

Seventeen. Black Hope

Lukan at first wasn't completely aware of another creature sitting next to him on the bench. There was already far too much on his mind for it to allow his mind to focus on anything else right away. His mind was lagging. Backlogged. Overwhelmed. So it was of no surprise at all when Lukan also failed to notice the other creature trying to get his attention. Lukan was already bad at this... But all the mental storm on top of that made it worse somehow. How was this possible? It couldn't be possible!

"Lukan?" The only thing Lukan was even remotely able to do was listen for his name, but the mechanism in his brain that made it respond to whenever his name was called out failed each and every time to activate. It was on overdrive to a point where Lukan felt that it may eventually collapse. Hell, he was barely aware of the creature next to him tugging on his arm. He was only aware of their presence. If he was even there at all. What was real anymore? What was life now? What was anything at all? Nothing makes sense anymore. All the entropy in the world was gone. Forever. Never to return.

His shoulder was being shaken. But Lukan was barely able to even make his body take notice. His mind was too numb. After more and more nudging, eventually Lukan fell back onto Earth. The raccoon was convinced his mind was about to hit escape velocity however. "Lukan!"

"Huh? What?" Lukan stumbled for words when he re-entered reality. He looked to his left and saw the same black cat from before sitting next to him, looking thoroughly concerned.

Nate put a hand on Lukan's opposite shoulder. "Are you okay? It seemed like you were about to pass out or something and-- hey... are you crying?"

Yet another testament to his mind's utter lack of attention to then and now, Lukan was surprised by the tears leaking from his eyes. "I-I guess so," he said shakily.

"What's wrong? You seemed fine when we were talking in the store..." Nate said sympathetically.

Lukan knew for a fact that he wasn't going to be able to evade any questions any longer. Not when he was beyond obviously broken down as such. This upset Lukan even more; all he ever wanted before in life was to stay as inconspicuous as possible. Where was his coon shell?! Where was his comfort in solitude?! "W-well... I guess you could say that I am having trouble getting over a breakup." Didn't Lukan already deduce that this was true, and that it was heartache and loneliness that he was more than likely suffering from? What was this? What were his true feelings? Lukan just wanted to scream. He couldn't take just how batshit confusing everything was now!

Nate looked down. "I see. I wish I knew what to say; I've never been in a relationship before," he admitted.

"Y-you haven't?" Lukan sniffed lightly, trying to clear away his tears before they became too severe for him to talk.

Nate shook his head sadly. "Yeah, and I do want to be in one, but... It's... hard."

"Y-you have no idea," Lukan replied. How would the raccoon know?! He had been in only one relationship before!

"I mean getting into one," Nate scowled. "But... if heartbreak is this bad, then is it worth it?"

Lukan had to think. While heartbreak was by far the worst thing he had ever experienced in his thus far, the sheer joy he had experienced when he was with Klaus was by far the best. In the end he just sighed. "I don't know."

"I guess it's something I have to find out for myself then," Nate replied tonelessly. "God, I wish I could help you though. I don't even really know what happened, but--"

"I hope I'll be alright soon. I've always been a broody shithead." Lukan admitted, forcing a smile and trying too hard to be humorous.

Nate nodded. "Are you sure?" He seemed one hundred percent skeptical.

"No." was Lukan's simple and blunt reply.

"Huh. Alright then," Nate responded. "I really am sorry. I can't be of much help." The black cat stood up.

Lukan shook his head, once again trying to clear it, and failing miserably. "No don't worry too much about it. Too be perfectly honest, I don't even know what could help me right now. A new boyfriend. Some comfort--" Lukan gasped, immediately realizing that he just slipped up. "Sh-shit I meant girlfriend, whoops.." He tried to play it off as a mistake, even though it actually was. A truthful mistake in fact. Nate said nothing immediately, but he seemed to be staring right through Lukan. Oh no... Was the creature a homophobe? Lukan had done his absolute best to try and avoid them as much as he could. Such a creature was the very last thing he needed to deal with right about now...

"Y-you're gay too? Y-you're going to think I'm pathetic as hell, but I thought I was the only one in Lilac Grove."

Wait WHAT?! Another one?! Lukan felt his eyes go wide. "I-is this why you said getting into a relationship was hard?" And why was that specifically the first thing he asked upon such a revelation? Even in heartache, still an idiot coon...

Nate nodded. "Yeah, actually, yeah. Well, bisexual more like, but..." He trailed off. Hey. That was Lukan's job!

Lukan barely managed to keep himself from flinching. Klaus had no idea that there are other creatures just like him waiting to be found. ...If he tried to find them,

that is. Wasn't the point of Klaus breaking Lukan's coon shell was so that Lukan could be more social? Lukan began to think: Was Lilac Grove really that bad after all? After all, he only had Klaus' assumptions to base his beliefs on. "Well..." He brought himself to say. "There are more gay guys than you think here. Literally, I think the only creature I know who isn't is one of my coworkers in this store."

"Is there really?" Nate's ears perked.

Lukan nodded. "There's my ex, an otter. There's also a wolf, a fox, and... a snep that I know." Lukan momentarily wavered on whether he should have mentioned the other feline at all.

"A snep? It wouldn't happen to be the one that was looking for you earlier, would it?" The amber eyes were as big and bright as the full moon.

Lukan hesitated. What was he doing? Why was he saying this? Especially when concerning how untrustworthy that snep had proven himself to be? He was worried if he said too much more, he would literally be guiding this cat right to Will, where the snep would do as he attempted to on Platt and Aero. There was no way Lukan could handle that on his conscious! "Um... Well yeah," Idiot coon! "B-but I wouldn't try and date him if I were you!" he quickly tried to save himself.

Nate looked curious. "Why's that?"

Lukan sighed again. "I dunno if I can explain it. I'm really bad at that, ya know. That fox I mentioned would be able to though. He's dated that snep for some time before."

Nate was scratching his head. "Okay..." he seemed uncertain and skeptical. "I dunno what you're really talking about, but... okay."

"Sorry," Lukan apologized fretfully. "I don't have the time to anyways. I gotta get back to work in a moment."

Nate dipped his head. "I getcha. Um, Lukan? I wanted to ask you something before you went back."

Lukan looked at the cat as he stood up from the cold bench, legs and hindquarters almost numb from the cold. Despite that, Lukan for some reason liked that feeling. "What would that be?"

"Well, I was wondering if you wanted to hang out sometime? The only thing I can think of to help you is to give you some company and such. Unless you want to be left alone, I understand."

Lukan smiled softly and ruefully stared at the ground. "I think being alone is the last thing I need right about now," he muttered.

Upon returning to work, Lukan had to mull even more things over. Did... did that cat actually ask him out on a date? Lukan became nervous. If so, then Lukan wasn't sure how well he'd do on one. He never had actually gone on one with Klaus after all.

Nate had asked to meet him in downtown after all. It wasn't the most ideal place for a date, although there were restaurants and movie theaters within there to make it so. Lukan hadn't even been in downtown Lilac Grove for over a year. Last time he went was before he dropped out of college to buy books from the only book store left in town. Also Lukan knew the only way he was going to even get there was via bus, and Lukan hated taking the bus. Hated how unreliable the bus always seemed, being super late one day, but early the next, and leaving early and resulting in Lukan missing the bus entirely!

Wait a moment. If this cat really intended to take Lukan on a date rather than hanging out as he said it would be, then... A flash of hope suddenly flared to life deep within Lukan's previously blackened soul. Does this mean the heartache could become squandered and replaced with the happiness Lukan had missed for so long already?! It was too good to be true. Lukan knew it. But despite that, Lukan wanted to hope. He wanted to be optimistic. This is what he wanted to be true. His heart beat in his chest with more energy, fueling Lukan with the same energy. A feeling that Lukan sorely missed.

Although a part of him wondered about Klaus. Klaus did say he had every intention of coming back for Lukan someday. How true was that statement? Lukan shook his head. As much as he loved the otter, he couldn't wait to squander the heartache for even another second. Now he hoped that the otter was lying to him. No. He was. He had to be. No matter what that otter could say to defend his decision, there is nothing on Planet Earth that could justify inflicting heartbreak under such circumstances! None! Lukan felt a strange brand of determination welling inside him. Lukan was angry at Klaus, but it fueled his determination to finally become able to move on from him to someone at least potentially new.

A few hours later, Lukan went to go and clock out for the day when the familiar shape flashed in front of him. A peanut butter colored otter wearing a tail piercing was swiftly maneuvering his way to the back of the store just as Lukan was. What on Earth was he doing here if he was allegedly fired? Lukan debated following him, but he decided against it. He was more than likely to run into him unintentionally. Lord knows just how often something like that has happened to him in his life. Because Lukan couldn't count that high. And Lukan was aware of obscure numbers up to vigintillion!

True to his predictions, just as Lukan swiped his badge at the time clock to punch out, the otter walked by holding a piece of paper. That paper was more than likely the creature's last paycheck. There were so many emotions on the otter's face that it more than likely outnumbered the amount of times Lukan unintentionally met someone he was trying to avoid. And all of them were negative emotions. That was all Lukan could discern. "Klaus..." he said as the otter walked by. But the otter completely ignored him. He didn't even look at him. And now Lukan's sadness returned, surging

alongside anger with a chaotic harmony. Well. If the otter was going to be like this, then Lukan knew exactly what to say should the creature decide to talk to him again.

As always in winter, the sky was already black as that cat's fur and dotted with stars. The bitter cold set in once again. Lukan's freezing nose told him it was below zero again. With February being close to over, so too was winter. He hoped the end of winter would signify more than just the bitter cold. Lukan also liked early spring only because of the similar temperatures to fall. But since it led directly into summer...

Lukan loved listening to the sound of the ice and snow crunching under his paws. The super cold air always calmed him down as well. It felt like the colder the air, the calmer his mind got. The clearer it became. It's no wonder why Lukan always went outside in the cold to plan things out for his life. So Lukan began to think. If Nate was intending what Lukan thought he was, Lukan was welcoming to the idea. Although... if it did happen, what did it mean for his plans to leave Lilac Grove? Lukan decided. It would be just like Klaus' decisions before they even got together. If Lukan was able to find a reason to stay, then he would.

What of Will and his nonsensical views of emotions? All Lukan knew that he could do was simply not allow the feline get into his mind like that. As much as he wanted to prevent other creatures from falling into his trap, he knew he was too powerless to do so. Besides, wasn't Aero doing that instead anyways? Suddenly, Lukan was curious as to how a conversation between Aero and Platt must have gone in regards to this. Back then and now.

Lukan also wondered how both those creatures were doing. Lukan hadn't seen either of them since Platt cut it off with Will. Lukan knew that it wasn't really his business what either of those creatures had been up to, but he couldn't help but wonder at the very least.

Then Lukan remembered something where he meddled in something that technically wasn't his business either. The Richtors' family financial disaster. Klaus was fired... and now Lukan wasn't helping either. They were starting to look up to, and now Klaus had to ruin it by breaking up with Lukan. Klaus had always blamed himself for their problems, but... Lukan was inclined to believe it was so. Still, Lukan hoped that they could still pull through somehow.

But there was something that Lukan couldn't even attempt to fathom. And that was Klaus' actions as of late. Why was he avoiding Lukan as much as possible? Why was he constantly ignoring him? And why did the otter look the way he did, always trying too hard to hide his anguish, but failing? What was the reason why Klaus broke up with Lukan. The real reason? And why did the otter completely collapse when Lukan had said he couldn't live another day without the otter? Why would the otter react like this...? Lukan just didn't understand this. And it hurts him even more that he couldn't just ask the otter with him ignoring him at every possible turn.

When Lukan returned home and hopped onto his computer, he saw the last page that he had left before going to work. It was open to a website that gauged the happiness of creatures within cities all over the country, along with a tab open to check their economies. Lukan couldn't locate one that did both. He sighed, hoping he wouldn't actually need to use these things. He truthfully didn't want to leave the place he had been living for most of his life. But at the same time, Lukan was ready for something new. Something different. Klaus DID show him the beauty of breaking a monotonous life after all. But where to go? Especially if... Lukan did not want to think about it.

Lukan noticed that his email was trying to get his attention. Probably another spam that he hated seeing. Especially since a lot of it came from politicians trying to get him to sway right or left. Lukan just couldn't be bothered. Nevertheless, Lukan went to dispel it. ...Only to see that it was an email. An email from the otter. Klaus Richtors. Lukan immediately felt the blood in the extremities of his body flood from them and towards his heart to fuel its rapid beating. Lukan almost didn't even want to click on it. He was afraid of what it may say considering how Klaus had been acting as of late. But, he knew that if closure was to be met at all, it would be a beneficial idea to open the email. So Lukan did so after a solid moment of hesitation. Lukan's eyes barely felt like they were looking at the words on the screen.

Lukan had to take a moment to process what he had just read. So Klaus was moving, just as he had planned? But it seemed like he didn't really want to move despite what he said. He said it was because he couldn't afford to be in Lilac Grove anymore, not because he had enough of the town. Also he wanted to meet Lukan the following day? But he was going to be with Nate for he doesn't know how long. Lukan gripped his fists. He knew what he wanted. But he also knew what he needed. Lukan wrote a quick and short response to Klaus. He wrote how he appreciated the otter's words and finally hearing from him, but that he had somewhere to go the following day. He couldn't bring himself to tell Klaus that he was hanging out with another creature. Lukan understood a little more... Klaus felt the same way about something he believes he had done to Lukan. But it wasn't in regards to breaking up with Lukan or ignoring him all this time. That wasn't it. But what? Something told Lukan that he was going to find out that Klaus was going to tell him next they met in person. But tomorrow did not seem likely. The otter replied within a few moments.

Lukan nodded to himself, knowing that no one else was going to see him. That seemed acceptable. It wasn't likely that Nate was going to have him all day into late night right? Seemed far too unlikely. Lukan sent his affirmative reply and with that, the otter did not reply anymore. Lukan sighed as he booted down his computer and climbed into bed. With all that seemed to be happening the next day, he new it was going to be an interesting one.

Nate had selected the Lilac Grove public library as a meeting place for the pair of them. Convenient, as the library was just a stone's throw away from where the bus transition station. With how small Lilac Grove was, it only required one of those in downtown. The black cat was waiting, facing away from where Lukan had entered the lot, facing the art museum across the street. Lukan was nervous. What should he say? What should he do? The cat turned around, and immediately saw Lukan. Think fast stupid coon! "Heya Lukan!"

Lukan walked over to the cat and returned his greeting. "Hi Nate." Hi Nate. Lukan could just facepalm right then. "So what did you want to do now that we're out here?" he pondered.

Nate shrugged. "Anything you want, really. There's the library, the museum, lots of stores, restaurants. We could see a movie or whatever. Heh. Lilac Grove doesn't

have much else to offer, honestly." One would think a population of sixty thousand would be gifted with more to do. Oh right. It's outdoors or nothing here. Additional reason to leave Lilac Grove obtained-- wait. The cat just suggested restaurants and movies. Holy shit.

Lukan was unnecessarily flustered. "I uh. I uh dunno what to do. I really don't get out very much at all so, I have no idea what the fuck I am doing, or what TO do."

Nate laughed softly at that. "It's alright. I don't really get out much either. How about we start with the museum first?"

Despite Lukan not having any objections at all that he would voice, he did not really like the idea of going into the art museum. It was mostly due to the fact that all the pieces showcased were nothing special, or so abstract that they lost all meaning. Or Lukan just didn't get it. Lukan wanted to be a good artist, but he definitely would create anything that would be considered "post post-modernism". Nevertheless, it felt good to be in another creature's company again even through such dull circumstances.

The pair had spent an hour in the museum before turning their attention to a cafe that was across the street. Nate, the entire time, was trying to get Lukan to try some coffee since Lukan stated his disdain for it. "Come on... try something! I guarantee you hate coffee because every time you get it, it's too black!"

"But I dunno what combination would best suit me!" Lukan protested. "I don't want to spend endless amounts of money trying to find something that might not exist!"

"That's why I'm buying, come on!" Nathias was tugging on his arm trying to get Lukan to try something new. J-just like how Klaus used to do... Lukan suddenly felt slight amounts of sadness in his heart again at such a comparison, which in turn, killed his motivation to argue with the cat any longer, and surrendered.

"Okay, okay fine! You win!" Lukan exclaimed before allowing his body to follow the cat to the designated cafe on the corner of a busy intersection. Once inside, the strong smell of coffee overwhelmed Lukan. The raccoon, like many other creatures, absolutely adored the smell of coffee. Now if only it wasn't so damn deceptive and actually tasted good!

"Okay! Which one would you like to try?" Nate asked curiously.

Lukan scanned the menu. Oh good lord. Frappe. Cappuccino. Espresso. Latte. Mocha. What? What the hell? So many... Lukan still hated his indecisiveness! "I have no fucking idea!"

Nate giggled. "Okay, then let me pick for you. Would you rather have something bitter, or sweet?"

"Sweet, of course, are you nuts?" Lukan replied immediately. Now THERE was something he was quick to decide on!

The cat giggled again. "Okay. You sit your striped butt down, and I'll get you something."

Lukan did as the cat requested and sat down at one of the small tables that lined the wall between the entrance and the counter. He looked around, seeing an assortment of creatures either socializing or on their computers, all holding various cups of caffeine infused beverages. A deer and a lynx, exchanging jokes. A coyote typing away at an expensive looking laptop. A weasel walked in and got behind Nate. It was a lively place. Creatures with seemingly happy lives. Lukan missed being able to say he could be among them.

Nate returned holding two small foam cups, steaming softly. "Hope you like french vanilla!" he said as he set one down for Lukan to take. Lukan took the hot beverage, but Nate interjected before he could take a sip. "Hey I'd let that cool a bit before you try it. Having a scalded tongue isn't fun."

"Fair enough," Lukan replied, setting it down. "So uh... What should we talk about?" he asked, realizing they hadn't actually done much talking. Nate just went on about certain artists while they were at the museum after all.

"Tell me about yourself, if you'd like?" Nate replied.

Lukan immediately lost all the words that he knew. "Oh I uh... I dunno. I'm a pretty boring creature. I'm just a coon!" Which wasn't entirely true anymore, Lukan realized. "Okay, well, I was born in the southwest, lived in four states so far, graduated from Fox Mountain, and have an interest in writing, science, and history I guess."

"That's it?" Nate said jokingly.

"Hey, I'm not very good at talking to creatures," Lukan said.

"What about you and your ex? Are you okay with sharing what happened with you two?"

Lukan flinched. "W-well, not really, but I don't want to recall such memories--"

"Lukan? Wha-?"

Lukan almost fell out of his chair. To do so in public would have been the most embarrassing thing, but he was more focused on the voice that triggered this reaction. He didn't even have to look at the creature to know who it came from. What the hell was Klaus doing here!?