He did. He's said it so many times, that repeating himself would be just as useless as asking him if he was okay. The otter couldn't get it through his mind. And it seemed that it wasn't because the otter did not WANT to. Something about his mind, his personality, his very being, one hundred percent, prevented him from doing so. Lukan was beginning to think about what he felt at the kitchen table, when they were talking about Klaus' birthday wish. Could it really be seen as that? Lukan had to wonder.

"The real truth is, Lukan... is that I'm broken. Beyond broken. Irreparable. But I knew that if anyone knew this, they would all just call me a drama king, not take me seriously, or not want to even try and help me. No one cares Lukan. People have always said to me that they do. Bullshit. Will in particular has made that very clear. So I pretend to be that otter that you loved so much, but... He's not me anymore! He died a long time ago. I-I'm sorry..."

"S-so I fell in love with... a facade? A masquerade?!" Lukan breathed. What was the otter saying?!

Klaus nodded, lips quavering. "I can't pretend anymore. I just can't. Remember when I said you were just like me, when you wouldn't tell me what was going on with you, before we became boyfriends? This is what I meant. I'm the dictionary's perfect definition of 'reticence'."

"Klaus. Please. I care. I want to help you. I'm not like anyone else!" Lukan was willing to say and do anything to regain the otter he had lost. He couldn't bear the thought of being without him for even one more minute! "I just wish I could make you see clearly, that I can help you!"

"How? How would you do just that, huh?" the otter's voice suddenly grew harsh and disbelieving. "Tell me!"

Lukan was lost for words. None came to his mind, and somehow even fewer reached his throat. He knew the answer. He knew what needed to be done. But he had no idea how to put those words into action. He had no idea what needed to be done in order to achieve what needed to be done. Just like every other time in his life. Lukan could only bring himself to answer the otter's question with one of his own. "I can only help you if you want me to help you! By that I mean, are you going to try and help yourself as well? I-I can't do something like this alone; I'm just a loser; a dipshit coon who spent too much of his life all alone!"

The otter's eyes were glowing, sparkling brightly with tears. Yet, despite that, they burned with an intensity that Lukan had never seen before. "I'm willing to try and do whatever it takes to end this pain. Even if--!" But Klaus immediately choked. Lukan had negative amounts of desire to know what Klaus was about to finish that sentence with.

"Then I just need you to focus on us. Okay, Klaus? Stop wondering what's up with Platt and Will and wonder more about our lives, once we get the hell out of Lilac Grove for goof!" Lukan said in a soft, tender voice.

Klaus shook his head. "I don't know how; it's all I can think about anymore!"

"Klaus, you have too much attachment to the past. You have to learn that life goes on with or without you! I learned that... when I let Bright affect me bad enough to where I never trusted a soul for my entire adolescence, and then you came along and..." Lukan trailed off, wondering how to finish his statement.

"So how do I stop it?"

"I-I would start with trying harder and harder to focus on the future, and not... what could have been. There isn't anything you can do to change back then, so... Why bother?" Lukan asked.

"Lukan, I... All I want is to be a good boyfriend for you, and I know for a fact that I am failing. I'm sorry... You deserve someone better."

"There is no one better than you," Lukan replied softly. But the otter's reply was not as soft.

"H-how do you know? You've spent the past seven, eight years, whatever, alone! I know I'm terrible. Platt agrees. Will probably does too. I wouldn't be surprised if Aero felt the same..."

"Klaus stop. None of these things are true. Because, I don't believe they are!" Great wording idiot coon...

"I love you, Lukan... Just please don't ever doubt that, despite everything, okay?" Klaus said, before taking a deep breath and swallowing whatever wallowing he had left.

"As long as you do the same, I won't. I promise." Lukan replied softly.

"I just... I just don't think I am a good boyfriend anymore. B-because Platt said-- what he said about me--!" the otter sighed. "Maybe he was right. Maybe I am a terrible creature. Maybe I do deserve to be all alone. No one deserves me..."

There was a waterfall that was sourced in the otter's beautiful, but tragically hurt emerald eyes. Immense pain. Immeasurable. That's what Lukan was able to detect in them. It was as if Klaus truly believed what he said with all his heart. "Klaus, then please... Please let me try and help you. That way, you won't have anything to hide at all."

Klaus was facing away from Lukan. "I have never felt as hopeless as I do now. Why Lukan? Why is this?"

"I-I wish I knew, Klaus. I-I've never walked the path your paws have," Lukan replied.

"I fear..." Klaus started shakily. "I-" He was taking deep, heavy, and shuddering breaths, as if he were fighting back a massive outburst of emotion and only just winning only by virtue of it not being displayed externally, despite the explosions that were more than likely happening on the inside.

"What?" Lukan breathed.

"I fear, that I have set you on a path where you will be, Lukan," Klaus forced out.

Lukan scowled, confused. "What do you mean, Klaus? I'm sorry; I don't understand you at all!"

"I'm only hurting you more, the more I stay with you like this, Lukan. Which is why I believe, as much as it absolutely fucking murders me to say, that if I wanted to truly prove how much I loved you, I would just stop. Stop everything. Stop being with you. Stop leeching off of you like, like some sort of mental and emotional parasite! And let you live, without me dragging you down! I'm poison... No. IT'S poison Lukan."

Lukan only heard what the otter was saying. He did not want to take in what the words meant. He did not want them to sink in. He did not want to believe what the otter may be doing. He refused. Simply refused! "Wh-what's poison, Klaus?! Nothing's poison except for these thoughts in your head!"

"I'm sorry Lukan... Platt was right to dump me. And we were wrong to think we could ever stand a chance." Klaus laughed ruefully.

"But I believe we do, if you would just believe it too!" Lukan exclaimed in a high pitched voice. He could feel his heart beating heavily in his chest. He could feel his breath becoming short. He could feel his head start to ache and tears starting to form in his eyes. He became light headed. What... what was this awful feeling!?

"I won't believe we will until I can become a better person. If it's even possible for anyone to change for the better..."

Lukan couldn't believe that such levels of pessimism were buried deep beneath the otter's soul. He couldn't fathom that such darkness lurked so deep in the emerald pools. It really did to feel like that otter he fell in love with never truly existed at all. Lukan couldn't breathe. Could not speak. Could not think. So. Was this it? Was this how it was going to be? No! Lukan refused to believe it!

"I'm sorry Lukan... But I believe it is the best for the both of us that we remain together no longer, Klaus whispered with a small smile. "I can only hope we can remain friends..."

Lukan had enough. "Klaus no! Please! All we need is a little more faith in each other, and for you to have faith in yourself!" But Lukan felt like he was pleading and

begging to a god that wouldn't answer. Shouting at a group of people while a hurricane was storming in their midst. Asking for something in vain, and predictably getting nothing in return. Lukan hoped someone, Klaus in particular, would hear. No. Hearing alone isn't good enough. They would have to listen... Something Klaus was clearly unwilling to do right now.

"Faith, huh... I had all the faith in the world in Platt. And in the end, he had none for me. And that's because I did not deserve any. None from him. None from you. And none from myself."

"Klaus..." Lukan was unable to prevent the waterworks any longer as they poured from his face, nose stuffing up to alter his voice.

"You said that it took time to heal. And I did not take that time after Platt broke up with me. I think, that's what the problem actually is. I think I just need to take that time, and try and heal properly."

"K-Klaus..." All Lukan could even say anymore was the otter's name, begging. Pleading with him. But all he could think about was how Klaus failed to heed to Lukan's wishes, and that they were nothing more than a waste of breath.

Klaus shrugged. "Wh-who knows? Maybe someday, we will work out. But for now, we'll only end up hurting each other more and more." Lukan stayed silent, quiet snivelling being the only sound to escape his body. "So for now at least, I think we should break--"

Lukan couldn't let Klaus finish that horrible sentence. "K-Klaus! I-I...!" Lukan paused, and Klaus did not say anything. "I love you so much..."

Klaus sighed. "You're making this really hard, but I love you too. But I really think this is what's best for us right now. We can absolutely still be friends, but..." Klaus did not finish, and Lukan was barely conscious of his body flinging itself at Klaus to hug him tightly and shudder out sob after sob into his fur.

"I-I d-don't want--!" Lukan gasped out.

Klaus patted his back softly. "I know, hun. But if you're going to try and make me see things the way you do, then please, try and see things in my way."

Lukan looked out the otter's window with blurry eyes as the otter held him for what would probably be the final time. Snow was starting to fall. As if it were symbolically hailing to something. The beginning of another new chapter in Lukan's life. And Klaus' even, to that extent. Lukan already knew that the days ahead were not going to be even remotely easy. He did not want to let go of Klaus. He did not want it to end. He did not want to be alone again. Having been shown what love was like has made him wish nothing more than that. But it seemed that this was one wish that Klaus was not willing to grant. Now Lukan feared and wondered... What was going to happen to them now?