

Sixteen. Hidden Thoughts

"What...? You two used to be...?" Lukan breathed, redundantly repeating himself out of pure shock.

Aero kept his head dipped. "We were. And we used to be madly in love with each other too. More so than most couples could be to be honest."

These two creatures seemed like the most perfect example one could get to when describing polar opposites. It was hard for Lukan to even fathom that they were at one point together. But then, he realized, those differences more than likely was what caused their relationship to become undermined.

Aero went on. "But the second I realized what his true thoughts were on mental health, I knew he was going to be trouble. I knew it. But I kept going anyways until..." he looked away, sighing deeply.

"And the second I found out what your own beliefs were... Well. Let's just say that I had parallel feelings, fox," Will replied, shrugging.

"If only other creatures have seen what I have..." Aero's eyes went wide. "But they are always fooled by how nice and smart Will is on the outside. When in reality..."

Will just shook his head. "You can perceive me however you wish. I am the only one who knows the truth."

Aero growled again. "No. I know the truth too."

Will continued to dismiss comment after comment against him. It was more than clear that he just gave no shits whatsoever about what anyone said against him at all. "Illogical. Not when you're emotions construe it."

Aero sighed, dipping his head again. "I'm not one to give up on anything, but... this cat is so far down that I wonder if anyone could reach him?"

"Maybe he actually is a robot under that fur," Lukan pointed out in a hushed voice.

"This... may not be the time for jokes, but in all honesty, I'm inclined to believe it," Aero replied with a scowl and in a low voice, obviously hoping the snow leopard wasn't hearing either of them.

"You seem to have forgotten that I am a feline? I can hear every word you say, and to be frank, it's been a while since I heard such praise." First of all, damn it, he heard them. Second of all, Lukan could not tell if the creature was joking or not. It was all the more impossible to tell through his perpetual monotone. "This is what I strive for, according to your perception of my goals, after all." Third of all. Yeesh this cat is really off putting.

"What exactly do you mean by 'perception', cat?" Aero demanded in a just as evenly monotonous, but stern voice. "Isn't it blatant what you are going for?"

"Why must you think of only what bad things an idea may bring? Why can you not see things in different, more positive ways?" Then Will shook his head. "No, it's as obvious as anything can get. Emotions."

"The lack thereof being why I broke up with you. And the corresponding excuses you made to justify the mental abuse you put me through," Aero growled. "Is THIS the world you wish for?"

Will sighed. "Back then, I was still trying to dispel my own demons. There was still anger that was able to seep through and allow me to hurt you. For that, I do apologize. At the end of the day, I wish for no one to be hurt. And I believe that ridding the mind of harmful thoughts and feelings is the only way."

Aero took a step back. "Th-that's..."

"What's wrong, fox?" Will demanded.

"Was that regret I just saw in your eyes, Willy? Maybe there is still hope for you..." Aero said softly. "If you really mean so well, why don't you try to understand how others feel? That, I believe, is how the right way to stop hurting each other should begin."

Will said nothing. He only examined the fox with his bright cyan eyes. They shined for no discernable reason. His intentions. Were they just as cut and dry as both Aero and Will let on? Just what was going on in his mind? Also, Willy?!

"Give it some more thought, won't you, Willy?" Aero said softly. "Come on Lukan. I'll go and get lunch with you if you'd like?" And without even letting either of them even have an attempt to respond, Aero took Lukan's hand, and guided them both through the park, in the general direction where Lukan, and by extension, Klaus, worked. Lukan took a brief glance back at the spotted creature behind them, who only looked back at them with a thoroughly unreadable expression, continuing to hide his deepest thoughts for more time to come.

Aero and Lukan settled on the quick and cheap burger joint that always sat on the corner of the main highway and the street that led to Lukan's store. The same one that Klaus often seemed to take his lunch break in. Lukan was somewhat apprehensive of potentially meeting him there again, before he realized, the mustelid wasn't even at work yet, let alone at his lunch break. "I'll pay," Aero said.

"S-so... How long have you and Will known each other?" Lukan asked curiously.

"A bit over a year. We were boyfriends for about eight months," Aero replied, not looking at Lukan at all. "Not nearly as long a time as Klaus and Platt had been together, but... Painful all the same."

"Painful?" Lukan echoed.

Aero sighed. "It's a long story, much too long. Long story short, he seemed like a great guy to be with at first. Then I found out what his beliefs were regarding mental

health. Knowing that I myself have occasional crippling bouts of depression and anxiety, I knew very well what harm he would cause to me eventually. But I ignored my own premonitions and kept going anyways. Sure enough... He started mentally abusing me. Calling me such names like selfish, psychopathic. It was... Awful."

"Yeesh, it sounds like it was," Lukan felt his eyes go wide.

"What's worse is that Will is not the only creature that thinks that way. Luckily in his case, it looks like he deeply does regret what he did to me, but... I don't know for sure. I hope so," Aero said. "His mind is just as easy to read as some indecipherable text from thousands of years ago."

"Wh-who knows?" Lukan responded, unsure of what to say. Lukan was only sure of his gratitude that his first relationship wasn't as awful as the relationship that Aero and Will seemed to have.

"So Lukan. I am curious. What are your plans from here on out?" Aero asked.

"Huh? Oh, well... I want to leave Lilac Grove. Move somewhere better, and maybe find that boy I need in my life," Lukan replied.

Aero nodded. "You sound like a lot of other gays I know. They want to leave their hometown because they do not believe it has anything to offer them in the way of relationships and... well. Does it always work out for them?" he asked.

Lukan suddenly felt his heart beating in his chest harder than he was comfortable with. "I... I can't imagine that it does," he replied shakily. "I mean, look what's happened to Klaus..."

"And now he wants to leave again, doesn't he? It seems like a lot of us actually become without a true home, not just because our so-called loved ones kick us out, but we kick ourselves out."

"You think that might happen to me?" Lukan fretted.

"It's very possible. But it might not either. Who really knows our fate in the future?" Aero asked. "Will doesn't really believe in fate. He thinks we can bend reality to our will at a given command of our cleared minds. His words, not mine."

"He's trying so hard to sound like he knows all the answers, I've noticed," Lukan remarked.

Aero nodded. "A sheer sign of complete narcissism made even worse by the fact that he's wrong. What he doesn't get, is that yes, emotions can hinder us, but they can also help us. The ONLY thing we can actually control is how we react to our emotions. And nothing more. The closest thing we can do to control our emotions is make it so that we eventually become desensitized to the same thing over and over. But even then, that doesn't work on everyone. Everyone's minds are different. They do different things, think different thought, hold different beliefs. Will wants everyone to be one and the same."

Lukan only sat there, listening intently to the fox speaking, not saying any words in response. He figured, that if there was any way he was going to learn just who that snep was, it would be through his ex boyfriend himself, in the fur. There was no better creature!

"Will just doesn't get it. I can't even begin to fathom the creatures that think like that, forging new relationships for the sake of furthering his dangerous agenda. I can't imagine the number of creatures he must have hurt before and after myself. What a monster."

"So..." Lukan finally spoke. "You don't think it's a good idea for me to let him try and help me clear my mind of what I've been feeling since Klaus broke up with me?"

"Absolutely not. He'll do more than just try to wipe your bad feelings away, he'll try to wipe all of them away until you don't care about anyone or anything. Not selfish, per se, but... Your empathy will be gone. And so will your desires and dreams, because you won't feel hope or have dreams as a result! Essentially, you'll be nothing but a soulless husk, as I may have mentioned before," Aero explained. "Apathy. That's the best word to describe what he wants everyone to feel."

"That sounds terrifying. H-has he actually gotten creatures to start... thinking that way?"

"Only weak minded or weak willed creatures would ever fall for something like that. And yet, I wouldn't be surprised if he had."

"I guess... This is another reason I should leave Lilac Grove then, huh? So he won't ever have the chance to try anything on me again, right?" Lukan prompted.

"Again, the choice is yours to make, and yours alone. But if you think so, then I say, go for it and good luck," was Aero's reply.

"Klaus really has me thinking now. What is the purpose for my life? Should I be content with doing the same things every day until I die? And he's shown me just how wrong I was with the way I was living my life all along. I want to change that," Lukan replied.

"I don't think there is a true way to live life incorrectly as long as you enjoy your life overall. There are miserable rich people with everything in the world, and happy poor people who can barely afford to eat after all," Aero said.

Lukan shook his head in response. "I was happy with life. And then Klaus showed me how much better it could be! ...And then... he ripped it all away from me like a complete tease. The more I think about what he did, the less I WANT to care about him, but... I still do. Why is that?"

Aero placed a hand on Lukan's shoulder. "You're a good creature. That's why. Nothing like that snep, and that's a compliment."

Lukan mostly disregarded what the fox said with his own theory. "Well, I mean he did say he still loved me. Still cared about me. But... Why would he break up with me

if he did? I don't understand why he would do something like this unless he hated me or I did something wrong or--" Lukan was not consciously aware that he was slowing degrading further and further into incoherent tears as he continued speaking until he felt his voice forcing him to stop.

"Well, the less experienced you are with relationships, the more it would come off that way. Klaus had his reasons, I'm sure, and they have nothing to do with outright trying to hurt you..." Aero replied calmly.

"Is that why he seemed so... torn up last I saw him?" Lukan perked his head up.

Aero sighed. "Heartbreak isn't easy. At all. But it will get better with time. It's the only effective medication when it comes to curing it. Give it a few more days or a week or so. Let's see how your thoughts change when that happens, yeah?"

Lukan nodded slowly. "Okay. I will."

Lukan, for the next two weeks, heard no news from anyone. None from Klaus. None from Aero. None from Platt nor Will. It was complete and utter dead silence. Lukan knew he should have become accustomed to said silence. It was his home, safe space, and overall home after all. But after all the excitement he had experienced with Klaus, the silence that used to be his best friend became nothing short of eerie. Discomforting. Uncanny. Nothing like it should be. Like everything in Lukan's life is wrong. No. WAS wrong. Lukan couldn't even tell if the heartbreak he endured after Klaus left him left him or not. His heart most certainly hurt. But it was no longer because the otter had left him. It was because he desired his life to feel complete again. Complete again. How odd. This was Lukan's exact life before he met Klaus. He felt it complete then, so why not now?!

Lukan had stayed home all day long on Valentine's Day when it came. He was supposed to work that day, but he called in. He didn't want to be out and about at all on that day. He also, to his utter shock, managed to stay offline and away from the Internet all day that day as well. The very last thing he wanted to be reminded of was of what was taken from him. And by just existing at all on that day was more than enough reminders of it. Staying away from society completely changed nothing. So Lukan was forced to ask himself. Why did he do it anyway? Despite asking himself this, he felt compelled to do nothing other than nothing. He lied in bed most of the day, only getting up to get food or go to the bathroom. And even then, he still wanted nothing more than to just remain immobile for the 86,400 seconds that would make up that accursed day. He even knew that if he allowed his mind to wander around, all his efforts to shut down reality would be in vain! He knew in the back of his mind that this was how it was, so why bother?!

And when Valentine's Day passed and Lukan woke up the following day, knowing full well what had taken place all over the world the previous day, Lukan still

refused to get up. Even after all the days that followed, he didn't want to get out of bed. He may have been off the day after Valentine's Day, but afterwards, he knew he had to work, no matter how much he didn't want to even get out of bed. He had never felt so unwilling to do anything in his life. Perhaps, the heartbreak still hadn't subsided after all. Why though?! Aero had said up to a week! It had been nearly double that at this point! When will this pain end?!

Or was it a different, more similar feeling. Lukan searched his mind for the right term to describe a more persistent, but otherwise similar pain to heartbreak. And then he found it. A fittingly similar word too: heartache.

Eventually, Lukan was able to get himself out of bed before he would be forced to go to work by reality telling him his plans can never work unless he builds up the funds he needed to make them work. Something like that was simply unprecedented. Lukan went to his computer desk to go online. To do what? He wondered that for several seconds. Youtube? No. Some free games site? No. ...A realty website? Well, Lukan knew that one of the things he needed to do as soon as possible, was to pinpoint where on Earth he should possibly go. Somewhere he knew he would stand a chance of finding what he had lost. Lilac Grove simply had no options. There was Klaus who... yeah. Platt, who is more than definitely not what Lukan was looking for, nor did the raccoon even remotely believe the wolf was interested in the likes of him. There was Will, whom Lukan wasn't even going to touch. And Aero. Aero... What about him? No. Lukan shook his head, forcing his overactive mind take a back seat to what he should be doing.

Lukan thought as he scanned a map of the country. The place was indeed huge, and filled with options. 50 states. Each with their advantages and disadvantages. Different cultures, styles, demographics, thoughts, and beliefs. Just where would be the right place? Probably somewhere LGBT friendly, for sure. That eliminates the entire south, essentially. And also a city big enough to have a lot of potential creatures living in it, but beyond that... Lukan had no idea what else to consider. It was all too confusing for his already gummed up mind to even want to try and figure out, let alone to actively try and figure out. Maybe stuff like climate, crime rates, the state of the economy may matter... Ugh. Lukan just didn't want to be bothered with something like this. He wanted to raise the money first, and then figure out the details later. In the back of his head, however, he knew that this wasn't the right thing to do.

"Hey ringtail!" Eira Tharo again. Well. Lukan did not have anything to lose by talking to her. May as well not even try to fight her off this time.

"What is it?" Lukan monotonously asked. Lukan just didn't want to be there, nor did he care about what actually happened.

"Did you hear Klaus got fired? He hasn't been showing up to work on time, or at all on some days, and they just fired him!" Eira exclaimed.

Okay. Now that was more interesting. "What, really?" Lukan responded.

"Uh-huh," Eira nodded. "I do wonder what's been going on... In fact both of you started acting oddly since the end of January. Did you two have a bad falling out? Huh... At the same time as you breaking up with your girlfriend..." Oh no... Please do NOT let Eira revert to her nosy ways. Please don't! "I feel they are connected, so perhaps I shouldn't ask you and go with that. Yeah. That's what I'll do." She was obviously talking to herself, but Lukan was relieved she wasn't pressing further. There's that silver lining, he supposed.

When Eira had strode off to return to her work, Lukan begrudgingly began to do as he was to do. And that was to pull fallen product that had fallen underneath the shelves. Suddenly, Lukan had the desire to want to talk to Eira further. Or anyone, for that matter. What? Why? Why was this something he could conceivably feel? It made no sense...! Lukan sighed to himself heavily as he pulled an old looking plastic jar of mayonnaise from underneath the first shelf. What the--? It looked like a brand that they didn't carry anymore. Great. Lukan hated dealing with these...

"Working hard?" said a smooth voice that sounded like it came from just a few attometers from behind him. The voice may have been smooth sounding, but it also blew through Lukan's ears like a penetrating arctic wind. He turned and saw a jet black cat with stunning amber colored eyes looking at him. The cat looked just a bit older than Lukan. Maybe a bit more so than Klaus, too. He wore a jean jacket over his gray shirt that displayed a decal of some kind that was too obscured by the jacket for Lukan to discern any details from. His pants matched the cat's fur and legs so perfectly that Lukan could barely tell if he wore pants at all.

"U-uhhh yeah," Lukan replied being his usually awkward self. Well, at least not everything has changed, he figured.

The strange cat nodded plainly. "Don't work too hard now. I doubt it'll be worth the pay at that point, if ya know what I mean," he continued talking to Lukan. Why do some customers insist to continue talking to Lukan? Lukan hated that. He hated it so much. But he knew that if he was even remotely impolite, there would be much more things for him to hate.

"I suppose you're right, but they'll yell at me if I don't," Lukan replied as evenly as he possibly could.

The cat blinked. "And that is a problem alright. An understandable one if you ask me." Why was he still here? Could he please go away? Lukan wished he could voice his wishes.

Lukan just shrugged. "I don't mind my job too much," he replied. Well, at least he was getting his wishes to converse with someone? It was a complete stranger though...

"The name's Nathias. Although if ya want, ya can call me Nathaniel. Or Nathan. Or Nate. I don't give a fuck which, honestly." The cat paused to read Lukan's name badge. "Oh, and you're Lukan. A nice name, that is." Oh goodie, now they are on a first name basis, the next step away from being strangers! Lukan wasn't entirely comfortable with all this...

Lukan tried to back up slightly. "I uh... do need to go back to work before you know... THEY, yell at me and stuff," he used that sentence a lot to excuse him from awkward conversations with the customers. This time did seem to work, thankfully.

"Oh of course! Wouldn't want that, now would we?" Nate replied. "Oh, and by the way, I think I saw a snow leopard asking another employee for you by name. Said something about a blue-eyed raccoon who worked here wearing a necklace? I dunno what that could all be about, but, I thought I'd run it by you. See ya." And with a farewell given, the black cat disappeared behind another aisle. It took Lukan a few moments to process what just happened. Who was that cat to instigate an unwarranted conversation and-- Wait. Will was looking for him? Oh great. NOW what could he want? Lukan did not want to even have the chance to run into him again, but he couldn't hide in the back room for his whole shift. Especially not with his boss having ordered him to clear products from under the shelf for the sake of a looming inventory check. Lukan knew it was only a matter of time. He thought it best not to fight it, and get it over with.

But for the next several moments, Lukan saw no trace of the heart scarred spotted feline creature anywhere. Lukan was able to clean underneath two complete aisles within the next four hours-- Some products were either a pain in his tail to pull out, or some were outright broken just underneath. Rude and uncivilized creatures must have swept their little oopsies under the shelf and called it a day. Lukan took back what he felt earlier about discontinued product; at least dealing with those wasn't his job! And of course, Lukan wasn't working up to standards because of just how much had been piled onto his mind. Klaus. Platt. Will. Aero. Lilac Grove. His sadness. His future. What he wants from all of this. All of it coalescing into a single hindering demon that was his own mind in reality.

It wasn't until it was just about break time that he saw the spotted feline at the end of another aisle that he was cleaning under. Oh great. Why here? Why now? Lukan had hoped that the snep would have given up once Aero had intervened between the two those couple of weeks ago. Lukan wanted to ignore him. He definitely was in no mood to talk to a creature like him anymore. In fact, when Lukan hear the snow leopard behind him, all he said was, "Will, please, let's not do this now."

"It's sad," said the snep, plainly. "It's sad to see that the fox has gotten you to think that you have about me. But it's whatever. Soon you'll see how wrong both of you

are as long as you continue down your path. Better hope it won't be too late like it is for Klaus."

"Yeah, keep flapping that muzzle of yours, snep. I ain't listening," Lukan replied coolly.

"It's not about that that I came to see you, you presumptuous raccoon," Will said. Wait. Was there a hint of annoyance in his voice?

"What do you want?" Lukan continued doing his job without even looking at the feline. In the back of his mind, he knew that from his managers' perspectives, he was completely ignoring a customer. Oh great. On top of everything else, this was NOT what he needed right now. He turned to face the snep and his enigmatically cold stare of his.

"Okay I lied, sort of. I wanted to ask you if you thought what I've been trying to do was right or wrong. Am I wasting my time and breath on someone who won't listen to what I have to say?" Wait what? Not only were there implications behind the way the feline creature worded the question, but to ask it at all was-- "You know how other creatures are like I do. Untrustworthy. Selfish. Entitled. Manipulative. Liars... Aero says that we can help each other if we were willing to actually try and do just that. But when most creatures are one or more of what I just listed, is it really possible? What say you on this matter?"

Lukan sighed. "I don't know. I honestly don't think there IS a solution to this. Like I said to Klaus a while ago- People who can be trusted and people who can't. Sometimes you can't tell the difference until when you take that chance, and it's too late."

"Hmph. So if you wanted to find a new lover, what would you do if this is the quote you live by?" Will pressed.

"I have no other choice. I have to destroy that coon shell, as Klaus would have put it."

"And how will you do that?"

Lukan shrugged. "I'm not a hundred percent sure yet. I need to think about everything. This is all just one huge headache."

"Then I will just say this. Calm your mind. If there is something that even Aero cannot deny is true, it's that too much emotion is a bad thing. I of course, think of it as nothing short of reprehensible, but I digress." Will shrugged and walked off, not giving a farewell as he usually didn't.

Lukan was left behind with a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions, colliding with one another to create a mental hurricane. Calm his mind. Easier said than done! There was now so much going on in his mind, that Lukan questioned the very possibility of doing so.

Lukan decided to go outside for his break this time. He needed to cold air to chill his senses, as he often enjoyed. He hoped the cold air would dispel the storm in his head and allow him to at least sort through his thoughts one by one. He sighed as he took a seat on the same cold bench that Klaus had opened up to him on, letting out a long stream of wispy breath into the freezing air. With all that was going on, Lukan was no longer sure he knew exactly what he needed to do next.