

Twenty-One. Indecision

Lukan counted even more days that happened to pass after Nate's terrible revelation, hoping soon Klaus would get the message. Lukan hoped that any delay in Klaus getting the message was because Nate had trouble sending it, like he had initially. Lukan thought about the idea that the otter probably had, but still did not want to make any contact with Lukan, regardless of what the truth actually was.

But the otter did not come back. No one came back. The golden furred fox, the frozen gazes of the snow leopard, the silvery wolf. All gone from Lukan's life. Did the otter cast them all out of the raccoon's life as well? Lukan didn't know whether he should feel relieved or not. The storm bringers were gone, but with them, so were the answers he wanted.

Lukan thought over and over as he usually did, wondering what he wanted to do next. Was leaving Lilac Grove still a viable option? What about looking for a new lover? Or perhaps he could seek Klaus or Aero out in search of the answers that were no longer within reach?

However, the more Lukan thought about everything, the more fed up with everything he became. He just wanted to be done with all of it and not even bother with anyone or anything ever again. Such feelings... How they mirrored the feelings he had years ago, he remembered.

Lukan did not want to give up, however. Despite wanting no more interactions with anyone, especially with creatures like Wiil, the loneliness that was dropped into his heart upon Klaus' departure still weighed him down and refused to allow the raccoon to feel even a shred of happiness for more than a few excruciatingly brief moments. Was it worth it? Was it worth such a risk? After creatures like the ones that Lukan came across in this time, the creature was not even remotely sure of the answer to such a question. If he were to try again, what were his options? Could Lilac Grove even provide him with such a desire? That only brought up the question of leaving Lilac Grove again, which further confused Lukan.

Lukan was tempted to enter a long distance relationship with another creature and set their location as his future destination when the time to leave came. Lukan was well aware of such a risk to be had there and questioned even harder if such a thing could be worth it. Anonymity on the Internet was a scary thing indeed. Creatures falsifying their identities from something as minor as eye color, to species, to literally everything possible in order to get what they wanted. But Lukan had no other options that he could consider other than to pick a city somewhere, blindly, and take every chance he could there. So many risks. So much uncertainty. Lukan wanted none of it. If

someone as seemingly trustworthy as Klaus was could not even be trusted, then who the hell could?

It was already April. The world was starting to slowly warm up around them as Lukan remained locked in his stalemate. Trees were beginning to bud. The grass was turning green again. Snow lessened in frequency and there was a sense of freshness in the air that Lukan loved. Lukan's second favorite season was under way, but Lukan paid it almost no mind whatsoever since the same things stayed in his mind each and every day. The dozens of days. The dozens of weeks. The hundreds of days-- It was all the same. Lukan's life had indeed returned to the rut that he was in prior to winter, but this rut. This rut was one that Lukan hated. It was one he was beyond just uncomfortable with. It was one he wanted to squander as soon as possible. But... Whenever he expressed such a desire to himself, all the questions of how to do so were prompted up to him again and again and again. Lukan didn't want to answer. He did not want to choose. Lukan felt immense fear and anxiety at the idea of making the wrong choice and potentially screwing over his life. Lukan felt completely stuck. He felt that he was out of options. The only options Lukan knew he could take were the risky ones. If there was one aspect to Lukan's coon shell that Klaus not only failed to break, but reinforced instead, it would be the raccoon's reluctance to take risks. Lukan took a risk trusting Klaus, and it did not pan out. His first attempt to truly trust another creature in close to a decade, and it spiraled into an incomprehensible mess that Lukan wanted nothing more than to run away from.

Lukan had had enough. He vowed that with every dollar he would raise, it would fund his escape plan. In the back of his mind, Lukan couldn't shake the feeling he was making a terrible mistake. But he no longer cared. He didn't care anymore. He just wanted out. With a new found apathy rising through the ranks of his mind during the first official spring month, Lukan found it easier and easier to decide what his future should hold.

As the lilac bushes that gave the town he yearned to escape its name began to blossom, at the end of April, Lukan found himself face to face with the same map of the country that he had been faced hundreds of times before already, more than just determined to finally put an idea to rest. He scanned each region carefully, discerning what he liked and did not like about each. The west? Too sparse. The northeast? Too overpopulated. The south? Fuck no. The southwest? Too hot. The midwest? Too rural. Lukan wanted to slam his head on the desk many times. Nowhere was truly good. He knew a poison had to be picked, but which one would be less damning?! He was only certain of staying far away from the south and nothing more. Well, that was a start.

He still hadn't even factored other aspects of each such as economy, which he had a hunch would automatically eliminate the south even further as well as the rust belt. Okay. Another step taken. There was still two thirds of the country left to look at.

What about climate? Southwest was out. Lukan abhorred the heat more than even his current situation in Lilac Grove. And now the midwest became less promising because of the humid summers...

While Lukan was absurdly lonely, he hated being around a ton of creatures, which he knew the entire east was full of. Lukan wanted something in the middle. Not a small town. Not a metropolitan super-city either.

Lukan breathed a sigh of relief. There was a small region that passed his desires. The northwest. Finally, he felt he was getting somewhere-- and then Lukan saw the prices for places to live there. No. There was nothing to even consider other than that two letter word. And now Lukan was back to where he started, which did illicit loud groans of exasperations from the ring tailed creature as well as his masked face meeting a desk at a high velocity.

Once again Lukan found himself pondering a long distance relationship. To him, it seemed like that would be the only thing that would help him decide where to go. Still, the worries held Lukan back from instigating a search and refused to dispel from him mind. The raccoon frustratedly beat himself up via punching his head repeatedly. Once again, he found himself going nowhere and began to wonder if he ever would progress at all.

The smell of lilac was dominant as May made its way with each day. Snow had completely stopped falling, and the temperatures were now warmer than average that Lukan enjoyed. He completely let his fleetingly short perfect climate pass him by as he remained focused on trying to figure out his bearings in life. He tried to ask advice from his mom, but all Sarah said was that it was up to him and that she had no advice to give. Something told Lukan that his mom had no idea what to do either. Nobody knew. Lukan was told that this was how life usually went for the vast majority of creatures in life, but that failed to even alter a tiny thing regarding how he felt on the matter.

For the first time in since Nate's message, Lukan saw one of the other five creatures that had entered his life after he first met Klaus. It was towards the end of the school year, and seeing this creature reminded Lukan of something he said to him before. It was, of course, Klaus Richtors himself. It was on his way to work, at his house that Lukan saw him. The creature was sitting at the front of his house with the rest of his family. Every last one of them looked completely melancholic and Klaus especially looked just as lost as Lukan felt. The end of the school year... That meant it was time for Klaus to potentially leave Lilac Grove for good, or it was as the otter said he aimed to do. However, there was no moving truck or any other sign of the creatures moving at all. Lukan was tempted to attempt to find out more, but was wary of the otter's uncharacteristic hostility towards him as well as the limited time he had before he

would be late for work. Lukan shook his head and padded along anyways, running his fingers through the lilac bushes along the side of the road. As Lukan walked away from the curious situation, he felt the fur on his back bristle, forcing a shudder out of the raccoon. Was it just him, or was he being watched?

After all this time, Eira Tharo was still giving Lukan a shoulder colder than winter, as if she had delivered to him what was left of the winter season via complete and utter silence. It spooked Lukan; such silence was absolutely nothing like her at all. And the raccoon knew that it was completely his fault. He was aware that the hurricane in his head was making him less patient, less tolerant, and more into a monster that he didn't want to become. He began to doubt himself more and more. If he were to get into a new relationship, would he even be an acceptable partner anymore? Yet even more worries. Lukan could no longer keep track of all of them any longer, but even if he could, he simply didn't want to after all. Lukan wanted to apologize to Eira. He wanted to talk to Klaus. But both creatures were more than just intent on evading him as Lukan once did himself. To have the tables turned on himself... Lukan felt even worse about himself for knowing that this was him. This was who he used to be so long ago. How he felt now must have been how other creatures felt in that past.

His bosses at work weren't leaving him alone anymore either, clearly detecting that something was very much so amiss in the raccoon's life. They cited how his mental state could affect the company's performance. They stated how much they wanted Lukan to feel happy about his job, even though his job wasn't even remotely close to the problem at all. Lukan shot them down each and every time they expressed concerns, knowing that not a single one of them could aid his situation at all. All they could do was wish him the best, which Lukan was growing increasingly skeptical could even happen anymore.

The weather became hot. Sweltering. Made Lukan feel like his fur was slowly melting off his skin. Sapped the energy right from the raccoon, turning him into an even more irritable sluggish mess of a creature, switching his personality right around, just as June always seemed to do. And with yet another month having come and gone, still the answers Lukan sought remained as obscure as ever. He assumed that Klaus would be long gone by this point since the school year the otter promised to remain in Lilac Grove for the remainder of was over, but to the ring tailed creature's surprise, the otter was still there. Lukan saw him just inside the windows of his house. He was standing there, looking out them. Lukan felt a massive jolt of electricity when their eyes met, even several dozen yards apart. The otter was too far away for Lukan to scan for emotions, but he didn't need to. He had a good feeling what the otter was feeling: the exact same emotions that he himself was feeling. As going to work was the only reason given to Lukan to ever come close to Klaus' home at all, Lukan once again couldn't allow himself to deliberate on the situation that Klaus may be having. Lukan

wondered if he should even care or not, since the otter seemed to not want him to at all. Lukan felt his heart skip a beat when he saw the otter's door open. But the otter just stood there for a moment, staring right at Lukan, and the raccoon, as a result, felt the same shockwave he felt when he last saw him and the rest of his family. Neither of the two creatures moved. They stood there for what seemed like an infinite number of forevers, exchanging knowing glances of understanding at one another. Was the otter finally ready to talk to Lukan? Did the otter finally get that message that Nate sent to him in March? The otter took a step forward, but almost as immediately as he did, he turned pierced tail and shut the door behind him. No. Not yet, it seems. Lukan sighed disappointedly, hoping one day, he would.

Once at work, Lukan saw another familiar face that he hadn't seen in even longer. Platt Rivers was at the bus stop at the corner of the store again. The look on his face was simply esoteric. Whatever the silver wolf was thinking, it was something he either wanted to keep hidden, or he simply did not think at all. Or want to think. Lukan wanted to at least greet the wolf, who still had not even taken notice to the raccoon yet, but his inhibiting mind told him that it was a bad idea, and not even because of limited time before work; the bus did come at this stop just a couple minutes before the top of the hour after all. Lukan didn't understand why he felt the way he felt anymore. He wasn't sure if he ever did. The only thing he knew now was simply that he felt the way he did and that he didn't know what to do.

That evening, the evening of the summer solstice, Lukan sweated through his fur on the way home, feeling utterly gross, sticky, and completely drained walking home in the heat. Lukan felt way too drained of energy to will himself to cleanse himself with a controversially cold shower. He flopped into his desk chair in a vain attempt to relax, knowing that it was just going to be another night filled with fruitless endeavors and searching. But tonight, was different, as he found out very quickly. It was an email. An email from none other than Klaus Richtors. Lukan felt his heart thump so hard in his chest that it felt as though the force behind it managed to break the rib cage encasing the organ. Lukan wasn't sure there was anything on his computer that he clicked on faster than that email.

'Lukan-

I did not really mean it when I said I wanted to kick you out of my life. I was just so sick and tired of Aero and Will and Nate and Platt- ALL of them complicating things way more than it ever needs to be just to prove each others' agendas. It's fucking ridiculous! And the more I think about it, the more I realize that they've been essentially doing the same thing to you too. It's not your fault. It was never your fault. And it

wasn't fair of me to lump you in with them like that. I'm so sorry I was so blind to this until after my family moved away.

Oh yeah, there's that too. The rest of my family and I decided that the best thing for us to do in order to save money was to stop relying on each other and separate. Mom, Dad, and Kandice all moved back to Rosethorn with the rest of my family. They were all upset that they didn't get the chance to say goodbye to you, but it was the only way to keep us off the streets before it was too late. I have this house all to myself now. Well, for now. I'll need a roommate to help me pay for it. I dunno who yet. Don't get any ideas; I am not asking you. I don't think I could bring myself to ask you of anything after everything that's happened. It'd be way too awkward, that's for sure. I guess, for now, I am stuck in Lilac Grove. For how long, I have no idea.

So why am I writing this to you? I suppose I just wanted to ask for your forgiveness, even though I don't really think I deserve it. I really hope the best for you.

-Klaus'

Lukan read the email once. Twice. Thrice. Forty-three times. It took him all night to comprehend what he read. And even after reading it for as many times as he had, he wasn't sure he still comprehended what the otter wrote to him. Kristina, Kuaren, and Kandice were no longer there. Even though they never spoke too much, Lukan still had once considered all three to be a part of his family, as Klaus had once said they were.

As the clock struck three in the morning, June 22, Lukan realized that the otter had to have unblocked him so they could converse again. That, and Klaus' message was indicative that Nate had failed to deliver his message to the otter as well. Lukan took almost an hour to write out his short response. He told the otter not to worry about the raccoon being mad at him and then, almost word for word, forwarded the black cat's message to him and explaining what happened the night Klaus kicked them all to the curb.

Lukan stayed up all night waiting for the otter to respond. Dawn cracked in the eastern horizon and Lukan was exhausted, but still he sat, waiting patiently for the otter's words to appear on his screen. Lukan longed for them. He missed them. He wanted to see them again. He didn't want to see anything else. This was all he cared about now. And finally, at sunrise, the otter responded with only a single sentence:

'...Meet me in the park after you get off from work. Please.'

Little did the otter know that Lukan was actually off that day, but he knew exactly when that would be. Once the otter's response had entered his mind, the

raccoon slid into bed and lied awake with the sentence buzzing in his mind for several minutes, preventing sleep from coming to his exhausted body right away.

Lukan had awoken at nearly three in the afternoon from a dreamless sleep and with a massive headache. Lukan had no idea what a hangover felt like, but he'd be seldom surprised if it was at least similar to the absolute throbbing in his brain at that moment.

Lukan spent the few hours between then and meeting Klaus waiting. Just waiting. That was all he could do. That's all he wanted to do. He wanted to do nothing else. He wasn't even bored. His mind was stuck to Klaus. It was all it could focus on. And Lukan made no attempts to fight that. Did Lukan still have feelings for Klaus despite everything the otter had done to him, to himself, and by extension, to all around him? Lukan was almost afraid to admit to himself that he did. What would Klaus say if he were to find out about that?

It was six o' clock. A half an hour before Klaus wanted Lukan to meet him in the park of which they had many different encounters now, and not just their very first one. Lukan swiftly made his exit from the apartment and almost choked on the dry heat sucking the moisture from his mouth almost immediately. There was no way it was under a hundred degrees. But despite the heat that Lukan detested to his core, it was still not enough to deter the focus from his mind.

Once at the park, he saw that the otter was already there, sitting in the swing, swinging on it lightly and unenthusiastically, looking to the west, where the sun would set in a matter of hours. And suddenly, it felt unnatural for Lukan to speak to the otter in any way after all the months that passed since they did. "K-Klaus?"

The otter did not turn around, but he did stop swinging. "You're off today, aren't you?" was all he said in response. His tone, for the first time, was not one Lukan could dissect and determine.

"Y-yeah," Lukan replied shakily.

"What you said about Nate and Will. Is that really true?" Klaus continued.

Lukan felt nervousness dominate his veins as he tried to reply with coherence. "Y-yeah, that's what he told me."

Klaus sighed. "I wish I knew," he said simply. A warm breeze shook the chains holding the swings that hung next to Klaus. The way they sounded was reminiscent of the otter's tail piercing. The otter did not continue, allowing the sound to be the dominant noise among them for several seconds.

"You do?" Lukan finally broke that silence awkwardly. Lukan so badly wanted to berate himself over his usual clumsy words, but wanted more to know what Klaus had to say to truly care enough to do so.

Klaus nodded, still not looking at the raccoon. Did the otter still feel too ashamed to even face the raccoon up close? "I really do. I've been thinking a lot since you told me what Nate and Will did to you. And I realize that none of that would have happened if I had just listened to you. If only I had the faith in you that you had for me, then none of this would have ever happened at all. And you'd be okay."

Lukan barely understood what the otter was saying. "What do you mean, Klaus?"

Klaus then turned around revealed his face. There were tears in the vibrant emeralds that Klaus had for eyes and his cheeks were matted from wet fur. "I'm saying, Lukan, that I do regret breaking up with you. I truly thought that by doing so, I could stop hurting you and allow myself to try and become a better creature. One that you may deserve. No. One you DO deserve. But I didn't realize that in doing so, and considering I've drugged you with how powerful love can be, I opened the door to allow you to become hurt by others, even more so than by me. That was a mistake. I guess everything is just one huge gamble, isn't it?"

Lukan hesitated with his response. "Y-you know what saying I like to go by is right?"

Klaus instantly nodded and recited it. "It really is a gamble. Who CAN you trust before truly meeting them? It's because of this unanswerable question that I decided that it would be for the best that I stop hiding who I really am or how I really feel from now on so you and everyone else no longer has to question whether I am genuine or not."

"A-are you sure being completely transparent is such a good idea, though?" Lukan prompted. "I-it was this that allowed Will to easily find a way to hurt me, y-you know?"

"Probably not, but I dunno if I really care anymore. Let that snep try whatever he could to mess with me. I'm not afraid of him anymore," Klaus growled.

"So..." Lukan awkwardly tried to keep the conversation going. "What do you want to do now?"

Klaus closed his eyes. Lukan knew the feeling that Klaus seemed to have. He wanted to say something- no. Request something that he was afraid of prompting. The otter hesitated. He seemed to take several moments deliberating and debating with himself on what to say. Such a classic Lukan move, Lukan was almost surprised. Almost. Because Lukan has seen the otter this way before. Klaus reopened his eyes. "I guess I will just come out and ask. Lukan, do you think you would ever be willing to... to give me a second chance?"